

**CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)**

**ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)**



Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

© 1994

Technical and Bibliographic Notes / Notes techniques et bibliographiques

The Institute has attempted to obtain the best original copy available for filming. Features of this copy which may be bibliographically unique, which may alter any of the images in the reproduction, or which may significantly change the usual method of filming, are checked below.

L'Institut a microfilmé le meilleur exemplaire qu'il lui a été possible de se procurer. Les détails de cet exemplaire qui sont peut-être uniques du point de vue bibliographique, qui peuvent modifier une image reproduite, ou qui peuvent exiger une modification dans la méthode normale de filmage sont indiqués ci-dessous.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coloured covers/
Couverture de couleur | <input type="checkbox"/> Coloured pages/
Pages de couleur |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Covers damaged/
Couverture endommagée | <input type="checkbox"/> Pages damaged/
Pages endommagées |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Covers restored and/or laminated/
Couverture restaurée et/ou pelliculée | <input type="checkbox"/> Pages restored and/or laminated/
Pages restaurées et/ou pelliculées |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cover title missing/
Le titre de couverture manque | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pages discoloured, stained or foxed/
Pages décolorées, tachetées ou piquées |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coloured maps/
Cartes géographiques en couleur | <input type="checkbox"/> Pages detached/
Pages détachées |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coloured ink (i.e. other than blue or black)/
Encre de couleur (i.e. autre que bleue ou noire) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Showthrough/
Transparence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coloured plates and/or illustrations/
Planches et/ou illustrations en couleur | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of print varies/
Qualité inégale de l'impression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bound with other material/
Relié avec d'autres documents | <input type="checkbox"/> Continuous pagination/
Pagination continue |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tight binding may cause shadows or distortion
along interior margin/
La reliure serrée peut causer de l'ombre ou de la
distorsion le long de la marge intérieure | <input type="checkbox"/> Includes index(es)/
Comprend un (des) index |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blank leaves added during restoration may appear
within the text. Whenever possible, these have
been omitted from filming/
Il se peut que certaines pages blanches ajoutées
lors d'une restauration apparaissent dans le texte,
mais, lorsque cela était possible, ces pages n'ont
pas été filmées. | Title on header taken from: /
Le titre de l'en-tête provient: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Additional comments: /
Commentaires supplémentaires: | <input type="checkbox"/> Title page of issue /
Page de titre de la livraison |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Caption of issue /
Titre de départ de la livraison |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Masthead /
Générique (périodiques) de la livraison |

This item is filmed at the reduction ratio checked below/
Ce document est filmé au taux de réduction indiqué ci-dessous.

10X	12X	14X	16X	18X	20X	22X	24X	26X	28X	30X	32X
					✓						

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

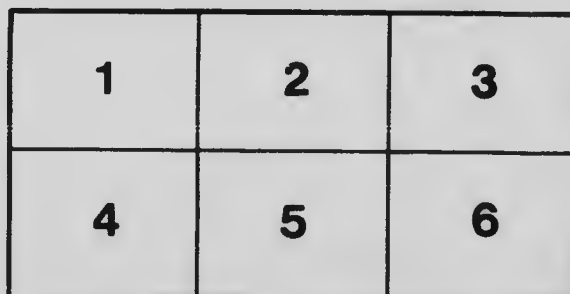
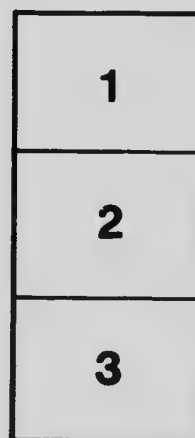
National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol \rightarrow (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ∇ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:



L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

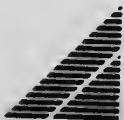
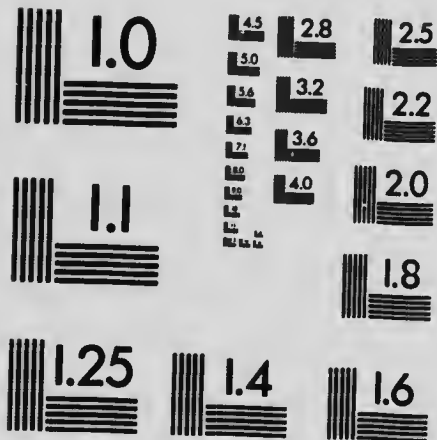
Les exemplaires originaux dont la couverture en papier est imprimée sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminent par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole \rightarrow signifie "A SUIVRE", le symbole ∇ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



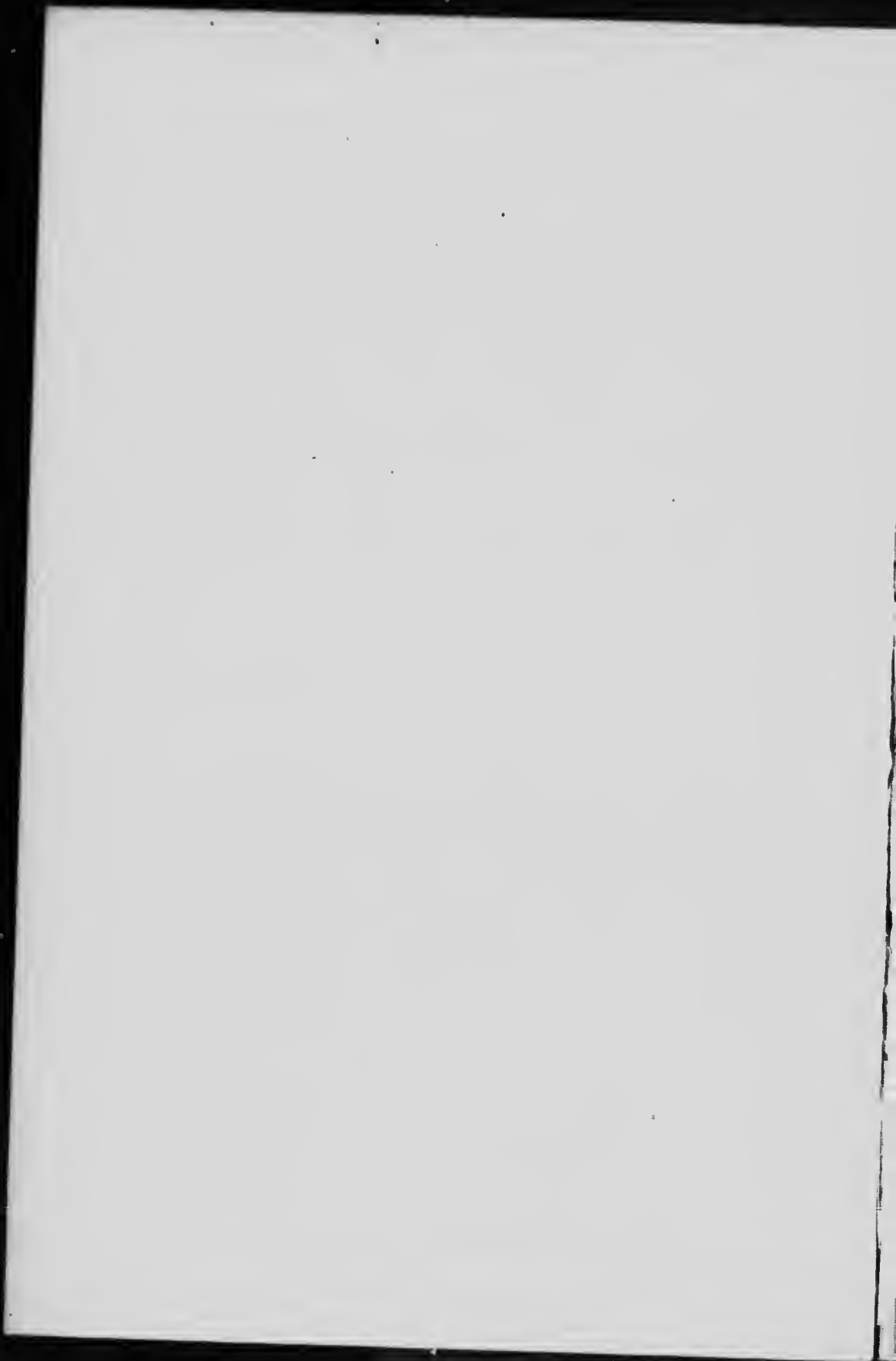
APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14603 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

THE SHERIFF OF
DYKE HOLE

Ridgwell Cullum.

150



THE SHERIFF OF DYKE HOLE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE COMPACT. *5th Edition*

THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS

5th Edition

THE NIGHT-RIDERS. *3rd Edition*

THE BROODING WILD!

THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

2nd Edition

THE DEVIL'S KEG

AT ALL LIBRARIES

Price One Shilling

THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS. *10th Thousand*

THE NIGHT-RIDERS. *12th Thousand*

Price Sixpence

THE DEVIL'S KEG. *25th Thousand*

Chapman & Hall, Ltd., London

THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

Hodder & Stoughton, London

THE SHERIFF OF DYKE HOLE

THE STORY OF A LEGACY

BY

RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF "THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS," ETC.

TORONTO
THE COPP CLARK CO., LIMITED

1909

PR6005

U4

S5

Copyright in the United States of America

TO

MY FRIEND

H. E. GARDEN

It has always been my thought to ask you to honour me by accepting the dedication of one of my books, but, bearing in mind your predilection for a certain class of character, I have refrained until such time as I produced one which seemed most likely to interest you. In this story I have endeavoured to gather together a group of Western characters such as I hope will afford you a few hours of amusement. Should they do so, I shall be more than repaid for the long months of labour I have spent on their portrayal.

RIDGWELL CULLUM.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. AN OLD "FORTY-NINER'S" LEGACY	I
II. DISCORD AND HARMONY IN CHLORIDE	10
III. THE SHERIFF EXPLAINS A FEW MATTERS	23
IV. THE SHERIFF AND THE SILVER KING	33
V. ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH	43
VI. DYKE HOLE PREPARES	55
VII. CRICKET	64
VIII. ROYDON CONFIDES IN THE SHERIFF	74
IX. BLUFF	90
X. ROYDON VISITS MARC OSLER	101
XI. THE SHERIFF TAKES TEA	112
XII. CIRCUS DAY IN DYKE HOLE	125
XIII. THE CIRCUS PARADE	134
XIV. IN WHICH SHAGGY STEELE TAKES A BATH	151
XV. A BOND OF SYMPATHY	159
XVI. DOMESTIC AFFAIRS IN DYKE HOLE	171
XVII. SCANDAL IN DYKE HOLE.	184
XVIII. IN WHICH BOB MAKAW CONVEYS A WARNING	200
XIX. DICK ROYDON TAKES THE PLUNGE	209
XX. HOW DYKE HOLE'S TEMPERANCE MEETING BROKE UP	221

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI.	THE WOLF AND THE LAMBS	235
XXII.	SNAKES HAS AN INTERESTING HALF-HOUR WITH THE SHERIFF	248
XXIII.	THE SHERIFF PAYS A CALL	255
XXIV.	DYKE HOLE PREPARES TO DANCE	264
XXV.	THE SHERIFF'S COUP	273
XXVI.	THE SHERIFF TURNS INQUISITOR	286
XXVII.	THE SHERIFF EMBARKS ON A PEACEFUL UN- DERTAKING	295
XXVIII.	THE SHERIFF SWINGS HIS BATTLE-AXE	304
XXIX.	THE SHERIFF GETS A SURPRISE	317
XXX.	"MATE" FOR THE SHERIFF	328

THE SHERIFF OF DYKE HOLE

CHAPTER I

AN OLD "FORTY-NINER'S" LEGACY

"WELL, I'm——!"

Dick Roydon settled himself in his chair, and gathering up the sheets of a letter he had just been reading began it all over again.

The smoking-room was very quiet and empty, for it was one of those bright, fresh afternoons in early spring which London, the much maligned, can afford us when it is so minded. Thus the "Junior Idlers" had, for the most part, been lured from their luxurious quarters in Pall Mall, to investigate the meaning of their city's unwonted good-nature.

Jack Saunders smilingly watched his companion as he frowned over his letter for the second time. But the letter was too long, or Roydon was too slow in the reading of it, for, wearying of the silence, he beckoned a waiter over to him.

"Bring me a 'Polly,'" he said, as the man came up. "Dick?"

"A brandy and soda," was the curt response.

Jack whistled softly as the waiter departed.

"What's up, old boy?" he demanded in some amusement. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Roydon dropped the letter in his lap and looked up unsmilingly. He was a man of about five-and-twenty, fresh complexioned and honest-looking. His clean-shaven face bore signs of exposure, its healthy tanning telling of an outdoor life. It was not a face that looked as

though its owner could be easily worried, yet just now there was decided trouble in the keen grey eyes.

"That's just it," he said. "There's something very wrong—at least, something very queer."

"Your—father?"

"Yes."

They both became silent. The waiter brought the drinks, depositing them on the table almost without a sound, and, with a quiet "Thank you, sir," as Jack paid for them, he as noiselessly withdrew.

Dick Roydon had just returned to town. He had been away on a county cricket tour in the midlands when the summons reached him. It was imperative; the man who was as a parent to him was ill, dying, and he came by special train in the night. But he arrived just too late to see his foster-father alive. When he reached Hampstead old George Raymon was dead. An attack of syncope, the doctors told him. A long winter, when his chronic bronchitis had been unusually bad, followed by a keen, biting spring and an early, wet summer, had done its work. He succumbed almost without a struggle.

A week had passed since Roydon's return to town. That painful week preceding the funeral, when friends and relatives gather and must be seen, when tradespeople and business affairs must be dealt with, when, worst of all, one is expected to publicly assert one's private grief by every vulgar, outward sign.

The funeral was over now. The will had been read, and Dick pronounced heir to the old man's fortune. But only conditionally. The conditions were not made public. Mr. Carter, the lawyer, his foster-father's friend, and the executor of the estate, after the reading of the will, had handed him an envelope addressed in the dead man's handwriting. And now——!

At last Roydon broke the silence. His eyes lit up into a half smile.

"It's so funny; that, if it were not deadly earnest, I should like to laugh," he said.

Saunders, sitting astride his chair with his arms folded across its back, waited. He was younger than Roydon, but very little. He had been in the army, and, after a three years' service, had resigned his commission. Pos-

essed of a comfortable income, he conceived the idea that if he had to live a life of idleness he might just as well do it unfettered by the lax discipline of a modern soldier's life. He and Roydon were great cricketers, and so they had become friends.

Roydon picked up his letter again.

"If it won't bore you, I'd like to tell you all about it," he said apologetically. "I shall be carrying out instructions, too," he added, as an afterthought.

"Do. I am more than interested," his friend answered quickly. "Nothing wrong about the—legacy?"

Roydon smiled curiously.

"Here—listen," he exclaimed, and gathered up the letter. He turned to the table at his elbow, reached his brandy and soda, and gulped it down. Then, lighting a fresh cigar, settled himself back in his chair.

"We always knew the dear old chap was rich—you and I," he began. "But we never quite knew how rich. He's left me—two millions net!"

"Two millions! Great Scott!"

"But there are conditions."

"Conditions? Ah!"

"Yes. Sealed conditions, contained in a letter, a duplicate of which is in Carter's hands. He is responsible that these conditions are carried out. This letter was handed to me after the reading of the will. Carter gave it me himself. Just as I was about to tear it open, he interposed. 'Read the address first, my boy,' he said. And when I looked at the envelope—but here it is, you can read it yourself. The dad was a queer old chap."

Roydon passed the torn envelope across to his friend. The address was plainly written in George Raymon's laboured handwriting—

"TO RICHARD ROYDON, ESQ.

"To be opened when in the company of a good friend. Two tongues can swear better than one.

"GEORGE RAYMON."

Saunders handed the envelope back with a smile.

"His love of a joke remained to the last," he said. The other nodded.

"I could forgive him anything for that," Roydon said. "Carter wouldn't let me open it in his presence. He said, 'No, my boy, I'm no good at swearing—outside a court. Hunt up your friend, Jack Saunders. He's a cricketer—also, I believe, a golfer.' But," Dick went on, becoming serious, "it's no laughing matter. Unless this letter is one huge practical joke, I don't know where that fortune is going to land me. Now I'll read it to you."

He sorted the sheets of paper into proper order and began his reading in a low, even voice.

"Oak Lodge,
Hampstead,
1st April, 189-.

"To my adopted son—
RICHARD ROYDON, ESQ.

MY DEAR DICK,

"I have been a father to you, and a father has the right to point out the way his offspring should go. I observe he has this right. I allow there's no kick coming to him if said offspring gets busy in another direction. Guess that's mostly how we stand. Further, I'd remark, by way of argument, if I kick you, you have a right to kick back; and, being younger, I'm prepared to believe you can kick a sight harder than I can. That's why I've waited till I'm dead to do my kicking. You'll notice that this way the advantage lies with me. The feller that hits and runs takes the fewest chances. Chances are cussed things to get up against any one. I've taken so many chances that I haven't time for more.

"Now, what I've got to say may seem like a weed-crop growing where you've sowed oats. That's how it'll likely seem. But there's oats there, and they're yours. I'm most anxious you should nourish at my expense. So I'll take it I'm paying for your oats, and you're busting to get hitched up to my buggy.

"I hold that no feller has the right to pass secondhand doings on to another—not even to the gal he's going to marry. It never did a heap of good, and is liable to make the pertickler party swear. Trouble might be saved this way. There's just one place where a feller's expected to talk of what he's done—that's the court-house. The

present instance is parallel. You're the court and I'm the prisoner. Mebbe, when you've summed up, I'll likely find the grave a sight more comfortable.

"Having made things clear with these few remarks, I guess I'll get on.

"Now, boy, I first made my pile out of silver, way out in Montana. I scratched around some farther south, in the old '49 days, but I reckon it takes a full-grown rooster to scratch down to where the fattest worms are located. It was in '69 I struck it rich in Montana, and I guess, by the time it come along, the patient Providence that steered me through thirty-five years of crazy youth had give me savvee to bile my kettle right. Yes, sir, Montana made me, and I've gone on piling dollars here in the finest prospect in the world—your England—ever since. But I'm barking about them days out West.

"Out of folly comes wisdom—if luck gets around and you don't happen to git hanged by the neck meanwhiles. I did some fool things them days. I got married. Females are mostly problems—and I'm not smart at problems. Mary stood by me thro' my ups and downs. And we never had no trouble till I struck it rich. It was about the time she got combing her hair into fancy fixins, and faking up her figger that the trouble come along. She was a fine upstander, but got social notions along with the dollars. She got a lead on Dyke Hole society. She guessed Dyke Hole was our hen roost and we'd got to do the crowing.

"I'd like to observe, social doings has their drawbacks. Which I mean society is like a locomotive or a hoss car, it needs a set track to run on. If it gets yawing indiscriminate things is liable to bust. That's how it was—things busted. I shot a feller who'd got a notion for seeing my wife when I didn't happen around. I've learned since the latter ain't reckoned irreglar in good society. But, you see, most things needs beginnings, and I haïn't a notion it was right in them days. Wal, I shot him cos I was red hot, and a gun came handier to me than manners. The proceeding upset Mary some, and, being good grit, she lit out, taking our four year old baby gal with her.

"Since then I've spent thousands hunting the world

over to find them two, but I've never set eyes on them for a second. And why did I look for them? Because that feller was Mary's brother, and, as we were way up in Dyke Hole society, and he was way down, Mary was scairt he'd disgrace us, and so kep him secret from me. And that's why I don't figger a heap on social doings.

"I guess this yarn takes more writing than I calclated, but I'll git on. It's allus good to kep on. I've done so much thinking on these things that it does me good to hand em on to you. Now I had a foreman at the mine when I struck it rich, and it was at that mine, and in front of that feller I shot Mary's brother. And I was quick to find that that foreman had got a cinch on me. I had to pay him, and pay him good and big. He was a neat proposition in blackmail. You see, the feller I shot was Mary's brother, so I hadn't nothing to work on.

"I soon got tired of the life he led me, and was plumb crazy to get Mary and the baby back, so, one day, I packed a valise and quit, without leaving word where I was going. I'd previous sent my cash balance to England. So I began my search. Wal, it's all come to nothing.

"Now you'll see how I'm heading. That mine is still my property, spite of all changes, spite of everything. That mine is mighty rich. That mine by rights should go to my wife, or the gal. And that's just about how I'm figgering it's going to be if I can do anything. You see I'm dead, so that shooting racket don't figger anything now.

"You're going to get that mine. If any one is running it in my absence you're going to put him right out of business and take possession. Then you're going to find Mary, or, if she's dead, the gal, and you're going to turn the mine over to whichever it is. There's two millions of solid cash, which is ten million dollars, which says you're going to do it. Then you can set around and spend the lot how you please. If you buck any, seeing I've brought you up a gentleman, there's just five hundred pounds a year to spend your life being a gentleman on, while the rest goes to the list of charities I've given to Carter.

"This sounds like a mighty hard kick, but it's more in the natur of a favour I'm asking. I'm asking good

and hard; but it's from the bottom of my heart I'm asking you to do this thing. It's the only way I can set them two pore folks right. Which I mean, if I left them the dollars who's to find them and give them to them. This way that mine'll make them rich, and I guess it'll pay you mighty well to find them and see they get it.

"Now to get to the end. Where's this mine, you ask? You'll strike for Dyke Hole county in Montana. From Dyke Hole City it's twenty-six miles S.W. as the ducks fly. That's how it was when I saw it last. There's a dam of water adjacent, which I built. There's the workings. There may be a city there now, these things have a way of growing, and there was signs of its coming before I left. The dam floods a conduit system in spring. And the conduit supplied my old washings. The mine buildings was set on the hillside and all the works were down in the valley. Carter will give you a plan of the mine in elegant drawing.

"One thing further. There's a feller can help you locate that mine if you get in difficulties. He was a good friend of mine—once. He's rich, too; he's got swell works around Dyke Hole or the vicinity somewheres now. His name's Marc Osler. You take and show him this letter. He'll be pleased when he reads it. You can tell him it's a message—a farewell message from the feller who was once his friend. Mebbe he'll help you all he can—I say mebbe.

"Carter has a copy of this, and he'll see that the conditions herein stated, as the law fellers say, are carried out. He'll also see to it you have all the cash you need for the work. But understand clear, that two millions has to be earned, and I ask you right out to get out after em, Dick, boy.

"So long,
"GEORGE RAYMOND."

Dick finished the reading, but remained staring at the letter. He now realized a pathetic note in the old man's story which had escaped him at his first reading of it, and it came home to him in a way that gave him a choky feeling in his throat. During his foster-father's life he

had never realized that the old man was beset by any secret trouble. The quaint, rough, lean old miner had at all times appeared the same to him; quietly genial, always ready with a half humorous, half philosophical remark, simple, unassuming. There had never been a moment of depression to obscure the sun of his kindly, warm-hearted nature. Was it all a joke? he asked himself. No, he knew the dead man too well.

It was Saunders who broke the silence at last.

"There's the devil in that letter," he said seriously.

"There are—possibilities."

The two men relapsed again into silence. The hovering waiter received another silent summons. It was Roydon who gave it this time, and the order he took was for two brandies and sodas.

"Of course, you'll do your best to carry out his wishes," said Saunders at last. "It means giving up cricket; it means giving up lots—of things," he finished up lamely.

His companion didn't answer at once. The waiter came back with the drinks and departed again. When he had gone Roydon sat forward in his chair and spoke earnestly.

"Look here, Jack, we're old chums, and I know you were almost as fond of the old man as I was, so I can talk freely to you. You don't know all I owe to him. I was only his adopted son, as you know. You never knew that, in his own words, he rounded me up and corralled me when he found me, at the age of eight, selling matches and bootlaces on a curb-stone. His one thought in life, as far as I was concerned, was to make me a gentleman. He sent me to the best of schools and the 'Varsity. I was sent abroad. I was taught everything that it was possible to teach me, but it wasn't learning he wanted. I was to be a gentleman and a sportsman. His ideas were often peculiar, but there was always reason in them. One idea was that I should excel as a boxer. He reckoned no gentleman could be a gentleman unless he could 'scrap some.' I confess this desire of his fell in with my own. No doubt I got the propensity from my gutter breeding. So that, if his idea was right, I ought to be a first-class gentleman. However, I only speak of these things to show you how much

I owe him. But I also loved the dear old chap for himself. His money was never any consideration to me. He was the best of fathers——"

"And sportsmen," added Jack earnestly.

"And I owe him what I can never pay."

"You do."

"He need never have put that clause about £500 a year in his conditions. I'm going to find those two if they are alive—I'm going to find them if the search lasts my lifetime. By God, if the old man's comfort in the grave depends on my 'summing up,' he's lying on down cushions by now, God bless him!"

"Amen," ejaculated the other solemnly.

"Jack," cried Roydon, springing to his feet and raising his glass aloft, "it's the West for me right away. Here, drink a toast. God rest the dear old dad's soul! May I keep health and strength until my search is done! And when I die may I go wherever he is!"

"To the old 'forty-niner's' rest. God bless him!"

And the two men solemnly clinked glasses and drank the toast.

CHAPTER II

DISCORD AND HARMONY IN CHLORIDE

CHLORIDE! No one ever attempted to explain its existence; no one knew whence it derived its name, or what its purpose might be. But in the early eighties there were lots of hamlets in the American west that wanted explaining. Chloride had a place on the ordnance map of the State of Montana. It was marked with a small circle, which indicated a town or village, tucked away amidst a surrounding of feathery etching representing the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains—and Chloride consisted of two buildings!

One of these buildings, by a great stretch of imagination, might have been called a hotel, or at least a saloon, but only because its owner purveyed a decoction of liquid fire which he vauntingly called whisky, and for no reason pertaining to its structural pretensions. The other was a mere shack—as a matter of fact, a stable, which not even a real estate agent would have dared to describe as anything more “desirable.”

The weatherboarded building—the saloon—stood on one side of the trail, and the stable on the other. The trail itself split up a cup-like hollow amidst surrounding hills. It was the road leading from the railroad terminal at Anaconda, some twenty-five miles to the south-west, to Dyke Hole and Spawn City eastwards. Below the two buildings a wide flat of grass-land spread out, crossed, at right angles to the trail, by a shallow river, buried amidst a dense growth of mountain forest. Then on all sides rose the hills, some sharp and high, others low and gradual; and these were the foothills, beyond which lay the vast seas of rolling prairie-land to the east, and the mountains to the west.

It was sundown, and the shadows were rapidly deepening

ing. Here, where all was so shut in by lofty hills, darkness came on apace. There was little of the rosy twilight of evening. What twilight there was was grey and forbidding; it was chill, too, with the cool breezes from the hill-tops.

A slight, bearded man was lounging on a rough bench outside the hotel. The greyness of the evening light did not improve his appearance, which was mean, unclean, uncouth. His hands were thrust in the tops of his trousers, which, stained and torn, terminated in a pair of heavily-spurred Wellington boots. His shirt looked as though it had never seen a wash-tub, and was a good match for the unwashedness of his face and beard. This idler was more than unwholesome to look at; he was wicked, with his mean face and narrow eyes, and a general expression of surly truculence.

He was watching the trail to the south-west with an intentness that shut out everything else going on about him. The laughter inside the building seemed to have no interest for him; the restlessness of the horses hitched to the tying-post a few yards away concerned him not at all. He was waiting, waiting; and it would have been hard to tell whether for friend or foe.

At last he stirred. He sat up and peered harder than ever into the deepening shadows along the trail. He had caught the sound of hoof-beats on the hard, sand road, and instantly his indolence vanished. He stood up as a horseman came into view; then, with a muttered curse, he flung himself back on the seat again. The man who now galloped up was not the man he was waiting for.

Dick Roydon drew rein sharply and flung out of the saddle. Seeing the idler on the bench he called out to him.

"Am I right for Chloride?" he inquired.

The stranger turned his sharp eyes on him.

"Eh?" His reply was as surly as his expression.

Roydon was dressed something after the fashion of the country. His trousers were of moleskin tucked into top boots, but he wore an ordinary tweed jacket and waistcoat which had an air of having been made for him. For the rest, he wore a soft shirt and prairie hat. It was the cut of his jacket that gave him away to the keen-eyed loungers.

There was no concealing the fact that he was "green" to the country.

"I'm making for Chloride," he explained.

"Guess you've struck it," said the man shortly, turning once more to his scrutiny of the distant trail.

"The town, I mean," Roydon went on, smiling pleasantly.

"Said you'd struck it."

The man spoke as though he begrudged the words.

"Oh!"

Roydon's smile died out, and he surveyed his informant coldly.

"And this—this is the hotel?" he went on, forcing the man's attention, as the sound of laughter reached him from within the building.

The other turned his beady eyes upon him.

"Straightways' saloon, I guess," he said, rising and moving off to the horses at the tying-post, with the evident intention of terminating the interview.

But Roydon followed him up. He secured his mare amongst the other horses and loosened the cinchas of his saddle.

"Straightways', I think you said?" he persisted, taking a keen delight in forcing the unwilling stranger to speech.

The ill-favoured face turned on him with a scowl.

"You ain't deaf!" the man cried.

Roydon shrugged and turned away. It was a movement calculated to aggravate, and the stranger came abreast of him in three strides.

"Guess you ain't satisfied," he cried, in an unmistakable tone.

Roydon hesitated. The hectoring bluster had roused his own somewhat hasty temper. He eyed the malignant face for a moment, then his answer came in his smoothest tones.

"Perfectly—thanks."

He passed on up to the hotel door. Outwardly he was calm, but his nerves were jangling, and his fingers itching for an active retort, but he realized the folly of quarrelling with a fully armed stranger in a strange country.

A roar of laughter greeted him as he entered the saloon.

It was deep, large, hearty, and it had the effect of soothing him at once, and, for the moment at least, his first acquaintance was forgotten.

The saloon was bigger than its exterior would have led one to suppose. The door opened into a sort of general room or office, which, in its turn, opened into a narrow, ill-lit bar. Beyond this, again, was another room where the guests took rough meals and played poker.

The laugh had occurred at the conclusion of a story which was told by a large, fair-bearded cattleman to a small group of idlers in the vicinity of the stove. It died out immediately their eyes fell upon him, and they watched him curiously. In spite of his recent encounter with the stranger outside, he smiled as he greeted them.

"Evening, gentlemen," he said cordially.

It was the burly cattleman who responded.

"Evenin', boss," he nodded, with a good-humoured grin.

The proprietor now emerged from the bar. He had heard the greeting and came to investigate. Roydon turned to him at once. He knew him by the dirty apron he was wearing.

"Can you put me up for the night—a bedroom?" he inquired. "And my horse?"

The other men were silent. They seemed to find something of unusual interest in the new-comer. His speech was not theirs. His clothes told them he was not of the foothills, nor even of the prairie.

Straightways' reply was doubtful at first. He, too, understood that this man was not of the men he was accustomed to.

"Bedroom?" he said, with a shake of the head, and a thoughtful rake at the roots of his unkempt beard. "Kind o' busy around these times; mostly full up. Guess I can shake you down with the hash-slinger. The bed's got room for two."

Roydon was perplexed.

"Hash-slinger?" he repeated questioningly.

"Why, yes. Kit's wholesome an' clean. Guess a United States marshal slep with Kit last night. Cookie's most ready to slep with anybody."

"Not a—a—female! cried Dick, aghast.

A general roar of laughter greeted his scared exclamation, and Straightways hastily proceeded to reassure him, his eyes twinkling in their deep sockets like the flicker of a candle flame in outer gloom.

"Why, no! Kit's mostly a man till the liquor's in him—then he's a hog."

There was relief but quick decision in Roydon's reply.

"I'm not sleeping with hogs, thanks," he said bluntly.

The hastiness of his reply seemed to damp the saloon-keeper's interest, for he replied with some coldness.

"Wal, ther's on'y blankets and floor space else," he said.

This suited the new-comer better, and he said so. Then, after inquiring as to his horse's comfort, and having been reassured on the point, and Straightways had turned back to his bar, he found himself left to further make the acquaintance of the other guests.

Dick Roydon was learning somewhat rapidly that here, on the fringe of society, he must not expect too much; in fact the best thing was to expect nothing and just take things as they came. He had already slept in a stable, and also on a billiard table, but he drew the line at sleeping with the cook of a wayside whisky booth.

As Straightways moved off, he turned to the men at the stove.

Who were they, these men gathered together at this roadside 'dive'? Where did they hail from? How did they live? He introduced himself, and was soon talking and laughing with them, and, bit by bit, he received answers to all his speculations. He gathered that the majority were mining men of a sort; some were cattlemen from distant ranges. He learned their names, too, in the half-hour before supper. The large man with the fair beard was Steve, of the "Bar V's," a cattleman from the hills, a good-humoured, hard-swearing giant, who quickly captured his fancy. There was Dave, a prospector, a little dried-out, elderly man, with quick, keen eyes, and long, tobacco-stained grey beard. There was Ute, a man who suggested drinks early in the proceedings, with leering eyes grinning meaningly in the new man's direction, and who came from the prairie, where he earned a precarious living by "broncho-busting." Then there was "Black" Lal, another cattleman, a spread-eagle American who had

never been outside his native State of Montana, and who had a better knowledge of the prairie saloons than he had of anything to do with his country's position in the world's affairs. Then another, Bat Nelson, a small farmer in the district, on whose land it was said a small "strike" had been made, and who, in consequence, had advanced in personal importance amongst his acquaintances. There were several others of a more or less like condition, for of such were Straightways' customers made up. They foregathered here, using the place as a news exchange, and a common ground for recreation, and it was through such gatherings that Chloride retained its place on the map, and incidentally yielded old Straightways a modest fortune.

The supper was not delicate, neither was the service anything worth speaking about, but the food was ample. It was hash—two sorts, dry hash and wet hash. This, with a decoction of *boiled* tea, and crackers and cheese to follow, was the menu for which each guest paid twenty-five cents.

After supper Roydon found his way to the bar with the rest. His companion was Steve, of the "Bar V's." He had been drawn to this man from the first; his burly figure, bursting with physical strength and health, his face beaming with good-nature out of a tangle of fair hair, his deep-throated laughter, were things which appealed to him as something to be thankful for.

Roydon had casually mentioned that his destination was Dyke Hole, where he was to seek one Marc Osler. The giant's face first broadened its smile, then it collapsed into a seriousness almost grotesque.

"Dyke Hole?" he said slowly, in the manner of a man gathering together a world of thought. "Dyke Hole's one o' them places you can't describe in ord'n'ry langwidge. It needs a heap o' cuss words of a delicate natur'. It ain't got no bizness anywheres anyways. Which I mean it's jest a funeral o' what might 'a' bin an' never didn't. It's the sort o' place you'd dump a naggin' wife in, ef you wanted to be quit of her—she'd take right on an' die o' dry rot. Guess I'd hate to chance things in Dyke Hole wi' a wad o' two cents in my pocket-book. They'd do me up fer it—they're that pore."

Steve emphasized his words with a thump on the bar that made the glasses rattle.

"Well, that doesn't fit with what I've heard," said Roydon. "At Anaconda I heard they were great sportsmen. Heard they went in for cricket——"

"Cricket! A-a-h!" The giant's face suddenly dropped. He turned to his gin-and-water and gulped it down. Then he faced his companion with an added earnestness.

"Guess you ain't figgerin' on cricket any, boss?" he asked funereally.

Roydon shook his head.

"No. But cricket in a little mining village? It speaks volumes."

Steve shrugged his great shoulders.

"They've nigh filled the graveyard with—cricket," he said heavily.

"Accidents?"

"Guns!"

"Oh!" Dick whistled.

"It's the cur'usest game," Steve went on. "Guess you ain't played it any?"

Roydon smiled as he hailed the saloon-keeper to replenish their glasses.

"Yes. I'm very keen on cricket. I was rather hoping to get a game when I heard they went in for it. You see, when I've found Osler——"

"Ah!" Steve broke in, while he watched Straightways refill the glasses. "Guess I'd kep right on an' find him. Cricket ain't natteral for Dyke Hole. They're jest land sharks an' pirates. Ther's on'y one feller ther' fit fer cricket in Dyke Hole; that's the sheriff. Y' see, he's the quickest man on the end of a gun around these parts. Here's 'How'!"

Steve drank half his liquor at a gulp, and then set the glass down again. Roydon followed his example, and then let his eyes roam over the assembled company. They came back to the cattleman as the deep voice began again.

"You ain't goin' to find Osler in Dyke Hole. He don't never git around that bum lay-out."

"Where, then?" Roydon inquired, pocketing the change Straightways handed to him. "Spawn City?"

"Sure." Steve emptied his glass. The spirit was

warming and he became confidential. "An' see right here, youngster. I'd jest lie low 'bout that silver boss around here. He's the big thing in silver, an' a mighty hard sport. Y' see ther's most every sort o' cuss butts in here, an' their ways ain't all 'Straightways.'" He chuckled over the pleasantry. "I ain't puttin' no bluff on you, but—you bein' in wi' a feller like Osler, who's worth a million or so, an' bein' free wi' the dollars yourself—why, ther's hogs around this lay-out as might find it agreeable to thin your wad out some. Ther's a husky gang up in the hills—Kit's gang. 'Six-shooter' Kit—not the hash-slinger. An' they're right on to the silver crowd at Spawn City."

"Yes, I've heard of that, too," murmured Roydon thoughtfully.

"I'm glad—real glad. You'll likely kep an eye peeled."

The man was in earnest, and he seemed to feel a certain relief in having warned this new-comer of the possibilities of his surroundings. A pause followed while Steve glanced around him. He had done what he felt to be his duty. Now it was time to seek entertainment in the way of a hand at "Draw."

Everybody was talking. Those in the bar seemed to have settled down for the night, and, by the noise proceeding from it, the poker-room was already well patronized.

It was a strange scene to Roydon's unaccustomed eyes, but one of deep interest. He had a strong predilection for the rougher sides of life. It was the instincts of the fighter in him, a reflex of the life ingrained into him in his early days, before he was brought and educated into civilization by old George Raymon.

Suddenly he gripped his companion's arm. His first acquaintance in Chloride had just entered the bar and was slouching through the crowd.

"Who's that just come in?" he asked, a wave of antagonism sweeping over him as he spoke. This man had ruffled him more than he knew.

"That? That's Snakes—Snakes Addy," replied Steve, staring at the man without the smallest pretence of doing otherwise.

"Ah! And who is he?" Roydon thought the name fitted well.

Steve shrugged.

"Snakes? Snakes is one o' them hogs as don't fancy wallerin' in their own pens," he said contemptuously. "Wher' he gits around ther's mostly trouble. Guess he mostly has to do with it, an' wriggles clear of it. He's a cur—but he's mean. He's one o' Kit's gang. Met him any?"

Dick was about to reply when an interruption occurred. Dave, the little dried-up prospector, detached himself from his group and came over with several others trailing in his wake. He was looking at a photograph he held in his hand, and his shrivelled up face was grinning like an antiquated ape.

"Here she is, Steve," he cried, in a high, cracked voice. "You've never seen her, have you? Wal, that's her! That's Kit!" He held out the picture for Steve's inspection.

"Kit?" exclaimed the cattleman, reaching out and grabbing the picture unceremoniously, and grinning back at the ape-faced man. "Wher'd you git it? Kit? Gee!"

His final exclamation came as he glanced at the portrait. He looked at it intently, a great admiration growing in his eyes.

"Kit?" he exclaimed at last. "I don't believe it. That's a leddy."

Dick was craning over to look. He beheld a beautiful, large-eyed, dark-faced woman, clad in a light shirt-waist and stiff linen riding-skirt. She was decidedly a woman, for her figure was full and ripe, and magnificently developed. Her large, dark eyes looked out from beneath a wealth of hair, loosely dressed, surmounted by a wide-brimmed prairie-hat. Her eyes were bold, nor was there the slightest touch of coquetry in them. It was a face that spoke of indomitable courage rather than any of the "badness" popularly attributed to her.

"Six-shooter ' Kit, eh?" he murmured.

"Kit?—no! Pshaw!" Steve held the picture out at arm's length. "I tell you that's a leddy. That ain't no 'man-eater'."

"That's Kit," asserted Dave stubbornly.

"Wher'd you get it?" questioned Steve shrewdly. "Mebbe she give it you!" He laughed boisterously at his own sarcasm.

"You're kind o' smart," sneered Dave. "I picked it up over at Lone Brake Rise, aside the trail. Say, look on the back. Ther's writtin' ther'."

Steve turned the card over. There was some writing in a bold, but clumsy hand. The giant held it close up to his eyes. He was unaccustomed to reading, and the ill-spelt words required close examination.

Dave urged him triumphantly.

"Read it out to the company," he cried, chuckling.

By this time Steve had mastered the four-lined doggerel written there, and he read the words out.

"This ain't no dogone epitaph,
It's jest a rhyme wot's pretty rough,
Kit's sed it wi' a mockin' laff
The man's my man wot calls my bluff."

(signed T. J.)"

"Say, that's Tombstone's!" cried Steve in amazement.

"Sure," replied Dave, still grinning. "Ther' ain't nobody to rhyme like him. He's a po't, sure. Guess that's his pictur'—an' it's Kit," he added emphatically.

"Looks like."

Steve looked up and caught the gimlet eyes of Snakes Addy fixed on his group.

"Ho, Snakes," he cried. "Here's a pictur' o' Kit—leastways Dave sez so."

"Pictur' o' Kit?" the ruffian sneered, slouching towards the speaker. "Pshaw! Tho't you'd suthin' fancy!"

The man's whole manner was indescribably offensive. Roydon again felt his antagonism rise. He had never encountered any one who could so ruffle him. His appearance was the least offensive about him. By this time the whole bar had become interested.

"Wal, ain't she fancy?" protested Dave, with a facetious grin.

"Fancy? Tchah! That durned——!"

The filthy epithet sent a rush of hot blood surging to Roydon's brain, and an unreasoning fury took hold of him. He glanced at the faces about him, and on these, hardened as they were, he read cold looks of disapproval. Dave was staring at the picture, but the grin had left his parchment-like features. Steve's eyes were flinty, as he, too, kept them fixed on the portrait. There seemed to be an ominous

restraint upon everybody. The sudden silence only aggravated Roydon's feelings, and words leapt to his lips before he had time to consider them. He turned to Steve, then his gaze passed to the man, for whom he had such an instinctive dislike, and remained challenging him.

"That seems to me a most unnecessary remark about any woman," he said sharply.

"Eh?"

It was Addy's voice that broke the silence that followed. Nor was there any mistaking the insolent meaning.

"You aren't deaf," Roydon retorted, quick as a flash, remembering the man's earlier words to him. Then he went on, with biting emphasis, "I said it was a most unnecessary remark to make about any woman. I'll go further. You're a low brute to have made it!"

Roydon's natural pugnacity was fully aroused now. He wanted a chance to hurt this uncouth brute, and intended to make one. He did not know the country he was in, he did not know its ways, or he might have restrained himself. A deadly silence fell upon the entire bar. Then Snakes moved a step nearer, with a hand resting on one of the guns at his waist.

"You'll take that back!" he cried, in a tense, hoarse voice, his face livid with passion.

Every fibre in Roydon's body was alert.

"I'll take nothing back," he cried. And as he spoke his left fist shot out with the lightning rapidity of a trained boxer, and with all the power of his muscular body behind it. It was a rising blow that caught the man's chin and fairly lifted him off his feet. Addy fell in a heap on the floor.

It was all so sudden, so unexpected. No one attempted to interfere. Steve looked on in amazement. He was unused to any fist play. Old Dave, still hugging his picture, edged away as Roydon, following up his blow, stood ready for the man to rise. In his inexperience he intended to thrash Snakes into a better frame of mind, but how far he might have succeeded was a question never to be answered. Snakes moved, but whether to rise or not no one could say, for at that instant there was a slight commotion amongst the onlookers, and the lean, tall figure of a stranger suddenly dropped upon the prostrate

man at his first move. There was a slight scuffle on the ground, then the stranger rose and stood clear.

Without a moment's hesitation he addressed himself to Dave, while Roydon, wholly perplexed and still furious, kept his eyes on Snakes.

"Say, I'll ast you for my pictur'," he demanded, in an easy voice which utterly belied the lean, hawk-like visage and wild eyes he turned upon the old prospector.

Dave handed the picture over without demur. There was something compelling in the quiet of the man's tone.

"I 'lows it's yours, Tombstone," he said amiably; "ther's the po'try."

"Jest so."

It was all the reply Tombstone vouchsafed as he took the photograph and slipped it into his coat pocket. He then turned upon the author of the trouble.

"Young feller," he said authoritatively, "you're goin' to git right out o' this bar—quick. Ther's goin' to be no shootin' done this night."

Then he turned to Straightways.

"Hustle him right off," he went on. "Give him some blankets, an' look to it ther' ain't no racket."

But Roydon made no move. He had not yet settled with his man.

"That hound's going to—apologize. He's going to take back what he said about that woman whoever she is," he cried angrily.

Snakes had risen to his feet, and stood skulking in the background.

For a moment Tombstone's wild eyes flashed in their cavernous sockets. Then the shadow of a smile flickered about his thin lips.

"Guess his apology's right here," he said quietly, holding up Addy's revolver.

Roydon never quite knew how or why, but his anger seemed to die out abruptly. He realized nothing of the enormity of his folly, he simply felt himself under the sway of this stranger as everybody else seemed to be, and, before he knew where he was, he found himself in a little back room, which served Straightways for a sleeping apartment.

Here he was left to his own reflections. At first

they were not pleasant. He chafed at the thought that this stranger, with the madman's eyes, had cheated him of his due. Then, as he remembered the revolver taken from Snakes, he began to realize that the man had acted for his good; perhaps, even, he had saved his life. This thought made him more easy, if not wholly content, for he felt that his submission had been cowardly, and he had allowed himself to be treated very like a school-boy.

He flung himself on the blankets Straightways had provided him with, and gave himself up to thought. After a while he became less aggrieved. He even found himself speculating calmly as to the identity of the stranger, who, he now had come to consider, had done him such good service. Was he one of——? Yes, that must be it.

Tombstone's tall figure rose before his mind's eye. He saw the great sunken eyes that had such a way of rolling in their sockets. He recalled the clean-shaven lantern jaws, the great, prominent, beak-like nose, the compressed lips that left only a line across his face when his mouth was shut. Yes, that was it. He must be a desperado of Kit's gang. Very likely her lover. He had heard the trouble, and—— But sleep was creeping upon him. He got no further with his speculations, for his eyes closed, and a few moments later he slept.

CHAPTER III

THE SHERIFF EXPLAINS A FEW MATTERS

THE next morning Dick Roydon found himself on the trail for Spawn City. He had accepted Steve's advice and abandoned Dyke Hole, realizing that his foster-father's instructions were given more as a help than as his expressed desire. Dyke Hole could wait until after he had found the old man's one-time friend, Marc Osler, who lived in Spawn City.

In the sober light of morning he felt glad to be away from Chloride. His brief stay there still clung to the back cells of memory like a nightmare. He felt annoyed with himself at the part he had played. That he should have allowed himself to be inveigled into nothing more nor less than a pothouse brawl he felt to be degrading. It was a bad start in the work he had before him. Without a doubt, for the future, he would keep a tighter hold on his temper and fighting propensities.

He smiled as he thought of the urgent manner in which Straightways had got him off before daylight. The old saloon-keeper had been in a terrible fluster to be rid of him. He had refused to shelter him a moment longer than was necessary to give him breakfast and feed his mare. He remembered his half angry and wholly anxious explanation.

There was going to be no murder done there, if he knew it. If he, Roydon, wanted trouble he'd find it in plenty after last night, but he wasn't going to have him find it in Chloride, at least not in his house, which was respectable, if unpretentious. He would find the trail far better suited for shooting purposes, and if, he advised him, his mare could travel any, he'd suggest he put her along for Spawn City at her best pace.

Straightways seemed to know his country. He cited a string of shootings for his guest's benefit which had all resulted more or less fatally, induced by far less provocation than had been the case last night. He must thank his "greenness" for saving him. But for that no one would have interfered, and certainly not Tombstone Joe, who was, himself, partial to a forceful ending to a legitimate quarrel. He, Roydon, must admit that he had given especial provocation, and when two "gen'lemen git busy over a woman" it was customary in the foothills to see it through in a "gen'lemanly way."

Thus forced, and with the taunt of his greenness still ringing in his ears, Roydon had reluctantly taken his departure in the morning twilight. He hated complying with his host's request, but, feeling that, in the eyes of the foothills' society, his conduct had been somewhat out of order, he deemed that he owed the man some slight reparation. So he expressed his regret, handed over a liberal *douceur*—and departed.

The solitude of the trail was sufficiently new to him to quickly charm any unpleasant thoughts away. He revelled in its seductiveness. On either hand was a sea of waving, tawny, weed-like grass; a billowy carpet, fragrant and soothing. The low hills, like the great motionless, wind-swept rollers of a vast ocean, rose and fell on every hand, and beyond were the mountains, an icy rampart hedging him off from the giant forests of the western slopes. Before him the trail wound its way along until it lost itself among the hills, which were not yet fully revealed in the brightening twilight of dawn. There was not a tree in sight, not a house, not a living creature; all was grass-land.

It was a vast, silent, delicious world to his inexperienced eyes, and he felt glad that last night's affair had not been permitted to reach its doubtless logical conclusion. It was very good to be alive.

It was just as the morning twilight was giving way to the rosy sunrise that his happy mood received a nasty shock. While yet he was pondering on the charm of solitude, the silence was rudely broken. A shout split the air with startling effect, and, at the same time, he became unpleasantly aware of hoof beats on the road

behind him. He turned in the saddle, and, in the dim light, beheld the figure of a horseman in hot pursuit of him. The horse was galloping furiously, and he had little doubt as to its rider's identity. He readily guessed him to be his man of the night before, Snakes Addy, and he read his purpose in the furious pace at which he was riding.

There was only one course to pursue, so Roydon kept on his way. He was perfectly cool and collected. He had already learned the necessity for a steady nerve in this country, where life seemed to be held so cheaply. At the same time he in no way under-estimated his danger.

Thanks to the affair of the previous night he was armed now. Old Straightways, on his departure, had thrust the gun Tombstone had taken from Snakes into his hand, when he gave him his message of warning. Now he drew it from his pocket and examined the chambers carefully. It was of large calibre and fully loaded.

At that moment another hail came from the pursuer. He was nearer now, and the angry meaning of his summons could not be mistaken. Then, without further warning, came a surprise for which Roydon was wholly unprepared, and one which sent the hot blood surging through his veins. The man fired a shot at him and the bullet flew past his head; another shot and another followed, and each bullet whistled past him so dangerously adjacent that he could almost feel the rush of air as they sped. All attempt at coolness vanished at once. His temper rose with a rush, and swept caution and everything else to the winds. He pulled up and swung his horse about to face his adversary. At the same instant the man's harsh tones again reached him.

"Will you yank that durned plug up, you a'mighty fool, or must I blow your carkis to hell?"

Roydon's anger was no less than the other's. He sat ready, gripping his gun with the nervous clutch of a man who intends to use it. At least Snakes should get its contents before—

Roydon had him covered, finger on trigger, as he came up. But it was not Snakes. It was his benefactor of the night before, Tombstone Joe, and, as he drew abreast, his manner was the last thing in contempt for the gun threatening him.

"Say," he exclaimed angrily, as Dick's gun lowered helplessly before him, "there ain't no heap o' foolishness equal to the feller that can't see when the drop is on him. Another haf minute o' your mulishness an' likely I'd have sent you huntin' a full-sized halo. I want you."

Joe's hawk-like face was flushed to a russet hue, and his jet black eyes rolled furiously in their sockets. There was a ferocity in his whole bearing that could not have failed to have effect had Roydon been less angry himself.

"Well, here I am, and what of it?" he cried, his face flaming with passion. "You did me a service last night, but I don't see how it gives you the right to attack an inoffensive traveller from behind. You are a coward and a bully, and I've dealt with such people before. If you had the pluck to put down that gun, and stand up to it like a man, I've give you the thrashing you——"

Tombstone snapped like an angry wolf.

"Eh?" he snarled, till his strong white teeth showed bare to the gums. "Say, get right off'n that plug, mister! I'm yearning' for that lickin'—guess, I'm sure bustin' for it!"

He was dismounting before he had finished speaking, but Dick reached the ground first and threw off his coat. Tombstone made no other preparations than to sling his reins over the horn of Dick's saddle, and the next moment the two men were at it like tigers.

The scene that ensued is impossible of description. Even to the most interested onlooker that fight must have been a mere blurr. Tombstone never for a moment gave his opponent an opportunity for that science of which he was a master. He was like a wildcat. His arms and legs seemed to be everywhere at once, and Dick was put to it to adopt the same tactics. They were a whirling mass of waving arms, and more blows missed their object than got home, while those that did were delivered like the blows of a sledge hammer.

In ten minutes their faces were like raw beef, and their clothes looked as if they had been used to wipe out a slaughter house. It was a scene of merciless hammering, colossal endurance and bulldog tenacity. They fought as two men rarely fight, rarely have the courage to fight.

There was no let up for breath and recuperation. It was a fight to the finish, in which both must do all they knew, and all opportunity gave them the chance to do. Clinch and fall, butt and hack; anything, everything. There were no rules or referees; neither wanted them. Their desire was to hurt, hurt anyhow.

The fight lasted an hour and more. It lasted so long that neither had strength enough left to deliver a blow that would have hurt a babe. Once Roydon got his right arm free, as they lay on the ground, and sought to deliver a terrific smash on Tombstone's upturned face. The result was that his fist fell helplessly on the bruised flesh, and they lay motionless. Then Joe sought to retaliate on the other's defenceless nose. There was no effect. Then, as if by mutual consent, their holds relaxed and they fell apart, and lay gasping on the sandy trail.

There was a long pause after that.

At last Tombstone stirred, and a similar movement occurred in Roydon's direction. It seemed, even in their last extremity of exhaustion, that neither would give way. Joe sat up, and, simultaneously, Roydon rose to a sitting posture. Joe edged off on to the lank grass at the side of the trail. Roydon moved in the same direction. Then they both looked for their horses. The animals were near by; the mare was quietly grazing, but the other was standing contemplating its master with mildly reproachful eyes. It seemed to be expressing a sorrowful regret for such an unseemly brawl. Shooting it understood. It had reason to, its hindquarters showed that, but this—this was a terrible come-down.

Just then Roydon glanced round at his antagonist. Their eyes met; Joe's were staring out of the blackest setting conceivable. The fury of both had passed, and though, at the moment, their features were incapable of expressing it, there was a smile lurking somewhere in their thoughts.

They stared at each other for some time in solemn silence, then Joe deliberately pulled out a plug of chewing tobacco and bit a piece off. He threw the remainder across to his adversary, who, shaking his head, returned it with a pitiful attempt at finding an outlet for his smile.

"Guess we've had a real dandy time," said Joe at last.

Then he sat munching his tobacco like some reflective, but disfigured steer chewing its cud.

Roydon tenderly wiped the blood from his face with a handkerchief.

"Yes," he said after a while, vainly endeavouring to staunch the persistent bleeding of a cut lip.

The sun was rising, and the hum of the rousing insect world had begun about them. Joe shifted his position and stretched his aching limbs.

"Guess you can sure scrap," he murmured thoughtfully.

"Ditto," retorted Roydon amiably.

"Meanin' 'same'?" inquired Joe simply.

The other nodded, and they relapsed into silence.

"There ain't nothin' so foolheaded as scrappin'," observed Joe presently. "But it makes you feel good," he added as an afterthought, and with a satisfied sigh as he examined his lacerated knuckles.

"Makes you feel glad you could do it, and sorry you did it," Roydon observed.

He was carefully removing the gravel from his wounded features. At last he gave up the operation and lay back on the grass.

"You said you wanted me," he began later, lying full length, with his hands pillowing his head. "Perhaps you have time to explain—now."

"Why, yes." Joe followed the example and stretched himself out. "Steve, of the 'bar V's,' told me you were a cricket sport. A real daddy at the game, reg'lar top-notch, ain't never been beat, can lick creation at it. That so?"

"I think I'm useful at it," Roydon replied modestly. "But——"

"Jest so. Wal, we've got cricket hereabouts. I'm boss of the cricket in Dyke Hole. Y' see, I'm the sheriff of Dyke Hole county, so I run most of the sport lyin' around. Guess we're goin' to lick hell out of Spawn City day after t'morrow. You're comin' right in to play with our boys."

"Am I? I'm going to Spawn City."

The sheriff shot a quick look at the lounging figure of his companion.

THE SHERIFF EXPLAINS A FEW MATTERS 29

"Guess you're coming right in to Dyke Hole. Y' see, if you git around Spawn City you'll be playin' agin us," he finished up naively.

"Well?" Roydon's smile was distinct enough now.

"Mebbe you don't take the argyment?"

"I can't say I——"

But the sheriff cut him short.

"No? Wal, it's this aways. The boys in Dyke Hole are death on sport." The man's restless eyes became motionless, and his manner retrospective. "We used to favour baseball, but that notion went out when Passon Ferrers, our referee, got hurt. Y' see, he was one o' them fellers who guessed they couldn't but act squar', an' got mulish on the point. It's not easy pleasin' all the boys, actin' squar'—wal, he died, an' his epitaph was writ. That event cast a nasty gloom on the boys, so I fixed it so Bulrush Moe was to hand out free drinks, to brighten things some. Guess they brightened, an' I had a deal to do kep'in' 'em off Moe for waterin' his liquors down. But that's beside the point. We gave Passon a jewel of a funeral, an' a fi' dollar coffin in ash. Some o' the boys wanted it red pine, but I guessed it was too easy burnin', an' didn't seem squar' by a right actin' man wi' notions.

"Wal, we took right on to cricket after that. The boys kick some at the runnin', but we've fixed that with a rule so no feller can count anything 'less he hits the ball to the boundary. That rule has its points. Y' see, them boys fieldin' can set right ther' an' kep an eye so no monkey work goes on around the stumps, an' ther' ain't no sort o' argyment 'bout runs an' things. I'd say the whole thing's sure easier than baseball. We ain't had a heap o' trouble since 'Dyke Hole' Bill winged Bob Gauvin nasty fer throwin'. We're mighty pertickler 'bout throwin'. It was a daddy shot o' Bill's, but he hadn't no call to make it. Y' see, I was referee, an' Bill was standin' 'way out 'long off.' I can't rightly tell how I missed that throw. Mebbe, seein' I was on Bob's side, I was watchin' the fellers battin' too close. Wal, Bill see it—we was all fielding, you understand—an' he winged him. It was a mean advantage, for Bill being 'long off,' Bob couldn't see he'd the drop on him. But

Bill was allus mean. Howsum, ther's fellers as never ought to git success. It give Bill notions, an' I had to sort him out. 'Tain't no use wearin' frills 'less you can pay the laundry.

"Wal, wot I was comin' to was 'bout them Spawn City nigglers. Now, last year we played 'em, an' we sure give 'em a dandy game. But, y' see, they've had trouble roundin' up eleven players since. They're a bum lot in Spawn City. Howsum, it's fixed we play 'em day after t'morrow, an' they reckon they're goin' to lick us. They're bringin' all the toughs o' the district, an' imported talent they ken get their hands on. So y' see when Steve put me wise you was makin' Spawn City, I jest jumped an' hit the trail."

Tombstone paused to expectorate. Then he fixed his wild, blackened eyes on Roydon's picturesque features.

"Now, see here, mister," he went on in his convincing fashion, "I'm a mighty reas'n'ble sort o' feller that ain't givin' to gassin' around, an' I'm sure death on Mission meetings, so what I says goes. You're comin' right in to Dyke Hole, an' you're goin' to lick hell out o' them Spawn City hoboos. You're goin' to chaw them hoodlams right up till they can't tell cricket from dry hash, an' we're goin' to see you right. But," and here this wild keeper of the peace laid a hand on one of the guns bristling at his waist, "ef you get mule notions, an' can't see the ad-vantages I'm offerin' in this deal, we'll—we'll jest get busy again right now."

The audacity of the man's demands was superb. Roydon knew he meant every word of them, too. His personality was convincing, let alone his manner. For a second he felt like flatly refusing and defying him; but it was only a brief return of his natural obstinacy, which passed as swiftly as it came. This man's sporting instincts appealed to him, and there was something in the situation that made him want to laugh. From the latter he refrained, however, for two distinct and excellent reasons. The process would have been decidedly painful, in the first place; secondly, it would have been dangerous. On the whole he felt himself warm towards this lawless law officer, and rather desired to see more of him. So, as he didn't care a great deal whether his destination were Dyke

Hole or Spawn City, he decided to accept the somewhat doubtful proposition, and go whither this man chose to lead.

But the sheriff had observed the smile which Dick could not repress, and resented it.

"You're laffin' a heap," he cried fiercely. "Guess this ain't no side show, and I ain't no freak——" Then he broke off as though he felt his last remark might just then be open to debate. "An' you're comin' in to Dyke Hole," he added, before the other could speak.

Roydon raised himself on his elbow.

"Why, yes," he replied, "I should think I am. You are much too enterprising to be refused," he added dryly.

The sheriff's whole expression lit up.

"Sir," he said warmly, "you're sure a man of elegant taste."

"Not at all," Roydon grinned. "I like good company, and am fond of sport."

Tombstone Joc eased himself. The hard earth had found out some tender spots in his ribs.

"Wal," he said, as he settled himself again, "I guess Dyke Hole's li'ble to give most any feller good sport. We're death on it. I'm most keen to play myself some, but refereein' is a delicate situation an' needs a feller of authority. Bein' sheriff it comes nateral fer me to do it. Then y' see, most o' Spawn City are up agin the law someways, so when I sez 'out' they mostly hunts their holes. I've heerd tell as they've a noo-fangled notion in Spawn City for referees to wear some sort o' dude, white coat fixin', so's they don't git mussed up wi' the boys playin'—that's what *they* sez. But I don't guess I'm yearnin' to cover my guns with no fool thing like that. White's a dandy fine mark for them onedicated hogs. I ain't takin' any kind o' bluff from Spawn City."

There was a vicious snap to the sheriff's last remark that made his companion eye him keenly. The wild eyes were brooding thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't think any one is likely to try and bluff you, sheriff," he said seriously.

"Not if they have any savvee," he answered coolly.

He paused. Then he went on slowly—

"But, you see, the boys around here are sure ready to

bluff any feller. It's all bluff; bluff from top to bottom. It's jest the whole system of life—is bluff. A man jest bluffs himself out of the cradle an' on to the floor, he jest bluffs his legs into carryin' him around when he gits sick o' crawlin', then he gits to it an' yeps, an' bluffs his mamma into carryin' him. Yes, sir, 'tain't no diff'rence, young or old. We jest start right in to bluff somebody from the first, if it's on'y to yep when we're brought into the world as if we hat-ed it, an' wa' kickin' to git out of it quick. Look at a feller when he gits to it courtin'. Ain't that the biggest bluff of all? He gits right alongside some female gal, an' he pitches yarns 'bout himself sich as 'ud bring the blush of shame to the features of George Washington, an' make Ananias hate himself. He makes her believe he's jest what every feller of sense knows he ain't, an' she, bluffin' herself like mad, bluffs herself into believin' she believes that he believes she believes what nobody else believes about him—that he's fillin' her up wi' truth! Then the kids come along and he's sure got to bluff harder than ever. Kiddies take a heap of bluffin'. When he's got a litter of six, it jest means he's got to bluff six times as hard. An' so he goes on till Death gits around. You can't bluff Death, which is the reason you've got to get off the earth. When you're fixed that way other folks come along an' bluff you. Your friends git around an' tell you they're a heap sorry; your kiddies come right along an' make you feel you've treat 'em bully, an' acted squar' by 'em; the gal you've bluffed into marryin' you gits around an' snivels, an' bluffs you you've been a real dandy husband to her; the doctor bluffs you you ain't goin' to die, an' the passon comes an' talks kingdom come, an' bluffs you you're gettin' right ther'. Then Death gits the drop on you, an' you go right down an' out. Everything's bluff, sir, till you git up agin the muzzle of a gun. Then your thumbs git up quick, an' you bluff yourself that bluff is one of them things you'd hate like pizen to hand out to a blind mule. Which I sez life's sure one durned long bluff!"

The sheriff rose to his feet after his final pronouncement, and moved towards the horses. Roydon at once followed his example, and, in a minute, they were again in the saddle and riding in the direction of Dyke Hole.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHERIFF AND THE SILVER KING

THE sheriff of Dyke Hole County occupied an unique position in the district that acknowledged his authority. It was necessary for him to be a man of parts, for his office was the sole authority, in a community so lawless that only invincible nerve and reckless courage could hope to keep any semblance of order in it.

The history of the Western States is writ large with the names of such men as Tombstone Joe, and men talk of them still with a certain awe and pride. In many instances these old-time sheriffs were lawless enough in themselves. But that didn't matter. All that was asked of them was to keep order in others, and this it was their pride to do. It was necessary for a peace officer to be a "terror"; he must have a reputation for the ready use of a gun; in fact, he must be a man who owed his continued existence to the neatness and dispatch with which he could shoot up his foes. In the days gone by the best, or, at least, the most effective peace officers were undoubtedly the greatest desperadoes.

Now, Tombstone Joe was only known to Dyke Hole County in his official capacity; that is to say, no one seemed to know whence he came, or anything of his past. He was elected by some one, but nobody seemed to know who. He simply appeared in the village one day and took up his position as sheriff, when his predecessor fell a victim to a celebrated "man-killer," and got shot up in a bar-room in Spawn City.

He had no record to herald him, no reputation to inspire confidence and awe, and Dyke Hole looked askance. Therefore it quickly became necessary to establish himself; a matter which he proceeded to do in the most

business-like fashion. He put after his predecessor's murderer hot-foot. He camped on his trail and never left it until he had hunted him down, captured him alive and brought him to Dyke Hole, and hanged him with his own hands, just to show his contempt for men of his kidney.

Dyke Hole looked on in silent wonder. Dyke Hole was impressed, as he intended it should be. But Dyke Hole was not ready to knuckle down easily. The sheriff realized this, and on that memorable occasion made a short speech which had the effect of sending Dyke Hole off home feeling that the new sheriff was right, that he knew his business, and, what is more, could and would execute it.

Tombstone, if sometimes graphic in his language, was always eminently to the point. He stood at the foot of the tree, and, like a circus showman, pointed out the solemnly twisting corpse, moving like a joint of meat on roasting-jack, suspended from the bough above him.

"Gents," he said, in a voice just raised sufficiently for everybody to hear, "this yer tree is the swellest thing fer hangin' 'toughs' on I've ever located. Guess it wa'an't easy to find. Y' see, it needs to have a heap of boughs an' things, an' be good an' strong, since I'm li'ble to have to do a heap of hangin' round these parts. I jest want to tell you gents right now that I've come to Dyke Hole to hang every mother's son who pulls a gun illegal, or takes a feller with his back turned. And," he added, in the midst of a deathly silence, "I'm goin' to do it."

In those few words he convinced the entire community, notwithstanding there were at least fifty pair of guns present. Dyke Hole realized at once that they were dealing with no ordinary man, and Tombstone quickly gave them any further proof they needed by closing the saloon on the following Sunday, and refusing to allow any game of cards to be played in any public place of entertainment on the seventh day of the week.

These high-handed measures aroused considerable resentment which was not long before it took active form. But Tombstone was ready, he was expecting it. An armed deputation waited on him for the purpose of giving him half-an-hour to get out of town. They had come to

his hut to deliver their ultimatum. As they entered, and before a word was spoken, he had the whole lot covered with a brace of heavy "sixes." There were eight of them, and he made each man, one at a time, lay his guns on the table, and then move to the far side of the room. After that he sent them packing, forcibly assuring them that in future he would treat them with less courtesy, and promptly issued a proclamation, that, henceforward, any deputations calculated to interfere with good order and the execution of his duty would be treated as open rebellion against the United States Government, and the leaders would be shot on sight.

But the new sheriff had other sides to his character of a far less desperate nature. He had moments when he was anything but the wild "terror" which he displayed the moment his authority was defied. But he was very careful when and where he allowed these traits to appear. He knew his people too well to give them an inch more rope than he could comfortably control.

Just now he was engaged in a conflict with a notorious desperado called "Tricksy" James, believed to be one of the celebrated family of that name. James was probably one of the worst scoundrels in the country, but he possessed a daring of the most picturesque type. The murders accredited to him were many, and stage robbery was his pastime. He haunted the hills and the highroads over which the various stages plied. In the public mind he was associated with "Six-shooter" Kit, who, with her gang of stage robbers, also had her home in the hills. But whether they worked together or not no one could say with any certainty. The sheriff himself didn't know, and cared less. He meant having this man for his credit's sake, and had expressed his intention of getting him before the summer was out.

But "Tricksy" was no idle sobriquet. James had earned it during a long period spent in wily eludings of the vigilants. He was a man of infinite resource and a desperate courage, almost equal to that of the sheriff, and, on hearing Joe's promise to hang him before the summer was out, had promptly sent a message to say he'd "shoot the sheriff to hell before the mosquitoes went."

The message warmed Joe towards him. Here was a worthy foeman, a man after his own heart. Here was a man a cut above the usual run of curs he had found in the criminal ranks. He was worthy of his lead, and he metaphorically smacked his lips and set to work.

It was this work he was engaged upon now, when he fell in with Roydon at Chloride, and it was the matters relating to this desperado that had brought about the wayside encounter. Therefore, after having settled his dispute with Roydon, and having seen his young friend well on his way to Dyke Hole, Tombstone, with that singleness of purpose which was always his, continued on his way to complete his work.

His way took him across country to Spawn City, where he spent several hours in visiting the many saloons and gambling houses. Finally he turned his patient horse towards the hill at the western end of the town on which the prim, grey stone offices of the Lucretia mine stood.

This place was at once the residence and offices of Marc Osler, Spawn City's millionaire. Here the silver king was to be found at all times day and night, winter and summer, for, in spite of his great wealth, work held him at all times. He rarely absented himself from the mines, and certainly never took a holiday. He preferred to live the frugal life of a hard-living western township, where men only came at the call of the almighty dollar, and took care never to bring their wives and daughters with them, that participate in the luxury to which his wealth entitled him. He had no yearning for anything but the practical pursuit of wealth.

His was a curious personality and one which brought him, if little friendship, at least an infinite respect from his fellow workers. The man of strong, selfish purpose rarely has the knack of forming friendships. Marc Osler made no appeal to any of the gentler feelings. Men regarded him as something in the nature of an accurately working machine, without feeling, without one particle of sympathy, as cold and emotionless as the very silver which it was his passion to wrest from the mother lode.

This coldness was in the very mould of the man. His hair was so flaxen that it looked as though it had borrowed its colour from the silver he so loved, and his

THE SHERIFF AND THE SILVER KING 37

eyes were of so pale a blue as to be all but expressionless. While now, when prosperity and great wealth were his, and the fulness of years was upon him, there still remained the hungry leanness about the lines of his face, and the shape of his spare, angular body, which belonged to his days of early struggle against poverty and starvation.

He had interested the sheriff at their first meeting. Tombstone usually understood men, and he intended, before he finished with him, to understand Marc Osler. What he expected to find when at last the man's mask should be suddenly lifted he kept to himself, but some day he knew that mask would lift, and he wanted its removal to occur in his presence.

There was no sign of it, however, when he entered the silver king's presence on this occasion. The pale eyes lifted directly the dyspeptic clerk announced him. There was neither inquiry nor welcome in them. Joe, be-chapped and fully armed, cut a queer figure in the midst of the simply furnished room. His eagle face was no less cold than his host's, and his manner no less guarded. It was like the meeting of cold steel.

Joe did not remove his wide-brimmed prairie hat. He held that there were only two occasions when it was due that a man should bare his head. He would uncover to a woman, he would uncover to his Maker, to the rest of the world he held it to be an acknowledgment of his inferiority, and as such was impossible.

The moment the door closed behind him he walked straight up to the desk at which the mine-owner was sitting.

"I'm gettin' 'Tricksy' James to-morrow," he said briefly.

Osler let a second or two pass before replying. Then he pointed with the end of his pen at a chair against the wall.

"Won't you sit?" he said in an even tone.

Joe very deliberately kicked a spittoon into position and drew up the chair. Seating himself, he took a chew of tobacco.

The other surveyed his battered face, but did not remark upon it. Then, with a shade of interest in his voice, he said—

"You're sure?"

"Yep."

"I'm glad."

Osler displayed no enthusiasm.

"There's no chance of him slipping through your fingers?" he inquired presently.

"Not a chance."

Joe spoke emphatically, and his wild eyes lit with scorn at the suggestion.

"Good. I shall be glad to hand you—when you've got him—the reward I've offered——"

"Reward? Dollars? Gee! I ain't doin' this for dollars!" The sheriff's uneasy eyes rolled. "It ain't for you or your dollars! He's put up a bluff at me!"

The man thrust out a lean, claw-like hand and pointed a knotted finger at Osler. He spoke with that spasmodic intensity which was so much a part of his nature, and his face was fiercely alight with the fires of his volcanic spirit.

Just for a second the blue eyes wavered, their lids flickered, and the ghost of a smile hovered upon the lined face of the millionaire.

"That was foolish of him," he said.

But the remark passed unnoticed. Joe was watching for the maturing of that smile. He waited in vain. It was gone with Osler's next words.

"And when you've taken him—and hanged him, will that insure us poor devils of miners safety for the silver stages? Shall we be free from this hill pest—these damned bandits?"

The sheriff shrugged.

"It's one of 'em, I guess."

"One?—yes, that's it. It's one of them. Do you kill an octopus by cutting off a single feeler? do you destroy a weed by cutting off its flower? You're at the wrong end, man."

"I ain't good at guessin'," Joe murmured guilelessly.

"Damn it, man, there's no need for guessing! It's patent to the veriest child. Let me put it to you." There was an unusual impatience in Osler's manner. His blue eyes were colder than ever. "For nearly four years I've been paying a steady toll to these desperadoes in

THE SHERIFF AND THE SILVER KING 39

the hills. How many stages have been held up in twelve months?"

"Seven—mostly."

"Seven. And so it has been for four years. That's about the tally. Twenty-eight robberies—and shooting. The aggregate of these robberies is a heavy one, and its chief weight has fallen on me. I have lost heavily. These devils are crippling our business, but worst of all they are growing bolder with success. Now you, as a peace officer, can see for yourself what must follow if this evil is not rooted out. The hill forces will grow. They will gather recruits here in the city. We shall be faced with a movement which will stand at nothing. I tell you, sheriff, if you do not attack the root of this pestilential sore and cut it bodily out, nothing and nobody will be safe here in your district. It is no use capturing and hanging one man for personal spite——"

"An' may I ast your notion of the root?" Joe broke in.

Osler gathered nothing from the quietness of his inquiry. He was talking on a subject very near his heart.

"My notion of the root? My notion?" He rose from his chair and began to pace the room with long, nervous strides. Tombstone was watching him, watching for that lifting of the mask that now seemed imminent.

Suddenly the man paused and stood staring down upon him.

"My notion is the only notion. It is a notion shared by everybody, every business man here in Spawn City. There is only one chief to this gang—a woman! A woman who takes no active hand in the robberies; she is simply a power of organization. She directs, controls, rules them all; she recruits the ranks by her good looks and personality. She gathers these scum about her, and they vie to do her bidding, and so win her smiles. She holds her position through a twofold force. She is a woman, but a woman who has the countryside in terror of her name. If reputation tells truly, 'Six-shooter' Kit, as these fools about here love to call her, has not her match in the whole State for dexterity with her gun. Nor is there a man who has the pluck to face her. She is the root. Remove her, and you can get rid of the rest at your leisure."

He paused. His heat had carried him farther than he intended. Tombstone was sitting up. He was gently rubbing the palms of his hands over the shiny surface of his leather chapps, and his action suggested that he was enjoying himself.

"She's a dandy," he said, with something like a chuckle. "Sure, she's the root. Most women's the root fer liftin' dollars out o' men-folk's pockets."

"She's the devil!"

"An' how d' you reckon to git her?" inquired the sheriff, goading the other ironically.

But Osler understood the tone.

"That sort of thing is your business," he replied icily.

"But there's nuthin' agin her," protested Joe, still baiting him.

"Tchah! Nothing?"

"You said yourself. She's sure got the reputation—but——"

"In God's name arrest her," broke in the millionaire, in a sort of icy frenzy.

But the sheriff shook his head.

"Nothin' doin'. Guess he ain't handin' out warrants in the State of Montana. Nope!"

Osler drew nearer and laughed in the other's face.

"Warrant, sheriff?" he cried. "I'll give \$5000 to see that woman arrested, and—I'll—give—\$5000 more to see her—hanged."

The sheriff's dark eyes slowly lifted to the blue ones, now burning so coldly with their fire. He saw the working features, he noted the intense pallor of the face. The mask was lifted, and he wanted to read all there was to be read before he made answer. He slowly shook his head again.

"Nothin' doin'," he said calmly. "Mebbe I ain't high enuff in government for graft like that. Hand me a warrant with a sworn charge, an' I'll lay her behind bars in a week. Or when Kit plays up I'll sure hit her trail an' never leave it. Now, that warrant—ken you swear it? Eh? No, you don't know her. You've never know'd her busy in them robberies. Say, I guess you ain't never even see her?"

THE SHERIFF AND THE SILVER KING 41

The last words came slowly. There was a shrewd speculative look in the man's wild eyes, but he kept them turned away. He wanted Osler's mood to last.

The latter gave a short laugh.

"I've heard it said that this woman boasts there's no one in the country dare call her 'hand,'" he said, with a sneer. "Your morality is—opportune."

The sheriff remained unruffled. His eyes had a far away look in them.

"Guess you've got it wrong," he said. "It's sed of her, when one o' her boys got gay she turned on him sharp and sez, sez she, 'I'll only marry the feller that can call my bluff!' Which, I take it, sure means the feller that's got the grit, an' is quick enuff to put the 'drop' on her."

"A feat you find it convenient not to attempt."

Osler's retort rapped out with biting sarcasm.

"A feat I'll do when it suits me, but not for—graft."

The sheriff's tone had suddenly leapt to fury. His volcanic rage had burst out in an instant. He was on his feet, and, in spite of the other's size, he stood towering over him. His hawk-like face was ablaze, and another man might well have shrunk before it. But Marc Osler stood his ground, becoming stonily calm under the other's threat.

"It's a feat you'll have to do sooner or later—if you'd hold your job," he said.

"Mebbe I'll have to. But it won't be to hold my job, nor for your graft. An' say, when I have to do it I'll sure remember that you offered that graft."

"A memory likely to make you curse yourself for being fool enough to refuse it."

The sheriff moved towards the door.

"That's as mebbe," he said, as he held the door open. "Leastways it 'll be a memory, sure." The last was thrown at the millionaire as Joe passed out.

Once the door closed behind him his anger vanished. He chuckled to himself as he made his way across to where his horse was standing waiting for him. He had succeeded well, and was quite pleased. After all, Marc Osler was very human, far more human than the most credulous would have believed. He mounted his horse

and rode down the hill again, this time taking the direction of Dyke Hole.

For a long time he rode on in deep thought. The miles sped away, all unconsciously, under his horse's raking stride, and he was more than half-way on his road home before his thought gave place to a fresh chuckle of satisfaction. He turned and looked back over the long trail behind him. Then he looked out ahead again with a fierce sort of grin spreading over his features.

"That's it, sure," he muttered in an ecstasy of self-satisfaction, while the smile died out of his eyes and a rapt, far-away look replaced it.

"Which I wish to remark of the skunk an' the mule,
They each has some p'int's allus found in a fule.
But it ain't a good bet to gamble a fule,
Has haf the good p'int's of the skunk an' the mule."

He repeated his composition twice over, his wild eyes glowing with enthusiasm. Then he touched his horse's flanks with his spurs and increased his pace to a gallop.

CHAPTER V

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH

DICK ROYDON found in Dyke Hole something quite an advance on the other Western hamlets he had encountered in his brief experience. Dyke Hole was a long-established fact, and its maturity, if nothing else, was a benefit to those who sought its hospitality. Time had evolved an hotel in its midst; not a mere drinking-booth, but an hotel of two stories, with bedrooms and a lady's parlour, and a balcony running its full length over the veranda below. Yes, the hotel was a landmark; it was Dyke Hole's pride.

Roydon's surprise was a pleasant one after the disparaging remarks he had heard about the place. A real bed; what luxury! An ample wash; oh, joy! The towels were a weak spot; he could not be sure if their colour was original, or if they had once been white. He hesitated a moment before getting into bed, but finally decided that it would be the act of an ingrate to inspect the reverse sides of the sheets.

Then the proprietor, "Bulrush" Moe, he was quite above reproach in his apron and boiled shirt, his hair well brushed and smarmed flat with grease. He was the very essence of smooth politeness, too, an unexpected feature which gave everything a sense of homeliness.

There was none of the harshness of his earlier experiences here. Time, it would seem, had worn down all the roughnesses, and added comfort and a certain art to the place. The veranda had a row of shrubs in green boxes standing at its edge, which helped to relieve the bare weatherboarding of the building. There was a magnificent kerosine oil lamp radiating through a great globe of variegated coloured glass. Then, inside the hallway, there was quite an artistic array of coloured plates of comic coons and impossible trotting horses upon the walls, and these

were interspersed with several moth-eaten deer heads, whose wild, glassy stare suggested the delights of the chase. Besides all this, there was the mimosa, a perfect forest of it stuck about, a resting-place for dust and the myriads of ecstatically buzzing flies which crowded the hotel from cellar to roof.

Roydon, tired and weary from the trail as he was, noted these signs of peace and comfort with some thankfulness. He felt glad he had encountered the sheriff, he felt that he owed him gratitude.

Nor was he particularly disillusioned with the morning light. At breakfast-time he sniffed for the smell of onions he had grown so accustomed to. There was none of it; just a pleasant odour of cooking, dominated by the more pungent fumes of the coffee.

Mavis, sometimes facetiously called the "Dyke Hole Daisy," was waiting for him in the dining-room, and as he came she rushed at him with all the pride of her calling expressed in the energy of her movements. He was hustled to a table, she snatched out a chair and jerked him into it, she fought the flies with her napkin without damaging any of the table decorations, while she fired her blank verse greeting at him.

"Beef-steak, pork-chop, mutton-chop er sassage,
Eggs—on—the side!"

It came in a sort of torrent, and had to be repeated three times before Roydon realized that she was reciting the bill of fare. And all the time she kept up a rhythmical flogging of the flies with her napkin. When at last he had made his selection she gave one final lunge at the flies and dashed through the baize door to the kitchen.

She re-appeared bearing an armful of small white dishes; she came like a whirlwind and dumped them on the table, with a take-it-or-leave-it expression of defiance upon her rosy countenance, smashed a dozen or more flies on a jam-spot on the cloth, removed one of the dead from his coffee with a dirty forefinger, swept a handful of crumbs on to the floor with a dexterous swish, and departed.

It was all so rapid. She convinced one from the first. Her victim felt that she knew her business from the bottom to the top. Nobody could teach her a thing.

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH 45

But this abounding civilization did not appear to extend to the guests at the hotel, at least not to the local boarders. There was a strong flavour of the primitive about the men. They creaked about in buckskin and chapps, they moved silently in moccassins and dungaree overalls, or blanket trousers. Few of them appeared to have indulged in any sort of morning ablutions, and most of them needed the services of a barber. They were an unkempt, savage-looking lot, and, as he encountered their bold, questioning eyes he recalled the words of Steve of the "bar V's." In appearance, at least, they were as neat a proposition in land-pirates as one could wish to behold.

Breakfast over, he moved out for a look round the village. Whatever claims Dyke Hole had as a social and commercial centre, it certainly was one of Nature's beauty spots.

It stood deep-set within the gaping lips of a wide valley, which was crowded with woodlands of every conceivable shade of green, from the silver birch to the funereal pine. There was just one central clearing, a triangular patch of grassland around which the houses stood in broken, picturesque array. The triangle stood for market-place, public grazing and recreation-ground, but chiefly for the latter, for the Dyke Hole market existed in name only, and no self-respecting steer or horse would have coveted one blade of grass amongst the rank weeds that grew there. Generally speaking, the houses were of little consequence, but, viewed from a distance, added to the general picturesqueness of the place. The majority were mere tumble-down shacks, and only the Mission House and the hotel could claim any sort of distinction.

Roydon was not hard to please. He had come there with a purpose, and not from any desire to associate himself with the place. What he saw he liked, and, standing on the veranda, he pushed back his hat, and, turning his face to the glittering sunlight, drank in deep gulps of the brisk mountain air. After a while he strolled forth to explore.

Wandering down the trail in the direction of the river, he encountered few people abroad. It was too early for Dyke Hole's citizens. Those who were stirring were gathered at Moe's bar, seeking "eye-openers."

He was rather glad of the solitude, for he had reached

what was practically the end of the first stage of his quest, and he wanted to think. From now out, the work of executing his foster-father's will was to begin in earnest.

As he strolled along the trail he wondered what sort of people he would find Mrs. Raymon and her daughter. Would he find them amongst the half-civilized slatterns he had already seen about the country? Would they be living a life of squalor in some prairie hovel? Somehow he did not think so. He might find them among the poorer classes in a big city, or even earning a living in some wholesome business, a life so common among American women. He could not bring himself to think the other.

He felt just a little helpless. His instructions were so lamentably vague, and the possibilities of his quest so enormous. Nevertheless, he intended to do his best, if only for the sake of the dead man, who had been the kindest of fathers to him.

Still reviewing his plans, he arrived at the river bank. Here he paused and sat down.

It was a broad, sluggish river, shut in by heavy woodlands. The banks were high, and up stream they grew steeper and steeper, mounting until they rose into great overhanging cliffs which narrowed the river's course to a deep cañon.

Half-a-mile up stream the river vanished amidst a sea of broken hills, which rose up, up, until they merged into the distant glistening peaks of the Rockies, making a picture of rare rugged grandeur and magnificence.

At last he bestirred himself. He rose to his feet and refilled his pipe. He could waste no more time here. He must go back and see the sheriff—— What was that?

The lighted match was still in his fingers. He stood listening, and slowly the flame crept up and burnt him. He threw it down hastily, and turned again towards the upper reaches of the river, where it debouched from the frowning cañon. He felt sure he had heard a human cry from that direction.

There! There it was again; a "cooee" as plain as possible, but faint and in a thin, weak voice. Some one was calling. Some one perhaps in—— He waited for no more. Thrusting the bushes hastily aside, he pushed

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH 47

his way along the bank in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

But his purpose was not so easy of accomplishment. The woods impeded him, so close-set were they. It was with difficulty he could keep to the bank, and his progress was slow. However, by dint of much scrambling and many divergences, he gained headway, and at last broke cover at a small clearing where he paused to take fresh bearings.

He was quite hidden from the river now. A couple of hundred yards ahead of him rose a considerable hill with a sharp, precipitous face, which he knew to be the beginning of the cañon through which the river ran. He had just decided to make for this when he became aware of a figure, clad in some sort of pale blue costume, laboriously scrambling up its side. The figure was already nearing the top, and he watched with keen interest.

The climber never paused. The bare arms and legs glistened in the sunlight as they groped their way over the barren surface of the hill. They were moving with the certainty of familiarity, making foothold where none seemed possible, as though each step were a matter of the greatest ease. And at last the summit was reached.

The next moment the blue figure stepped boldly to the brink overhanging the water, and out rang the now familiar "cooe" again. The white arms shot up into the air. There was a pause. Then came another "cooe," and, almost simultaneously, in the most perfectly graceful dive Roydon had ever beheld, out sprang the figure and dropped headlong to the water below.

A sharp gasp escaped him, and with it came an exclamation of astonished admiration.

"Jove!" he cried. "A fifty-foot dive! And it was a— a—girl!"

He knew he was not mistaken. The details of the blue bathing costume, with its skirted tunic and the brief knickers beneath, were unmistakable. He had caught sight, too, of the wealth of golden hair floating in the sunlight as she dropped to the water. Here was an adventure; and he wondered what next he had better do.

A moment's reflection decided him. Obviously there was only one course open; he must beat a retreat. The girl

was taking an early morning swim, and he had no right to be there. He would make good his retreat to the village before she left the water, and thus leave this woodland nymph to the privacy of her sylvan bath.

Laudable as were his intentions, he had not reckoned with his inexperience in woodcraft. And Dame Fortune was in that mood when she would serve him in spite of himself.

Striking into the woods again, he promptly lost himself and for half-an-hour he wandered blindly, his sense of direction carrying him every way but whither he wished to go. At last, just when in desperation he was about to abandon himself utterly to chance, and simply follow his nose, he suddenly emerged upon a clearing at the foot of the very hill he wished to avoid.

It was too bad. But his troubles did not end there, for his first glance revealed the wholly unconscious bather reclining in the shadow of a large maple tree, with a paper-covered book in her hands, over which she was poring. She was dressed in a white cotton gown, and her hair was hanging loose to her waist, drying in the fresh, warm morning air.

It was the breaking of the bush as he pushed his way into the clearing that disturbed her. She looked up with a start, and sat staring at him with a pair of wide-open astonished grey eyes. She gave a little cry, and half started to her feet, but the man's apology came at once, and she fell back to her original position.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you," he said earnestly. "I had no intention of intruding, but the fact is everything is against me. I got—got completely—bushed. Please don't be frightened."

His final words were inspired by the stare of horrified amazement he now beheld in the girl's grey eyes. For a moment he didn't understand, then with a rush came the recollection of his recent battle with Tombstone Joe, and almost unconsciously he put up a hand as though to screen her from the sight of his disfigurements.

The thought made him laugh.

"I forgot," he said. "It's my face. I'm afraid it's horribly battered."

The girl suddenly seemed to lose her fear. She, too,

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH 49

laughed, and somehow all further restraint was at an end.

"Battered?" she cried. "How—how can you manage to see me?"

Roydon crossed the intervening space and stood before her.

"I don't know, but I can," he said, smiling. "I say, but it's terrible to be fresh in a new country, isn't it? Now, I——"

"It's not good to be 'fresh' anywhere out here," the girl observed quietly. "You don't belong to Dyke Hole?"

"No. I'm from England. Just out."

The girl nodded comprehendingly. The fact of his being a stranger seemed not to disconcert her one whit. She belonged to Dyke Hole, where conventions held small place. This stranger's manner pleased her, his voice was pleasant, and, in spite of his temporary facial disfigurements, his size and bearing were good to contemplate. He was different from the men she was accustomed to, and the difference was to her liking.

"Most Englishmen are 'fresh,'" she nodded eagerly. "At least, so I've been told."

"'Fresh'?" Roydon was puzzled.

"Yes. You know. Cheeky."

"Oh!" He laughed again. "I see. I didn't mean that. I meant I was new to the place."

The girl's responsive laugh rang out, and Roydon noted the two delightful dimples in her rounded cheeks. She was very pretty, and every time she laughed she displayed two rows of perfect, dazzling teeth.

"I thought you meant you'd got into trouble through being—'fresh,'" she cried, when her mirth had subsided.

Her frankness, the ease and unconsciousness of her manner delighted Roydon. Yet there was nothing indelicate about her. She spoke well, with just a suspicion of that accent so charming in America's women, and there was a simplicity about her that perfectly harmonized with the conditions of their meeting. Whoever she was, Roydon felt that she had nothing in common with the class of woman he had already encountered in his brief experience of the prairie. Her dress, too, he was quick

to notice, was in good style in spite of the simplicity of its material and make.

"I must plead guilty to getting into trouble," he said quietly. "But I wasn't 'fresh.' It was the sheriff, Tombstone Joe. He did something I didn't like, and—well—"

"And he beat you?"

The girl was all eagerness, but the tone of her inquiry was almost an awed whisper.

Roydon shook his head.

"Neither of us had the best of it."

"He didn't whip you?" There was an incredulity in her tone that nettled him.

"No," he said.

"Joe's the greatest fighter in the country—my word!"

There was a wholesome look of awe and admiration in the grey eyes as they looked up into the bruised face before her. But Roydon did not want to pursue the subject. He was by no means proud of his share in that fight.

"I feel I must explain things," he said. "I don't mean about the fight," he added hastily, "but to account for my presence here. You see," he went on, "I was taking the morning air when I heard your 'cooe.' I was down near the ford. Well, being a man, and curious, and having nothing else to do, I came along to see who was calling, and why. Some distance away I saw you on the hill here, and watched you dive into the water. Realizing my intrusion, I set out through the bush to get back to the village, lost myself, and—here I am."

The girl's sunny laugh rippled out again.

"Oh, you Englishman!" she cried. "Fancy getting lost in this bluff. Oh dear, you must be 'green.' But won't you sit down. It's quite dry, and this land is public."

The laughter was still in her eyes. Roydon could not associate coquetry with so frank a manner. Her eyes were just full of fun, and were wholly honest. He accepted her invitation without a moment's hesitation.

"Sure I'm not disturbing you?" he smiled. "You were reading."

"Only a silly old history of the Civil War. No. I'm drying my hair."

"Oh."

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH 51

Roydon's admiring eyes settled on her hair. It was very beautiful, gleaming in the sunshine, a tangle of burnished gold.

"So you know Joe?" the girl went on.

"I have reason to."

"Yes, of course. Joe and I are great friends. I forgot. My name's Jocelyn Leyland. I'm called 'Jock.' I live with my guardian, Ripley Boyle. He's the lawyer in Dyke Hole. You see, mother's dead. Mr. Boyle was mother's lawyer, so he looks after me, and I keep house for him. Now you know all about me," she finished up gaily.

The girl's frankness was too delicious. Roydon acknowledged her confidence.

"My name's Richard Roydon," he said in return. "I'm out here to look about me—to see the world, and to execute a matter of business. In fact, to earn a fortune for myself."

"Oh, how stunning!" Jocelyn cried impulsively. Then she added, with a little doubtful shake of the head, "But Dyke Hole's a poor place to come to. If you collected all the money there was in the place, and made it your own, it wouldn't amount to a fortune large enough for a mouse."

"But there's lots to interest. And the people."

"Ah, yes. You've met Joe—haven't you?"

Jocelyn smiled slyly.

"Yes, and Joe and I are going to be friends."

"After——?"

"That's what's made us friends. I'm going to play cricket for him to-morrow. There's a match against Spawn City."

"O-oh."

The smile died out of the girl's eyes. Her face clouded with the suddenness of an April sky. She turned away and glanced pensively out at the river. The shining water held her attention for a few silent moments. Then she went on slowly, and in a tone of real regret.

"I'm sorry you are a cricketer—real sorry. You don't know cricket in Dyke Hole. It's no joke," she added, as she noted her companion's smile. "It's just the most dreadful thing I know. Why did he want you to play to-morrow?"

"Seems to me it's rather an important match."

"Important!"

The girl's ejaculation was a little scornful.

"I was talking to Joe some days ago," she went on hurriedly, "and he was telling me about to-morrow's match. He said that he was going to issue a notice that all women must keep indoors from the time Spawn City arrives until they leave!"

"Whew!" Roydon whistled, while a grin slowly spread itself over his disfigured features. "That's like him."

"Like him?" This time there was a world of resentment in the girl's tone. "You don't know Joe, you don't know cricket here, or you wouldn't laugh. There's always trouble when they play. The boys are like a lot of wolves gambolling. You see, there's not enough doing here to keep them out of mischief. They spend half their time drinking and quarrelling. The rest of it is spent going elsewhere to do the same thing. And Joe—Joe simply loves fighting. He's always fighting—or rhyming."

Jocelyn had talked her anger away, and now the smile broke out again.

"You see, Joe is a poet," she went on, the dimples reappearing, and her eyes dancing. "He's always rhyming, and the boys call him a poet. He makes such funny verses; but he's quite serious."

"Yes, he's very serious."

"Desperately. I shudder to think what Dyke Hole would be without him. But this cricket match," she went on, with a return to her anxiety. "I'm sure there's to be something dreadful happen. Joe hates the Spawn City folk. He calls them the sweepings of creation."

"Yes, I think there's some game on," Roydon replied easily. "I'm glad I'm on Joe's side."

"Oh yes, he'll win; but——"

"I know what you mean. I am beginning to understand Joe."

"I like him. He's scared of nothing on earth."

"You like pluck."

"Where's the girl that doesn't? I hate a coward! I wish Joe would let me see the game to-morrow," Jocelyn finished up, with an inconsistency that made her companion smile.

"So do I," he replied heartily.

ROYDON ENCOUNTERS A WATER-NYMPH 53

They both laughed again. Jocelyn set her face against the vagabond doings of the "boys," but if there was going to be any fun she wanted to see it. Her spirit was absolutely fearless.

Suddenly she bethought herself of her position now. She knew she had talked long enough with her new acquaintance. She felt she ought to be going. But she made no move. After all, she argued, why should she? Here was a pleasant young man, a gentleman undoubtedly, probably good-looking, when his face mended, whom she had met by chance. She must dry her hair, and it would be churlish to drive him away if he wished to stay and talk. It was quite pleasant, too. Much more pleasant than a solitary perusal of the history of the stupid Civil War. What a pity the sun was so hot, and her hair drying so fast. She laughed a childlike, irresponsible laugh, and suddenly pointed at his face.

"Oh, you do look so funny," she cried. "Do you know, I wish I had seen you both fighting. I should have laughed till my sides ached to see you making such sillies of yourselves. Look," she went on, pointing out each disfigurement. "You've got two black eyes, one bloodshot, a lump on the bridge of your nose, two long scratches on your cheeks—yes—and a cut lip."

"I'm a pretty picture, I know," replied Roydon ruefully. "I nearly had a fit when I saw myself in the glass this morning."

"So I should think. How long do you remain in Dyke Hole?"

"A long time—if I survive the cricket match."

"Yes, if—well, perhaps I may have a chance to see you as you really are. I wonder if I shall recognize you."

"Can't say."

"What colour are your eyes?"

"Blue."

"That's a help."

"I say, why not see me every day till my face gets—right. Then you won't be able to make any mistake," Roydon said daringly.

"Every day?" The golden head shook demurely. "You haven't got over to-morrow yet," she said slyly. Then

she suddenly became all contrition. "I'm sorry. That was unkind. I didn't mean it. Really I——"

But the man only laughed.

"That's all right. I shall survive it," he exclaimed confidently.

"Of course you will. But"—springing to her feet and moving over to the bush on which her bathing costume was spread out to dry—"I must really be going."

Jocelyn gathered the garments together and folded them over her arm while Roydon watched her. She was very graceful. She was tall, and possessed a healthy, athletic figure which her simple dress could not disguise.

It was the man who spoke next.

"I've some business to do that may need a lawyer," he suggested.

She turned her grey eyes steadily upon him and regarded him gravely.

"My guardian's office is next to the hotel."

Roydon laughed.

"I say, you are a—a joke," he cried, springing to his feet.

The girl's smile instantly returned. This stranger amused her. He was so different from the men she knew; he was so easy, so assured, yet nothing he said seemed rude.

"You're better than that. You're funny. I'm going to get my guardian's breakfast. Good-bye."

"Mayn't I see you—on your way?"

But the girl laughingly shook her head.

"You'd make a poor escort. But I'll put *you* on your right road."

"Oh, that's too bad. But all the same I shall be thankful to you. Which way?"

Jocelyn pointed at the mouth of a narrow footpath and led the way.

"Come along then," she cried. And they ducked their way into the dense undergrowth.

CHAPTER VI

DYKE HOLE PREPARES

It was the morning of the great cricket-match. Tombstone Joe was out selecting the pitch, a task he never entrusted to anybody else. The matter was one that required some niceness of judgment, for the market-place possessed a rare variety of unevennesses. It was not a case of selecting the best grass, but rather of avoiding it, for what little there was grew in obstinate, protruding tufts which rose high above the general level. Fortunately its sparseness left much that was utterly bare, and with some care, and the liberal use of a shovel, a pitch of sorts was to be obtained.

A small boy, bearing a large bucket of whitewash, followed close in the sheriff's wake, watching his movements with interested, inquiring eyes. At last Joe came to a halt and beckoned the lad to his side.

"This yer's the spot, I reckon. Jest cast your eye over yonder patch. It's sure consid'able smooth, Tite," he remarked with satisfaction.

Tite set the bucket down and did as he was bid. The great man's confidence was very pleasing to his youthful mind. His face shone with pleasure, and he eyed the ground with the air of an expert.

"She's a daddy," he observed complacently.

Joe nodded.

"Guess we'll plant 'em right here," he said, driving one of the locally made stumps into the hard ground with the mallet he carried. "Ther', you set the other two sticks right up, an' I'll pace out the track. I'll sure hev to teach you cricket next year. You're a dead sport, laddie."

The boy beamed his delight and set to work.

"You ain't short of a man now, are you, boss?" he inquired.

"Wal, no."

"I'm kind o' grieved," Tite replied, getting down on his knees to his task. "Father says I'm a dandy at pitchin'. He gives me fi' cents a day keppin' the hens off'n our kebbiges, firin' rocks. Can't you set me pitchin'?"

"I've heerd tell," observed Joe dryly. "Guess we ain't short to-day, but you ken sure stand around an' holler when our boys gits doin' things."

Joe moved off, pacing out the pitch, giving full measure to the yard. He had counted twenty-two paces, and then turned to square his direction, when his eyes fell upon the work he had entrusted to the youthful Tite. He let a sudden roar out of him, and the boy sprang to his feet and backed away, upsetting the bucket of lime-wash in his nervous haste.

"What in thunder! Holy—grab the gorn durned bucket! Say, you ain't fencin' in a pastur', you wall-eyed image. Them sticks ain't fence posts! Bunch 'em up! Gee!"

Tite had grabbed the bucket in time to save some of the lime. Then he precipitated himself upon the stumps, which he had carefully set up nearly a foot apart. But Joe didn't wait for him to rectify his mistake; he came back with a rush and seized upon the stumps to set them right, while the disconsolate boy bailed up the lime with the brim of his prairie hat.

"Say, you're the neatest proposition in intellec' around this city," Joe yelled at him, emphasizing each word with a blow of the mallet, as he drove the wickets into the hard ground afresh. "Guess we'll hev to make you president of Dyke Hole cricket, you're that s pry. You sure need muzzlin'. Ther'," as he delivered a final blow, and the wicket stood erect, "that's a wicket, sonny; an' a wicket's a thing wot the feller wi' the ball figgers to scatter some, an' the feller wi' the club jest guesses he can't. An' it's cricket when they git busy provin' the argyment."

Joe's composure was restored. He could always work off ill-temper with blows, whether they fell on dead wood or the object of his wrath.

The lad was still shaking with apprehension, but he timidly sought to ingratiate himself afresh.

"An' who finishes the argyment?" he inquired meekly, his innocent eyes looking up appealingly into the lean face above him.

"Why, the referee mostly, you sunbeam of inspiration," Joe responded, with one of his tigerish smiles. "When the referee says 'out,' ther' ain't nothin' more to be said. The feller wi' the ball jest chucks it right up——"

"Wher'?" inquired the aspiring cricketer.

"Why, in the air, o' course."

The youthful interest was deepening, and Tite's mild eyes continued their inquiry.

"What for?" he asked with more confidence.

"Cos the feller's 'out.'"

Tite turned the matter over in his mind.

"Why?" he asked again in a puzzled tone.

"Cos the referee said so, sure," Joe replied patiently.

"What for?" came the inevitable question.

Joe rolled his fierce eyes in the boy's direction and spat. Then he seized the bucket and moved off to the other wicket.

"Guess you'd best git right back to your mam," he said, in a tone of mild exasperation. "I 'lows she can't spare a real bright boy like you."

For a moment Tite hesitated. A further question was on the tip of his tongue, but it never matured. Tears began to well up into his inquiring eyes, and he slowly moved away, grievously wondering why he had been so summarily dismissed.

Joe went steadily on with his work. He marked out the batting creases with great care for artistic effect. He had just used the last of the lime, and was carefully noting the exactness of his work, when he heard a girl's voice greeting him. It was Jocelyn Leyland returning from shopping at Ramford's store.

"Good-morning, Joe," she cried, as she came up. "What have you being doing to poor Titus Steele? I met him away back there on his way home. He was crying fit to break his poor little heart."

The sheriff abandoned his brush, and, standing erect, flourished his hat in salute. Jocelyn was his favourite of

all Dyke Hole's people. This girl with her sunny, happy disposition under the hopelessly sordid conditions of her life appealed to him in a way that always made him her ready helper, counsellor and friend.

Her guardian was nominally the lawyer of Dyke Hole, but, as a matter of fact, he was little better than a drunken loafer in "Bulrush" Moe's bar. He rarely drew an absolutely sober breath, and was never known in his professional capacity. Yet he seemed to live fairly well, and money, if not ample with him, never seemed to be a source of worry. How he lived no one seemed to know or care. He was one of Dyke Hole's institutions.

The life Jocelyn lived with him she carefully kept to herself; never by word or action did she give any inkling. Rumour suggested something in the nature of tragedy, but she never helped to confirm such gossip. Her disposition was always sunny, always apparently happy. She was ever ready to help others, to sympathize with those who needed sympathy, but for herself she was silent. The sheriff, wild man as he was, seemed to understand something of her life, and though he never allowed himself to show it, he possessed a feeling for her which might well have astonished those who only knew him in his official capacity. Ripley Boyle was an eyesore to him; he was more, he was a positive offence; yet, for the sake of this motherless girl, he hid his dislike and tried hard to lighten her burden.

"Wal," he said, his wild eyes steadying to a pensive humour as he replied to the challenge. "Tite's a real spry boy, an' knows a heap. But ther's things he don't know, an' they're a heap too. Ther's jest one person to set a kiddie right when he wants to learn, an' that's his mam. So I sent him along."

The girl laughed.

"Ah, yes. He has an inquiring mind."

"A kiddie like that should sure git to Congress. Guess they'd cure him—or kill him."

Jocelyn looked up, taking in the man's great raw frame, all bone and muscle. His eyes had lost their brief smile.

"You've found a new player?" she said presently, glancing away from him with pretended interest in the freshly laid-out pitch. Joe brightened visibly.

"Why, yes." Then he paused; a thought had flashed across his eager brain. "You've got acquainted?" he inquired.

The girl nodded.

"Met him down at the river. Why are you dragging him into your feud with Spawn City? Is it fair? He's so 'green'; green as grass. Why can't you do without him? I—I don't suppose he ever handled a gun in his life."

Just for a moment the sheriff stared out at the veranda of the hotel where he saw his *protégé* standing amidst a group of idlers. When he spoke it was with a quiet determination that admitted of no further discussion.

"See here, Missie Jock," he said, "you come around astin', an' smilin', an' makin' a feller feel mean refusin' you anything. But ther's things to be done by men that mebbe women don't understan'. Now, that boy's got to play on our side. He's goin' to 'cap' the side. I want him bad. This ain't no or'nary game. Guess you ain't deaf, nor blind, nor lackin' in intellec', so mebbe you'll savvee. Now git along an' lie low. He's goin' to come out all right, I'll give you my word on it. But he's got to play. Guess you'll see the fun from your window—t'other side of it—that is. I'm gettin' around to see the boys at the saloon yonder."

The men of Dyke Hole were idling away the hours at the hotel, waiting for the coming of Spawn City. From the veranda they watched the sheriff preparing the pitch, but no one offered to help him. It was not their way to interfere when another chose to work. They merely contented themselves with a few remarks at his expense, feeling that he was sufficiently far away for it to be quite safe to speak their minds freely.

Ripley Boyle saw something humorous in the movements of the man stalking about the market-place.

"Seems to be enjoying himself," he observed, with a grin on his youthful face.

He was a little fat man of some forty odd years, but his face was the face of a cherub, round, clean and rosy, and it wore a perpetual smile of bland amiability.

He addressed himself to Roydon who was standing next to him, and at whose expense he had already made

several attempts to quench his thirst that morning. But Roydon's thoughts and eyes were in another direction; he had just seen a girlish figure emerge from Ramford's store. Even at that distance he had recognized Jocelyn. It was "Dyke Hole" Bill who responded to the lawyer.

"Enjoyin' hisself?" he exclaimed, with a rough laugh. "Looks like a laid-out hen scratchin' fer worms. To see him paintin' lan'scapes on the ground wi' that 'ere lime-wash, you'd think he wus a slob of a painter feller. Makes me sick."

Bill shrugged his great shoulders, while his piratical face scowled disgustedly. His remarks were instantly taken up by Bob Gauvin, the fast bowler suspected of throwing, and incidentally a cowpuncher, as his sheepskin chapps implied.

"Guess it's like to make you sick, Bill," he said, with a grin. "You mostly feel that aways when sheriff's around."

"Kind o' fresh, ain't yer?" sneered the other angrily. "I 'lows I ain't stale."

Dave Bless, the veterinary surgeon, another bowler, but of the underhand "googly" type, joined the group. "Who ain't stale?" he inquired. "You, Bob? No, I guess not. An' you don't need to be stale this day neither. Say, Pete's just told me our young friend here's to take his place as skipper. Joe give him the word. Say, he's mighty sick—is Pete."

He eyed Roydon slyly. That individual had turned abruptly from his contemplation of Jocelyn, who was now making her way out to where the sheriff was at work. It was the first he had heard of his promotion, and it brought him no sort of satisfaction.

"What's that for?" he asked sharply.

Dave shrugged.

"The sheriff said——"

"Hang the sheriff! For two pins I wouldn't play. Who's he to dictate?"

"Mostly sheriff," murmured Boyle gently. "Y' see, he's doing you an honour. Pete must be dreadful sick being deposed." He chuckled at his own pleasantry, and as Roydon glanced about him and saw that the rest were

grinning broadly, he tried to conceal his annoyance under a cloak of quiet argument.

"It seems nonsense to me, putting a stranger to captain a side. I don't know anything of the individual talent."

"Don't need to," replied Boyle. "Joe'll see to that."

"Well, why the devil doesn't he captain the side himself?"

"He's referee," said Dave.

"But the umpire can't interfere with the ordering of the game," exclaimed Roydon.

"Can't he?" inquired Boyle, with a laugh. "Guess you don't know Joe."

"Pshaw! This isn't cricket."

Bob turned quietly on the Englishman.

"Say, young feller, 'tain't no use in talkin' o' the rights o' the referee. We got local rules, an' Joe knows 'em. He made 'em. An' when he shouts, you've—why, you've jest got to jump."

"An' mighty quick," put in Dave, with appreciation.

"Well, I've promised to play, so I'll play," exclaimed Roydon in disgust. "But I'm used to cricket—not—not—child's play like this."

"'Tain't child's play," observed Dave dryly. "You'll likely find it entertainin'. Joe's no end of a sport. You'll find what he says goes. If it doesn't—why, he's like a battery of artillery with a push-button."

Roydon stood aghast.

"But you don't carry guns playing cricket?" he cried.

"Dyke Hole" Bill laughed loud and long. The subject of guns in the field interested him.

"Not carry guns?" he cried, with ponderous satire.

"An' who's goin' to stan' around while the referee gits gay? A mighty fine cinch you'd give him. It's the likes o' him needs to be held tight doin' his work fair. An' who, I ast, has more right than the fellers playin'? Ther's things the referee don't want to see, an' it's jest fer that reason the fellers playin' needs to speak sharp. Now, when a bowler gits throwin'—"

"Meanin' me?" interrupted Bob Gauvin angrily.

The suspected bowler flushed to the roots of his unkempt hair as he stepped forward threateningly. There

was a deadly look in his fierce eyes as he fixed them on Bill. Bill returned his stare with interest.

"I'm talkin' o' them as throws an' calls it bowlin'," he said quietly. "It's a skunk trick, an' needs dealin' with accordin'."

"Jest about as low down as pullin' a gun on a feller's back," retorted Gauvin with heat.

"Yes, an' wingin' him proper—*fer throwin'*."

"Yep," snarled Bob, his anger increasing in proportion to the other's coolness, "an' so doin' up a bowler cos you darsen't to stan' up to him."

"An' so whippin' him right out o' the game, which is his deserts," retorted Bill, with an angry grin.

"I ain't no son—of—a — to drop a feller when he ain't lookin'," cried Bob advancing.

It was the filthy epithet that precipitated things. Roydon saw a sudden movement on the part of Bill, and he quickly dropped a hand on his shoulder. But further trouble was interrupted from another quarter.

"Hold up, Bill," cried Ripley Boyle. "Here's Tombstone."

The effect was magical. The wolfish ferocity of these men, so swiftly stirred to the pitch of slaughter, instantly calmed at the sheriff's name. It seemed incredible to Roydon, yet he was somehow thankful for it. To him these hardy creatures of ungoverned impulse were a little overwhelming. Yet he liked them. Their manhood seemed real, and the mainspring of their lives was a great physical courage. In this they appealed to him.

The sheriff strode up to the veranda, and Roydon seized the opportunity to invite everybody to drink. He felt that harmony must be restored and the sooner the better. Yes, they would all take Rye whisky. In the history of Dyke Hole there was no record of any citizen ever refusing such an offer. No personal quarrel could be allowed to interfere in a matter of that sort.

Tombstone drank his liquor and turned on Roydon at once.

"Say, you'll 'cap' the side, boy," he said, in his direct fashion. "An' you'll kep around till them Spawn City hogs git along. I'm goin' to be busy meanwhiles. And say, don't pour no more of Moe's swipes into these fellers'

sinks, or they'll get logged right up to their back teeth till they don't know Tuesday from Rye whisky." Catching the watery eyes of Ripley Boyle he turned sharply on him. "You jest light out o' here an' sup cold tea. We don't want Dyke Hole's shame settin' around when Spawn City gits here; an' you, Bob Gauvin, an' Bill," he went on with delightful impartiality, "kep your guns tight an' don't hand out langwidge, or I'll hev to fix you wise to pretty talk. We sure ain't hevin' fool tricks till we've cleaned Spawn City up."

Then he departed as abruptly as he had come, leaving a silent bar-room behind him. Such was the personality of this man. No one attempted to gainsay him. He held Dyke Hole in the palm of his hand; he was the shepherd of this wolfish flock.

From the moment of his departure all interest seemed to flag. Even Roydon was sensible of the depression he left behind him. He had come like a breath of ice-cold air upon spirits artificially warmed by Moe's execrable liquor. And though, in spite of his admonishment, a steady soak of Rye set in, it was quite without effect in relieving the depression that seemed to be crowding down upon everybody. Glasses were filled and emptied in silence, and the funereal gloom deepened.

The last hope of its ever lifting seemed to depart with the sigh that escaped the onlookers, when Moe, with due regard for the festivity of the occasion, suddenly appeared in his bar resplendent in his holiday attire of black swallow-tails and huge black bow-tie, as large and gloomy as the outspread wings of a night owl.

CHAPTER VII

CRICKET

"THEY'RE comin' right along!"

Pete, the deposed captain of Dyke Hole, thrust his head into the bar-room and made the announcement.

Like the lifting of a pall, the cloud of depression passed, and a current of suppressed excitement swept over the bar. In an instant everybody was agog with interest. Spawn City was arriving! Spawn City, their arch-enemy! Spawn City, whom they hated better than anything in life! Spawn City!

Talk broke out like a torrent in springtime. There was a general rush to the veranda. So great was the interest that half-finished drinks were left on the bar, and even Moe forgot to chalk up a score against the thirsty lawyer.

"They're comin'!"

The words echoed round the room which was left empty before it died out.

Spawn City was punctual. They arrived to the minute, and Roydon, obeying orders like the rest, was at his post to receive them. It was an imposing if queer cavalcade which came dashing down the trail into the village. It might have been the escort of some high public official, or foreign potentate, it had such an air. First came an advance-guard of horsemen mounted on tough-looking bronchos. Then, with some yards intervening, came a four-horsed democrat wagon driven by a large man with a terrible squint. The wagon was loaded down with passengers until its springs jarred with every unevenness on the trail. Behind these, after another intervening space, came a rear-guard of more horsemen making up the tally. Thirty-five men, ruffians of every description, represented Spawn City; and each man was armed to the teeth.

Roydon noted these things, and suddenly the recollection came to him that he was captain of the Dyke Hole side. Of a sudden he felt as though he had had no breakfast, as though he had eaten nothing for months. He was aware of an almost painful vacuum in his stomach which gave him a feeling of dreadful nausea.

But relief came to him as the cavalcade drew up. It was the sight of the sheriff's familiar figure approaching. The latter greeted the arrivals with an unconcerned, "Howdy," and watched whilst they dismounted. Then he hailed Roydon to his side and presented him to the captain of Spawn City, directing him to toss for first "knock" or, as he put it, "fer first boost at the ball." Then, when the matter had been settled and Dyke Hole's new captain had lost, he turned to the men unloading the wagon, passing the squint-eyed teamster by with scarcely a glance.

Roydon followed him up, feeling a little helpless in his new position. He felt he couldn't do better than watch the sheriff, and, if possible, take his cue from him. His responsibility weighed lighter in Joe's vicinity.

As they reached the wagon's side a white bundle of clothing was being passed out. And the onlookers' attention was called to it by the satirical pleasantries of the men who handled it.

"Here, git a holt on the shirt-waists," the man in the wagon cried.

He passed the bundle out to one of his companions.

"Shirt-waists? Guess you mean the passon-fixin's. Gee, he'll look a pictur' in them fixin's. Most like the bishop when he gits around christ'nin' babbies—ef it wa'an't fer them fun'ral features o'—"

"What's them?" Joe demanded, in his short, fierce way.

The man had not seen him standing so near, and evidently regretted his remarks.

"Them? Oh—yes, them's coats," he said clumsily. "Y' see," he added, recovering himself, "we've bin readin' up some, and guessed they was needed to make things reg'lar. Y' see, this yer game's mostly played in white flannels. But the stores on'y kep a stock o' red, an' red check; so we passed on that, an' guessed our own fixin's 'ud do fer the players. Howsum, the referees

needs distinguishin' some, an' the rules calls as they should wear white coat fixin's to avoid con-fusion. That was dead easy. The missis made these. They're neat. Mostly hand sewed. Try 'em?"

The man grinned and held the bundle out. Roydon watched the sheriff's wolfish face. He expected an explosion. But none came. Only an unutterable contempt shone in his hungry eyes. He reached out and clawed possession of the bundle, and turned away. It was then that Roydon saw a sardonic grin spread slowly over his features.

"Say," he observed, "we'd best git doin'. Get the boys around."

Getting the boys around was not the easiest possible task, but at last the new captain succeeded in launching them upon the field. Nor could he help a feeling of chagrin at the appearance they presented. They were indeed a motley crew, and slouched towards the wicket as though they hated the whole thing and didn't care a curse if they went or not. Roydon looked for signs of the sport Joe had boasted to be in them. But their hang-dog faces only displayed an unutterable discontent.

He threw a catch to Bob Gauvin as they went, but the effort was wasted. Bob let the ball pass him without removing his hands from the tops of his trousers, and turning with an angry scowl on his ill-favoured face, snarled out a protest—

"Gettin' kind o' gay, ain't you?" he inquired.

To which, for the moment, Roydon had no reply. Presently, as no one else made any attempt to do so, he was forced to run after the ball himself. He felt that these sporting "boys" of Dyke Hole were an offence to any true cricketer. They moved as though they hated themselves only one degree less than they hated each other, and even begrudged the necessary energy to do so.

The "gate" consisted of men and a few boys, who slunk about between the houses. And curiously enough the spectators all seemed to be occupied in an endeavour to conceal the fact that they were looking on. The saloon veranda appeared to be the visitors' grand stand, for no citizen of Dyke Hole was to be found near it. They stood about on the outskirts of the ground, huddled together in

small silent groups, having the appearance of idly conversing, but, in reality, waiting, watching for what the game should bring forth.

Roydon encountered tremendous difficulty in disposing his field, and though he exercised the greatest patience he was at length forced to give it up. To a man they objected to the deep field, and none of them could see the necessity of changing their positions with each other. Their one idea seemed to be to hang about the wickets. It was Dave Bless who voiced the general feeling.

"Tain't no use, boy," he said, with amiable firmness. "This yer game's on'y to be won by us gittin' around the wicket. These Spawn City hogs needs watchin' close."

After that Roydon gave up any further attempt to place his field. He had never had so hopeless a task. He turned to the wicket-keeper, Sladie Joyce, a small man with a crooked leg and a decided hump on his back. He didn't want to talk particularly, but his own thoughts afforded him no sort of comfort. The man was examining his guns with the care of an expert.

"I bowl pretty fast," he said amiably. "You'd better stand well back to it."

"How's that," Joyce inquired, without looking up.

"My bowling. You won't be able to stop the balls without gloves," he said.

"Pshaw! that don't cut no figger. Joe don't count runs 'less the feller hits the ball," he said easily.

"Yes. But——"

Sladie cut him short.

"Say, Joe knows the rules. He's sheriff."

Dave sauntered up.

"You're bowlin' fast," he began insinuatingly.

Roydon nodded. He didn't care to talk any more about it.

"Then I'll jest send 'em down gentle. Sort o' persuade 'em wi' teasers," he suggested, with a great grin of cunning. "Mebbe they'll likely try an' hit 'em. Then sheriff 'll fix 'em."

Roydon was beginning to think that Joe was more than sheriff. He didn't see the necessity for having any other players at all. This man was more than equal to a whole team.

At that moment the peace-officer himself came upon the scene, and at once all Roydon's disgust vanished in an almost irrepressible desire to laugh outright. The sheriff stalked out from the hotel, with long swift strides. He was encased in a strange-looking white coat of home manufacture, with the skirts, which otherwise would have reached his heels, caught up in a bunch about his waist, and tucked into a belt weighted down with a whole arsenal of weapons and ammunition. The impression he gave was that of some horrid, lean-necked bird of prey advancing upon its victim. There was something so aggressive, so full of fell purpose in his gait. With him came a short, thick-set man whom Roydon had never seen before.

Following in the wake of these two came Spawn City's umpire. He, too, was clad in a white coat, the fellow of the one the sheriff wore, and, like the other, his firearms were painfully in evidence. This man Roydon recognized at once as the squint-eyed teamster of the democrat wagon.

He was curious as to the identity of Joe's companion, and turned for information to Sladie Joyce.

"That?" responded the wicket-keeper, without interest, "that's Bob Makaw." Then as an afterthought, "He's the deadest shot in the county—next to Joe."

The description made his hearer smile.

Then the game began. Roydon gave a hopeless glance round at his inadequate field, and his heart sank. A gun-park would have been a skittle alley compared with that field. It simply bristled with the instruments of death.

When the batsmen took their places at the wickets a sudden alertness, like an electric current, passed over the field. There was a light in every eye which utterly belied all recent indifference. Roydon noted it, and he, too, became a prey to the general excitement.

The first few overs were productive to the Spawn City men. Dave's "teasers" met with scant respect. The batsmen's eyes were true, if they did slog with cross bats. Roydon had not yet found his length, and though his "expresses" worried the batsmen they managed to hold up their wickets.

It was not until the fast bowler's third over that a wicket fell. He had sent down three balls which the

batsman had contrived to smother, a process under which the sheriff grew restive.

"Hit him a boost on the leathers," he said irritably, in a stage whisper, as Roydon passed him for his fourth delivery.

And somehow the next ball accurately carried out Joe's orders. Roydon bowled at his top speed. Straight as a die the ball sped for the man's legs, and took him on the top-boots with a mighty thwack. The man gave a yell and sprang into the air, flinging his bat from him as he did so. Then he sprawled upon the ground, rubbing his injured shin.

Without a moment's hesitation the sheriff's voice rang out.

"Out!" he roared, without waiting for appeal, and utterly regardless of the fact that the ball was well off the pitch.

A yell of approbation went up from the field, and Roydon found himself staring incredulously at the man who had delivered the unsolicited decision.

At last he recovered his presence of mind.

"But——" he began in protest.

The sheriff cut him short with such ferocity that he was instantly reduced to silence.

"Ther' ain't no argyment," he cried. "Out!"

The batsman was still squirming on the ground. He made no move to depart, and Joe fairly jumped with fury.

"Hout!" he roared again, with a pronounced aspirate, and in such a tone that the man rose painfully to his feet and limped away from the wickets.

Tombstone heard him muttering as he went, and, in a moment, was crossing towards him. As he came up he thrust his lean face close down into that of the injured batsman.

"I sure sed you wus 'out,'" he purred.

And the man ceased to mutter and hurried on towards the hotel, where an audible murmur of disapproval was going on.

Joe strode back to his wicket and gave his attention to Roydon.

"Say," he remarked, while his wild eyes pensively

wandered in the direction of the hotel veranda, "air you playin' fer Spawn City?"

The other was all indignation.

"Of course not," he returned hotly, "but——"

He was given no time to finish what he had to say.

"Wal, you jest git right to it firin' that ball. I'm runnin' this lay-out."

The next batsman that came in got the full benefit of Roydon's temper. He sent the ball down recklessly, and at tremendous pace. The new-comer made a wild slash at it, fully a second after his wickets had been strewn about the field, and Gladie Joyce was reposing on the ground with the ball somewhere secreted about the pit of his stomach.

As the man departed Joe's face lit with a smug look of satisfaction.

"Kep right on, boy," he observed complacently.

"Things 'ill git busy after awhile."

With the change of over, Joe, regardless of the captain's rights, quietly ordered Bob Gauvin to bowl at the other end, and at once a new element began to disturb things.

With his first ball Bob deliberately threw, and it came whizzing dangerously down the wicket. It was the Spawn City umpire's turn this time. He promptly "no-balled" him. The sheriff suddenly spat out his chew of tobacco, but otherwise remained quiet. Again Bob threw, and again the Spawn City umpire "no-balled" him. But this time the batsman jumped out of the way of it and the ball scattered the stumps.

"Out!" roared the sheriff promptly from his end, without waiting for any sort of provocation.

The batsman turned on him furiously.

"That wus a gori-durned 'no-ball'!" he shouted in his face, as he stalked up to put the wicket right.

Joe very deliberately straightened the stumps first. Then he looked the man squarely in the eyes and spoke with dangerous mildness.

"I'll ast you a reas'nable question," he said, with one of his peculiar grins. "Was them sticks up, or was they down?"

"Down o' course, but that——"

"Wal," said he, in his suavest tones, "that bein' so, I 'low you're 'out.' Mebbe you'll va-cate."

There was a moment of suspense while the man eyed him. Then the batsman looked down at the wicket, and, finally, his eyes came back to the umpire again. He seemed to see something in the sheriff's cold eyes which helped him to a decision, for, shouldering his bat, he hurriedly moved off.

Roydon was fuming, and as the man departed he turned on Tombstone in no uncertain manner. Sheriff or no sheriff he would no longer put up with such bare-faced swindling.

"Look here," he said, endeavouring to keep control of himself, "give them a chance."

"Chance?" replied Joe easily; "you're talking foolish. Ther' ain't no 'chance' when a feller's out."

"*When* he's out!" the bowler retorted meaningly.

"Per-cisely."

Then Roydon's temper got the better of him.

"Well, if you don't play fair I clear out," he blurted out.

Joe looked at him with a glance of pity and contempt.

"Say," he said coldly, "you're here to lick hell out o' them critturs, an' mind your bizness. Hah!"

His final exclamation came as the other umpire came within range of his stormy eyes. The Spawn City representative was crossing towards him.

Instantly the man's whole manner changed. His face lit up and his terrible eyes sparkled, and there was a movement about his lips as though he were tasting a delicate morsel. Roydon watched him closely. He saw him shoot a swift glance in the direction of Bob Makaw, standing somewhere about "cover point." Then his glance came back to the approaching umpire.

Sladie Joyce was standing just behind Roydon, who turned on him and began to put a question.

"Who——?"

But the wicket-keeper cut him short.

"No time fer questions," he said, in a hoarse undertone. "Kep an eye on the sheriff!"

Thoroughly puzzled, Roydon turned again to watch the meeting, but the squint-eyed man from Spawn City had

not yet reached the sheriff. Just then an intense whisper reached his ears. It was Joe's voice, and the look in the man's eyes set his pulses beating and his head whirling. He felt that all that had gone before had simply been leading up to this moment. This was the moment Joe had awaited.

"Pick 'em up easy. Do it casual," said the whispering voice. "Use 'em when I say."

While he was speaking something fell dully to the ground at his feet. Roydon, with great presence of mind, promptly sat down as though to rest himself. Then, as the squinting umpire came up to within a few yards of the sheriff, he scrambled to his feet grasping a pair of light, leather-covered handcuffs. His heart was thumping with apprehension. It was a terrible moment of suspense. He glanced round the field, and saw that the boys were standing around all apparently unconcerned. Bob Makaw was even lying prone upon the ground. He felt that he must shout to warn everybody; but he kept silent. Then the sheriff's voice broke the silence.

"Say, mister," he observed cheerily, addressing his fellow umpire, "guess your boys ain't doin' too well."

His manner sent a chill down Roydon's back, but he revelled in the man's audacity. The squinting eyes glittered.

"Guess it ain't what they're doin', what's worritin'," the man said, with a swaggering insolence that would have been maddening but for his ludicrous squint. "I've jest come along wi' a word fer you. It makes me ter-ble sick that Dyke Hole ain't got no more manners than to set a hog of a sheriff to do their dirty work. I want to tell you I ain't takin' no more of his bluff; ther's goin' to be a decent citizen, ef ther's one in Dyke Hole, to stand referee, or we quit right here."

Roydon thought he had never seen Joe to better advantage than at that moment. He was so quiet, so easy, yet his sharp strong teeth were gritting, and his smile was fixed, and reminded one of an angry cat.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, with a hollow laugh, "that's real fancy talk. But I'd jest like to say as Dyke Hole mostly appoints ther' referee, an' don't need no bum pirate from the hills to butt in. It don't fit in with my notions of

things to be standin' makin' compliments to 'Tricksy' James nohow!" And as he finished he clapped his hand on the butt of one of his several guns.

Then happened one of the quickest things imaginable. It would be impossible to disentangle the happenings of those moments. Two shots rang out, and James's gun dropped from his hand. Simultaneously Joe's voice rang out.

"On him, boy!" he cried; and Roydon knew that the command was meant for him.

Without a thought he hurled himself at "Tricksy." He had no consciousness of his reason, except that he had heard the sheriff's command and felt he must obey it. A physical battle was always to his liking, and he applied an enthusiasm now that gave James small chance of further use of firearms. Big and strong as this desperado was, the fight he put up was child's play after Roydon's battle with the sheriff. Besides, he was wounded. In a few seconds the fellow was down, and, after a brief struggle, the shackles were snapped on his wrists. Then, for no reason of which he was aware, Roydon felt his senses depart and everything became a blank to him.

CHAPTER VIII

ROYDON CONFIDES IN THE SHERIFF

ROYDON was left a long while in ignorance of what followed the capture of "Tricksy" James. A merciful Providence had plunged him into an unconsciousness from which he did not awake until a day later. Then he found himself a very sick man indeed, with a hole in his side which Dave, the veterinary surgeon, whom he found attending him, declared was "that big he was scared to death of breakin' his neck fallin' in it."

This was Dave's delicate pleasantry. Though a horse-doctor, he was skilful enough with gun wounds. He had had a large and varied experience, and, under the watchful eye of the sheriff, was forcibly kept sober until such time as his patient was out of danger.

Recovery was a long process, and it was nearly three weeks later that Roydon was allowed to receive his first visitors. Mavis, cheery-faced and hustling, was preparing the room for the occasion. She was an amiable, well-meaning soul, who had come to regard the sick Englishman as a perquisite of her own, and one which offered possibilities. In the past her matrimonial efforts had covered a very wide field. She was the only woman in the hotel, and had tried her blandishments upon every male creature within its portals, from the commercial "drummers" right up to the proprietor, "Bulrush" Moe, and even down to the Chinese cook.

Roydon felt very kindly disposed towards her. Though he often smiled at her efforts to cheer him, he was glad enough of her company, and declared that it was her never-flagging spirits and unfailing kindness that kept him alive.

Now her flow of small-talk was exhausted, and she was racking her brains for a fresh topic of conversation. Sud-

denly she brightened up. She had just remembered something of importance.

"Ther's punkin-pie for dinner," she exclaimed, her eyes wide and her lips smacking with gastronomical delight. "Punkin-pie—Gee!"

"Punkin-pie? Yes?" Roydon had no idea of the succulence of this delicacy, or the local favour it enjoyed.

The girl came over to him and spoke with almost comical earnestness.

"I've made cook keep one aside for you—a whole one!"

Roydon thanked her heartily, and Mavis beamed.

"And I'll bring it right along up presently," she said. "Y' see, ther'll be a run on punkin-pie when the boys get around, and maybe cook won't be able to keep it down there. Say," she went on, "when's Dave goin' to let you out?"

Her patient laughed.

"When? Well, he said I'd be fit for 'harness' tomorrow. I really think he imagines he's doctoring a horse. He never dresses my wound without making that hissing noise fellows use when they're grooming. When I move he says, 'Whoa!' When I don't move he says, 'Get up!' And his 'Steady, lad; easy now!' is his invariable way of keeping me quiet. He wanted to try a liniment he'd invented on my legs. It's for 'splints.' And when I told him I wasn't a horse, nor a mule, and not even an ass, he guessed the mistake was his, and went off in a huff."

"Had Dave been drinking?" the girl inquired seriously.

"No—at least, I don't think so."

"Ah, well, Dave's smart, sure," Mavis declared, but not without some scorn in her manner. "But he's been mistaken frequent when he's got liquor. They do say he always has to count his patient's legs before he gets busy with his physic. There ain't no doubt but it's a good thing fer a feller like him to make sure of such things. The liquor's liable to make him see queer, and there ain't a heap o' difference between two legs and ten when he's like that. Which I guess it would puzzle a patent medicine 'drummer' to physic a centipede. Now, the way he treat Shaggy Steele's wife when she had her last baby—the

fifteenth, or was it the sixteenth?—was awful. The boys ought to have lynched him."

"You don't mean to say he treats such cases?" cried Roydon, aghast.

"I do that. And they do say as he's right smart. I guess he was in liquor then—sort of foolish—for he come right along and ordered her into a loose-box, and said they was to give her a bite of sweet hay, and a bran-mash. And her man was that soused himself he was for doing it right off. Guess it was a mercy old Sarah Glades come along. She's a temperance crank what reckons to sober Dyke Hole up. She's a woman with a heap of brain and notions. Her father was in the hydraulic business up at Spawn City, and she's been death on water all her life in consequence. She's figgering on setting up public wash-houses in Dyke Hole, her mind's that set on water. Well, anyway, she got around, and when she see what's doing she ups and sent one of the kids right off for the sheriff. Y' see, Sarah reckons to marry Joe, some time, and never loses an opportunity. Well, Tombstone come right along and just heaved Dave into the water bar'l to weaken him down some, and Shaggy he fixed up in the barn; then he puts out for Spawn City himself, and brings along a real doctor. He's a man, is Joe. My word!"

The girl's admiration for the sheriff was very evident, and Roydon had a shrewd idea that Sarah Glades, whoever she might be, was not the only female in Dyke Hole whose eyes were turned in the direction of the law-giving Joe.

"I suppose there was trouble when the men got sober?" he said, with difficulty suppressing his mirth. The girl's seriousness made him feel that laughter was out of place.

"Well, no," Mavis responded. "Y' see, Dave disappeared for a week. He got in a mix with the foreman of the 'bar V's.' He had a call for a case of a mare with glanders. And when they asked him for to shoot her, he got mule-headed, and guessed his first duty, as a man of med'cine, was to save the mother, sure. Said he wasn't particular about the child, seein' she'd been foaled sixteen times before. It never got around wot they said to him after. My, but such folk as Dave give you the sick!"

Roydon dared not trust himself to speak for some moments. Finally he remarked—

ROYDON CONFIDES IN THE SHERIFF 77

"Well, I'm glad he diagnosed my case all right. He's kept sober, too."

"He darsen't do anything else around you," Mavis said emphatically. "Joe 'ud kill him if he did. Joe's real mad at you gittin' shot up."

"Is he?"

"Yes, he just is, and—— But there, I'm standin' here yeppin', with that punkin-pie waitin' down-stairs."

She moved over to the door and stood as though loath to leave. Then her face broadened into a good-natured grin.

"A whole punkin-pie!" she finally exploded as she departed. "Gee!"

Left to himself, the sick man forgot all about the promised pie. Such things had little appeal for him; besides, truth to tell, he had so many things to think about that he even forgot the girl herself. There were his affairs. They required much serious consideration, but, urgent as they were, he could not keep his mind on them.

The fact was he was haunted by the recollection of his water-nymph. Her delightful grey eyes had gone straight to his susceptible heart. Then there was another reason, had he needed any spur to his recollection; there were traces of her about his room now. In every vase, and there were quite a few, Mavis had clumsily gawked a bunch of flowers, which, though they had arrived each day without name or word from the sender, he felt sure were the kindly thought of Jocelyn.

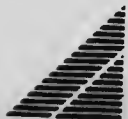
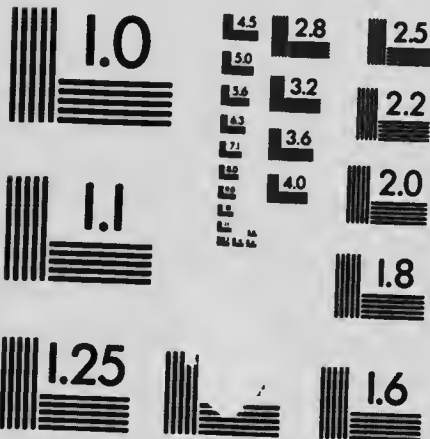
He sat back now and thought of the girl's charming sun-tanned face, the happy light of her merry eyes when he first saw her. He thought of her easy good-comradeship with himself, the trusting simplicity she had displayed. And he was thrilled, as he sat on dreaming, dreaming.

The door was quietly opened, and Mavis deposited the promised pie on the table. Then she departed, throwing meaning glances behind her as she went. They were quite lost on her patient. He murmured his thanks absently, and his dream remained unbroken. His thoughts were far too pleasant for him to allow a mere punkin-pie to break them up. They had come to him as a ray of sunshine. They lifted him up. He was mending mentally as well as physically, and his capacity for happy interest



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

was growing. He made up his mind that he must see this girl again, and soon.

But a loud knock at the door banished the last vestige of his love dream, and he sat up with a start.

Tombstone Joe flung the door open and strode in.

"Feelin' good?" he inquired, with unmistakable eagerness.

The cordiality of his greeting was in his manner rather than in his words.

"Capital," the sick man returned heartily. "I'm jolly glad to see you, sheriff. I was feeling a bit deserted."

"Say, that bum hoss-doctor ain't neglected you for his swipes?" Joe cried, with volcanic heat. He had jumped into a threatening attitude, with one clenched fist poised as though about to strike. "Ef he has I'll—I'll make it so hot fer him he'll jest yearn fer a desert of fire to cool off in."

"No, no," Roydon pacified. "He and Mavis are angels—of sorts. No, I meant in the matter of visitors."

Joe dropped into a chair, searching for a spittoon. Finding none, he shifted to the open window, a movement which brought him within range of the pie, which he regarded with stern approval.

"I'm glad you've come," the other went on. "I want to talk. You're not in a hurry?"

"Nope. The folks are busy up to the Mission House, fixin' their souls right. Guess I ain't needed till they get through," Joe replied dryly.

He proceeded to make himself comfortable, unstrapping the guns at his waist, and flinging them aside. Then he settled himself in his chair.

"First of all," Roydon began, "what happened at the cricket match after I went down? Dave seemed a bit mixed as to facts."

"Mixed?" cried Joe, with withering scorn. "His roofin's that mussed with hoss iles it's most like a poultice. Guess James is way up to Anaconda fer hangin'. I fixed him."

"And to think we were playing cricket with him!" Roydon soliloquized.

Joe grinned.

"It's a mighty sociable game," he said.

"Brings people together, eh?" Roydon smiled.

"Yep. Ther' ain't no fancy frillin's to sport," Joe observed, catching the other's mood.

"No. But things might have gone badly."

"Badly?" Joe shrugged. "I don't never worry over no sort of trash like 'Tricksy' James. An' the chances wa'an't a heap. He took all the chances lyin' around, I guess. Bob Makaw, sure, had him right along. Y' see, Bob an' me was ready for him, which fooled him some. We had him set. You can't hide up a nasty smell wi' ten cents' worth o' white cotton. When I riled him, an' he drew, Bob fed him a daisy. As neat a case of lead pizenin' as you'd wish fer, an' a favourite play of Bob's. Guess I'd calculated a bit fine, though," he went on regretfully. "It wus when his gun spoke, as his arm dropped, an' took your stummick. I got real mad then, an' guessed right away that Spawn City owed us more'n it could pay easy, and we set right in to talk 'em straight. Say, it wus the neatest proposition in the way of a scrap I've seen in years. We scrapped 'em right off'n that ground," he cried, with fierce relish. "We hunted 'em right back to the saloon here. We blasted 'em out with a ton o' lead, an' onto their mangy plugs of low-bred horses, an' turned their wagon into a funeral hearse. We put 'em out onto the trail, an' shot 'em along to wi'in six mile of Spawn City, wher' we left 'em to fix theirselves—wot remained of 'em—so they'd be fit to greet their women-folk to home. Sir!" he finished up, with a great wild pride burning in his hollow eyes, "it was an elegant proposition. Gee!"

The man's wolfish nature was shining in the flash of his eyes; he was thrilling with the lust of battle, and his passion swept his hearer along with him on its burning tide. Every chord of Roydon's nature was vibrating in sympathy. He, too, loved the thoughts of such a battle.

"Great!" he cried. "Great!"

Then both became silent. And, in the silence, Tombstone reached out and seized the knife lying beside the pie. He helped himself to a liberal portion and devoured it absently.

Roydon was staring out of window. He was lost in the contemplation of a mental picture of the battle. While

scene after scene of the lurid drama passed before his mind's eye, the sheriff's strong teeth were kept busy.

A sigh of content from Joe at last brought the other back to his surroundings. After all, there were other far more important things to consider than an outrageous battle between two factions.

"Sheriff," he began seriously, "I am going to ask for your advice."

Joe smiled.

"That don't generly need the astin'. Passin' on advice comes natteral to human natur'. Like an epidemic; you can't avoid it nohow, an' it's sure mean when you git it bad."

The other nodded. He was quite serious.

"Well, anyhow I want your advice if you'll give it."

"Sure."

But it was not easy for Roydon to state his case. He debated with himself, and Joe had leisure to resume his assault on the pie. This time he completed its discomfiture. The last wedge of the yellow pastry was poised ready to be demolished when Roydon looked up. Their eyes met. And the sheriff was reluctantly impelled to insinuate it in his host's direction.

"Pie?" he inquired half-heartedly.

Receiving a negative shake of the head, he promptly aired his relief.

"You're right, boy; a sick feller ain't no call mussin' his stummick with trash like pie."

He punctuated his remark by swiftly bolting this last portion lest Roydon should repent his decision. Then, when his mouth was sufficiently empty, he went on.

"You wus sayin'?" he inquired, with a satisfied sigh.

"I'd better start by telling you my story," the younger man said thoughtfully. "You see, I came to Dyke Hole to carry out the wishes of a dead man who left me a fortune. A fortune of about ten million dollars."

The sheriff's face was a study. Its expression passed through every conceivable form of astonishment, and finished up with incredulity.

"You sed—ten—millions?" he almost gasped.

"Yes. That's about the amount."

"Ten! Them figgers sure needs grippin'," Joe said, a little helplessly. "Ten! Gee! Guess that feller wa'an't

a king, nor an emp'ror. Say." with the light of inspiration in his eyes, "he was sure a pol'tician?"

"No, he wasn't. But he was a prince—a prince of good fellows."

Joe gazed admiringly upon his sick *protégé*, and nodded approvingly. Roydon went on.

"He was the best man I ever knew. He was my foster-father. The point I want to get at is that he left a rich property in this district. To that property there is, or should be, an heiress, and the conditions of the will demand that I find that property, and the heiress, and restore the one to the other before I touch my ten millions."

Then Roydon slowly unfolded his story. He began at the very beginning of his early career, and went, step by step, over the details of old George Raymon's never-failing kindness to him, and finished up by reading the dead man's letter to his companion.

During the long recital Tombstone sat back listening intently; and at its conclusion his first remark seemed irrelevant.

"We're all huntin' silver," he observed dryly. "It's silver with us, I guess, mornin', noon—an' night."

"I suppose you mean my chances are small?"

"Chances? Ther's allus chances."

Joe seemed suddenly to have developed a fit of gloomy reflection. Perhaps it was the reaction from his astonished interest in the size of George Raymon's fortune.

"Yes. Ther's allus chance. Most everything's chance, 'cept when a hoss-doctor gits physickin' folks—then it's a pertickler elegant funeral proposition. Now, 'bout that gal?"

But it was Roydon's turn to become abstracted. Joe's mention of the silver-hunger by which everybody was beset reminded him of the woman "terror" who rode roughshod over the country, the vampire of the silver industry. She and her gang of stage-robbers.

"This Kit—'Six-shooter' Kit—since you're talking about girls. Who is she?" he demanded.

The sheriff's thin lips suddenly tightened. For a moment he seemed to shrink into his shell, and his eyes died to that cold light which his companion had seen in them so

often—that cold, metallic hardness which suggested such deadliness. But the look passed, and the lips relaxed, and his eyes became almost gentle.

“Kit?” he began. “Kit? Wal, I guess she’s jest a woman; one with notions, I allow, but a woman, anyhow. Kit?” he repeated softly. “She’s a neat proposition in bluff. Best around these parts. Folks sez she ain’t no equal with a gun. They say she’s that quick she’d empty five bar’ls of a ‘forty-five’ into a word of two syl’bles passin’ over a telegraph wire, an’ pick out the letters of her fancy. That’s as mebbe. Her game’s the ‘hold-up.’ She’s out after the silver stages like a wild cat after chickens. Guess the silver she handles ’ud mostly fill a dime bank—lestways it ’ud kep a Mormon’s wives in candy fer nigh a year. She’s a dandy, upstandin’ crittur what, report sez, runs a gang of ‘sports’ who’d do as she sez fer a smile. Say, ef women went to Congress, it ’ud sure only be the women’s votes as ’ud keep her out o’ the White House. Sir, she’s a grand woman.”

“And she terrorizes the country?”

“Why, yep. But it ain’t allus bin that aways wi’ her. Six year ago I see her way out to Wyoming, livin’ wi’ her mam, just as nicky a wench as ever straddled a broncho hoss. She was a lovesome dream of beauty, as innocent as a suckin’-hog—which I should say sow. She’d a face as brown an’ sweet as ol’ Ramford’s molasses, an’ a sight purer. She’d a peach-bloom that ’ud have made a fruit-ranch holler help. She was a dandy, sure. Wal, I never see her agin till I hit these parts. Her mam jest faded out like, an’ Kit cleared out of Wyoming. Mebbe a year later I got busy makin’ folks around here hate theirselves, an’ was handed word of this hill ‘terror.’ So, cuttin’ adrift from the social whirl of Dyke Hole, I lit right out on a circuit fer to par’lyze crime, reward virtue, an’ generly speakin’ uphold the constitootion an’ set the wings o’ the great American Eagle flappin’. Guess I took the hills in on that tour. After scratchin’ around some I sure come face up agin our Kit of Wyoming. It was her. Guess I knew them cheeks, them eyes, that ha’r, like store velvet, that figger, bustin’ wi’ all that ever boosted a feller along the fiery trail of hell. I knew ’em. Wal, I guess so. Sez she, right off, ‘Sheriff,’ she sez, that meek

an' quiet as wouldn't have waked a babe, 'is this visit jest fer compliments, or are you chasin' glory?' She's got a nice sense of making things pleasant. So I answers quick, 'Glory ain't a circumstance after settin' eyes on you, Kit. It's a real pleasure to see you agin.' At that Kit jest laffed right out, an' I see the deviltry in them fancy eyes of hers. She handed the next quite merry-like. 'I've heerd pleasure's mighty nigh to pain,' sez she, laffin' fit to bust her waist-fixin's. I took her way an' answers back, 'That's wot that bum sportin' crank sed when he was up to the mountains shootin', an' a black puma got busy chawin' him in the neck when he wa'a 't lookin'.' Her laff cooled some at that, an' she snapped back quick, 'Your application's ap-proprate,' sez she. Y' see, she's a dandy at book learnin', an' has a fine flow of words. Them words made me feel real good, but I jest couldn't let her rake in that 'pot' without 'callin' her so I sez, as ready as you please, 'I most allus had a pongshong fer a tater-tate with a leddy.' Which was a favourite talk of a Dago friend of mine who ran a shavin' parlour down to Bute City. Her eyes opened wide at that, an' I see she'd got it hard, so I goes right on, 'An', since we're talkin' 'bout puma,' sez I, 'I'd remark casual that huntin' that ornery crittur is jest the dandiest sport I ever yearned to take a hand in, an' if you're wise to any around these parts I'll take it real friendly ef you'd pass me word. I'm right out here to clear these hills of 'em, an' any other nasty critturs what worrits law-abidin' citizens goin' peaceable 'bout their work.'

"I guess we sure had a dandy haf-hour talkin' compliments, an' I wus kind o' sorry when she sickened of it an' left. Which I sez it, the refinin' influence of women is the hub o' civilization. Ther's——"

But at this point Joe was interrupted by the sudden opening of the door, and the apparition of Ripley Boyle lurching into the room in an advanced state of drink. His condition was the mellow glow of an ample sufficiency, rather than the overflowing atmosphere of a thorough saturation. He had a tangled mass of cut flowers crushed to wilting point in one hot, fat hand, while the other was tightly gripping the neck of a whisky-bottle, already half empty.

He oozed into the room without a word, his eyes focussed steadily on the sheriff, while his aim was in the direction of the sick man. In consequence his progress was somewhat crab-like. Finally he tripped and stumbled, and thereafter halted.

"Howdy, sheriff?" he said, with an ingratiating smile. Joe's attitude was wholly uncompromising.

"So."

"I was just passing, an' thought I'd run in."

"Guess you'll find crawlin' a sight easier," observed Joe coldly.

Boyle eyed him more intently, opened his lips to speak, and, finally, broke into a cackling laugh.

"He! he!—h-hah!"

"Guess they grew them flowers in Moe's bar," Joe went on sarcastically, indicating the bunch of flowers in his hand.

The lawyer looked at them seriously.

"See you've got your waterin' pot too," Joe proceeded, with a dash of heat in his further sarcasm. "Guess that come from the same place. Seem'ly you figgered you was the flower needed waterin'."

"I've been called a 'daisy,'" Boyle grinned, attempting to lighten the threat of storm by another inane cackle.

"Cabbige!" cried the sheriff, with a fierce snort.

Then he suddenly reached out one long arm and snatched the whisky bottle from the little man's hand, and threw it out of window. Before the lawyer could protest Joe was on his feet, threatening him.

"Wot's them flowers, you swipin' sponge?"

The drunken man laid the mangled blossoms upon the table.

"She sent 'em," he said sulkily. "They're for him," he went on, pointing at Roydon. "An' that's what I came around for—to give 'em."

"That's jolly kind of her!" exclaimed Roydon impulsively. "I say, Mr. Boyle, you must thank Miss Jocelyn for me. Aren't they ripping, sheriff? You must have a drink."

"Not on your life!" Joe roared, with one of his volcanic outbursts. "Say, you'll git to home quick, an' you won't stop for no tea-parties," he went on, glaring down upon

the shrinking lawyer. "Git home an' slep off your souse without lettin' that gal of yours see you. You're an' eyesore, you're a blot, you're a gori-durned con-tamination. Git out, you liquor disease, an' ef you let that gal of yours see you I'll make you hog water till you feel as near as a temp'rance trac' in a prohibition State. Git!"

The lawyer remained only just long enough to reach the door in three unsteady strides. He rolled out of the room, his churned-up brain whirling with venom against the cause of his discomfiture.

Joe's temper was ruffled. After Boyle had gone, Roydon tried to continue their talk, but his efforts to hold the peace-officer's interest failed, and he welcomed a further interruption.

The new-comer was Miss Sarah Glades, the temperance missionary.

She was extremely plain and decidedly elderly. She minced into the room, and minced out her greeting. She minced herself into the seat nearest to the sheriff, and edged it as near to him as was decorously compatible with her elderly maiden state. Instantly Joe became a different man. Of all Dyke Hole this woman alone had power to make a coward of him. The scarlet tip of her inquiring nose disconcerted him. Her elderly archness set him groping for a defence, while her air of proprietorship weakened his independence of spirit till he felt, in his own phraseology, like drowned whisky. He felt that Nature had played a dirty trick on his sex in garbing this virtuous soul in skirts and spring-side boots. She was a sort of enveloping movement that cut off retreat, defied attack, and rendered him helpless before her advance.

He heaved a sigh of resignation as she opened her batteries.

"La, Mr. Sheriff!" she exclaimed gushingly. "And to find you here! Well, I'm sure. But I always was lucky." She coyed and shot him an arch glance of wiry sunshine. "No, please don't look at me," she hurried on, in spite of the fact that the sheriff was steadily contemplating the view through the open window. "I hadn't time to dress myself properly. I'm so busy. I just snatched a few moments from my work of redemption to come and cheer this poor sick boy up, and give him a wee bit of advice."

She shook her antique headgear till its flowers threatened to shed their petals. "Then, too, I'm sick to death myself. What the trials and troubles of a reformer's life are you can never know. Ours is a hard lot. What I suffer—but there——"

"You ain't got no symptoms, mam?" Joe demanded, struggling hard to inspire his tone with sympathy. "Ef it wus your head it ain't so easy. Best git right off to the bug-house 'fore you git actin' foolish. Ef it's the stummick ther' ain't nuthin' to ekal a poultice. I've had 'em, so I know. But you sure need to be careful settin' 'em right. Y' see, poultices is mean. They're most as mean as a hoppin' flea. They sure ain't never wher' you're guessin' they are. It's mighty uncomf'table settin' with a poultice tricklin' around. 'Sides, ther' ain't no sense fillin' up your boots with bilin' linseed. Now, wot I sez is set that poultice in a bagan' git a feller to lash it to your stummick with——"

The spinster gave a little horrified scream.

"Oh, Mr. Joe!" she cried, thrusting out a large hand as though to ward off some deadly peril. "Oh, only to think!" Then she recovered herself with astonishing rapidity. "But there," she exclaimed, "you are so sympathetic, dear Mr. Joe. It's not my—ahem—stomach. I was speaking in metaphor. It's my heart."

Joe threw his eyes up in melodramatic despair.

"Hearts is cussed," he said, with an ominous shake of the head. "When they git busy you can't never tell what's goin' to bust. First they hammer your ribs till it seems like they're drivin' tacks, or some other domestic stunt, then they buck like a broncho hoss, an' you feel jest as tho' your neck was full of haf-boiled duff you can't swaller, an' 'ud hate to spit out, or else you find it located som'eres around in your pants—which I ast your pardon, leddy, fer talkin' so free wi'——"

The spinster's horror interrupted the sheriff's flow of simile, and he forthwith swerved his conversation into a less dangerous channel.

"Yes," he proceeded at once, with admirable assurance, "you were talkin' of sympathy, mam, and I say it right here sympathy is a pertickler fine thing. Ther' ain't nothin' so saft, an' sweet, an' comfortin' as sympathy,

when folks is sick. Et's most like the delicate flavour of flowers, after workin' around a hog-pen; it's a downy cushion when you're saddle sore an' ain't no sort of fancy fer settin' around on chairs; it's the gentle balm of healin' ile when some all-fired son-of-a-moose ain't had no more manners than to shoot your carkis up to——"

At this juncture Roydon saw his duty plainly and jumped in.

"Er—won't Miss Glades take some refreshment?" he said eagerly. "A little glass of wine?"

His interruption was not the success he had hoped for. The temperance advocate was round on him in a moment, and her eyes snapped disapproval.

"Young man," she cried, snatching a bundle of papers from the worn velvet reticule she carried, and thrusting them forcibly upon him, "your remark is opportune, if in doubtful taste. You recall me to the object of my visit, which is drink. I am here to save you from yourself. I know you. Your disgraceful orgies, your wanton debauches. Fighting, swearing, licentious drunkenness. That is your character here in Dyke Hole. You disgrace your manhood; aye, and even your mother and sisters. Think of your poor mother who went through all the pains of bringing you into the world, dying of starvation in some prison cell, or at best in some poorhouse, because of your evil ways. What has your poor broken-hearted father done that he should go down in sorrow to his grave? Your poor wife, is she not to be considered? Your children? Think!" she cried, suddenly rising to the height of her best platform oratory. "Think of the homes you have wrecked. Think of the poor women you have sent to perdition, when the flowing tide of drink has swept you upon its bosom, and flung you to the depths of the pit of moral degradation! Think, I say. Pause. Lift yourself up! Save yourself while yet there is time! Cling to the Cross lest you drown, and your wickedness like the roaring li——"

"Mam," broke in Joe, with considerable firmness, as the woman's voice rose to breaking pitch, "I guess your bow-tie's come unfixed."

The spell was broken. The lash fell from Roydon's shoulders, and his heartfelt thanks went out to his friend.

Joe reached out as though to set the good woman's tie straight for her. She turned to him, her faded smile dawning again breaking through the storm-clouds of her fanatical rage like the tired light of a waning moon. But she suddenly drew back. Even his fingers she would not allow contact with her maiden bosom. She clutched at her tie, which was still lying unruffled and intact on her meagre chest.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Joe," she sniggered.

"That so, mam?" he inquired blandly. "I'll ast your pardon. You wus sayin'—?"

"It don't matter what *I* was saying, Mr. Joe, dear," the spinster replied impressively. "But since I'm here, and you are so sweetly sympathetic towards me and my work, may I ask you a favour?"

"Mam," responded Joe, in his largest manner, "in astin' it's you who're doin' the favour."

Roydon coughed.

"You're so gallant, dear Joe," said Sarah, with a chuckle of self-consciousness, and a degree of greater familiarity.

"Might I—might I ask you to say a few words at the Temperance Meeting I am holding at the Mission House, dear Joe? Dearest Mr. Joe, I should—"

"Say nary another word, mam," cried the sheriff, now reduced to a condition of nervous terror at the endearing manner of her speech. "I guess the subject's as near to my heart as is your lovely sex, mam. I'll 'dress them swipin' hogs down for you, mam. I'll orate if I bust!"

It took another quarter of an hour to get rid of the good Sarah, but at last she was successfully piloted out of the room, and Joe sighed as though a great weight had been lifted off him.

"Say, boy," he said, with a humorous raising of the eyebrows, and a skyward glance of hopelessness, as he came back to his seat, "ther's jest one thing worse than the feller who's scairt to death o' water. It's the woman who ain't."

"Seems to me," he soliloquized seriously, "human natur's jest crazed fer buttin' into most everything it ain't no call to. Now, that air female would hand trac's of a temp'rance natur' to a babe, ef she see it on the end of a bottle. Guess Solyman an' all his glory would sure hev

found hisself up agin it with a female temperance crank. Psha!" He laughed harshly, and put the subject from him, returning to matters of their own concern. "Say," he demanded in his sharp way, "'bout that mine, now?"

"Yes, that mine," said Roydon. "Look here, I told you my story 'because—because I think you're a man I can trust. Because I think you can help——"

"We'll cut them bokays right out," Joe interrupted brusquely. "Guess I ken do my own boostin'. I'll tell you right here I've took to your yarn. Ther's folk as think riddles an' sech-like ain't of no account. That's as mebbe. Seems to me they're better than all the cereals fer brain food, an' a feller in Dyke Hole needs a heap of brain food to kep him from gettin' right down on to his han's an' knees an' chawin' grass an' sech-like ridic'lous stunts. Now, ef you're set on bluffin' some Dago citizen out of what he reckons to be his own pertickler graft, you've got to git right down behind some mighty high fence an' stay ther'. Which I mean you'd best share my dep'ty with Bob Makaw. It'll put the law behind you, and folks won't ast questions—a pretty convenient thing ef we're goin' to locate that mine. An', meanwhiles, we'll get around an' see if old man Boyle knows anything 'cept the taste o' whisky."

CHAPTER IX

BLUFF

THE sheriff's hut in Dyke Hole could be best described as a haven of luxurious discomfort. It was designed on a perfect system of practical frugality.

For instance, he had a bed consisting of a straw pal-
liasse and some blankets on a wooden framework laced
with rawhide stringing, therefore he needed few chairs.
When he wished to use the table he only had to draw it
up to the bedside.

His walls were disguised, and he called the disguise his
picture gallery. It consisted of two large prints pur-
chased on the truly commercial principle of the largest
possible quantity for his money. There was also an
oleograph, alleged to represent our Lord's Supper, exe-
cuted in a wealth of gaudy colouring, and one or two old
carte-de-visites, and several faded tin-types of his female
acquaintances. These decorations fulfilled their purpose;
they diverted the eye from the glaring failures of the rest
of the mud-plastered walls.

The man's frugality was further displayed in the fact
that he performed his ablutions in an iron bucket. That
bucket had many uses, but not so many as the iron cook-
stove. His cookstove was his greatest possession. Those
who have lived a bachelor life on the fringe of civilization
know the proper value to place on a cookstove. Cooking
is only one of its many functions, heating another. It is
at once a sanitary dustbin, spittoon; when cold it can
be used as an extra seat, and even a table, to say nothing
of a sideboard. When well polished no one can deny that
it is an ornament.

But beyond all these common uses it can, and does,
become an influence upon mind and disposition. While

it has power to stir all the kindlier emotions through its timely amiability, it can also teach a saint to swear by its obstinacy. It can rouse all the baser passions, and inspire every shade of hatred and revenge as easily as it can soothe the nerves to a placid good nature when its fire is burning, its ovens baking, and the boiling pots are crowding the air with appetizing odours.

Nobody can be absolutely idle with the care of a cookstove upon the conscience. It demands as much tactful handling as a grouchy husband, a peevish child, or a woman of uncertain temper. Marriage may be a lottery, but a cookstove is a game played with most of the cards against you.

The luxury of Joe's home lay in its immunity from all restraint. It was his anchorage where he could do as his liver prompted him.

He returned to this place one morning and flung himself upon the creaking bed. He had just come in from a long ride, and was still be-chapped and spurred. He was in no way a man to consider the niceties in his home life. His bed was for rest whenever he needed it.

He was tired now, and his mood was peevish. The work of putting down crime in his district was no sinecure.

He lay quite still for some moments, with his lean hands clasped behind his head and his eyes staring gloomily. But his restless spirit would not allow him the rest he needed. Suddenly he stirred. He sat up and drew his picture of "Six-shooter" Kit from an inner pocket, and sat silently contemplating her handsome, bold face.

"You're a mighty big thorn of trouble, milady," he muttered indulgently. "You've growed an' growed around this country like choke-weed, an' it's ter'ble hard to git good an' started on you. Yep. You're a proposition that's worth handlin', an' I'm goin' to handle you. You're a woman, too, an' that's wher' the cuss of it lies. Guess ther's folks reckon to handle most anything, from a wild-cat right up to a presidential 'lection, an' I don't figger as ther's a heap of nerve goes to waste in either of them things. But I 'lows you'd set the brain of a Wall Street broker buzzin'. Yep. It's you an' me, my gal. We're up agin it. Nope." He shook his head slowly. "You

ain't goin' to break my fences. I'll call your bluff, mam. I'll sure call it; an' when I do I'll hev you beat right out o' sight."

He put the picture away and sprang to his feet. Moving over to a cupboard he cut himself a piece of meat from the ragged joint within, helped himself to a lump of bread, and dug out a supply of butter from a basin. Then he proceeded to appease his hunger, and washed his meal down with a draught of fresh water. He only eat from necessity.

A few minutes later he was in the saddle and riding in the direction of Ramford's general store, where he made a few careful purchases, which he bestowed with some elaborateness in his saddle-bags. Then he climbed into the saddle and rode out of the village in the direction of the hills.

His early moodiness had altogether left him now. His fierce eyes were shining with the volcanic fires of his spirit. Depression never stayed with him long. He was of that nature which makes for victory always. Opposition was his greatest stimulant. It was the scent of battle in the nostrils of a war-horse.

He rode along, wholly indifferent to his surroundings. Every inch of this trail was as familiar to him as was the creak of his saddle under him. He had ridden that journey all hours of the night and day, almost ever since he had lived in Dyke Hole. It could present no new features to him. Hill, and valley, and level, he heeded none of them, and his horse struck a gait which, to the experienced horseman, plainly said that it knew precisely how far it must travel, and the exact amount of energy it could afford to expend.

The mileage grew, and within two hours of leaving the village he passed the first of the foothills. Now the country grew more rugged and his progress became slower. His time was divided between easing his horse, as the animal laboriously climbed the shelving trails up the face of steep hills, and the almost equally arduous descent on the other side. And so another two hours passed. Then a small hut, perched on the hillside, and closely surrounded by a vast sea of pine forest, came into view. This was his goal.

The place was a mere shanty of logs and thatch, but it was weather-proof. Its setting was so remote, so deliberately hidden as to suggest that its original construction was for purposes of secrecy. But there was no suggestion of secrecy about it now. A thick curling smoke twisted its way skywards from its single chimney, and a fine display of snow-white washing strung out on ropes secured from the hut to the forest trees, which grew to within a few yards of its rough walls. Then there were fowls and turkeys strutting about as though they owned every inch of the land they walked on, while several gross porkers grumbled themselves along, rooting for the delicate morsels to be found in the virgin soil. An old cow and a weak-kneed horse completed the picture that greeted the sheriff as he swung himself out of the saddle at the door.

A moment later a crippled antiquity appeared round the corner of the building, and following closely in his wake came a pair of bright little children, laughing and shrieking their delight at sight of the sheriff. The children clamoured up to him, and, grabbing him by the fringe of his chapps, uproariously mixed themselves up with his long, lean legs.

"Uncoo Joe!" they cried in chorus, pulling him about with their little brown hands.

"Lift me up, uncoo," the little girl shrieked in her piping treble. But she was instantly drowned by the more raucous voice of her brother.

"No, uncoo! Me—me—me!"

They pushed and scrambled until both had been lifted high in the air. The man himself was transfigured. His eyes, which faced the world with so fierce a challenge in them, became as soft and gentle as a woman's, while his face was wreathed with a smile as grotesque as the grin of an ape. His great strong teeth flashed white between his parted lips. Not a particle of the man that Dyke Hole knew remained.

When he had satisfied the claims of the two mites, when he had kissed each in turn and set them safely on their feet again, he turned to the cripple.

"Wal, Martin," he said kindly, "them little bits is lookin' fine an' dandy. They're growin', too. Say, these

hills is jest a cinch for them beams o' sunshine. Bathin' 'em reg'lar?"

"Sure," replied Martin, with a nod. "Guess I bathe 'em reg'lar, tho' I can't see as everyday—once a week in summer, an' once a month in winter wus all I got from my mam. They're that clean you can't see they've bin in the water. I ain't no use fer sich finikin'," he finished up in a grumbling tone.

"That's so," observed Joe dryly. "Guess water ain't in your line. Now kiddies is diff'rent, bring 'em up to water an' you'll kep their minds clean, same as their little bodies. Say, come you right here, Sally," he cried to the girl. "How's that cough? Do you drink your physic reg'lar?" He passed his horny hand tenderly over the child's chest and back. "Don't seem no thinner, Martin. She ain't coughin'?"

"Coughin'?" grumbled Martin, with a shake of the head. "Coughin'? No she ain't, sheriff, but it's no thanks to the bathin'. 'Tis I sez is, when ther' ain't no cough ther's danger. It's them cold baths as stopped the coughin', which is bad. They're 'nuff to send a mule into his coffin."

The sheriff sat on a box close to the doorway, and drew the children to him as though he would protect them from the dangers Martin threatened. Then he dismissed the old pessimist.

"Take my hoss an' rub him down some. Guess you can leave the saddle right here. I've got things in them bags. Say——"

"Uncoo," cried the girl, interrupting him by putting her diminutive arms about the man's neck. "Wot's in them bags? We ain't no candy t' eat. 'Tis 'ran'-pa Martin says it's awfu' bad for our teeth. He jest gives us m'lasses on Sunday, an' sez he hopes it'll choke us if we muss our clothes. But he sez that of most ev'rything. It won't choke us, will it. Only corks an' things that swells will choke us? That's so, ain't it?"

"Silly kid!" exclaimed the boy contemptuously. "Who's goin' to eat corks?"

"I've seen you eat grass, Willie," replied Sally indignantly.

"That's when we play hosses, kid," retorted Willie patronizingly. "If you're a hoss you must eat grass."

"We could pretend, couldn't we, uncoo?" Sally appealed.

"Guess grass is ter'ble mean fodder fer kiddies. Now in them bags——"

"Shall I fetch 'em?" asked Willie eagerly.

"Wot's in 'em?" coaxed the girl, hugging close to the sheriff, and rubbing her wan little face against his stubby growth of beard.

"Mostly physic, I guess," replied Joe slyly.

The two children remained silent in their disappointment, and stared doubtfully at the bags.

"Wal," Joe went on, smiling, "you ain't yearnin' fer wot's in them bags. Say, sonny, pass 'em over, an' don't go fer to drop 'em, or mebbe them bottles o' physic 'll bust, an' you won't be able to hev it."

The boy reluctantly dragged the heavy bags over and laid them at the sheriff's feet. Then, seeing that his sister was occupying one of the man's knees, he proceeded to possess himself of the other. Joe disengaged his arms, opened the bags, and drew out three parcels. The first one contained an inferior doll in a bright red dress. He looked at it in pretended disgust, while little Sally shrieked her delight until a fit of violent coughing nearly choked her. Joe's anxious eyes watched her with a world of tenderness in their depths. He held her close to him, his arm circling her in a nervous embrace.

When the coughing ceased he went on with the matter in hand as though nothing had happened.

"Say, I guess that feller at the drug store got foolish. That ain't physic, kiddies, is it? That's sure a dolly. Say, ain't she jest sweet? Wot daisy hair! all gold an' braided. Gee, an' look at them pettic'its an' fixin's, ain't they real 'cute? My, but I'd b'lieve that suit of hers takes right off'n her so she ken go to bed of nights same as you. My word!"

Long before he had finished the doll was torn from his hands and securely hugged to the child's small bosom. Her blue eyes were wide with excitement, and the brilliant colour in her cheeks had become more vivid. She was almost shaking with delight.

"Oh, uncool!" was all she could say, but it was all the thanks the law-officer wanted.

He took up another parcel and began to unwrap it, talking all the while.

"Now these is pills an' things, sonny; they mostly heals everything, from a leakin' biler to a cold in the head. They're jest mirac'lous, they are. Some folks sure uses 'em fer heelin' boots. Which I sez, them hoboos ain't no sort of manners anyhow. Fancy heelin'— Eh, wot's this?" The last paper fell off, and Joe started in pretended dismay. "Why—why—that's a—yep, it must be a mouth orgin. Wal, sure, the feller as don't know one of them music fixin's from a bunch of pills needs lynchin'. Now, I guess you could play that dandy, Willie boy. Guess, I sure knew you'd a heap of music in you. Mebbe that storekeeper guessed it too. Here, you take it right now an' blow music clear through it. Gee!"

The echoes of the still forest world suddenly awoke at the delighted boy's first efforts. He blew on the instrument and danced to the noise he made, till his little bare brown feet raised a perfect fog of dust. And while this musical orgie was in progress the sheriff was unfastening the last and largest of the three parcels. It was the man's first exclamation that caused the din to cease, and brought Willie to his side in a state of ecstasy.

"Shucks! there it is, sure. Y' see, that drug feller has put the physic in a box," Joe cried, in pretended relief. "He knows his business, sure. He's smart. Now, physic's most allus put in a box. My, it's a large box! Say, kiddies, an' look at this. Why, it's tied up with pink ribbon. Pink—o' course. Pink stands fer rhubub. That's rhubub! It's a way-up physic, is rhubub. Some folks makes it into pie—an' I calc'late it's mighty good, but it ain't like punkin, is it? Now!" He took hold of the lid and raised a corner of it so that he could peep in.

The children were agog with excitement. Their little hands were ready and itching to tear the lid off, but Joe delayed in an aggravating manner.

He opened it a shade wider; the boy was trying to peer into it, and little Sally was craning round towards the open corner. Suddenly a small shriek broke the silence.

"Candy!" shouted Willie, in the wildest glee.

For an instant a shadow fell across them, but no one noticed it. Joe was as excited as the children. His big wild heart was thrilling, and he cared for nothing, thought of nothing, but those two mites tumbling over each other in their joy.

"Candy it is," he cried. "Candy! Gee, but that feller must ha' know'd wot you kiddies liked. Say, he must clean ha' fergot the physic." He tore the lid off and exposed to view a gorgeous array of chocolate. "My word! Candy! Say, here's one fer you, Sally—that's it," as the girl stretched out one eager hand, "leddies first. Now you, Willie," and he handed one to the boy. Then he held out the box with a delighted grin. "You two take 'em, and we'll see 'bout gettin' that physic after you're thro'—"

Suddenly the two children found themselves tumbling on the ground. Joe was on his feet, anger shining in his rolling eyes.

A tall woman in a blue canvas riding-skirt was standing a few yards off, smiling straight at him with a mocking light in a pair of magnificent dark brown eyes. She was very handsome and of superb physique. She had witnessed the whole scene, and the sheriff knew it. And his eyes blazed his displeasure.

One word escaped his tightly compressed lips.

"Kit!" he cried. And the tone of his voice sent the two children scuttling into the house like rabbits.

The woman's laugh had little mirth in it.

"You weren't looking for visitors, sheriff?" she said derisively. "Tombstone Joe in the bosom of his family," she went on, waving an arm in the direction of the hut.

Joe was silent. He glanced from the woman to her horse, which was standing restively some yards away, tethered to a tree. He found himself foolishly wondering how she had come by so splendid an animal, and his eyes fixed upon the carefully obliterated brand on its shoulder.

As he made no answer, Kit went on—

"I hadn't heard that the sheriff of Dyke Hole was married. My, but there are surprises around, if we only look for them. Even the wolf has his gentler moments. Say, you made quite a picture with the little ones at your knee. Ha, ha! It's so funny."

"You're welcome, mam, to the pleasure of it," Joe retorted, writhing under her derision. "As you said, I wa'an't lookin' fer visitors," he went on tentatively, "but since they're around I'm agreeable. Mam, it's a pleasure to see you." He drew off his prairie hat and flourished it broadly, as he bent himself into an angular bow.

"Ah, that's better," Kit rejoined, still in the same mocking tone. "Much better," she nodded. "You were angry at the interruption. But my visit was not a chance one. It was very deliberately intended. I tracked you here to talk with you, because I hoped to find you alone. And now I find you with your children."

The sheriff's lips tightened.

"Not my kiddies, mam," he said dryly. "Guess you're mis-informed."

The woman smiled incredulously.

"Not yours?" she said. "And yet——"

She broke off aggravatingly. Joe did not answer at once. He seemed to be debating with himself. At last a quiet look of humour crept into his eyes.

"Mam," he said, and his words came deliberately, "them kiddies, which you give me the compliment of reckonin' I owe the duty of a parent to, is the kiddies left behind by one of the worstest toughs I ever had the pleasure of hangin'. Seein' I've sure helped him on his way to hell, an' the re-cords don't give no account of their mam, I guess it's up to me to help things along fer 'em some. But you wus sayin' as your visit wa'an't no sort of chance?"

It was the woman's turn to pause now. She stared hard, as though she would read his inmost thoughts, and the mockery had gone from her eyes. Finally she made an uneasy movement, and when she spoke it was with an air of angry impatience.

"You're right," she exclaimed, "my visit was no chance. Since you mention a hanging matter I'll come to the point right here. You've taken James—'Tricksy' James—and on your evidence he's going to be hanged at Anaconda."

"That's so, mam," replied Joe imperturbably.

A strange earnestness came into the woman's eyes.

"It's the last hanging you'll do," she cried.

"On the con-trary, mam," Joe purred in his smoothest accents, "I'm sure on'y jest beginnin'."

"It's a beginning that must finish right here."

The sheriff's calmness was perfect. The smile in his eyes was a consummate aggravation.

"Mam," he said, with excessive politeness, "it grieves me till I'm sore that it can't finish before it begins. But since it's only begun I can't see how it's to finish till it's done. An', y' see, it can't git done till ther' ain't a tough in Dyke Hole county left. Ther's the argyment. Ev'ry proposition needs a heap of argyment. Say, now that argyment is up to me, an' I'm worritin' thro' the best I know how. With respec', mam, I'll say this hangin' bizness must go right on. I'm goin' to hang ev'ry mother's son—an' daughter, too—who's up agin the great American Constitootion, or its laws. Bein' a woman, I don't figger as your feelin's 'll let you take that easy. Which I mean you feel mean an' sore when you see your feller man lookin' foolish, an' feelin' wuss, at the end of a bit of rope that won't let him set foot to the ground. Now I'll take it kindly to hear the natur' of your visit."

"Nature of my visit, man? I'm telling you!" The woman drew a step or two nearer. Her bosom heaved, and her brilliant eyes were flashing. "We are not here to beat about the bush, Joe," she cried again. "We are not back in the old days of Wyoming. I am a different woman here——"

"No, mam," put in Joe quietly. "Jest the same Kit—on'y your mother's gone."

"Listen to me!" she cried in exasperation. "I'm not to be fooled with! I'm not here as a butt for your jests! I'm here to tell you that you've passed your own death sentence. Every man on these hills has sworn your life. I came to give you warning. To tell you to get the sentence on James reversed, if you wish to go on living. You refuse. Very well. It is up to you. All the hangin' you will do will be to attend your own. I have given you warning for—for old times' sake. Remember, whatever happens now is your own fault. As sure as James hangs at Anaconda, so surely the boys will hang you on the biggest tree they can find on these hills."

Kit's anger made her quite magnificent to the sheriff.

His deep eyes never left her face. With every word she uttered his interest thrilled, and she became more and more surely the most wonderful creature he had ever been brought into contact with. Her words, her threats conveyed small meaning to him. His admiration was the all absorbing thought and feeling of the moment. As she ceased speaking his reply came in a quiet voice.

"I ain't never give a heap of tho't to gettin' mussed up wi' a rope, mam," he said easily. "But since your mind's set right on to the notion, seein' you're a leddy, it ain't fer me to contradic'. Wot I sez is, ther's sure one thing to it. I'll ast you to get them boys to hev me set in the place I marked out fer myself in the graveyard in Dyke Hole. The headstone ain't yet set up, nor is the epi-taph writ on to it neither. It's jest a notion wi' me, an' can't do no sort of harm by them. An' I'll ast you to see that durned tank of a lawyer, Boyle, hands my dollars over to old Martin here fer the kiddies. Y' see, they ain't got nothin' else. That seems mostly all. Meanwhiles, I'll say, astin' your pardon for keppin' you standin' around here, I'd like to thank you fer the honour of this visit an' your warnin'. An' when you git back to them boys in the hills, I'd be real glad if y'd jest say to 'em, they'd best git busy right away wi' this hangin' racket 'fore ther's too few of them left to do the job han'some. I'd hate to hev a bum fun'ral." He took a step forward as Kit in her anger turned back to her horse. "Wi' your permission I'd be glad to help—— No?" He made as though to help her, but Kit sprang into the saddle, ignoring his outstretched hand. As she turned her horse's head away he bethought himself of a further politeness. "We're thinkin' of givin' a hoe-down back ther' in the village. Now, mebbe, we'd be real glad to see you an' any of the boys——"

The woman did not wait for him to finish. She jabbed her horse's flank with her spur and galloped off.

Joe stood looking after her in thoughtful silence until the piping voices of the children brought him back to more practical affairs.

"Gee! but she's a grand woman," he murmured, as he turned back to rejoin the little ones.

CHAPTER X

ROYDON VISITS MARC OSLER

ROYDON quickly got to work when once he was out of the sick-room. His appointment as Joe's deputy was at first received with derision by the men of Dyke Hole. The frequenters of Moe's bar laughed loud and long at the impertinence of setting a "tenderfoot" in authority over them, but under their laughter was a fierce resentment that might well have caused the new law-officer some disquiet. Then they expressed themselves in no measured terms upon the sheriff's action in the matter. They saw in it a deep-laid scheme to fleece the "tenderfoot" of the money he spent so freely, and of which he seemed to have such a liberal supply.

One day Bob Gauvin was moved to express his opinion. "He's punk!" he said. And his remark was aimed at Roydon. "It jest needs him to git 'fresh' an' butt in when the liquor's frekent; then ther'll be a noo War of Independence fought right out here in Dyke Hole."

He had drained at least ten glasses of whisky, and had arrived at that condition of mind when men are sometimes apt to grope back into the history of their country, and bask in the reflected glory of magnificent deeds of valour and devotion which they are devoutly glad to be well out of.

The lawyer was the recipient of this burst of patriotism, and felt the onus of retort to rest upon him.

"With Bob Gauvin for a George Washington?" he inquired innocently.

Seeing that Bob's veracity was notorious for its purely incidental nature, and his powers as a fighting general wholly dependent upon the amount of alcohol he had previously consumed, this quiet satire went extremely well with the audience, and the fast bowler was forced to con-

ceal his discomfiture behind another whisky, purchased through the clemency of Moe in the matter of credit.

But Dyke Hole was extremely careful when and where it discussed any action of the sheriff's. Joe had such an uncomfortable way of hearing a long way off, and his eyes were so annoyingly clear-sighted as to be thoroughly disconcerting.

Thus Roydon heard nothing, and saw nothing of the acrimonious feeling inspired by his appointment. Whether Joe was aware of it nobody but himself knew. So, for the time at least, the new-comer was left undisturbed; he had little else to do but restore himself to perfect health and strength, a process he at once adopted with all the enthusiasm of youth and a clean constitution.

It was nearly six weeks from the time he was shot up by "Tricksy" James to the day that found him on his way to pay his first visit to Marc Osler. Neither he nor the sheriff had discussed the affairs of George Raymon's will since the day he had sought his superior's advice. And this was partly due to his physical unfitness to take any action, and partly to the sheriff's desire that he should be fully restored to health before the campaign opened. Therefore Joe cordially assented when he at last requested permission to set out for Spawn City.

"I'm real glad," he said at once. "We got to git busy. An' we sure won't need no blind hosses to this racket of yours—nor no lame ones neither. Git right along, boy, and," he added, "I'll be settin' around here when you git back."

Roydon pulled up at the door of Marc Osler's office in Spawn City. He felt very cheerful. Those weeks under the doubtful hands of Dave Bless had tried him severely and taught him how to appreciate his present bounding health. It was good, too, to be at work on his affairs. There was something akin to excitement in his quest. He could not even guess what the future might have in store for him. He regarded this visit as his real starting-point: Osler might be able to simplify the whole thing; or, on the other hand, his foster-father's belief might be all wrong, and this old-time friend might be able to give him but little assistance.

The silver king was at his desk when Roydon entered the office. They were the same fish-like eyes that looked up when he was admitted; the same expressionless mask confronted him that had faced the sheriff weeks ago. One could almost have imagined that no change of expression had occurred since that time.

"You are—Mr. Roydon?"

While Osler was speaking his pale eyes took in every detail of his visitor's appearance. Roydon had taken on something of the prairie in his costume, and this was not without effect upon his host.

"Your letter said you intended to call. Well?"

There was some impatience in the final interrogation. He was not accustomed to show much courtesy to men who savoured of the prairie. Besides, he had no desire to prolong this interview.

Roydon ignored the shortness of manner.

"I hope my letter explained," he said. "You see, there was so much detail, too much to put in a letter. My foster-father, as I told you, recommended me to come to you. You were his friend."

The other nodded.

"You want advice," he said coldly. "It is necessary for you to find this mine Raymon once owned. That is what I understood."

The blue eyes looked straight into those of his visitor.

"Yes, if you will be so good."

"Ah. Yes, George was a friend of mine. Will you give me the full—details, and——"

The man let his voice die out leaving his sentence unfinished. But Roydon felt that his interest was greater than his manner suggested.

Clasping his hands together, Osler propped his elbows upon the desk and bent his head until his chin rested upon his white knuckles, while Roydon drew a chair forward and seated himself. He began the story of Raymon's will, telling it with a care for detail that tried his hearer's patience. It was as if he would rather have dispensed with the telling of the story altogether, as though it had no bearing on the advice he had to give, and that it could well be done without. Finally Roydon handed him George Raymon's letter. This the millionaire read with

evident interest, but he spoke in the same cold, hard manner which always characterized him, as he handed it back.

"It's all a long while ago," he said, with the air of a man thinking aloud. "Yes, a very long while ago. There have been changes, too—I mean in this neighbourhood. Have you got the plan of that mine?"

Roydon passed a large folded paper across the desk. The millionaire took it, and again his visitor became sure of his interest. He could not have said how, for the man's eyes told him absolutely nothing. Presently he moved from his desk and crossed to the window, where he stood looking out, with the paper still folded in his hand.

His back was turned, and Roydon could not see his face or what was passing there. He was staring out on the machinery operating in the dip, which fell away abruptly just outside the window. He was thinking, thinking far back, when George Raymon had been known to him, had been his friend, and it would have been hard to say whether that memory was pleasant to him or not. At last he opened the paper and examined it closely. After a while he turned round.

"This paper brings back many memories to me," he said, with more warmth in his tone than he had yet shown. "It is the work of old George. I recognize his writing. It must have been drawn many years ago. The old boy was always clumsy with a pen. It's all so many years ago it makes me feel very old. Not a pleasant feeling, eh?"

"You recognize the place?" inquired Roydon eagerly, forgetful of the man's feelings, oblivious to all save the object of his search.

Osler shook his head.

"That's the trouble. I do not. You see, though we were great friends, Raymon and I, we lived in a place, and at a time when it was necessary to observe great secrecy in our discoveries. In those days there was little friendship where rich strikes were involved. I was perfectly aware that George was helping himself to something rich, and that it was somewhere in this region, but," he laughed, his mirth a mere audible expression,

"though I tried very hard at the time to discover the whereabouts of his mine, he always thwarted me. You see I wanted to stake out claims near him, in the hopes of getting on the same lode. However——" he shrugged.

"This map," he went on a moment later, tapping the paper with his forefinger, "is very exact, but there are a lot of erasures on it. It suggests, from the elaborate surroundings George has drawn in, that the locality might well be here, at Spawn City. Then there is the direction—twenty-six miles south-west of Dyke Hole. That confirms the impression. Still, changes have taken place since those days. Settlements in the district have grown—and died out. This town has been built. Landmarks have changed. Many on this map are quite strange to me now. Did he never give you any verbal information?"

"None whatever. He never spoke of these things. He was most reticent about his fortune, and the manner in which it was made. I simply knew that in the old days he had struck it rich. His past was quite his own."

Osler appeared to be occupied with the map.

"He never told you anything—of those days?"

"Nothing."

"And yet his life story should have been very interesting—very interesting."

There was a pause. The millionaire seemed to have been carried back again to the days he was speaking of, to scenes which had long remained somewhere hidden in the back cells of his memory. Roydon was beginning to feel a keen disappointment. He had relied so much on this man's help.

"But that was always George's way," Osler said at last.

"He was the most secretive man. He told you absolutely nothing but what—is in that letter?" Roydon nodded.

"Too bad, too bad!"

"Then you can't help me?"

Marc Osler carefully folded up the map, and handed it back to his visitor, his pale eyes at last lighting with real interest.

"I don't say that. On the contrary, if anybody can help you I think it is I. I have always had a morbid desire to know the whereabouts of George's mine. Call it stupid curiosity—or covetousness—if you like. I know

pretty well every property around the district, and now I shall make it my business to go into the history of each, and compare its locality with that map. I incline to the belief that it is not an abandoned mine, but one that some person, or company, is working now. And, somehow, I think that is how George thought when he wrote that letter. Well, if this be so, the course I suggest will be quite the best." He laughed out loud. "There are some details on that map which suggest my own mine, right here. Curious, isn't it? Only, seeing I have owned the place since silver was first discovered in paying quantities upon it, the likeness falls flat. Well, well, we must sift the matter to the bottom. Would you like to leave that map with me?"

"If it will help."

All Roydon's disappointment had suddenly vanished. This man's evident interest had revived hope. If Marc Osler were to join in the search with his knowledge and experience, his power in the law, they were bound to arrive at some satisfactory issue. With this man's assistance he had no fear. His dead foster-father's confidence, after all, had not been misplaced.

"It will help, certainly. But I'm not quite sure about keeping it. You see, it is a most important document. No, I'll tell you what I'll do. Leave it with me for a few days. I'll send it away and have a couple of copies made of it, and then you can send the original to your bankers for safe keeping. We must take no chances. Will that be satisfactory?"

Roydon eagerly assented. He felt glad he had come to this man. His first impressions had quite passed away. In his calm, quiet way Marc Osler was full of interest and kindness. He promised very little, yet his manner was full of assurance, and this last suggestion appeared to be most admirable.

"Good," Osler went on. "You can let me have it now," and he held out his hand for the map. Roydon passed it over to him again. "This is Monday. I'll send it on to you this day week. The copies will be done by that time. And, meanwhile, I shall have set about my inquiries into the history of all the mining properties in the district. It will be a long process, but it will give

us a groundwork to theorize on. I'm very pleased to have met you, Mr. Roydon, not only for my old friend's sake, but for your own."

He rose from his seat and held out his hand.

"Next Monday, then?" he said, as they shook hands.

"Monday," Roydon said cordially. "And thanks——"

"No thanks, my boy. I owe your foster-father more than this. He and I—but there, the old past is ours, and will be of no interest to you. Good-bye."

Roydon found himself leaving the office before he intended. There was a lot he would like to have said, but his host gave him no chance.

When the door had close^d behind his departing visitor, and Marc Osler found himself quite alone, he quietly spread out the map on his desk. He sat staring at it for a long time without once raising his eyes. Nor was it until his dyspeptic clerk had knocked at the door, and been admitted, and dispatched to execute some fresh duty, that he refolded the paper and bestowed it in the safe behind his chair. Then he picked up his hat and stood before the window.

"So George has waited to do his kicking until he is dead. That's like him. But—I'm afraid he's waited too long." He smiled over at the safe which contained the dead man's laboured effort. "I wonder what bee he had in his bonnet when he made up his mind to send that boy to me. There's some deviltry in it. But, George, my friend, your native shrewdness should have told you that erasions are not good things to have on a document that is likely to become important legal evidence."

He waited till his departing visitor should be well on his road, then he surprised his clerk by leaving his office many hours earlier than was his rule.

Roydon drew rein at the sheriff's hut. Tombstone Joe was awaiting his return with wonderful patience, and his greeting was charged with a sort of funereal satire.

"Say, ain't he a joyous proposition? Ain't he elegant company? He sure oughter run a coffin enterprise, an' do a bit of fancy gard'nin' in a graveyard as a side line. I'll bet five dollars he hadn't a notion of that mine."

Roydon flung out of the saddle.

"You're right," he laughed, as he followed his chief into the house. "He didn't know the mine. But," he added, as Joe nodded his own certainty on the matter, "he's going to help me. He says if any one can help me he can."

Joe gave a dissatisfied grunt.

"An' is he goin' to help you?"

Roydon noticed the other's ironical tone. Nor could he refrain from smiling. He was so pleased with the result of his visit to Osler he felt he could afford to laugh at Joe's pessimism.

"Of course he's going to help," he asserted triumphantly.

"An' what'll he git out of it?"

Just for a moment Roydon became serious.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Jest wot I say, boy." The sheriff's eyes began to dilate. "Jest wot I say, no more nor no less. He's goin' to help you—wal?"

Roydon shrugged at this display of cynicism.

"Nothing," he answered shortly.

Joe's retort came short and sharp.

"Then he's not in, boy."

He flung himself full length on the bed and Roydon sat on the edge of the table.

"I think you rather misjudge him," the latter said.

"You forget he's my father's old friend."

"I don't fergit nothin'. I don't fergit that I've know'd Marc Osler, an' had dealin's with him. Guess I don't fergit he's the silver proposition of this district. An' I don't figger to fergit that he ain't li'ble to let any silver gag run loose around Spawn City. He ain't handin' over no propositions like that mine of yours, fer you or any other guy to play the market with jest as you notion. Guess you're real smart. Guess you wus raised a Britisher?"

Roydon was angry.

"And you?—I should think you were raised with a pack of wolves. If you're interested in the matter at all you might keep civil. You, with your jaundiced views, can think what you like. I am prepared to accept Osler as I find him. He was certainly civil, and that's more——"

The sheriff laughed harshly.

"Tchah!" he cried, with a viciousness that completely swept aside his companion's annoyance. "We ain't playin' kindergarten. Ef you ain't a notion fer straight talk wi'out no fancy frills, ther' ain't no place in Dyke Hole fer you. I'm tellin' you right here ther's jest one circumstance to Marc Osler—which is dollars. Silver's light, heat, food, breath to him; it's jest his life. Wal, here it is. You got a mine—a silver mine—som'eres around. Sez he, 'Here's a boy right here looking fer it. He's sure a real smart boy, with a good head fer bizness'—speakin' sarcastic. 'This thing's a cinch; it's pie.' An' right he is—dead right. Sez he, 'I'll help this boy to locate that mine, an' when it's found I'm in on it.' See? Now we'll hev your yarn."

The sheriff's words and manner carried absolute conviction, yet Roydon realized that his statement had no authority in fact. It seemed incredible that the man his foster-father had sent him to could possibly be the kind Joe made him out to be. However, he knew it was useless to argue, so he contented himself with giving the story demanded of him. Joe listened to his account of the interview with the greatest possible attention, and it was plain that he was looking for the subtlety which he felt must have underlaid the man's attitude. At the conclusion his comment seemed irrelevant.

"Say," he remarked dryly, "ther's uses to most ev'ry-thing, though it ain't allus easy to see how. Now, ef you'd ast me wher' wus the use to a bar'l of bad liquor, sech as Boyle, I'd hev been real glad to give it up, same as any other gussin' game, an' sech-like foolishness. But mebbe we ken git him with a dry spot in his punkin head. If so ther's a chance. But first I'll hev to shut off his liquor, an' git him squeezed dry."

"And what do you hope to get out of him?"

The sheriff's eyelids drooped.

"Tea," he said, and his thin lips came together in the dry manner so peculiarly his own.

Roydon laughed while Joe raised himself upon his elbow in an aggressive attitude. But there was a gleam of humour in the eyes which were now open to their full extert.

"Say, boy," he exclaimed, "you jest handed that map of the mine right over to Osler fer to copy? You ain't got no copy of it yourself? You ain't got it in your memory?"

Roydon felt uncomfortable.

"Yes, I gave it him. And—no, I don't remember its details well."

Joe fell back on his blankets with a grunt.

"Say," he went on, after a pause, "hev you ever butted up agin a real live fool in your life? A real high-class, speshul-line fool? Not a job line of the second-hand article, but a dandy, slap-up, top-notch parcel o' the goods? Ef you ain't dead sure, ther's a five cent mirror on the wall ther'. Ah, you're riled. Guess'd you would be. Cut it out. Ther's fools born most ev'ry minit, an' it ain't their fault any. They sure ain't ast the question. They sure got to git around an' git busy bein' foolish. Ther's most ev'ry kind. Ther's the natteral-born fool, as 'ud hate to hev the savvee of a low-grade jackass about him. He ain't no sort of circumstance, 'cep' to his mam, which is the way of female natur'. Then ther's the feller with brains that ain't a notion of usin' 'em. He's the kind wot does them things he knows is foolish. Guess he'd yearn fer a feed of hay-grass if the heavens wus rainin' pie. Then ther's the fool wot thinks he ain't foolish, on'y other folks is. Ther' ain't no cure fer him. He mostly butts in when ther' ain't no call, musses up everything he comes up agin, blames creation fer bein' one-hossed, an' 'ud call a 'jack-pot' on a pair of deuces. He's mighty bad, but ther's wuss—so it seems to me. Say, I ain't got a word for the fool who 'fills' his hand and 'passes' without a bet. Say, that's you! You've passed that map over to Osler, an' you wouldn't rec'nize it when you see it agin. Gee!"

Joe's disgust was profound. Roydon was furious, but his good sense told him that, brutally as the other had put it, he was perfectly right. His only excuse was his foster-father's recommendation to Marc Osler. And now, in the light of Joe's remarks, he felt that he had been extremely foolish. He choked back his anger and smiled weakly.

"Perhaps you are right," he said remorsefully. "I dare

ROYDON VISITS MARC OSLER

111

say I should see a fool—a damned fool—if I looked in that mirror. Can't I remedy the matter? I can go and——"

"Make it a hell sight wuss. You're in an a'mighty mean position, but ther' ain't no use to settin' a rope around your neck, an' askin' some bum to haul on to it. We've got to git bright with Marc Osler. We're up agin a proposition of some condition, an'—wal—I guess I'll do some thinkin', an' I'll root around some, an' then we'll take tea wi' ol' man Boyle—an' that gal. Mean-whiles, I'd ask you friendly to mind, that Natur' is a wise institootion, an' when she fixed folks with full-sized mouths, she guessed they'd have the savee to use 'em mostly fer fillin' their stummicks with."

CHAPTER XI

THE SHERIFF TAKES TEA

ROYDON and his fellow-deputy, Bob Makaw, were passing the time with a mild game of "draw" poker, when Joe unexpectedly made his appearance.

He came into the hut bringing with him the dusty atmosphere of the trail. He was covered with a grey powdering of sand, which had even caked itself on his perspiring face. But in spite of the grime his mournful eyes were bright with a look of contentment and even lightness, and there was an unwonted cheeriness in his, "Hello, boys," as he greeted them.

He went straight to the water-bucket and took a long drink, then he turned to the table, propped himself on the corner of the cookstove and watched the game. He saw Roydon help himself to a pool of some seven or eight dollars, and he chuckled.

"Say, Bob," he remarked, with quiet sarcasm, "you'd sure best turn your fancy to suthin' easier. Shaggy Steele's kiddies is runnin' an elegant game wi' pea-nuts."

But his sarcasm drew no reply from the taciturn Bob, and he went on.

"Seein' I'd hate to have a decent feller-citizen done up by a 'tenderfoot,' I'll jest ast you to quit learnin' Bob that game, Roydon. We're goin' to hunt ol' man Boyle to his hole an' take tea with— Moe's cut off his whisky main—under pressure—an' he's had to lap water, same as any other yaller dawg. Gee, but his vitals must be kickin'."

He laughed silently, while Bob sat staring up at him in a most unfriendly fashion. Roydon flung his cards down at once.

"Right you are, Joe," he said readily. "I'll just change my shirt, and——"

"Eh? What's wrong with that? 'Tain't wore out?" Joe exclaimed, looking up from brushing his clothes with a corn-broom.

He gave the broom an angry flourish.

"You sure got civilization bad," he went on peevishly.

Roydon laughed.

"But, hang it, there's Miss Leyland——"

Joe cut him short.

"Guess your shirt ain't no consarn of hers," he protested. "Them things don't cut no ice with her. That gal's a real gem. Ther' ain't nothin' haf so delicate, so nourishin', so saft an' pertickler elegant around this city as she is." His eyes began to glow eloquently. "Say," he went on, "that gal 'ud make 'home' of a hog-pen, an' fer makin' folks act squar', I 'lows she'd set a Bible tract curlin' up with hate. Ther' ain't no finikin' to her. No, sirree!"

With his final exclamation Joe flung himself at the water-bucket and began a vigorous sluicing of his dust-caked features. Then he buried his face in the folds of a towel of questionable cleanliness, blowing and puffing with the shock of cold water.

Roydon rose from the table.

"Then I'm ready when you are," he said, with a shrug.

Joe's fierce eyes twinkled as he lifted his face out of the towel.

"Ther's hoss-soap in the bucket outside. Mebbe you fancy soap?"

"I'd hate to think of it," Roydon grinned back at him.

"Then we'll git along."

Once outside the hut the two men walked rapidly through the village. From the moment they left the house Joe's manner became thoughtful. In fact, the journey to Ripley Boyle's cottage on the hillside beyond the village was made in absolute silence. Several times Roydon was on the point of questioning his companion on matters concerning this visit, but something in Joe's manner plainly told him that it would be both useless and unwelcome. The sheriff had something particularly repellent about him when he chose to keep silent.

The house nestled in a bluff of pine trees. Nothing could have been more delightful for the home of his water-

nymph, Roydon thought. The place was unpretentious; it was small; but there was the neatness, the compactness such as he would have expected. Other houses in the village were slatternly, ill-kept, and dirty, but here was a trimness no doubt solely due to the girl who cared for it.

In the soft-toned creeper that covered the diminutive veranda, in the neat garden, ablaze with colour, in the strutting fowls enclosed in a wire netting fence, in the fat pony tethered on the best patch of grazing, in the mouching cow, with its tin neck-bell, philosophically chewing its cud beside the top-rail fence surrounding the garden, he saw the care and thought of Jocelyn. Hers was the guiding hand. Her drunken guardian could surely have no part in such things.

As they drew near he felt glad that Ripley Boyle's figure was nowhere about to spoil the picture. He hated the thought of the man's presence in a place where he must be in constant contact with Jocelyn Leyland. He felt that, if such an association were absolutely necessary, he, like the unsightly swill-barrel, should be shut out of view somewhere behind the kitchen.

Jocelyn was on the veranda to meet them. Her bright smile and laughing words of greeting were like a breath of fresh mountain air, after the more sordid associations of the village. She was dressed with almost severe simplicity, and her glorious hair was massed closely to her head, framing her pretty face in a shining golden setting. Roydon loved the picture she made standing amidst the foliage of the creepers.

"I'm so glad you've come," she cried gaily, holding out a welcoming hand to Joe, but taking Roydon in with her smiling eyes.

"We're real pleased, Missie Jock," replied Joe readily.

"Say, I've sure had a heap of trouble keppin' this boy from leavin' his duties to git around here before."

"Of course." Jocelyn turned directly to Roydon. "You are one of Joe's deputies now, aren't you?"

"Rather. But I don't know how long he'll keep me. I'm afraid——"

"You mustn't be 'afraid,'" she laughed up into his face. "Joe doesn't want men who are afraid. Do you, Joe?"

The girl eyed Dick's athletic figure. She was mentally comparing him with the man she had first known, who had disturbed her at her morning swim in the river. Her decision was favourable to his present appearance. He had lost all his British air. Except for his type of features, he might have belonged absolutely to the prairie. Yes, she liked him better now.

They followed her into the house. The homely atmosphere of the parlour, into which the front door directly opened, struck Roydon with a delightful sense of comfort. There was no luxury here, only the little femininities disguising the plainness of the furnishings, and the pretty touches which characterize the surroundings of a woman of simple but refined tastes. Joe creaked into a basket chair and lolled his black head back on to a fancy-work cushion, and sighed contentedly in the luxury of the moment. Roydon took a more rigid chair. Jocelyn drew a small table forward.

"I've tried to prepare you a tea such as I fancied you would have in England, Mr. Roydon," she said.

"That's jolly nice of you," he smiled.

"Not at all. Now, I'm going to get the tea-things, and, if my guardian is awake, I'll send him to you. He'll be very——"

"Pleased to see us, I guess," put in Joe, with a grin.

Jocelyn shrugged her shoulders and laughingly hurried out of the room.

After her departure Joe turned quickly on Roydon. "Say, when he comes, don't ask him no questions. You ken leave him to me. I——"

He broke off abruptly. The shuffling of soft slippers in the passage told them that the lawyer had needed no calling.

The little man's cherub face appeared in the doorway. His expression had nothing of his ward's welcome. He stared coldly at Roydon, and then turned to the sheriff, and the coldness of his eyes was replaced with a look of decided unfriendliness. He was quite sober, and sat down in a chair as far from his visitors as possible.

"A kind of party visit," he said almost offensively.

The sheriff laughed.

"Why, yes," he replied, with unusual good humour.

"He's British," he went on, indicating Roydon with a nod of his shining head. "He guessed it was the thing. Sed folks most allus oughter pay party calls. Sez it's the etikay in England. That's French fer dude manners an' sech-like. Say, boy"—he turned to his deputy casually—"them letters of introduction you got. You bin away payin' party calls sech a heap that I'll be real glad when you're thro'."

Roydon took his cue.

"I've only got two more," he said.

"First time I ever heard of folks needing introductions in Dyke Hole," said Boyle, with an ill-tempered sneer.

Joe took no notice of his mood. His own was apparently one of supreme good nature.

"They wusn't fer Dyke Hole?" he inquired of Roydon.

The latter shook his head.

"Mostly Spawn City and—and outlying districts?"

Boyle seemed to become more interested.

"Who was that feller you went over to the other day?"

Joe went on.

Roydon did not feel sure of the other's drift. But he answered without hesitation.

"Oh, a fellow called Marc Osler, a——"

"Yes, course." Joe nodded. "I remember. It was about that mine you're huntin' out. Say, Boyle, you got a nicky little shanty here. She's a boss gal, is Missie Jock. Guess you're sure lucky."

The lawyer nodded. Joe had seen a light of interest in the man's eyes at the mention of Marc Osler's name, and, for that reason, switched off on to another topic.

"I think you're jolly wise living up here, instead of down in the village," said Roydon, following his chief's lead. "What air on these hills!"

"Air? Gee!" Joe nodded emphatically. "Say, Boyle, you wasn't at the saloon last night. I looked around, too."

The lawyer had been watching Joe closely while he was talking. He was trying to make out the drift of this visit, and this talk. Now he smiled blandly. He had evidently arrived at a decision, which required a change of attitude. Before all things he was a lawyer, and possessed all a lawyer's cunning.

"It's no use going to Moe's when that able but rascally host is ordered, under severe penalty, to refuse me the refreshment he's licensed to sell. Look her, sheriff, why did you do it?"

"Do it?" Joe stretched himself luxuriously. "Say, I'd sure hate to see a decent citizen of Dyke Hole travellin' hellwards anyhow. I've know'd you fer awhile, an' I tell you right here, Boyle, you're ruinin' a fine career with that same bluestone swill Moe dopes out fer whisky. Ef you wus to cut it out I could put a heap of good work your way."

The lawyer shook his head. His face was frankness itself now, a change Joe had carefully noted.

"It's kind of you to think that way, but—but I don't want work. I'm doing all right. But I'll say this, if you drive me this way, I'll have to get out to Spawn City and live there."

"Wal, ev'ry man to his taste," Joe agreed. "Still, I'd like to do you good. You're not right out of business?"

"I've got my office."

"Ah."

Joe paused as though in thought. Then he turned to Roydon.

"About that mine you're huntin'. Mebbe Boyle here'll remember George Raymon."

"George Raymon?"

The lawyer was surprised out of himself.

"Tho't you'd know him," said the sheriff amiably.

"Yep. It was his mine, sure. Say, old George left that mine to this boy. He's jest out here to locate it."

Joe's eyes were on the lawyer's face, watching for every chance expression. He was sitting well forward in his chair now, and looked, amidst his surroundings, like a lean-necked vulture in a dovecote.

Boyle quickly recovered himself.

"Oh, I remember him well enough—though I was only a kid at the time. A fine old sport, by all accounts, was old George. And he left you that mine? You're his son? No?" Roydon shook his head. "Ah. Well, my father did his law business, but I never found any account of that mine among his papers. And I wanted to—we all wanted to find out about that mine. Guess it must have

petered out when old George left. They were mighty uncertain times——”

The lawyer broke off as Roydon rose to open the door for Jocelyn. He took the tea-tray from her, and set it on the table.

Joe had fallen back into his lounging attitude. His eyes were on the girl laying the tea, but his attention was in her guardian's direction.

The subject of the mine now gave place to general talk, in which Jocelyn took the lead.

“I suppose you both take sugar and milk?” she inquired, pouring out the tea as the men drew up to the table. After receiving an affirmative from each she went on—

“What's this show I hear is coming into the village, Joe?” she asked. “Is it a good one?”

Joe shrugged. Shows didn't interest him.

“It's jest a bum circus with freaks an' things, an' a few mangy beasties that never see the outside of a cage all their miser'ble lives,” he said pityingly.

The girl turned to Roydon.

“We always go to the shows, when they come along,” she said. “I like it. Joe hates them. I had one great treat once—a long time ago, though. It was before Dyke Hole was like it is now. It was *Hamlet!* Would you believe it?”

Joe stirred himself.

“Hamlet?” he questioned. “Guess you mean ‘settlement.’”

“No, no, Joe,” Jocelyn exclaimed, not wishing to let her friend appear ridiculous before the others. “‘Hamlet’ is a man's name. They call him the ‘moody Dane.’”

Joe paused in the midst of sipping his tea noisily.

“Them Dagos is most allus a grouchy lot,” he asserted.

The cake Jocelyn was eating nearly choked her, and Roydon found it necessary to cough violently. Boyle wasn't even listening.

“Poor old Bill Shakespeare,” Dick murmured, when he had recovered himself.

“Say, you ain't acquainted with Bill?” inquired Joe, in astonishment.

Roydon nodded. Then he caught Jocelyn's eye. The girl was frowning severely. But he only grinned.

"He's an old friend. Very old. Everybody knows him. He's a great chap."

There was a significant rattle of cups on the tea-tray, but Dick would not look round. He was listening to Joe.

"Sure. Most ev'rybody knows him round these parts—leastways in Wyoming. Bill's a mighty slick hand. I never see him beat with a rope, an' cattle— Gee! But the gun—that an' whisky wus his trouble. I kind o' took to Bill Shakespeare. He wus a bright lad."

Again Jocelyn came to Joe's rescue. She was quite annoyed with Dick.

"We're thinking of different people," she said kindly. "The Shakespeare we mean was a play-writer in Queen Elizabeth's time. He——"

"I guessed the mistake was his," said Joe, indicating Roydon, his wild eyes shooting an unfriendly glance in his direction. "The feller I mean sure oughter bin hanged."

Jocelyn's little tea-party would have been a very pleasant affair, but for the presence of her guardian. His silence had a damping effect. He tacitly resented the visitors' presence, yet he had to keep somewhere within the bounds of civility, because of the sheriff. Even the interesting piece of news about Roydon's search for George Raymon's mine was not sufficient to make the man forget his dislike of Tombstone Joe.

On the other hand, Roydon enjoyed it. Jocelyn's presence was enough for him. He no longer disguised the truth from himself, he had undoubtedly fallen in love. And the girl was glad of their visit. It was such a change from the dreary routine of her life. Her day was so filled with thankless duties. Her guardian accepted her efforts with all the selfishness of his intensely selfish nature. There was no appreciation, no affection shown. His home-life was mostly a condition of recovering from the drunkenness acquired at Moe's saloon. All her most cheerful efforts could not disguise the sordidness of her life. And it was only her courage that made it bearable.

Conversation was not easy, and at last the girl rose to

clear the tea-things away. She somehow felt that there was an undercurrent of restraint among the men. Her guardian never once opened his mouth during the meal.

The moment she left the room, however, he turned to Roydon.

"If I can be of any use to you in the matter of that mine I'd be glad to see you at my office," he said blandly. "In spite of what the sheriff here says, I do practice law, and I don't suppose even he knows this district better than I do. Come and see me whenever you feel inclined."

Roydon was about to reply, but Joe anticipated him.

"I guess you're the only man here as ken help this thing out. As you say, things is a long ways back. Now you an' Marc Osler's the only folk li'ble to remember anything o' them days. An' Marc Osler ain't likely to know a heap 'bout anything that's likely to interfere with the silver market. Guess we'd best git goin'."

Jocelyn came in. Her guests had risen ready to take their departure.

"Why, you're not going yet?" she exclaimed, and her look of disappointment was very real.

"That's so," Joe said kindly. "Y' see, ther's a heap of things needs doin' with that circus comin' along t'morrer——"

Roydon was seized by a sudden inspiration.

"Look here, sheriff," he broke in. "I'd awfully like to take Miss Jocelyn to that circus. Can I have the afternoon? Will you come?" he inquired, turning to the girl.

Jocelyn's bright smile answered him.

"I should love it. You're very kind. But what does Joe say?"

She turned to the sheriff with a little pleading smile.

"Guess he'll hev to," that individual replied, with pretended reluctance. "That boy's done a mighty heap of work around here since I took him on; he'd come nigh shammin' a jibbin' mule. Gee, but ther' ain't nuthin' wuss than a woman buttin' into a man's work."

Later on, when they were outside the house, Joe took a chew of tobacco.

"Them fancy cakes is pizen," he observed, as he lovingly rolled the tobacco into his cheek.

Roydon answered his remark with a grumble.

"Well, we've drawn a blank. Boyle's not going to be much use to us after all. I suppose I'd better go and see him at his office. There might be something in it. He seems well-intentioned and honest about it, which is a great thing."

"An honest lawyer is about the most del'cate work o' creation—an' I 'lows he's sure the scarcest," Joe remarked quietly.

They picked their way in Indian file down the hillside.

"What do you mean?"

But Joe shook his head.

"We ain't wasted nuthin'. Guess I've learned two things sence we came out. 'Tain't allus reas'nable to guess a feller laffs by reason of his good nature, any more than he drinks rotgut whisky at Moe's bar from weakness of intellec'."

"You mean——?"

"I mean nuthin'. Say." Joe halted abruptly and pointed a lean forefinger at a little enclosed patch of ground a couple of hundred yards away. It was dotted here and there with white crosses and tombstones, and nestled close up beside the edge of a wide spread of pine forest. "The graveyard," he announced. "Ain't she a pictur'? Ain't she jest the neatest ever? Say, wot do a feller want more? A bit of a box, an' some o' the boys to haul him along. A real, elegant monument of white enamelled pine, with some swell po'try to say who he is. Gee! Ten dollars 'ud do the lot han'some, an' leave a bit over to give the boys a bust up after they'd set him in the ground right. Ain't it dandy? Guess that graveyard is one o' Dyke Hole's most elegant attractions. I fixed it."

The man's intense pride was quite wonderful to see. This graveyard was the child of his inspiration. Dyke Hole had never had one before he became its sheriff. He had conceived the idea. He had bought the land. He tended it, and laid it out. He helped to fill it. He cared not at all if it were criminal or honest citizen who occupied this last resting-place, so long as he had the satisfaction of having it used.

Roydon had no particular interest in such places, but

he was always ready to fall in with his strange companion's moods. Therefore, when the latter led the way in its direction, he followed without demur.

They paused at the gate in the top-rail fence. Joe glowed with pride.

"Ain't she a dandy?" he exclaimed, indicating the flowering shrubs dotted amongst the white enamelled tombstones.

It certainly was a pretty place, and Roydon had to admit it. There was every shade of colour within the enclosure. And the monuments and mounds marking the graves gave a religious peace to the place. Then beyond were the dark, church-like aisles of the pine woods.

"Come right in."

Joe led the way, and Dick felt as though the lean, sombre figure of his conductor might have been the figure of Death itself, guiding him to his last resting-place.

A few paces inside Joe paused at a grave, and, almost affectionately, laid his horny hand on the wooden cross adorning its head.

"Say," he began thoughtfully, while his rolling eyes surveyed the inscription, "now this corp give me a heap of trouble, an', in consekence, bein' human, I kind o' set a special value to it. He should 'a' bin hanged fer shootin' up his two pardners, but he got fresh when I come up, an' I had to git busy on him with two guns. Ther' it is. Read that."

Roydon leant forward and read the inscription.

"Here lies a feller as come from the West
 He shot up his pardners wi elegant zest.
 He blew em to Hell, which wus all very well,
 But forgot when he shot, he might get there as well,
 And how awkard the meetin might be.
 But he likely knows now, as he lies here at rest,
 Since the sheriff come up an blowed holes in his chest."

"Mine!" exclaimed Joe triumphantly, as Roydon finished reading. "That's an elegant bit o' po'try. Took me nigh onto a week."

He moved off to a grave with a plain wooden slab at the head of it. The white enamel was weather-worn in

places, but the inscription was quite clear. Joe pointed at it in potential silence, and Roydon read—

“ This feller Pedrowitski
Was a Dago give to whisky,
He had a wife an Dago daughters three.
They soused him at the river
Where the water made him shiver,
An consumption, not o whisky, set em free.”

“ I writ that,” Joe observed quietly. “ Guess the spellin’ fixed me some. But Bob Makaw give me a hand. He’s got eddication, has Bob.”

They passed on amongst the graves, and at each one Joe made Roydon read the epitaph. The man’s vanity was colossal. He listened to each reading with much the same feelings as a composer might have, listening to the performance of his first composition. These doggerel lines were the result of great mental labour. They were the offspring of his brain. Every nerve, every atom of the man was in them. He loved them more than anything he possessed. They were not doggerel to him, they were real poems.

The sun was nearly down when they came to the last tombstone. But though his companion was heartily sick of reading, Joe would not let him off. This was his *chef-d’œuvre*, and he would not spare his victim.

Roydon humoured him unwillingly, and read it out.

“ Here lies the corp o pore Sadie Long.
She warnt no beauty, nor almighty strong.
Shed a heap o disease
From her head to her knees,
Added to these, a perpetooal sneeze.
Ther wus folk swore they knew as she suffered from fleas.
But death come to this miserble lady
From a chill, and an overlaid baby.”

“ Guess that’s neat,” Joe said, with satisfaction. “ Y’ see, ’tain’t ord’nary po’try. Tho’ I sez it, I don’t guess ther’s a feller in the hull State of Montana could ha’ writ that but me. But she wus sure wuth it. She’d a heap of troubie, pore thing, an’ when she took an’ died, after fixin’ that pore kiddie of hers,—she wus that awk’ard she’d ’a’ broke her neck tyin’ her shoe-lace—I

kind of guessed ther' wa'an't nothin' left fer me to do but give her some po'try that wer' most unord'nary."

"Well, you certainly showed your sympathy in that way," replied Roydon gently. He dared not trust himself to say much, or he must have laughed right out. He turned away and pointed at an open grave. "Who's that for?" he inquired.

"That's mine," Joe said seriously.

"Yours?"

Roydon's astonishment banished his desire to laugh.

"Yep."

"But why have it dug now?"

"Wal, life's kind of uncertin, an' I don't want contrac' work fixin' my grave. Y' see, I jest know it's right good an' deep, an' ther's no skimpin'. The tombstone's made, but I guess I ain't writ the po'try yet."

"It's a morbid idea," the other protested.

"Mebbe it is, tho' that's mostly a matter of opinion," Joe said thoughtfully. "Guess I don't take chances 'bout most things, but ther's a heap of lead movin' around these parts, an' it's a pertickler form of pizenin' I ain't much fancy fer," he added, with a grim smile. "Y' see, life's mostly like a farmer's dance. Up the middle an' down the sides, an' fall right back to the wall. You jest get to it an' walk on ev'ry feller's feet, an' butt right in most ev'rywher'. Sometimes you're li'ble to swing the other feller's partner, an' make him hate you. But you kep right on bowin' an' scrapin' till time's called, an' the ol' feller with the hay-mower busts up the fiddle, an' Death gits around an' snuffs out the taller-fat candles. That mostly happens sudden. Wal, I guess it's good to be kind of ready fixed up fer that time. That's how I figger. Say, we'll git to home."

CHAPTER XII

CIRCUS DAY IN DYKE HOLE

JOCELYN was up betimes on the day the circus came to town. Her guardian's callous, self-indulgent nature left her but the smallest margin for the trifling pleasures of their village life, so that even a visit to a travelling circus was a dissipation of some moment, not to say an event in her life, and one calculated to require a considerable change in her day's routine.

On this occasion she meant to crowd her work into the morning, so that she could have the whole afternoon free, without any accusing consciousness of duties neglected, and work to be made up on the following day. Her feelings on the matter were not inspired by any depth of affection for her guardian, not even by respect. She simply possessed a strong sense of duty, and of the responsibility that was hers.

The events leading up to Ripley Boyle's guardianship of her had never been told her. She knew nothing of her mother's circumstances, and her father was not even a memory to her. She had a vague recollection of her mother—she was only six years old when her mother died—just as she could remember indistinctly the horses and cattle on their ranch, the men who worked for them, and the old ranch house out on the rolling uplands of the prairie. Then it seemed that, in some unaccountable way, she suddenly became part of the lawyer's household. Later, she learned that it was because her mother had died and left her to his care. The financial side of the matter was kept a sealed book to her.

In those days Ripley Boyle was a sober, not over-scrupulous, but hard-working and, on the whole, able lawyer. At that time his weaker side had not shown

itself to any great extent. But when Mrs. Leyland died, leaving her money and property in his trust for her child, the real man in him asserted itself. Here was his opportunity; here was the chance he had waited for. The girl was nothing to him, but the money was everything. He used the funds in his charge for guiltily rash speculations; no one knew of the widow's trust in him, and he had carefully kept her affairs from the knowledge of the general public.

It was the old story over again. Disastrous speculation; everything went wrong. The money simply slipped through his fingers. Then his weakness found him out. Drink followed, and he went down and out. In two years he had undone all the work of his early struggles. He was lower at the end of that time than the bottom of the ladder up which he had so laboriously climbed.

He was never able to recover the ground he had lost. Drink sapped his always doubtful moral strength. No one would trust him again. Then followed a period of desperate struggle. He certainly existed, but that was about all. This lasted for some five years. Then, suddenly, he seemed to reach a level of comfort which no one could understand.

From then on he never seemed to do a single stroke of work. And yet he kept his office beside the hotel, and the house on the hillside. He always had money to buy drink with, although, in this direction, he was never lavish except when indulging himself. And he was recognized as the most hopelessly persistent drunkard in the place. The more curious in Dyke Hole wondered how he did it. Women promptly formed theories, but the men accepted the facts as they stood. Tombstone Joe, alone, in his official capacity, kept his eyes upon the man with what others might have considered unnecessary vigilance.

Jocelyn accepted her lot without question. He was her guardian, and, as such, she must look after him, and, since there was no one else to do so, work for him. This she did with all the thoroughness of a sweet and loyal nature. She condoned his dissipations, she forgave his brutalities towards herself. He never failed to bully her and drive her when he was under the influence of drink.

When he was sober, which was very rare, he avoided her. She knew full well that he hated the sight of her, and begrudged her even a bare existence.

Though this knowledge troubled her at times she rigorously put it out of her mind. Though her heart ached, and the sordidness of her life often made her utterly miserable, and, in the early days of it all, she often cried herself to sleep at nights, she struggled on, working all day long that he might see, if only as a servant, she was worth the money it cost to feed and clothe her.

But it was a terrible grind; one long round of dreary, thankless labour. One kind word, one cheery smile of encouragement to a nature like hers would have set her sun shining and made her life something more than merely endurable. She was a girl who needed so little. Hers was one of those happy temperaments that find their joy in mere existence, but, as it was, the gentle eyes in repose wore an expression of gravity that should never have been there.

To-day there was an unusual thrill of excitement in the thought of the circus. It was different from all her previous dissipations. Before, it had been her custom to go to the local entertainments with some woman acquaintance, occasionally Joe had bought the seats and taken her. Now she was going with Roydon, and he was so different from all the others. She had rarely come into contact with people of his stamp. To her he was, for all his limitations, something far above anybody she knew. Besides, he was so kind, so—so easy in his manner, yet so pleasant and entertaining.

And she thought a good deal about his personal appearance, too. She tried to judge him fairly, to criticize him impartially. No, he was not very good-looking, she told herself. But he was manly, and there was something healthy and clean in his steady eyes and firm chin and mouth. She laughed as she remembered his face when she first met him, the blackened eyes, and the bruises. Yes, that first meeting was very amusing.

Again she laughed as she thought of it, while she patted her unruly golden hair into some sort of order in front of the little looking-glass on her bureau. She knew she was taking extra pains with her toilet, nor did she hide the

fact from herself. Why shouldn't she? She would hate to disgrace him. She only had three what she called proper dresses, and she took them all out of the cupboard and considered them carefully. They were well worn, and she felt a little hopeless. It was a shame. She couldn't wear her Sunday dress, it was too solemn. None of them were suitable to the occasion. Then she remembered. She had ironed out a white linen dress the day before. That, at least, was clean. She cheered up at once and fetched it from the kitchen where it had been hung up to air.

The result satisfied her, and it satisfied the man for whose benefit it had been put on when he called an hour later. She looked even more charming, he thought, than when he had first come upon her at the river. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her cheeks were flushed under their healthy tan. She was all life and vivacity. The sordidness of her life had fallen from her as only it can fall from the shoulders of the very young.

"I say, you do look ripping, Miss Jocelyn," was Dick's unconventional greeting.

And Jocelyn only laughed and coloured with delight.

"Where's your guardian?" Dick proceeded. He was afraid they might have old Boyle on their hands.

Perhaps the girl understood his inquiry, for she answered with satisfaction.

"Oh, he's gone out driving and won't be back until evening. Is it time for us to go?"

They were on the veranda. She had seen him approaching and come out to meet him. She had just finished her dinner, which consisted of bread, cheese and milk, and she did not want him to know that her fare had been so humble.

"Well, no. I am an hour too soon, I'm afraid. You see, I didn't want to keep you waiting," he added ingenuously.

"I call that nice and thoughtful of you. But—but what are we going to do to fill in the time?"

Dick glanced at the two chairs beside them.

"It's a long climb up the hills. You see," he went on naively, "I've been an invalid for a long time."

The girl laughed.

"Of course, poor fellow, you must sit down. I forgot how weak you must be. It is a shame."

Dick dropped into the chair she pushed towards him, and stretched out his powerful young limbs with a long, smiling sigh of contentment.

"It's really dreadful to be an invalid, isn't it? I say, there are two chairs, though."

He smiled up at her, and Jocelyn's frank laugh rang out in response as she took her seat facing him.

"Tell me all about the show," she said. "I don't suppose you care a bit about circuses."

"I simply dote on 'em. If there's a thing worth living for it's a circus. I don't think I could live without a circus."

"Now you're laughing at me. I know you are—just the same as you did the first time I saw you."

"The water-nymph. I remember. Blue bathing——"

"Don't go into details, please. How on earth can a man remember such things as colours?"

"Oh, we remember lots of things. What was it? The *History of the Civil War*. There's an effort for you. You were reading it, and——"

"Improving my mind." The girl laughed. Then she became thoughtful. "Isn't it awful to be ignorant? I am. You know I only had two years' schooling. Of course that ought to be enough for Dyke Hole. But somehow I should like to know a lot."

Roydon tried to enter into the girl's mood.

"Well, I'm not so sure. Now I'm the biggest duffer in the world. Don't know anything. I'm decent at athletics. I'm a fair shot; I can ride. But as for the inside of books—well, I'm jolly glad you confess ignorance. You see it's something in common between us!"

Jocelyn's blue eyes were dancing merrily.

"I'm frightfully disappointed," she exclaimed, her manner belying her words. "I thought you were real clever. I thought you knew everything."

Dick raised his eyebrows in mock seriousness.

"Of course I'm very clever really. Frightfully—only modest about it. But, honestly, I really don't know everything. Do you know how many beans make five? Well, I do. And believe me, it isn't everybody who does.

I say, do you know what Joe said to me this morning when I was getting ready to come out?"

"How should I?" the girl inquired, as he paused.

"Of course—how should you? Well, he told me I was as dozy as an onion grown in a poppy field. That's not how he said it. I can't get his accent, nor could I possibly get his awful tone of contempt. But it was rude, wasn't it? Because I'm really very wide awake. Then he was very contemptuous at breakfast. I wanted the milk, and he told Bob to 'pass the cow to the calf.' He'll get into trouble with me if he keeps on."

Dick's laugh was infectious. His attempt to imitate Joe's speech convulsed the girl.

"Joe likes you," she said. "You mark me, Joe would go through fire and water for you. He's a great friend."

"Well, he's certainly going to a lot of trouble for me. You know he's the most outrageous ruffian, but nothing he says ever seems to ruffle me. I always feel he doesn't mean half he says. It's his way. I really believe Joe can be quite soft-hearted."

"I know he can—is."

The laughter had died out of Jocelyn's eyes. She was quite serious now. There was a ring of enthusiasm in her voice.

Dick glanced at her. Just for a moment a thought that this girl was in love with the sheriff entered his head. But it passed on the instant. It was impossible. Besides, her liking for Joe was too outspoken. But somehow the passing of that thought annoyed him in a way. He hated to think of this simple, fresh young creature being anything to a man like Joe. He hated to think her anything to anybody. She was so simple, so honest, so utterly different to any girl he had ever known. He had suddenly become quite disturbed, and his usual smile had given place to a frown. Jocelyn saw it and wondered. Then, as he turned away, she followed the direction of his gaze and saw old Sarah Glades coming up the hill. It was her turn to feel disturbed. At that moment she did not want Sarah.

Miss Glades came up, her ascetic figure bending as she climbed. She was breathing hard with the exertion.

"La sakes, what a climb!" she cried, as she came up. "Why, Jocelyn, I didn't see you'd got company. Well, well—and it's Mr. Roydon. Your guardian's out, I s'pose?"

Sarah's malicious reference passed unheeded by the girl. But Dick was furious.

"Yes, he's out driving. He went early this morning," Jocelyn said innocently. "I don't know when he'll be back either."

"Just so. Oh dear, oh dear! I'm so worried. There's this circus just come in, and all the men are drinking like a lot of dry land fish down at the saloon. There should be a law against circuses, my dear. There should indeed. The devil's abroad wherever circuses go. It's dreadful. I talked to the sheriff about it, and he said it was awful, too. He's such a good man, my dear, so kind, so sympathetic. He said, 'You just let them keep on drinking. If you'd weary a man of anything let him get all he wants of it.' I do hope he's right. Do you think he is? If I thought so I'd go and pay for all the drink they could take."

"It sounds a good idea, Miss Glades," Dick observed, with a solemn face. "Why not try it? I'll do the buying for you. You know Joe's generally right."

Jocelyn was watching him closely. She saw the corners of his mouth twitch, and understood. Sarah seemed to entertain the idea.

"Oh yes, he's always right," she nodded. "Always. But then it's flying in the face of Providence giving the folk drink. Do you really think it would cure them? Mr. Joe is such a man. He's going to speak at the temperance meeting. I do hope you'll both come. I'm sure it'll do you both a lot of good. You'll realize what you look like to other people, when you hear Joe speak against drink. Drink is awful, Jocelyn; think of the exhibition you make of yourself, rolling about the streets, unable to see, or think, or control your actions. Just think what an object of degradation you must be——"

"But Miss Leyland never rolls about the streets, Miss Glades," Dick said quietly. He remembered her attack on himself, and so cut her short, fearing the pitch she was capable of working herself up to.

"Of course not," replied the spinster, cooling at once. "I was speaking in metaphor."

"Just so," Dick replied, and promptly changed the subject. "Miss Leyland and I are going down to see the fun, aren't we?" Jocelyn smiled and nodded. Then he turned again to Miss Glades. "But I say, you know, I think you're quite right about this drink. I shall certainly come to your temperance show. I suppose you'll address the meeting? I think you're quite wonderful, devoting your life to such a grand cause. Think of the good you are doing! Your influence with the sheriff is simply enormous. I never see him taking a drink now. Ah, Miss Glades, you women are wonderful creatures—wonderful! We poor men are as clay in your hands. Really, the way you can make Joe do anything you please is astonishing. You know, I'm sure it's Joe's admiration for you that does it. You know a man in love——"

He broke off and shook a finger at the spinster's simpering face. Joe was her vulnerable point, and he felt that to play on it was the only way to keep her on reasonable ground.

The silly woman was happily confused, and Jocelyn, watching her, felt that Dick ought to be ashamed of himself.

"Mr. Joe is a very good man," Sarah said, with a simper. "It's not me—oh no, not me. He's just one of us himself without our using our influence. Though I never fail to do my duty by him. I keep the evil of drink ever before his eyes, and if that helps him to keep off it himself I feel that my work is not always in vain. Ah me!—But there, you made me forget what I came to see Jocelyn about. Yes, yes, I know now. It's about a meeting to inaugurate a society for the better clothing of drunkards' children in Dyke Hole. I'm calling all the ladies of Dyke Hole together for next Sunday afternoon at three. Will you come?" She spoke with the air of an acknowledged leader calling her forces together.

And Jocelyn was forced to assent. She felt that this eccentric old woman would only stand there talking to her, and at her, until she agreed.

Sarah was satisfied, and went off quite overjoyed. She beamed on them both at leaving, and forgot to say another

word about her crusade against vice. Dick spoke his relief when she was out of earshot.

"Crazy—she's plumb crazy," he said emphatically.

"But she means well," Jocelyn added.

Then they both laughed.

"You know you ought to be ashamed of yourself the way you made fun of her, Mr. Roydon," the girl said, when her mirth had subsided.

"I am aware of that fact, Miss Leyland," Dick rejoined, mocking her tone. "And, further, I'd like to say that it's time we were moving. And also, if you don't mind, everybody but Joe calls me 'Dick.' True, some folks prefix it with peculiar adjectives which are not always of a complimentary nature. But 'Dick' is easy to say, and easy to remember."

"Well, most folk call me 'Jocelyn,'" the girl retorted, in her turn mocking him. "And since I'm not sure I'd know an adjective if I heard it I'll say nothing about them."

"Oh, you'd know an adjective, Jocelyn," Dick cried with decision.

"Should I? Well, then we'd best get along, Dick."

The girl sprang from her seat and moved off the veranda, laughing merrily, and presently the two strolled leisurely down the hill.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CIRCUS PARADE

METAPHORICALLY speaking, Dyke Hole was in its Sunday clothes. Literally, it is more than doubtful if, generally speaking, Dyke Hole possessed Sunday clothes. Bulrush Moe did, certainly; and also some of the Dyke Hole ladies kept an especial suit for the Mission House. But the men had none, and simply went through their usual day's routine, only on this occasion they refrained from all excuse for their idleness.

The circus had been heralded in the night by the arrival of the "advance" agent. He came in a cart, sitting on a pile of egregious coloured printing, surrounded by such embellishments as a bucket of evil-smelling paste, a huge brush, an apron, and a well-oiled top-hat which he called his "sky-piece." He spent the small hours of the morning in disfiguring nature and the weatherboard houses with glaring posters of what never did and never could possibly have existed in any circus since the deluge.

So when Dyke Hole awoke it gathered in small bunches of unwashedness around the bait so carefully set out for its gaping mouth. Some of the more cynical expressed themselves sneeringly, and called the scenes depicted "bum acts"—said they'd "seed cirkises as could lick them a mile, an' not worry any neither." Others felt that the importance of Dyke Hole was being recognized, and were extremely gratified that they were citizens of the place. They closely scanned the bills for the prices of admission. There were others, and they formed a considerable majority, who hastened to the saloon to see, and ingratiate themselves with, the advance agent. It might mean free tickets, and precedent had taught them it would certainly mean free drinks.

The agent was there. It was his business to be there. He was the hub of conversation round which moved a continuous flow of refreshment. Bulrush Moe's mournful bow-tie was in evidence for the occasion, and he stood ready and willing at the great man's elbow. The man talked—how he talked! That's what he was paid for.

"Ther's cirkises and cirkises," he said, in answer to some playful gibe from one of his flannel-shirted audience. "I've see bearded ladies as 'ud moult that quick they'd be clean shaved, packin' up the tent after the show, an' dressed in overalls same as the rest of the 'razor-backs.' Yes, I know, gen'lemen; I know them things sure. You're quite right—quite right. I like folks as can talk straight just what they think. That's why I like you, gen'lemen. An' believe me, gen'lemen, this is the country to talk straight in. America!—the Stars an' Stripes! Emblem of truth, morality, freedom! Freedom of everything! Freedom of speech! Freedom of drinks!"

A great laugh went up at this humorous sally. The agent, with his bulbous nose, his shiny "sky-piece," his even more shiny Prince Albert coat, knew his audience. He set his hat at a more rakish angle.

"Gents," he went on, with a knowing wink, "I said to the boss before comin' on, I said, 'We're goin' to make good in Dyke Hole.' 'Cos why?' he asks. 'Cos why?' I answers. 'Cos Dyke Hole knows what's what!'" He turned to Moe with his most grandiose air. "Fill 'em up again," he said. "Everybody! Dyke Hole drinks with me! Drinks with my boss, Louis K. Hallig! The greatest impressar-io in America!—in the world! We got Barnum skinned to death! Drink, gents," he finished up, as Moe set out the replenished glasses.

A chorus of "How's" followed, and the glasses were emptied with alacrity. Then the agent's "sky-piece" was set at another fresh angle, so that his blotchy forehead and greasy black hair were well exposed, and he returned to his work.

"What we got, you ask? Eh? What we got?" he cried, his face beaded with a dirty perspiration. "I knew you'd want to know." No one had expressed themselves in the least interested on this point. But he fixed them with his blood-shot eyes, and held their attention. Dyke

Hole were always ready to listen to people who had money to spend. "It's fools who bet blind. Fellers in Dyke Hole want to know what they'll get for their dollars, an' right they are. Say, we got a band, gen'lemen, wot played at the President's ball when he received the Chinese government's corpse, when Mrs. President got hurt dancin' a rag-time. Say, they played it that pertickler fine, she hadn't heard the like of it before, and it kind of confused her feet, an' she got a fall. Ther' ain't a heap of them. Oh no, not a heap—only forty. But they're all of them real artists. Sirs, they can blow a hurricane! That ther' dance wus an o-casion, gen'lemen, an' no mistake. Mr. President had just fixed a contract with them tarnation 'chinks,' whereby an' wherefor' the glorious American Eagle was to feather his nest with ten millions of bran' new dollar bills. Say, our Pres' is a dandy.

"We've got a drammy, gents! It's got four shootin's, three suicides, two lynchin's, a divorce an' a weddin', a real house afire, a fight with real live Injuns, which is to show the superiority of the noble white man over them durn, verminated red critturs, an' a real livin' corpse brought on the stage, an' the charge to this most wonderful show is ten cents! We got a broncho hoss as ain't never been rode, an' I guess ther' ain't nobody outside of Dyke Hole ever likely to ride him. We got a dandy fine lady e-questrienne," he went on, with a knowing wink. "Gee! what a leg! Our elephants does somersets in the air, an' ther's a talkin' b'ar as swears ter'ble. We've a hog as plays poker—which ain't as rare as you'd think, gents," he grinned. "But," he proceeded, "we ain't got no mermaids! I make no apologies, gents; none. We simply ain't got 'em, cos they don't exist. I says it, gents; I, Cyrus T. Melkin, says it!

"But," he went on quickly, "we got a whale! Now, gents, I ask your best indulgence to my words. Listen all to the word of truth! Listen to what science has proved for the first time! Listen to the message them great botanists, geologists, bacteriologists, mineralogists, psychologists, astrologists, and physiologists of Kansas now send to the great minds of this world through the medium of Louis K. Hallig's show, and the mouth of Cyrus T. Melkin! Whales lives two thousand years! Two thousand! That's

the message. And how, you ask, do they know? Cos Louis K. Hallig, with the help of Cyrus T. Melkin, sent our whale up to Kansas, on six flat cars, to be inspected by them gents. Six flat cars, gents! We jest laid him out with the help of ten steam cranes and forty derricks, an' we sent him up by speshul train. An' word come back along with him as he was two thousand summers old, and the biggest and oldest whale in the known world. Say, gents, ther's more to that whale than that, an' we know it; we found it out after he come back. Them guys in Kansas 'ud give their ears to hear what I'm goin' to tell you. Say, that there whale took sick on them flat cars. They kind of shook him up, an' he got the bile. That there fish got a vomit on it that nigh drowned his keeper. An' he brought up a whole heap of HUMAN BONES! Do you know whose bones they was? No, course you don't. Guess you never read your Bible—askin' your pardon, gents. Never heard tell of Samson who was swallered by a whale! They was his! We located 'em. Ther' was no mistake! There was his hair, seven foot long, an' the ten-inch spike that that ther' pritty dancer, Salome, druv through his skull when he was bustin' up King Solomon's Temple! The museum at Washington has offered Louis K. Hallig twenty thousand dollars spot cash for that ther' fish! Guess you'll take a drink on me, boys!"

He talked until noon, by which time the noise of the brass band down the trail heralded the advent of the circus. It was his cue for departure, which he took with all possible dispatch. His team was hooked up, and he headed away for the next stand. His work in Dyke Hole was done.

When the circus entered the village the saloon debouched its half-drunken freight upon the veranda, where it stood dull-eyed but interested, waiting for the wonders of the show to reveal themselves.

It was a pathetic sight. It came with a brassbound flaunting by which it hoped to hide the unutterable meanness of its condition. The whole thing had that atmosphere which had doubtless caused a pharisaical society to regard the mummers of ancient days as rogues and vagabonds.

Yes, it was a circus, the flags and tattered banners declared such to be the case. Besides, there was the

usual impedimenta. There were horses, there were wagons that had once been gilt, there were cages of beasts—the handbills added the adjective “wild”—there were women who, later, would undoubtedly jump through hoops. Yes, and there were two men with chalked faces and white sugarloaf hats whose purpose in life was to make a living by being funny, and only contrived to exist.

No thinker could have looked upon that queer cavalcade, with its woeful pretence, which succeeded only in shouting aloud its squalor, without a feeling of profound pity not untouched with contempt. Nor would this feeling have been for these purveyors of light amusement only. Surely it must also be for the people who made such a means of livelihood possible.

Jocelyn Leyland, watching the procession from the hillside, standing beside Dick Roydon, was possessed of this feeling of pity. She would not have considered herself a thinker. She knew so little of the world, she knew so little outside of her small, narrow life. But she possessed all a woman's heart, with its full capacity for sympathy, and that sympathy went out to all the poor creatures she now saw struggling to hide the horror and misery of their lives under brazen trappings, and drowning the bitter cry of their hearts in the braying of brass instruments, the clash of cymbals and banging of drums. She saw not with eyes trained to such sights, not with a mind capable of probing beneath the surface of the lives around her, but with her heart.

There was very little to amuse her in the band of “forty” spoken of by the advance agent. This consisted of three powerful niggers with cheeks, eyes and veins distended in their efforts to blow three battered E flat cornets into better shape, two small boys satisfying their youthful lust for noise with two huge pairs of cymbals, and a decrepit white man, who also played “aged father” parts in the show, who worried out a march time on a drum, with which his bunioned feet had difficulty in keeping up. This man had been in the circus business all his life. He had filled almost every part in the life of a circus man from manager down to—when stress of circumstances and a paucity of commissariat drove him—the “skeleton dude” in a side show. Just now he was thriving. He

was a man of responsibility with Louis K. Hallig. He was ring manager, he fed the menagery, he looked after the stores, and always drank with his boss when that individual felt convivially inclined. And his salary was ten dollars per week—with stoppages.

The menagery was limited. There were three cages, that had at some period in their history been gilt all over. Now they were simply cages. There was a lion that spent most of his time scratching himself and licking the sores his great claws made on his mangy skin. There was a tiger without any sort of feline enthusiasm. He slept at all times, for his years were very very many, and he had got tired of the incessant roar of his early youth. This "ferocious beast"—as the announcement on the cage described him—always had to be roused to a condition of aggressive annoyance on entering a town. The third cage contained a puma. It certainly was a puma, but it lived on soft cooked meat, because its few remaining teeth were too decayed to masticate raw flesh. The acrobat always entered the town travelling inside this cage. It was an excellent advertisement, and he stood in no sort of danger from his aged companion. Louis K. Hallig had a great eye for effect.

It was a chariot drawn by a pie-bald team that held Jocelyn's keenest attention and excited her utmost pity. The horses were trapped with harness trimmed with bells, and were driven by a mean-looking nigger in dirty tights and spangles of a colour that might have disturbed any self-respecting "porker" at its evening meal. This chariot bore a streamer over it signifying that it was the beauty wagon. Six ladies rode in it. They sat smiling out upon the village through their paint, amidst a maze of gaudy draper's material and tinsel. They were aged, worn, weary-looking creatures, and their smile was pitiful even to the uncultured folk of Dyke Hole. They passed silently along, holding fast to their smiles as though they feared to part with them, lest the horrid truth should find expression in the lines and hollows which no amount of paint could hide when their faces were in repose.

But the feature *de luxe* of the whole parade was the sad-eyed, shambling, half-starved elephant, who bore the

burden of a second-hand hoodah which enthroned Mr. Louis K. Hallig himself. The "greatest impressario in the world" was carefully posed. He wore a costume that might have been extracted from a museum, and was supposed to be Eastern. His round, full, shining face beamed out upon Dyke Hole as he came, and he graciously bowed acknowledgments to the imaginary thunders of applause from the countless hordes of Dyke Hole's populace, which didn't exist. Whatever he did during the rest of his time, at the parade into a town Louis K. Hallig certainly lived. It was his triumph. His elephant pose of his had cost him much thought and secret joy, and now beneath the shelter of his hoodah he was completely, unutterably happy.

Thus came the circus into Dyke Hole, followed by all the usual impedimenta of such concerns. The clowns cracked their wheezes, played pranks such as they had played all their professional lives, and, as they kept pace on foot, longed for the moment when the halt occurred, and they were free to visit the saloon, a matter which was duty and pleasure combined.

Jocelyn Leyland watched it all with mixed feelings. The women and the weary beasts stirred her heart to profound pity. For the men she felt less. They were men, and men to her were the fortunate of life, and needed none of her pity. She tried to picture the women's lives, their camp life, for well she knew that at least two-thirds, if not the whole, of the year they lived this wandering, vagrant life. The discomfort, the privations they must endure seemed awful to her gentle heart. Poor souls, she was sure they didn't get enough food, and they looked so weary—so hopeless! All her joy at the prospect of witnessing their performance died out as she watched the parade make the complete circle of the village and finally halt upon the green.

Had she been nearer when the preparations for the show began she might have been even more shocked. Her sympathies would have merged into a feeling infinitely more painful, more hopeless.

As the tent went up confusion seemed to reign everywhere. Men, strident, shouting, cursed anybody and everybody, and hurled vituperation broadcast about them.

The women, more shrill and shrew-like, joined in the hubbub, cursing no less than the men, and with infinitely more viciousness. There was no thought of sex where the erection of the tent was concerned. It was all hands to the ropes, and as much was expected of the women as of the men. Even the children had their place in the Louis K. Hallig scheme of economy. And amidst it all, and above it all, the great man himself shouted and blasphemed at everybody and everything with a perfect impartiality.

By two o'clock the show was in readiness for its Dyke Hole patrons, and again the drowsy village writhed in agony under the lash of discord from the nigger band.

The house of Shaggy Steele was on the outskirts of the village, just where the trail turned off through the woods down to the river ford.

Shaggy was a man who earned a precarious livelihood by casual employment in the capacity of auxiliary police to the sheriff. Tombstone Joe often found him useful, if somewhat unreliable. He, like the rest of Dyke Hole, was uncertain in the matter of sobriety. But Joe had a method of handling him that, from his, Joe's, point of view, was perfectly satisfactory. Besides his drinking habits, Shaggy was considerably a ruffian and a bully. But the latter did not trouble his employer in the least.

The house in which the Steeles lived was a trifling affair for a family such as they boasted. Four rooms would be none too large for two people, but when fifteen children, with a cluster of triplets, and two pairs of twins in the list, with the eldest thirteen, and the youngest six months, needed housing, it was a problem the solution of which left little room for furniture, and certainly none for luxury.

About noon on the day of the circus Shaggy was sitting on the door-sill moodily gazing out at the sunlit village, in the direction of the parading circus. He was longing to be down at the saloon, but fate, in the shape of Mrs. Steele, willed it otherwise. The fact of the matter was it was his wife's washing-day, and Shaggy had declared his intention of going into the village. This was early in the morning. Now, Mrs. Steele was a woman of considerable force of character. She had brought fifteen

children into the world, and was entitled to an opinion on matters domestic. Therefore she decreed that Shaggy should not go into the village until the performance of the circus. And then it would be his duty as a parent to take all the children with him. In the mean time, while she washed, he must keep the children outside the house. There had been some debate, and for a while matters hovered in the balance, but a sudden contact with a copperstick, which took Shaggy in the left eye, seemed to decide matters, and the man took up his position on the door-sill and brooded over his wrongs.

Shaggy felt safe while he could hear the steady swish and rub going on in the back regions of the house, therefore his exertions for the amusement of the children were confined to a few curses, and more frequent clouts and kicks. And his offspring took it well enough on the whole. Tite and the elder boys, Montague Harold, Isaiah Bertram, and Hezekiah, with one or two of the elder girls, Esther, Maud Sarah, and Lillian Helena, kept as far out of his way as possible. The smaller ones did not understand his methods of play quite so well, and fared less favourably.

The time dragged wearily for the man. But things went pretty well until some evil genius brought on a fit of Tite's peculiar malady. The boy sidled insinuatingly up to his parent, always keeping a doubtful eye on the great hands thrust deeply into the top of the man's moleskin trousers. He came up as though he had drifted that way by force of circumstances, and not of his own volition. He had detached himself from the elder minority, who were equipping themselves for a game of "Apache *versus* Sioux." He didn't like the game. He had been scalped too often, and had no sympathy with the tortures of the "sun-dance." He was a thirster after knowledge, so he oozed up to his father's side.

"Say, paw," he demanded gently, "ther's a cirkis in town, ain't ther'?"

Shaggy grunted.

"Shure," he replied absently.

"Kind o' noble show, ain't it?"

"Mebbe."

"Montague Harold says cirkises is great?"

"That's so."

The man's moody eyes were steadily turned upon the village. Tite's questions had scarcely penetrated to his brutish brain. The scowl of his unwashed, unshaven face would have been repellent enough for any ordinary child, but Tite was never ordinary when his thirst for information was uppermost.

"You ain't never bin a cirkis rider, paw?" the youth proceeded dreamily.

"Nope."

"Nor a clown?"

"Guess not."

"Not even a 'freak' in a side show?" the boy inquired, in tones of regret.

"Kind of astin' questions, ain't yer?" Shaggy snorted angrily. The fact was slowly dawning on him.

"Ain't it good to ast things?" the boy persisted innocently.

His father remained silent, and Tite went on.

"Gee, it must be awful noble to be a 'freak,'" he observed. "Which 'ud you choose, paw, if you could have your way? Which 'ud you sooner be, the 'human snake' or 'human pincushion'? You ain't never bin a 'human pincushion,' have you?"

"Quit! You're talkin' foolish."

The boy edged away, but only just out of reach. He continued to fire his questions, as though they were wrung from him by some power beyond his control.

"Why am I talkin' foolish? Montague Harold says it's great to be in a cirkis. He says you'd be real elegant in a side show. Montague Harold said you'd be great as a 'human fish.' Wot's a 'human fish'? He said that or a 'orful sample' for a temp'rance lecturer. What did he mean by 'orful sample,' paw?"

"Get to hell out o' here!" roared Shaggy, threatening the innocent questioner furiously.

"Wot for?" demanded the boy.

"Ef you don't I'll larrup your durned hide!"

"Why, paw?"

"Cos I will, you imp of hell."

Then the boy broke out again.

"Wher's hell, paw?"

"Wher'? I'll——"

Shaggy, with his evil face flaming through its dirt, sprang at his offspring, and the boy ran shrieking towards the "scalpers."

"You ain't going to hit me, paw, are you?" he shrieked. And then, as the man's brutal hand came down upon his head, his cries of terror and pain were drowned in a babel of war-whoops from the Indian section of the family, who promptly fell upon his sprawling body and put him through the process of scalping he so dreaded.

At the same instant Martha Washington, the youngest of the infant section, who had been busy filling herself up with the golden sand and flint pebbles she was sitting amongst, set up a fierce halloobaloo, and fell backwards, shrieking and choking in a terrifying manner.

What might have been the result, with Shaggy roused to brutal action, it would have been impossible even to guess at. Fortunately, at that instant there was a rush of skirts through the house, and Mrs. Steele appeared upon the scene. She took in the situation at a glance, dashed at Martha Washington, grabbed her by the skirts, swung her upside down, and, while shaking and jolting her violently, turned furiously on her spouse.

"Ha! You can't do no better than this, you slob!" she shrieked at him. "You mutton! You drunken hog!" she went on violently between the shakes she was bestowing upon the choking Martha Washington. "You'd stand right ther' an' let this pore chil' swaller sand an' rocks like some crazy ostrich, you would. Guess you want her dead, you do! Ain't you no brain, nor nothin'? Look! Look ther', you gawkin' hobo! Look what I've shaken out of her!" She pointed at the moist mixture of sand and pebbles slowly trickling out of the shrieking infant's gaping mouth. "How's she to swaller that stuff? An' the pore critter nigh choking. Say, ain't it awful!" she said, tucking the child feet foremost under her great muscular arm. "You're wuss'n a nigger, you pore critter of a two-legged man. How'm I to git thro' wi' the wash? Ef I hear any more, I'll jest git around an' see what I can do fer you, you—you—beast!"

The woman's fury was something to fear. She was a

great, mannish creature, with the muscles of a blacksmith. Shaggy's awe of her was very real. But he growled out his excuses.

"How ken I look after 'em all, anyways?" he demanded. "I only got two eyes——"

"Yes, an' no brain, you miser'ble worm."

"You're a crazy wench, anyhow. Say, give us the bills an' I'll git 'em right off to the cirkis. Guess ther' won't be no scratchin' around then, an' you can get fixed wi' your wash."

Mrs. Steele was slightly mollified now that Martha Washington was becoming pacified, but she still shrieked at him.

"Cirkis? Don't you cirkis ne," she cried. "There's cirkis enough right here. It's you brought all these kids into the world, an' you'll take your share seein' to 'em. Ef they got a taste fer sand, they got it from you. I ain't spendin' my life siftin' gravel out o' their stummicks."

Bearing Martha Washington still in her uncomfortable position, but now quite indifferent to passing events, she marched into the house. As she went she called back over her shoulder.

"Gather up them kids, an' set 'em at the wash-bucket. Git their bow-ties fixed, an' you ken take 'em along to the cirkis. An' say, you kind o' remember that some misguided providence set you on two weak-kneed legs instead o' four. An' fer that reason only you ain't eatin' grass."

At one o'clock Shaggy led his family out of the house on their way to the circus. For once in their lives the children were reduced to an outward semblance of obedience. They strung out like the tail of a comet, of which Shaggy was the bright, foremost spark.

This obedience had not been arrived at easily, but was the result of endless kicks and cuffs, the united efforts of both parents. Once this condition was fully established, and the children were stood one behind the other like a Sunday school "walk out," in order of seniority, Mrs. Steele counted them. Then she gave her final instructions to her husband.

"Ther'," she said in her grudging way, "ther's fourteen. Martha Washington'll stay with me. An' fourteen

you'll bring back, Steele. Montague Harold," she addressed her firstborn; "you've had schoolin', so you'll jest count 'em four times goin', and four times comin' back, so's none gets lost. Your paw's a pore ignorant crittur an' can't count more'n five. He's goin' to take you right straight to the cirkis an' straight back," she went on, ignoring Shaggy purposely. "Straight ther' an' straight back! An' if any one—mind, any one—gits goin' into the saloon, you'll have to tell me, an' I bet he don't git another thirst fer a month. Don't you none of you lose your bow-ties or dirt yourselves. You ken lead 'em out, Mr. Steele."

Shaggy led the way, slouching out of the house with his hands in his pockets. But his right hand was holding a five-dollar bill tightly. He felt less down-trodden than he looked. The children strung out behind him, keeping careful step and in perfect silence. They kept to the trail villagewards in one long, straight line, each following in the steps of the child in front. They had the appearance of a railroad train in perspective, grading down from the top of Shaggy's head to the diminutive Pete, aged about two and a half, who toddled along in the rear, well hidden behind the screen of his vast bow-tie.

Not a word was spoken until they drew near the saloon. Every pair of eyes, excepting Shaggy's, were set upon the well-patched tent of the circus, and, what seemed to the children, the endless sea of wagons, and cages, and people gathered about it.

It was the inquisitive Tite that brought about the first interruption. His eyes suddenly brightened with renewed intelligence, and his piping voice reached his parent from his seventh place in the line.

"Can we go right into the cirkis now, paw?" he inquired.

Shaggy didn't reply at once, but he hesitated, and the step down the line suddenly became lost. Finally he stopped and turned about. The line swayed and closed up like a concertina. He looked down at Montague Harold, who at once began to whistle a rag-time.

"Say, I guess I'd best go right into the saloon an' find out about things," Shaggy said thoughtfully. "Tite's real bright. I 'lows I hadn't tho't o' that."

"Sure, paw," agreed Montague Harold, readily.

"You stay right here, then," his father went on, quite genially. "Say, an' you ken git right on with your countin'. Ma's pertickler, eh?"

He winked at the boy, and hurried away to the saloon, where he disappeared through the swing doors.

Montague Harold counted his brothers and sisters. He counted them again. Still once more he counted them. He remembered with pride what his mother had said about his counting. Five minutes went by, and some of the children sat down. Presently a fight started, about half-way down the line, and Montague Harold was forced to intervene, but not until two bow-ties were hopelessly mangled and torn.

About a quarter of an hour later Shaggy swung his way out of the saloon and came towards his children, who were now quite busy with their roadside games. They sprang to order as their parent came along, with new life in his gait. Tite was all eagerness.

"Well, paw," he inquired, "can we go right in?"

"Eh?" Shaggy inquired in pretended surprise.

"Didn't you find out, paw?" cried the boy.

His father pulled himself together and grinned.

"Wal, now, ain't that foolish of me," he said. "Guess I fergot. That's talkin' to the sheriff. I'll go right back an' see to it."

Without more ado he turned back and re-entered the saloon; and the children went on with their games.

Fifteen minutes later he came back. This time there was a certain hilarity about him, which was very pleasant to his high-spirited children.

"Say," he cried, "it's jest the greatest cirkis in America. It's chock full o' the wildest beasts, an' Injuns an' things. My, an' the freaks!" They gathered about him, mouths and eyes wide open. But Tite was practical.

"Then we can go right in?" he demanded.

"Well, I guess so," Shaggy replied doubtfully. "But there, I sent a feller to find out, an' he ain't got back. Guess I'll get back to the saloon an' wait fer him. You kiddies git to it an' play Injuns till I git back."

Away he went again, and this time he was gone a full half-hour. His suggestion was acted upon, and the chil-

dren played Indians. And, by the time he returned, the last bow-tie was a mangled remnant, lying somewhere in the dusty road, well trampled out of all recognition.

They watched him return with wonder and speculation in their childish minds. They saw him yaw into four different directions, as, with face and eyes in their direction, he struggled against the leeway his mental tide was making. For the life of him his helm would not keep him on his laid course. He was sailing with a fair wind one moment, beating to windward the next, and ever bringing up in the wind, and getting set aback. His navigation finally brought him to his destination, but it was by a route involving every point of the compass. He stood before Montague Harold, swaying and licking his lips, and vainly striving to make sure that the right Montague Harold got what he said.

"We'll-go-ri'-in, m' boy," he said, using great deliberation over his words. "Follow-me!" he added authoritatively. "'F any-you-ge'-out-o'-line-I'll-bea' the hide off'n you! Now-march!"

He executed a pirouette which overbalanced him into the foremost children, and scattered them like a litter of autumn leaves in the roadway. Then he staggered to his feet, amidst a furious string of curses, and set off at a great pace for the circus tent. The children followed, far too scared of him while in that condition to display any initiative in the matter of reaching their object by a more direct route.

The tent lay about two hundred yards away across the market-place, and he made a violent dash for it. But somehow his feet carried him straight on down the trail. He saw the tent to the left of him and turned. But he turned too much, and found himself heading for the Mission House. This annoyed him. He saw his mistake, and turned again to the right. This time the tent seemed to describe an arc before his eyes, and now ahead of him lay the saloon. For the moment, from habit, he held to this course. Somehow he had less difficulty in this direction than in any other, but the voice of Montague Harold behind him pulled him up with a jerk. But it was Tite who directed him.

"Say, paw, why you actin' queer?" he inquired. "Ain't

that the tent, yonder?" he added, pointing at the marketplace.

Shaggy cursed very indistinctly, and made another effort. This time he had some measure of success, and got on to the grass. The children followed him closely and in order, and the whole string kept up a series of serpentine undulations behind him. He yawed this way and that, he doubled on his tracks, he stumbled and lost direction altogether, and went off at a sharp angle until piloted back to his course by Montague Harold. And all the while the trailing family loyally wound in and out, following closely in his footsteps.

All Dyke Hole was watching his evolutions, and speculating as to what the end would be. But Shaggy meant reaching the circus if he died for it. And reach it he finally did, after such a maze of windings and twistings that the younger children were nearly sick in the stomach, and had lost all heart for the circus they had come to see.

"Ten cents for kiddies," cried Louis K. Hallig, who was standing at the pay-box, now tricked out in shiny Prince Albert coat and silk hat, rakishly set at a fierce angle on his head. His trousers roused some curiosity in the Steele family by reason of their colour and pattern, which came in the nature of a miracle to them. They had only *heard* of a check pattern.

"Ten cents for kiddies," he said, as Shaggy brought to an anchor, supported by Montague Harold. "Fifty cents you! That's two, four, six—— Say, boy," he turned to the pay-box clerk, with a grin, "count 'em; my eyes ain't good."

The clerk counted.

"Dollar forty them," he said quickly, "an' fifty cents you. Dollar ninety, mister, an' you'll pass right in. Freaks to the left, an' the whale to the right, cos ther' ain't no room fer nuthin' else when that ther' a'mighty fish gets a-waggin' of his most magnificent tail. Dollar ninety, mister."

Shaggy silently groped for the money. He went through his coat pockets and drew blank. He went through them again, producing a series of articles, but no money. Montague Harold offered suggestions, and, with some difficulty, persuaded his parent to try his trousers. As he

groped in these Shaggy's face took on a grin of satisfaction. His hands had come into contact with some coins, which he drew out with an cath of triumph, and slammed on the ledge of the pay-box. But the clerk's indignant voice killed his enthusiasm.

"Say, wot's this checken feed? Dollar ninety, I sed."

Louis K. Hallig purpled with indignation.

"Them cents ain't no use, anyhow," he exclaimed.

"Say, you best hand out a dollar ninety or git! You're blockin' folks out."

Montague Harold picked up the twenty cents from the pay-box, while his father furiously searched his pockets over again. Louis K. Hallig grew more purple, and more angry. He dropped out a few broad hints of a derogatory nature, and Shaggy retorted. For some moments the situation became strained and threatening. Then Tite saved it by a quiet sarcasm of his own.

"Say, paw," he observed quietly, "you ain't dropped your wad at the saloon, have you?"

The clouds suddenly dispersed. Shaggy did not see the sarcasm. His face lit and he beamed out afresh.

"Sure, boy," he cried. "Guess I'll git ri' back an' fin' it. Sure!"

He turned to go, but Dick Roydon and Jocelyn barred his way.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH SHAGGY STEELE TAKES A BATH

AMONGST those who watched the Steele family's progress towards the circus were Jocelyn and Dick Roydon. The sight came to them at first with wonder and amazement. Then, as they realized something of its meaning, they both began to laugh. Jocelyn was the first to get over her mirth. Her laugh died out almost before it had matured, as she realized something very pathetic in what she beheld.

"Oh, Dick," she cried—she had already quite accustomed herself to the man's first name; "it's dreadful. That man is drunk, and—and with all those children. Look! Everybody in Dyke Hole is out watching them. Oh, the wretched man! Those poor, poor children!"

Roydon checked his laughter with difficulty. While in no way hardened, he was far less sensitive than this girl.

"By Jove! there are enough of them," he said, not knowing how to express his sympathy. "Are they the—the school children guying him?"

"They're his—all his!"

Dick whistled. He had no answer ready. They walked on while he tried to count the trailing family. The girl never took her eyes off the twisting, turning, undulating line, and every few yards her companion struggled vainly to suppress a fresh chuckle at each new tactic on the part of the drunken Shaggy, in his efforts to make the circus. But Jocelyn took the matter quite seriously. His laughter jarred her. And at last she spoke quite sharply.

"Please, don't laugh any more. It may be funny, but unfortunately I haven't sufficient sense of humour. I wish Joe were about."

Dick sobered at once. He glanced at the girl's pretty

face, and his heart smote him when he saw there were actually tears in her eyes.

"I say, Jocelyn," he cried, all sympathy at once, "you mustn't let it worry you. You really mustn't. I don't suppose those jolly little kiddies understand. Of course not. They're going to the circus, evidently. And I don't suppose they're thinking of anything else. You really mustn't distress yourself."

The girl turned to him. His ingenuous words had done more to re-instate him than any carefully worded sympathy could have done. She smiled through her unshed tears.

"I'm silly, I know," she said weakly. "But it's something dreadful to me to see children surrounded by such a sordid life as that. Dyke Hole is a dreadful place." She sighed. "Perhaps," she went on, "your appreciation of Joe will be greater when you more fully realize the conditions of this place. No reformer ever had a more hopeless task set him than Joe has. But he can cope with it, too," she cried, with one of those little bursts of enthusiasm which Dick envied so much. "But it's a slow process. I do wish he were about."

Dick suddenly laughed, but he felt safe in doing so. He pointed out beyond the circus tent.

"You have your wish. There is his highness, stalking along like some beast of prey. He's making straight for our unfortunate friend. Joe's a marvel. I don't believe he ever sleeps. I wonder what he's going to do."

But Jocelyn's interest had taken a fresh turn. "Let's hurry. We can just cut him off," she cried.

And Dick, watching her, saw an expression of real anxiety in her soft grey eyes.

"Why?" he inquired. Nevertheless he hurried to keep pace with her.

"Joe's such a queer fellow. I wouldn't like him to start in and thrash poor Shaggy. You see, it's not his fault so much—— Come along."

They hurried along to intercept the sheriff. Joe's tall, purposeful figure was devouring the intervening space between him and the Steele family by long swift strides. He came with that stern air of authority which never seemed absent from him, no matter in what circumstances

he might be placed, or what the nature of his work. Jocelyn was right, however, they could just reach him before he came up with his quarry.

Joe saw them before they got to him, and slackened his gait at once. He spoke the moment they came within speaking distance. Flourishing his prairie hat, he addressed himself to Jocelyn.

"This is a real pleasure, Missie Jock," he said, his face as solemn as a stagnant pool. "I wus jest gittin' around to say a few words to that liquor-pickled guy that don't seem to know whether it's Toosday or Spawn City. Say, I'll jest fix him an' git right back."

He was about to pass on when Jocelyn detained him.

"One moment, Joe: don't be harsh with him. You know drink's a disease with him. Suppose you just send him off home, and I'll see to the children. That would be the best way—it really would. You won't mind," she went on, turning to Dick with her gentle smile. "They really need some one to look after them. I'm sure Mrs. Steele would be glad if I did. You see," she turned again to Joe, whose fierce black eyes were intently fixed on her, "my guardian's away and won't be back till late. Maybe not till to-morrow. I don't know when, for certain. He went off in such a hurry this morning in the buckboard I didn't really have time to ask him. Anyway, I've got the whole afternoon to myself with no meals to get, and I'd like to devote it to those poor children."

"And where do I come in?" Dick inquired, with a smile.

Jocelyn laughed.

"You? Oh, you can help me, of course," she said.

"I think it would do you good to help the children. And I should think you'd do it rather well," she added, smiling critically up into his face.

Before Dick could answer Joe broke in—

"Guess that's a reas'nable notion, when you git thinkin'," he said. "Say, ol' man Boyle went off early this mornin', did he? Now, mebbe he hadn't sed nothin' 'bout goin' last night?"

Jocelyn shook her head.

"No; he rather surprised me at breakfast time when he said he was going."

"Guess he's got business in Spawn City?" Joe mused, his tone disguising his question.

"I don't know," Jocelyn answered, she was so interested in Shaggy's children that Joe had no difficulty in drawing her on. "But he certainly took the Spawn City trail. We'd better catch Shaggy up," she cried abruptly, "or he'll have reached the tent first."

Joe scowled at the drunken man.

"Guess ther's a heap more 'yaws' 'fore he makes it," he said quietly. "But, say, we'll git doin'. Guess I'll need you, Roydon, after all. Anyways, Missie Jock 'll be busy with the kiddies."

They hurried after the Steele family.

"You mean I can't have the afternoon, Joe?" Roydon said rebelliously.

"That's how."

There was no mistaking the tone of command, and Dick and Jocelyn exchanged meaning glances.

But for once Joe's calculations proved wrong. By a sudden desperate manœuvre Shaggy reached the tent with his dizzy flock, and was just finishing his debate with Louis K. Hallig when they came up. He laid a heavy hand on the man's shoulder that nearly brought him to the ground.

"Say! You're soused!" he cried violently. "You've got to git your legs, an' straighten out them hog's brains of yours some. I want you."

Then he turned to Jocelyn.

"Here's fi' dollars," he said, in a low tone, crushing the bill into her hand quickly. "You take them pore kiddies right in an' I'll send Roydon in after I'm thro'. See to it quick."

The whole thing was done so rapidly that Jocelyn hardly knew how it happened. She passed to the pay-box, the children following her, and as she went on thence to the door of the tent, she had a vision of Shaggy Steele being marched rapidly away between Dick and Joe, each with a grip on the man's shoulders and wrists.

There had been no argument, no given orders. Dick took his cue from his chief instinctively, seizing the man simultaneously with the other, and the three went off. Once only he glanced into Joe's face, and his mute inquiry was answered with a curt nod.

"The river," was Joe's laconic response.

Roydon was in a condition of bewildered amusement. As yet he didn't understand what was going to happen; what was working in his chief's extraordinary mind. "The river." It suggested all sorts of possibilities, but, beyond the mere fact that they were directly heading for it, he had no idea of what was to be done when they got there.

Though all Dyke Hole was out curiously watching the doings round the circus, no one paid any particular attention to the two men half dragging and half pushing their drunken freight along. It would have been different had the sheriff not been there. But his hand in the matter gave it an ominous significance, and though many curious eyes were turned in their direction, no one attempted to follow them, as would have been the case in any more civilized community.

Bob Gauvin, on the saloon veranda, remarked on the matter with a laugh to Dyke Hole Bill.

"Sheriff's real smart when a feller's that soused he don't know his ways thro' a cirkis door," he said, with a sneer.

And Bill, always antagonistic to any opinion of Bob's, replied personally.

"Makes you feel mean he ain't got the chance actin' that aways by you jest now," he observed.

"Guess you ain't got the money to fix me that aways," retorted Bob, by way of a stinging repartee.

"Wot, I ain't got a dime? Psha! anything 'ud put your sheep's head queer."

Bill turned his dull eyes on his companion. A smile as slow and malevolent as his dull wit could inspire stirred the corners of his mouth.

"Go to hell!" he cried, and walked off in dudgeon.

At the river the sheriff released his prisoner. Shaggy stood on the bank struggling to elucidate the meaning of his presence there, and what relation there was between him and the water, and what purpose there might be in the fact of the sheriff's presence. He looked from the water to Joe, and back again at the water. He hated water anyway, and in his present condition this hatred was particularly pronounced. He loathed it now, and turned to

Roydon for relief. But Roydon was watching Joe, who interested him more than ever just now. He had already forgiven him the spoiling of his afternoon with Jocelyn. He was not long left in doubt.

Joe faced the now much worried Shaggy threateningly.

"Say, which notion suits your fancy?" he began coldly. "Ther's sure two ways of takin' a bath. Ef you git out of your rags you're li'ble to raise a reas'nable sort of cold, an' die of newmony, which wouldn't be no sort of loss; ef you don't, you're li'ble to get 'em washened, too, which, I take it, won't come amiss to 'em. Anyways you're goin' to git right into that water, an' swim roun' an' roun' till you ken say, 'Durn Dirty Drunkard o' Dyke Hole,' twenty times without gittin' your feet mussed up."

Roydon grinned; but Joe was quite serious.

Shaggy started to whine, but his tormentor wouldn't have it.

"Say," he cried fiercely, "you're a mighty small proposition as a man anyways, but like most ev'rything in Natur', even grass snakes an' greasers, you sure has your uses. I ain't no time fer any sort of argyment. Is it to be rags or no rags?"

"But it's water——" Shaggy cried, about to start a fresh protest.

"It certainly ain't liquor." Joe stepped up to him deliberately, and Roydon followed him.

"But I can't swim," cried the unfortunate man, shrinking back.

"Guess you'll drown easier," the sheriff snapped, at the same time nodding at his assistant.

"Gee! You ain't really—you ain't——"

But Shaggy's further protest remained unvoiced. He gave one yell as two pairs of arms picked him bodily up and hurled him headlong into the river.

There was a moment's silence as the two on the bank watched the drunken man plunge and flounder about in the water. Then as they saw him strike out in a steady stroke Roydon drew a breath of relief and laughed aloud. He had not been sure that the fellow could swim.

But the sheriff saw nothing amusing in the situation.

"Say," he snapped, "guess you ken do your laffin' later."

Then he drew one of his heavy guns, and bent over the water as Shaggy turned towards the bank. And his icy tones fell dispiritingly on the swimmer's ears.

"Say ther's six bar'ls to this yer gun, an' they're mostly loaded. Turn right around an' kep on swimming until I say quit, or I'll empty every blazin' one till I make your thick hide wuss than Swiss cheese. Now!"

And Shaggy turned away and swam as directed. He swam and swam, round and round, as the sheriff said he should. And Joe watched him, coldly indifferent to the ridiculousness of the picture he made. And every time Shaggy drew near the hither bank he covered him with his revolver, and made him recite the prescribed formula.

And thus twenty minutes passed before he allowed the man to land. Then he ordered him ashore, and Roydon learned his real purpose.

Shaggy stood shivering between his two captors, a picture of wretchedness and unutterable, moist misery, but he was sober, or, at least, sober enough for the sheriff's purpose.

"Guess that water's di-luted you some, an' ther's room fer common savvee inside your roof," Joe began coldly. "Git a holt on this. Old man Boyle drove out to Spawn City this mornin'. He went along with his buggy. You'll trail him. Foller him. You'll see wher' he went, an' who he went to see, an' you won't leave his trail till he gits right back here. See here," he proceeded with that deadly threat, which the citizens of Dyke Hole knew so well and dreaded so much, "ef a drop of fire-water crosses them ugly lips of yours before you git back an' report to me, you'll sure do fi' years penitentiary fer aidin' an' abettin' agin the law, sure as hell's a fire, an' you're goin' to roast in it. Git!"

And Shaggy "got" with sufficient rapidity to satisfy even so exacting an individual as Tombstone Joe. He moved off as though a tribe of scalping Indians were on his trail. He simply fled.

When he was out of sight Joe turned to Roydon, and his fierce eyes lit with something like a sparkle of sardonic humour.

"Guess I don't calc'late to rob no folks of their rights," he said grimly, while his lean, sensitive nostrils suddenly

snuffed at the air, like a war-horse scenting battle. "Speshully a leddy. Howsum, this time I 'lows I sure saved 'Ma' Steele a deal of trouble in the way of straightenin' out the father of her fam'ly. Say, we struck a red-hot trail with something of your mine at the end of it."

While he was speaking his restless eyes had turned away, glancing out in a south-westerly direction where a haze of smoke was slowly rolling up into the sky, and dimming the brilliancy of the afternoon sun.

"Seem'ly ther's a fire," he observed, as Roydon remained silent. "An'," he went on, "I'd guess it smells of timber. Say, you'd best git right back to that cirkis, an' I don't figger it's necessary fer you to answer a heap of questions. Women is sure cur'us."

Roydon nodded. He refrained from questioning. He was beginning to understand how his chief hated questions where his work was concerned.

"Aren't you coming?" he inquired casually. Joe was still staring out in the direction of the fire.

"No," he said.

And he hurried off as the fog of smoke completely hid the sun.

CHAPTER XV

A BOND OF SYMPATHY

UP in the hills, in the heart of the virgin pine forest, the two children were playing in front of their log shack, while the old cripple, Martin, was solemnly tucking cordwood for the cookstove, somewhere in the rear.

Every now and then the piping voices of the children, or a shriek of infantile laughter, told the old man that all was well with his charges, and he was satisfied. Such sounds carried to him the only message he needed. He was responsible for their well-being to the sheriff. He had no particular love for the little mortals. They represented a living for him that was easily made, and as comfortable as his decrepitude would allow him to enjoy. His consideration for them went no further. His own condition of physical suffering claimed all his sympathies. He had no thought for anybody else.

For the most part the children played without noise. Their youth seemed to have imbibed something of the quiet surrounding them; they were influenced by it even in their childish games.

At the moment they had a large matter in hand. Nothing less than the construction of a brick house, and they were making the bricks for it. Willie had a box which he was using as a mould, and into this, aided by his little sister, he was steadily pouring loose sand and gravel.

Sally was always loyal to her brother. She had no opinion of her own on the matter; only a wondering admiration for the brain that could conceive such a stupendous undertaking. Time and again she stumbled along with her outstretched pinafore filled with the sand her small hands had gathered. Her efforts were great,

and each journey she made invariably ended in a harsh fit of coughing.

It was so peaceful, so simple. These little lives knew no care, no want. Everything for their wholesome upbringing was provided by the man who had hung their father in the course of his duty. And they never knew; he saw to it that no shadow of their father's misdoings was allowed to cloud their fresh young lives. To them Joe was an "uncle" whom they loved, whose gentleness and tender thought for them was their one great joy.

The whole thing seemed so utterly incongruous. These small lives, so simply innocent, dwelling under the charge of a decrepit old ruffian like Martin, whose past would bear no inspection, cared for by a man of Joe's peculiar temperament, among those wild hills, infested as they were by a band of desperadoes who were dreaded by all law-abiding dwellers upon the plains, in the very heart of Nature's wild, where endless wastes of forest and swamp, hill and ravine, afforded nothing save a life of simple savagery. Yet here was perfect peace, the simplicity and innocence of childhood.

The bright noon wore on. The children laboured steadily at their task. The box was filled many times. Each time it was emptied in the hope that a brick would result. And each time their hope was dashed by the resulting pile of loose dirt.

There was no thought of impending danger in their young minds. There was no thought of coming evil. Even Sally's cough meant nothing to them. But then they were so young, so small, and the protecting shadow of the sheriff hovered over them. He had always seen to it that no trouble befell them.

And so it was that, slowly, the brilliant sunlight dimmed without their being aware of it, and there crept into the fresh mountain air an odour that well might have struck terror into older hearts than theirs.

Old Martin suddenly ceased work and flung the buck-saw down upon the pile of blocks he had cut. His wrinkled face was turned skywards, and in his dim eyes was a curious look of inquiry. His sight was not good, and his sense of smell had suffered in the course of years, but his hearing was quite acute. It was the raucous

tearing of his bucksaw which had hitherto prevented his hearing a curious hissing sound that now came to him.

He straightened his aching back, and his right hand was pressed painfully upon its "small." His old eyes blinked. Then something gripped and held him, while his aged brain fastened itself on, and interpreted, what he saw and heard. Slowly his eyes turned upon the forest about him, and into them had crept a strange look of anxiety.

Now he moved away and hobbled painfully to the woodland trail. Here again he paused. A fog of smoke was densifying to windward, and the voices of the forest giants had grown louder. The hissing had changed to a low, distant moaning like a far-off growl of anger. He stood where he was, waiting like one who hears and understands but cannot make up his mind to act. His dull brain could not be quite sure of itself, of its own comprehension. And this very uncertainty fostered his alarm. It was growing all the time, but he did not realize it. Then, all of a sudden, panic seized him. A blast of hot air swept over his parchment face, and he fled forthwith to the hut.

The forest was on fire!

Now he knew. Now, with a sudden realization, he understood the hopelessness of it. The forest was afire, and he stood helpless in the midst of it. An hour, half-an-hour, and, to his panic-stricken imagination, the ground where he stood, the hut over his head, would be swept by it, and—— But he waited for no more.

Blindly he made for the bureau in his room. He snatched a small roll of money from a drawer. It was all he had in the world; that, and his clothes, for which he did not care. For one instant he thought of the children. Then he remembered that the pony was out grazing. There was no time to get him in. No, the children could go hang. He could not carry them. He could scarcely carry himself. They must take their——

He stumbled out of the kitchen door in his blind terror, and made off into the woods.

The children still played on.

A woman and a man were riding through the forest.

Their horses were at a walk, treading lightly over the underlay of crackling pine needles and cones with that springy gait which plainly told of their freshness. As the riders threaded their way down the long winding aisles between the grim, straight-grown tree-trunks, they talked quite openly. There was no one to hear. Besides, was not the woman queen of this particular domain?

The man's crafty face was eager. There was a light in his eyes which spoke of an unusual depth of feeling backing his words. But it was the burning intensity of animal passion roused in a man not given to any restraint—a man whose whole life was governed by his inclinations. His appearance was brutish, only that he lacked the common cleanliness of the brute world.

"It's this aways, Kit," he was saying, with a tense calmness in his voice. "I've hung on your trail fer months an' years, an' I've acted right by you. Ther' ain't nothin' you could ast but wot I'd have done jest to please you. Ther' wa'an't never any need fer you to ast, wi' me around. An' wot do I git? I ast you. Wot? You're soured on me. You laff right into my face. You ain't content to tread on me, jest as if I was some crawlin' worm, but you ast the rest of 'em to do it with you. Say, I've got right to the end of it. You're goin' to cut it out. I'm jest a man, an' you're a woman, sure. Say, Kit," his voice lowered, and thrilled with an eager passion, "I'd go plumb to hell fer you. Ther' ain't a man I wouldn't do up, sure, ef you jest held up your little finger. Kit, I love you that bad ther' ain't nothin' else worth livi' ' fer. Won't you hitch up with me? Won't you, gal?"

At first the woman had been listening carelessly, but now she turned her bold eyes swiftly on him, and they seemed to freeze his very soul.

"No, I won't," she said deliberately. "You?" she went on, after a moment's pause. "You?" Then she laughed defiantly. "The man I marry 'll need to be a man. Not you, Snakes, my boy. And since you're talking so much, let me point out that you're running on some. All you've done has been for yourself. I want nothing from you. It's the other way on. You've hung

on to me up in the hills because you feel safer, like all the others. Yes, and it's you, and others, whose work is placed to my account. It's you who have to cut something out—not me. See here," her voice became sharp with a vicious snap. "If you come near me again with this sort of talk I'll deal with you in my own fashion."

"You'll deal with me, eh?" The man's passion had suddenly become lost in the animal in him. He turned in his saddle and his face was livid, devilish. "You, you she cat! How'll you deal with me?" he cried, his teeth showing yellow through his ragged moustache, his whole body shaking with fury.

In a flash the muzzle of a heavy revolver was levelled at his stomach, and the woman's bold eyes were looking squarely into his.

"Put your hands up, you cur, put 'em up, or——"

Snakes Addy slowly dropped his reins on the horn of his saddle, and put his hands above his head. Kit brought her horse alongside of him and snatched his guns from their holsters and flung them to the ground. Then, pulling her horse to one side, she urged him on. And Snakes, cowed but furious, kept pace.

"You can drop your hands," she said. Then she laughed, while she still held him covered. "Do you need any telling how I'll fix you now?" she asked contemptuously. "I understand you and your sort, my boy. You're all great big men when you're behind a gun, but precious small fry when the position's reversed. In future you'll forget filthy names when you go courtin'. This time you've got off with the loss of a pair of guns. Next time it may be something else you lose." She laughed, but cut the laugh off short as the man checked his horse. "No you don't!" she cried sharply. "Keep right on with me, or——" Her pistol was threatening again.

Snakes made no further attempt to return for his guns. Kit held him, and he knew her too well to disobey. To himself he consigned her to warmer climates. How, he argued, could any man deal with a woman of her nature? He called her a wild cat, but he felt that the term was wholly inadequate.

They had ridden another mile or so without speaking.

Then Kit laughed abruptly and opened her revolver, holding it up for the man's inspection. Its chambers were empty. But she immediately filled them while she talked.

"You?" she cried. "You talk of doing things? You? Pah! You haven't the savvy to call a nigger's hand. You? Ha, ha!" Her laugh rang out contemptuously. "It's got to be a man that I marry, eh? A man, Snakes; and he'll know how to call a bluff."

The woman's handsome face was alight with mockery. She was quite magnificent to look upon. Her untamed spirit shone in her brilliant eyes, in the poise of her beautiful body, in the defiant carriage of her shapely head. Well might she have reduced better men than the brutish Snakes Addy to his condition of abject servitude.

But just now she wanted to be rid of him. Their meeting had been none of her seeking. He had followed and overtaken her.

Suddenly she reined up.

"Well, which is your way?" she inquired in a tone that made him hate the whole world about him. Nevertheless, he answered her.

"Guess I'm makin' Spawn City."

"Well, I'm not. I'm going elsewhere."

"That don't need a heap of guessin'," the man growled. "Not on your part, my friend," Kit replied lightly.

"What are you going to Spawn City for?"

"That bum lawyer, Boyle, sent word along this morning he needed to see me ther' to-night. Guess he's got some monkey game——"

Kit laughed.

"Old man Boyle?" she cried. "Has he come over to the hill gang? Say, hold yourself tight, Snakes. You watch that feller, or you'll be up against a proposition a deal worse than—an empty gun. Does he say what he wants?"

"Nope. Guess I ain't hep."

"Well, the play is yours. It's up to you. So long."

Kit turned her horse and rode off, being careful to take a route directly opposite to the man's. She was off like the wind, her great horse bearing its insignificant burden as though it were nothing. On she rode through clearing and woodland, over hill and into valley. Now on

a trail, and now speeding over the yielding underlay of the dark, primordial forests.

She seemed at first to have no very definite direction in her mind. Her horse appeared to head whither it listed, for the reins lay loose upon its neck, and she only seemed to use them to check its ardent spirit. But by degrees she circled round making a wide detour towards Dyke Hole, until, at last, she struck the hill trail.

She reined in her panting horse as he stepped on to the roadway, and sat looking along it in either direction. She seemed to be doubtful in her mind. And while thus occupied she became aware of the haze of smoke that hung in the air. Its coming had been so gradual, so stealing, that she had not realized anything unusual before. But here, in the open, the change was quite marked.

Her startled eyes turned at once to windward, and, away in the distance, she saw great banks of smoke rolling up. She knew at once that the forest was on fire, but was quite undisturbed, for its course lay well clear of where she was, heading on up into the remoter hills, towards the mountains beyond.

She lifted her reins to move on, and her impatient horse responded with alacrity. Then, in a second, she had drawn him up to a halt again, and turned him in the opposite direction away from Dyke Hole. A sudden thought had swept through her brain. The fire was heading up into the hills. Directly in its path lay that mysterious log hut where dwelt the two small children she had once discovered the sheriff playing with.

Strange are workings of the human mind; stranger still the workings of a woman's mind, and the feelings and sympathies of her heart. She sat still just long enough to estimate the speed at which the fire was travelling. Then, without more ado she pricked her horse's flank with her barbarous Mexican spur, and galloped off in a race with the fire.

And what a race it was. For once in her life this self-reliant woman pinned her faith to the horse under her. She thought of him only. Her mind did not for an instant go beyond, to the object of her race. The question that agitated her, and held her whole attention, was, had

the fire the legs of her? Had this horse the mettle she believed it to possess?

The race occupied nearly an hour, and the fire dogged her the whole of the way. The blinding smoke travelling with her left her ignorant of whether the devouring demon was ahead or behind her. She could see nothing save the trail and adjacent trees. While the knowledge of the converging flames ever haunted her.

She arrived at her goal. The heat was almost unbearable, and she estimated that the difference between win and lose was only a matter of minutes in her favour. She rode up to the log hut which loomed hazily through the smoke. She reined up and called. There was no answer. She flung out of the saddle and ran into the hut, calling all the while.

It was in the bedroom that she got the first response to her calls. She heard two small muffled cries. They came from under the rough bed on which the children slept. She called to them to come out, and, after what seemed to her interminable minutes, but which was in reality only a matter of moments, two heads appeared from beneath a curtain of bed-clothes.

"Where's—where's the old man?" Kit demanded hastily.

But the little mites were bewildered, frightened and crying. Questions were only waste of time. Kit was ever direct in her actions. She seized both children and dragged them out to her horse. Then she sprang into the saddle, and, leaning down, lifted up first one child and then the other. She laid little Sally across her knee, and the boy, with much difficulty, she made sit astride of the horse behind her, with his little arms clinging tightly about her waist. Then she set out for Dyke Hole as fast as her horse could travel.

By nightfall the whole atmosphere of Dyke Hole had changed. The fresh mountain air was gone, and, in its place, the village was weighted down by a pall of depressing heat and smoke. The circus lights inside the tent, where preparations were being made for the evening's entertainment, burnt yellower than usual, and, instead of illuminating, only intensified the gloom of the fog.

Smoke, thick and reeking, was everywhere, for the breeze had died down and left the air stagnant and poisonous.

Moe, in the saloon, was doing an excellent business by kerosene lamp-light. Smoke-parched throats needed lubricating. The circus artistes, weary and choked, needed refreshment. Every change that occurred in Dyke Hole, no matter what its nature, whether funeral or party, whether storm or sunshine, whether fire or flood, it all brought grist to Moe's mill.

On this particular evening much grist was forthcoming. In consequence, all the male population of the village had foregathered, while the female and infant population were shut close indoors, endeavouring to keep the smoke out of their lungs.

Dick Roydon and Jocelyn were having tea up at Boyle's house, after returning the full tally of fourteen embryonic Shaggys to their lawful maternal parent, and having listened to a dissertation upon the folly of marrying a man, as compared with the possible felicities had selection fallen upon a hog.

So, for the time, the village was practically deserted. There were none about to see the little comedy-drama that was being enacted in its midst. No one saw a flying figure ride into the village earlier in the afternoon and draw up at the sheriff's hut, and, a few moments later, ride away again. Everybody was occupied with the circus. No one saw, much later, a solitary horseman coming slowly down the trail from the hills and enter the village, because of the smoke and darkness, and the thirst the former created.

Had any one seen Joe coming into the village they would have been set wondering.

Joe's face, always forbidding when in repose, looked a thousand times more terrible now. He glowered at the village ahead of him. He was in a fierce mood, a mood that might well have carried death for the unfortunate who happened to cross him at the moment.

He was a man who never experienced the feelings of despair, unhappiness, and all the gamut of the miseries of human emotion in the way they usually assail the heart. Under all such influences he became a sort of

volcano of consuming rage. And such was his mood now. He longed for a vent to it. It burned him, he felt that it was consuming his very vitals, it set his head whirling, his eyes scorching with mental strain. He felt he could take the very earth in the palms of his hands, and wring blood from the rocks of its foundations.

His horse was jaded, and hobbled along weary-footed, for it had travelled many miles, driven by cruel spurs to the very limit of its endurance. Smoke and dust begrimed, master and horse were returning heart-broken to their home.

And the reason. The fire had swept the log hut in the mountains. The children had vanished, and only the hideous, charred bones of the cripple, Martin, were left to tell of the tragedy that had overtaken his little orphans. Joe's search had occupied hours. He had searched every inch of the region that the fire had left accessible until the light failed and he was forced to give it up. The little ones were gone!

He entered the village in the misty darkness. He passed the circus like a ghost, unseeing and unseen. If he could have been glad of anything at that moment, it would have been that the darkness hid him.

As he drew near the familiar little hut which was his home he pulled himself together, and gleaned some slight satisfaction that the place was in darkness. Neither of his assistants were there.

Within some twenty yards of the place his horse gave a start and pricked its lolling ears. Then, as its master's knees tightened on the saddle, it suddenly shied violently. Joe's quick ears caught the sound of sobs coming from his own doorway, and he called out a puzzled, "Hello!"

In an instant came back a piping, familiar greeting. "Uncoo!" cried a childish voice.

In a flash Joe had vaulted out of the saddle and was running headlong towards the hut.

Dick Roydon, returning home, was sauntering leisurely up to the hut, thinking happily of the girl he had just left. He was in that delightful condition of mind when hail, rain, snow or fog meant nothing to him. His thoughts soared far above the pettinesses of mere every-day

life. But the unexpected sound of human voices will not be denied by even a lover's dreaming. And thus it was that such a sound broke in upon his thoughts as he came within a few yards of the hut, and held him still and listening.

The voices were light and indistinct, but dominating them, every now and then a great harsh laugh rang out in a man's voice. And the laugh was whole-hearted and happy, but, curiously enough, try as he would, it was one he could not recognize. He made up his mind that it was a stranger, for he was convinced that he had never heard a laugh like that before.

Obviously it was his duty to investigate. He walked straight up to the door and, in the darkness, nearly fell over a small group sitting on the step.

He pulled himself up just as a resounding curse in the sheriff's fiercest tones rang on his ear-drums.

"Gorldurn you, fer a miser'ble hop-head!" he roared. "Durn it, mind them kiddies! Who is it, anyway?"

Roydon understood now why he had not recognized the laugh. It was Joe's. He apologized feebly, wondering the while.

"I'm sorry——" he began.

But Joe cut him short.

"Say, git right in an' light the lamp. Hey, Sally, gal, come right here. He's a big-footed galoot, but he sure knows better'n to stamp them splay feet of his'n onto you."

Roydon was too astonished to wait. He wanted to see. So, gingerly he stepped over the little group, and went into the hut and lit the lamp. Then he turned back to find himself confronted by Joe, who had followed him in, bearing a child on each arm. The two mites were clinging to their guardian with their small arms thrown tightly about his lean neck, and their cheeks pressed close up to the hollow parchment-like face. It was a sight calculated to take his breath away.

"Say, ain't they little beauts? Ain't they?" Joe cried, grinning into Roydon's astonished face. "Ain't they?" he cried again, his roving eyes filled with such a happy glow of delight and tenderness that Dick would never have recognized them. "They're mine! Ain't you,

kiddies? You're jest mine, an' I've found you agin—thanks to the kind leddy. She's a grand woman, kiddies, ain't she? My—but ther', you pore little bits, you're sure sleepy an' tired. Ther'—ther', come on, my little daisies. You ken jest slep all you know how. Come right on."

He strode over to his bed and laid them gently down. Sally was already asleep, and Willie sat rubbing his eyes wearily. Joe turned upon Roydon, who seemed to be struck dumb.

"Say," he cried, his voice sharp and rasping, without one vestige of his recent emotion left in it. "Git right to it an' fetch some milk from Ramford's—an' some bread. Say, an' don't you be more'n two minutes. An' you ken git right up an' see Missie Jock, an' give her my respec's, an' say I'll be glad fer her to come right down here in the mornin' quick." And he turned again to the two children as though nothing else on earth mattered.

CHAPTER XVI

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS IN DYKE HOLE

THE next morning Dick Roydon was early astir. But early as he was Joe was before him. The sun had just cleared the horizon, and was rapidly vanishing behind the pall of smoke which still overhung the entire countryside, when Dick began to prepare his frugal breakfast. He moved very quietly about the hut, for the two children were still sleeping. They must not be disturbed at any cost.

He eat his slab of fat bacon and dry bread, and drank his indifferent coffee in a condition of doubtful speculation. And it was the two children who were agitating him. Whose were they? Where did they come from? Joe had refused all information over-night. Then, what was the sheriff going to do with them? They certainly couldn't stay in the hut with no one to give them proper care. He tried to imagine Joe in the capacity of nurse, he tried to picture Bob Makaw looking after them. As for himself—he thought of the breakfast he had just eaten. No, he couldn't even cook a slice of bacon decently, so how could he be expected to look after children?

He gave the problem up, lit his pipe, and started to clear away the wreck of his breakfast. It was while in the midst of his household duties that Jocelyn arrived.

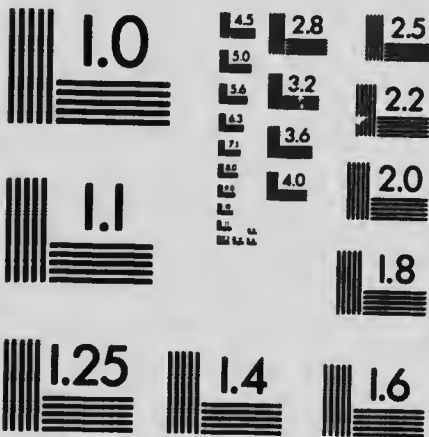
She came full of wonder and excitement. Her grey eyes shone with interest, and her face wore an anticipatory smile. Dick thought he had never seen her looking so sweet in her simple white lawn shirt-waist and black cloth skirt. There was such freshness, health and womanliness about her.

"I say, Jock," he cried, in his buoyant way, "this is ripping of you. I didn't think you'd come over so early.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

You don't mind me being all upside down. You see," he added, with an ingenuous smile, "I'm in the midst of my household duties. Breakfast," he grinned, holding up a very dirty frying-pan.

"You don't eat out of that?" the girl exclaimed incredulously. Then, as Dick nodded quite seriously, "You wretched, helpless, dirty man. But where are the little ones? And Joe?"

He held up a warning finger and pointed at the sheriff's bed.

The girl saw the two small morsels of humanity locked in each other's arms, sound asleep under a pile of rough, brown blankets. They looked so helpless, so pretty. She came over to the bedside on tiptoe and stood looking down at them, every womanly feeling in her stirred to its depths. Dick was at her side, but it was not so much the children he was thinking of.

At last Jocelyn turned to him, and he saw that tears were very near her eyes.

"Well?" he inquired.

She shook her head a little helplessly.

"What are you going to do?" he went on.

The girl suddenly realized all that this second question meant. They were looking to her for help.

"Whose are they?" she suddenly asked. "Where do they come from?"

"I know no more than you do. Joe would tell me nothing last night. But there they are, and——"

"Yes, there they are, and we've got to see to them. Joe is a marvel." Jocelyn laughed. Then her practical nature asserted itself.

"We must get them some breakfast," she said in a whisper. "Now, look here, Dick, first of all, you can boil me some water. I dare say you'll know how to do that——"

"Don't be hard on a chap."

"Don't you interrupt," she said, with an air of mock authority. "You'll boil the water—if you know how—then we'll get their breakfast, and, after they've eaten, I'll bath them."

Dick's admiring eyes were on her.

"Great!" he exclaimed; "you are a wonder."

The girl pretended not to notice his admiration.

"Where's the food?" she demanded, in a business-like way.

"Oh, in the cupboard."

They both made a dart for the cupboard and peered in together.

"Why, there's nothing there but a piece of bacon and some biscuits," exclaimed Jocelyn in disgust.

Dick became humbly apologetic.

"It's only bacon, but it's not bad. It's Ramford's best. Joe and I eat it. You see—I could fry it, and cut it very small. Oh yes, and those biscuits, I could soak 'em in grease and fry 'em, too. There's plenty of grease."

Jocelyn stood up and stared at him indignantly.

"Yes, and it is grease!" she exclaimed. "So is axle-dope. If this is the way you feed it's a wonder you aren't sick to death." She took him by the arm, laughing at his helpless expression. "Here, you put the water on to boil," she went on. "Then, off you go down to Ramford's and buy some eggs and jam, milk and butter, and hurry back. Can you remember all that?" Dick nodded. "Then I'll wake the darlings up and wash them. You really are some use, after all. Now, the water first."

He went off and filled a large tin boiler from the water-barrel. Then he came back and set it on the stove.

"You're great!" he vouchsafed, as he turned to her again for further instructions. "It's wonderful how easy you make things. What next?"

Their eyes met and they laughed.

"Off you go for the food," the girl said.

"Eggs. A dozen?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Two."

"You needn't jump on a fellow. Joe often eats a dozen at a sitting. Well, about the jam? What sort, and how much?"

"Better see what Ramford's got. A pot will do."

"Well, there's apricot, strawberry, raspberry, plum, ap——"

"For goodness' sake go and get what you like."

Dick was trying. But Jocelyn only laughed. He was a joke to her, so good-natured, such a dear, good blunderer. But there, of course he knew no better. How should he?

She looked at the hopeless confusion about her. The unclean pots and pans, the tumbled blankets on the floor where the sheriff had slept, the stove crowded with ashes, the washing-pail full of dirty water. It was all so mannish to her mind, and just what she would have expected. Then the woman in her prompted a quick resolve. She would tidy up before Dick came back. She liked the idea of tidying up for him: It would be a pleasant surprise for him. It was too bad that he should always have to do it. For the first time in her life she found herself with a grievance against Joe. What right had he to foist the domestic duties of their life upon Dick? How could he expect it of a man like him? It thoroughly well served him right that he couldn't do it.

All her thought was of Dick while she busied herself clearing up the litter about her. It was not until that was done, and the water was boiling on the stove, that she turned her thoughts to the children again. Then, with that peculiar faculty so essentially womanish, she put the man and everything else out of her mind while she wakened and bathed Joe's orphans.

The children awake lost none of their charm for her. They were good-tempered and obedient. Their life under the tyrannical old Martin had made them more than tractable, and, besides, they were so young and so small. Willie was not yet six years old, while his sister was about one year less.

It was a long time before Dick returned; so long, indeed, that the children were ready dressed when he arrived. And the delay put Jocelyn out. She did not like to keep them waiting for their food. When he eventually appeared he was bearing a great sack upon his back, and the girl's eyes opened wide.

"What *have* you got there?" she asked. "My, but you must have bought Ramford's clean out."

"Well, you see, I thought—well, I was a bit ashamed of this place, and all that, don't you know—and then those poor little kiddies. So I—so I—"

"Yes, yes. Well, give me the eggs," the girl interrupted his somewhat incoherent explanation sharply.

Dick emptied the sack out on the bed and mopped his brow.

"I think I got everything," he said doubtfully.

Jocelyn began undoing the bundles. First there were six pots of jam. There was bacon, there were candles, there were cups and saucers and plates; there were three dozen eggs, there were two pounds of tea, four pounds of sugar, six tins of condensed milk; there was oatmeal, there was bread, there was beef, there were candies, toys, cheese, soap, sponge, tooth-brushes, butter, flour, lard, salt, mustard. There was apparently everything that he could well have purchased at a general dry-goods store.

The girl puckered her brows. She was quite worried as she looked over the fearsome assortment. Then she was forced to laugh.

"But I wanted things for breakfast," she exclaimed.

"It's all there," Dick returned easily. "You see, they haven't got anything with them, and there was nothing here, so I thought——"

"You must have spent about thirty dollars," said the girl practically. Then, "Oh, you silly, foolish man!"

She had nothing else to say, and the breakfast was still to be cooked.

And what a preparation it was! Dick helped, the children got in the way, and everything went along merrily, in spite of one or two mishaps. And when it was all done Jocelyn was quite cool and practical, Dick was hot and quite hopeless, and the children were happy and excited. They eat and laughed and choked, while their elders did all they knew to make them happy, and, in the midst of it all, Tombstone Joe appeared.

He stood for one fleeting second in the doorway, while his fierce eyes took in the scene. He lost no detail of it. He saw the piles of goods on his bed. He saw the tidiness of the room. He saw the carefully set meal, with china cups and saucers and plates, instead of the usual tin pannikins. He saw Dick with Willie on his knee, helping him to his food. He saw Jocelyn with little Sally, doing the same on the other side of the table. And in that second there came a softness into his wild eyes such as might have astonished the citizens of Dyke Hole had they been there to see it. But it was gone just as quickly.

"Who's bought all that bum trash?" he inquired, in his usual harsh tones, pointing at the stuff on the bed.

Jocelyn answered him.

"Dick's been down to Ramford's and——" She broke off and indicated the result on the bed.

"He's sure crazy," said Joe, in that biting fashion which was so essentially his own.

He sat down eyeing the pile of stuff, and some moments passed while the children went on with their food. Somehow a silence had fallen since his arrival. Jocelyn was wondering if he was going to tell her anything about the children, and Dick felt a little ashamed of being discovered in his present position. The children, too, were affected by the sudden silence of their elders. Presently Joe spoke again, and there was a strange softness in his voice.

"Say, Missie Jock," he said, "I jest bin out an' rented that shack of Bob Gauvin's. He ain't livin' in it no more. It's mighty dirty, but I set the boys fixin' it up some. I tho't mebbe you'd get around an' see they do it reg'lar. Y' see, you're a leddy, an' ken jest make 'em see proper to the niggly bits. They're a bum lot when it gits to a bit of work. But you ken fix 'em, an' ef they git sassin' you, you jest let me know. An' say, when they done that, I'd ask you to go right on to ol' Ramford an' buy everythin' needed for them," he went on, nodding in the direction of the children. "They ain't got nuthin', not a darn thing. You'll git furniture, an' clothes, an' food, an' fixin's, an' tell ol' Ramford to charge it to me. Don't you spare nothin'. Meanwhiles I've got to git around some. While I'm gone I'll see ef I ken get hold of a woman to do chores fer them kiddies."

For another brief moment his wild eyes softened as they rested on little Sally's thin face, and something of the man's real feelings seemed to be dragged from him in spite of himself.

"Say, ain't they daddys? Gee!" he exclaimed.

Then he rose from his seat and seized an opportunity to nullify the effect of his sentimental outburst. Dick was holding a large piece of bread and jam for Willie to bite from.

"Say, you're ter'ble bright, ain't you?" he cried angrily. "Ain't you got no more savvee than to choke that pore little crittur wi' haf a loaf? You sure ain't no more sense than to gather soup wi' a hay-fork."

With which final step he left the place, striding vigorously off in the direction of Shaggy Steele's house. He knew the children were in safe hands. He knew that Jocelyn would not fail him. And he had other work of importance which must not be neglected.

The air was still choked with smoke in the silent village as he made his way to the house of the Steeles. There was a nasty burnt flavour everywhere which made him long for a gulp of fresh mountain air. But it was as if the fire had killed the breeze entirely, leaving the atmosphere a pall of thick resinous odours poisonous to breathe, irritating to the eyes, and nauseous to the taste.

The discomfort set the sheriff's sudden temper on edge, and, by the time he reached his destination, his amiability was less than a doubtful quantity. He paused outside the door with his fist raised to summon his man. But he changed his mind. He could hear a disturbance going on within, which told him a tale such as he had frequently heard before.

There was a clattering of pans and the sound of falling crockery; there were low, harsh curses, and high-pitched shrieking avalanches of feminine vituperation; there were heavy bumpings, and delighted cries in children's voices, blending with the shuffle and scuttle of many feet.

His angry look gave place to a grim smile as he listened. He realized that some dispute was in progress between husband and wife, and its satisfactory settlement was likely to take some minutes yet. He felt, at that moment, that a sheriff's duties had their limitations even in Dyke Hole, so deliberately sat himself down to wait.

It was not more than a few seconds before the inquiring mind of Tite projected that seeker after knowledge round the corner of the house. He came timidly enough, as was his habit, but his thirst for information knew no sort of diffidence, and a question tripped off his tongue at the first sight of Joe.

"What's paw been doin'?" he inquired abruptly. "An' why's maw raisin' hell wi' him?"

Joe turned thoughtfully upon the youth. He was speculating as to what the nature of the disease might be that had put such a melancholy stare of inquiry into the

lad's eyes. Then it occurred to him to put the boy to confusion by a process of retaliatory interrogation.

"Why for does any folks raise hell with each other, Tite, my boy?" he inquired, with the necessary air of parental patronage.

"Yes, why?" responded the boy with alacrity. Then his brows went higher up his forehead, his eyes opened further, till they stared into Joe's like two poached eggs, and he added, with the rapidity of a machine-gun fire, "Why does maw call him a 'hop-headed circumstance of creation'? Why does she empty buckets of soap-water over him? Why does she break up the chiny when she an' paw gits talkin'? Why don't paw shoot her, same as he says he shoots other folk who gits busy around him? Ken you tell me they things, Mr. Joe?"

But Mr. Joe couldn't. And furthermore, Mr. Joe was fortunately saved from further discomfiture by a diversion in the region of the house.

The noise rose to a sudden climax, the door was burst open and Shaggy Steele was forcibly ejected backwards. He hit the ground, gave a violent lurch, completed a back somersault, and, finally, sprawled face downwards upon the ground, while his gaunt spouse stood over him, threatening him with the bright steel poker in her powerful hand.

Joe sprang from his seat, and caught the implement and twisted it from her grasp. She turned furiously to attack him, but even in her blind rage the woman recognized him and stood, her eyes blazing and her features working convulsively with the passion that drove her.

"What you doin', you sheriff?" she cried. "Give me that iron. I'll show him, the drunken bum. I'll show him!"

She suddenly made a grab for the poker, but Joe had no intention of delivering it up to her.

"Stan' right ther', mam," he said calmly, "an' don't you worrit about that ther' iron. Your man's sure got his dose of physic. 'Tain't easy fer a woman to figger when she's sed enough, I guess, but, like most reason'ble creatur's, I 'lows she ken be told, so I'm tellin' you. Shaggy's a pretty low-down feller some ways, but I guess he's feelin' nigh to the bottom of things jest about now. With respec', may I ast the trouble in your fam'ly?"

Mrs. Steele had had time to steady herself, and the sheriff's cool words were not without effect. Just for an instant her spare bosom heaved and her eyes flashed ominously. Then she seemed to think better of a fresh outbreak, and spoke almost calmly.

"Ther's things an' things as a woman can stand—has to stand," she said bitterly. "The good Gawd only knows of the things I've stood. Me, a married woman, wi' such a family of offspring as never fell to any other woman's lot. I've put up with every sort of low-down triek from him, my lawful man," she pointed a scornful finger at her prostrate spouse, "an' I ain't sed nuthin'—not nuthin'. An' what have I got, wot do I allus get? I ast you. Say, sheriff, wot you think? Yes'day I sends him wi' the kids to the cirkis, an' I give him fi' dollars to pay for 'em. Wot does he do? He gits soused at the s'loon, an' other folks has to pay fer the pore kids, cos he's got stewed on the money. I sez nuthin' 'bout that. I'm used to them tricks, I am." She snorted angrily. "After that he goes right off'n to Spawn City, an' gits soused right over again. Still I sez nuthin', knowin' the kind of crittur he is. He stays out all night an' gits to home this mornin'. He raises hell, upsettin' a coal-oil lamp on the parlour rug, dumps a pail of swill right on to the cookstove, an' lies right down wher' he is till I fix him to bed. An' not a word does I say nasty—not a word.

"But ther's things no woman ken stand, nor won't stand. That's wot I'm comin' right c. to. It's this mornin'. I goes to his bed an' rouses him to his bacon. Ses I, 'Git up, you fancy-lookin' hog.' He sets up, an' looks around. An' when he sees who it is he gits right to it an' blubbers like a well-spanked kid, shoutin' fer me to light right out an' take the children wi' me. Say, Mr. Sheriff, believe it or believe it not, that ther' misguided crittur was took with the notion he could see a cocoanut settin' on the end of the bed a-shavin' itself with a hay-mower. An' it wa'an't even that as fixed me riled any. When he see his pore children he guessed they was a hull reg'ment o' lead sojers, an' got the notion they was marchin' around an' around his head a-beatin' drums, an' a-blowin' flutes, an' jest drivin' him crazed. Sez I, that's the limit, an' you reached it. Wi' that I give him cocoanuts an'

sojers; I give him drums an' flutes; I give him hay-mowers an' whiskers, I did! An' I'd ha' given him a sight more but fer you coming' interferin' Oh, you low down rag of a crittur to be the father o' my children," she cried, wringing her hands in hysterical distress. Then she suddenly swung round upon the fallen man and threatened him afresh. "Oh, you filthy swill-pot!" she shrieked. "Oh, you——"

But her flow of vituperation failed her, for, suddenly, her great gnarled hands went up to her worn face, and, bursting into a flood of sobs, she rushed into the house, slamming the door behind her as she went.

Joe stood for some moments. His expression was sphinx-like. Then something of his feelings found vent in a well-directed kick at Shaggy's ribs.

"Get you up!" he cried. And his tone brought the man to his feet quicker than anything else could have done.

Shaggy stood there looking for all the world as though he had spent a lifetime struggling his way out of a thorn-bush. His face was almost unrecognizable.

There was a silence between them for some moments, while Joe's cold eyes surveyed the spectacle. Then he said—

"She's gone. Set!" And he pointed at the door-sill.

Shaggy first tried the door and found it latched. He put his eye to a knot hole in one of its boards and looked through. Then, having satisfied himself there was no immediate prospect of a rear attack, he sat down, but evidently alert for any sign of his wife's return.

The sheriff took a chew of tobacco and thoughtfully bestowed it in his cheek.

"Wal," he demanded at last, "about that lawyer, Boyle?"

Shaggy felt easier already. The presence of Joe was distinctly a protection. So he eased himself, shook his great shoulders, ran his fingers through his tangled hair, and spat on the ground.

"I found him," he said confidently. "I found him, an' trailed him. I never let him out of my sight, an'," he added thoughtfully, "I guess he's doin'. He's playin' a bluff of some sort. An' it's with the hill folk, sure. Say,

that air Boyle's a punk lay out, and orter git lynched. Listen!"

"An' he ain't the on'y feller around these parts needs lynchin'," observed Joe coldly. "Get to it."

Shaggy was ready with his story. He was ready to tell the sheriff all he knew, and anything the spirit of the moment prompted him to invent. But Joe knew his man, and held him to facts without scruple or regard for his feelings, and he did it without noise or bluster. A look, a word, and Shaggy found himself correcting his own statements whenever they diverged into the world of romance.

And the story, robbed of its embellishments of filthy oaths and coarse allusions, was simple enough.

He, Shaggy, after some trouble, had discovered the lawyer's trail, and it carried him to Marc Osler's office. There he found that Boyle had been received by the silver king, and had remained closeted with him for over two hours. What passed between the two men he was unable to say. But this he knew: when Boyle left Osler, he, Boyle, was in a frame of mind that suggested a satisfactory issue to his visit.

Asked how he knew this, Shaggy informed the sheriff that, after a while, he met Boyle at the saloon, where he had put his horse up, and found him in such spirits that he actually wanted—and was permitted—to stand him, Shaggy, a drink. The incident was so unusual that it more than carried conviction to his mind. In his own words, he guessed he "jest reared right up, an' nigh come over backward wi' surprise."

He went on to say that he kept on the lawyer's trail all the afternoon without rousing suspicion, and discovered nothing of any importance. Boyle drank a lot, but, after a while, Shaggy realized that there was some further object in the man's mind. This surmise proved correct.

Directly it grew dark Boyle wandered off to a low part of the town, and went into a saloon. Shaggy remained outside and watched his man through a window. Boyle was with one of the hill men, Snakes Addy. He remained with him nearly an hour, and, at the end of it, paid over a number of bills to his companion. After that the lawyer went back to the other saloon, where Shaggy again joined him, and they drank the rest of the evening out at the

lawyer's expense. It was one o'clock in the morning when the latter set out for home, with the sleuth hard at his heels. Nor did Shaggy leave him until he had seen the last light extinguished in the man's house on the hillside.

That was all he had to tell, but Joe found much to interest him in the story. His interruptions were few but pointed, and Shaggy knew he had done well by his employer. At the conclusion Joe offered no comment whatever; he did not even tender any thanks. He simply stood looking out towards the village. Then he moved a step or two away, as though about to depart, but he changed his mind and turned suddenly to his companion.

"Git inside an' tell your leddy I'd take it favour'ble if she'd jest come out here awhile," he said.

Shaggy jumped from his seat as though a spring had been suddenly released under him. He had talked himself into forgetfulness of his spouse. Here was a rude awakening. He must confront her again. His recent domestic unpleasantness came back to him with overwhelming force.

He raked his fingers amongst the roots of his shock of red hair, while a humid pallor spread itself over his mutilated features.

"But——" he protested.

Joe cut him short.

"Send her out!" he commanded fiercely.

And Shaggy slunk off into the house.

When he had gone Joe's eyes twinkled. He waited. Presently the sound of voices within the house reached him. A shadowy grin passed over his lean features. Then he heard the swish of skirts, and the raw-boned lady of the house appeared.

"You was astin' fer me, Mr. Sheriff?" she inquired.

"Leastways, that's how that——"

"That's so, mam."

Joe checked her crisply.

Mrs. Steele's curiosity drew her out of the doorway.

"It's this aways, mam," Joe said, in his most gentle fashion. "Most folks has their uses, or the good Gawd wouldn't hev 'em hangin' around to worrit other folks as they do. That air man of yours sure has his uses, though, I 'lows, you'd likely need a Government observatory to locate 'em. I sent him into Spawn City, an' he did his

work ther' reg'lar, so I guess I'm kind of owin' him twenty dollars. Seein' he's got back to home, an' done a heap of wreckin' around the house, it's on'y right as he should pay fer it. Thereby, I'm goin' to hand you that twenty right now. Mebbe you'll find a nickel or two of change fer him."

Joe handed the woman the money and started to walk away. Mrs. Steele was too dumfounded even to express her thanks. But suddenly he turned back. An idea had occurred to him.

"Say," he demanded. "That oldest gal of yours. She sure could do the chores around two bits of kiddies?"

"She's fourteen come Thanksgivin' Day," was all the astonished woman could say.

"Then send her right along down to Bob Gauvin's shack, an' say I sent her."

And without waiting for a reply Joe strode away.

CHAPTER XVII

SCANDAL IN DYKE HOLE

THE saloon was very full. All the loungers had foregathered there. Yesterday the arrival of the circus gave them excuse; to-day it was the smoke-laden atmosphere that aggravated their thirst.

It was interesting to observe the methods of these people in their quest of drink. Each man would slink into the bar, greet any previous arrival in the manner peculiar to himself, locate himself in his favourite position, and join in whatever talk might be going on. The bar itself was usually avoided. They rarely even looked in its direction, unless it was to address Bulrush Moe, who always stood behind it, and rarely failed to find a glass that needed wiping. As a rule the rain-stained windows occupied their attention, not because there was any busy life outside to interest them, but simply that they served as a sort of focus by which to concentrate their mental energies. Then would begin a period of waiting. Maybe an invitation would come along quickly; maybe it wouldn't.

Everything was discussed in Moe's bar. Politics held a great place in the talk. Labour was a subject always treated superficially, and was invariably discussed in the abstract. It was the only way in which a division of opinion could be secured on the subject in Dyke Hole. But social matters of their own village were of burning interest.

Social matters held the company now, and talk went backwards and forwards much in the manner of a well-thrown ball. Dave Bless with Bob Gauvin and two others were playing a game of cent "ante" poker at a table under one of the windows. "Dyke Hole" Bill was play-

ing a game of solitaire, laying out his cards on the seat of a broken chair. An audience of three watched him. Shaggy Steele had got hold of Ripley Boyle and was talking to him. He remembered the money the lawyer had been so freely spending in Spawn City the night before, and was wondering if it were all finished, while gently fingering a solitary dollar bill in his own trousers pocket. It had been given him by his wife after the sheriff's visit that morning.

Moe was leaning with his arms folded upon his counter. He hadn't had a glass to wash for half-an-hour. He was watching the company with shrewd, smiling eyes. He knew his business well. He had grown to the ways of these folk and never attempted to push trade.

Shaggy was talking so that everybody could hear him. He felt that he had something to impart that gave him a right to the floor, and was taking full advantage of it.

"I ain't never heerd tell as Joe wus married," he was saying to the lawyer, with a dubious shake of his head, which he calculated would elicit inquiry from that individual.

Boyle understood the movement and responded at once.

"Nor did I," he said. "What d'you mean?"

"Can't make nuthin' out of it, noways," Shaggy went on, with a further shake of the head.

The poker-players looked up from their game. Bill shuffled his cards absently, listening the while. Shaggy was gradually getting the attention of the room. But there were others standing by who still talked amongst themselves.

"Out of what?" inquired Boyle.

Shaggy glanced coldly around and spoke more loudly still.

"Why, them kids of his!" he cried.

"Joe's?" Boyle's astonishment raised his voice too.

"Joe's kids?" called out Bob Gauvin from the poker-table.

In a flash every eye was on Shaggy Steele. Moe edged himself along the bar without changing his attitude. Shaggy spat on the floor and smiled his satisfaction.

"That's what I'm sayin'," he said emphatically. "Joe—an' his kids."

Bill laid his cards aside.

"Joe's kids?" he echoed. There was a derisive inflection in the tone of his voice which annoyed Shaggy.

"Say, them things you wag aside of your features ain't griddle cakes—if they look like 'em," he observed offensively.

"That's so, I guess," replied Bill equably. "But they ain't jest used to foolish talk. Joe's kids! Ha, ha! Gee, that's a good one. Say, fellers, Shaggy got mighty soused last night."

"But he ain't allus soused," Shaggy retorted bitingly.

"Say, Shaggy," broke in Dave Bless, with a grin, "don't pay no 'tention to Bill, he's got fleas. What's it about them kids?"

Shaggy gave one glance of unutterable contempt at Bill, and returned to his subject.

"Jest how I'm sayin'. Joe's got two blazin, little kids. They're his'n, sure. He come along to my shack this mornin' an' hired our Maud Sarah to do the chores around 'em. Guess he's hired a shack fer 'em, an' is settin' up house. Now, I ask you? Say, fellers, who's their mam?"

To Shaggy's chagrin Bob Gauvin imparted some further information.

"He come along this mornin' an' rented my old shack. I wus kind of wonderin' some. Likely that's the shack you was speakin' of."

"Can't rightly say," replied Shaggy coldly. "Say, 'tain't likely old Sarah Glades——"

"Dyke Hole" Bill saw his opportunity and took it.

"Say, ain't you bright—ain't you real bright?" he sneered. "Guess you fix right on to her cos she's a temp'rance crank, which ain't a heap in your line o' conduc'. Ain't you got a pretty intellec'? I'd take a chance it's made o' dry hash an' whisky—which is a nasty thing to say o' good dry hash."

"Kind of smart, ain't you?" said Shaggy angrily. "Who's the leddy, then?"

Bill grinned harder than ever when he saw Shaggy's angry eyes turned on him.

"I'd ast the sheriff ef I was so mighty cur'us," he said.

"Are you sure he's the father?" inquired Moe, anxious to keep things going amicably.

"Guess that's a delicate proposition," grinned Shaggy. "All I know is he's seein' to 'em. Fixed the shack, bought haf Ramford's furnishin's fer 'em, an' hired my gal."

"An' I 'lows that's jest 'bout all you do know," chuckled Bill, beginning to lay out the cards afresh. "Jest about all. Say, fellers, ain't it a heap? I'd jest hate to hev sech a heap of knowledge around me. I'd be scared to death I'd git runnin' around yeppin' like a yaller dorg. We'll certain need a sanator'um in Dyke Hole wi' Shaggy gittin' that wise. Say, Shaggy, it ain't dope set you that wise?"

Shaggy felt that Bill was spoiling the effect he had been working for, and it made him angry. Still he didn't want to row with him. He had come there to impart his information to his colleagues, believing it to be worth at least a drink or two. And Bill looked like spoiling the whole scheme with his ridicule. So he adopted fresh tactics. He put on an injured air.

"See here, fellers," he said. "Tombstone Joe's rid over us mighty high—kind of as if he wus the high muck-a-muck of everything. Sort o' cock angel o' Doom. An' we've stood fer it, cos we're a lot of bleatin' lambs. I got that to tell you as shows him wot he is, an' not wot he ain't. His kids ain't got no mam. That's all, I sez. I'm done talkin', that's all. Though I 'lows I could say a heap. With a feller as bright as Bill around I guess ther' ain't room fer any feller else to say nuthin'. I've jest done. My mouth's shut."

"Which is a mighty good thing," laughed Bill, without looking up from his cards, "seein' ther' ain't a heap o' floor-room in this yer bar."

"Shut your face, Bill," growled Bob Gauvin. "Ef Shaggy's got anything to say let him git to it. Ther's suthin' mighty queer 'bout Joe, an' I 'lows it's up to us to see things right. How's that, Shaggy?" he inquired, turning from the solitaire player.

"Tain't nuthin'," Shaggy replied, while Bill quietly pocketed his cards and came over towards them. "I ain't got nuthin' more to say. Guess Bill's got the rights o' this thing——"

"That's how," drawled Bill, bringing his piratical face unpleasantly near to Shaggy's disfigured features. "It don't take a heap of figgerin'. You're kind o' sore on the sheriff, ain't you? You don't know nuthin' 'cep' he's hired your gal, an' thereby give you money you hain't never worked for. You're sore, you are. You got right holt o' this yer yarn, an' you see how you ken git back on him by settin' folks naggin', an' settin' a stink to his name. Say, you're a mighty mean feller, Shaggy. You're the worstest bum in this city. An' if you've a notion to argyfy any——"

The whole company were on their feet by this time and began to gather round the disputants, but, at that instant, Dick Roydon's voice broke in.

"Any of you boys seen Bob Makaw?" he cried. He had just entered the bar, and was quite ignorant of any trouble going on.

Moe saw an opportunity of creating a diversion.

"He ain't bin around," he said hastily. Then, addressing himself directly to Bill: "You ain't see him, have you?"

Bill shook his head with an angry scowl.

"I wonder where he is," Roydon went on easily. "Joe wants us to go out for green stuff to decorate the Mission House for Sarah Glades' lecture."

Quite unconsciously he had saved the situation, for now Boyle put in his word, and the talk became general.

"Sarah Glades' lecture, eh?" he said, winking at those around him. "Say, you can likely tell us something some of us are mighty curious about. It's these kids of Joe's. They *are* his, ain't they? Shaggy, here, says so."

Roydon laughed.

"Can't say," he replied carelessly. Then something in the eager faces about him made him pause. "No, I don't think so," he went on seriously. "He's looking after them, but——"

"And who's their mother?" asked the lawyer, with another knowing wink at the bystanders.

Roydon thought for a second before replying. What was the drift of this questioning? He looked at those brutal faces, and it occurred to him that it would be as well to be guarded in what he said. Joe was absolute

king amongst these people, but he was only one amongst a small army of lawless men, whose passions might drive them to almost any excesses.

"I never thought to ask Joe," he said simply at last. "I shall see him down at the Mission presently, and I'll ask him then. I wonder where I'll find Bob."

But the lawyer persisted in his cross-examination.

"That's just it. Why doesn't Joe say right out. There ought to be no need for asking. It doesn't matter, anyway, but it's a good joke to find Joe—Tombstone Joe—so high and mighty, so particular about the morals of our village, with two children, and no mother to show. Ha, ha! boys, ain't that good? Joe! Gee!"

Roydon felt himself getting angry. He understood the spleen at the back of that laugh, and he hated it; and he hated the man still more for it. He had meant to get away without saying anything more. Now he felt bound to defend Joe.

"Don't make any mistake, Boyle. Those children are not Joe's," he said decidedly. "I'd stake my life on that. Another thing, Joe's not the man to trifle with any woman. He's too straight for anything of that sort. Make your mind easy on that score: he's just befriending those children because—because there's no one else to do it. I——"

"You're talkin' a heap of trash. That's what you're doin'," said a harsh, metallic voice in the crowd. Roydon swung round like lightning. He had only heard that voice once before, but he knew it, would have recognized it anywhere. And the effect on him was just the same as when he first heard it. He resented it, he hated it, and it set him bristling.

As he turned he found himself looking straight into the crafty face of Snakes Addy, who had joined the gathering without any one seeing him enter the saloon.

The insolence of the man told him that the challenge was a matter of personal enmity. Snakes had not forgotten the past, and some sort of settlement of it would have to take place before either of them left the saloon.

"Trash?" Roydon said, with a smile that in no way hid his anger. "Perhaps you can satisfy the company with an explanation then."

He saw in a glance that Snakes was fully armed. He, too, was armed, but he took no thought of that. He was less educated in the ways of this back country than he believed.

"That I can," said Snakes, with vicious emphasis and a contemptuous scowl of his shifty eyes. "You wus astin' who wus the mother of them bastards. Who bro't 'em into town last night but Kit—Kit o' the hills? I see her. An' why for does she bring 'em? Why for does she bring 'em to the sheriff? Why for does Tombstone Joe carry around Kit's pictur', an' writ po'try to it? Why for don't he hustle Kit out o' the hills, same as he does other toughs. Why for is these things, I ast? Cos them kids is his—an' hers! Tchah! Say, I don't need to lie anything fer any man. I ain't no white-livered son-of-a— of a dep'ty, an' ain't in his pay. I——"

There was no fuss and very little commotion. In the midst of his brutish insolence, Snakes was suddenly lifted bodily off his feet, and, the next instant, was sprawling in a heap in a corner against the bar. Roydon followed his attack up in a perfect fury. He sprang upon the fallen man, and, wrenching his guns from their holsters, flung them out of reach. Then he picked him up in his arms like a babe, and, calling to some one to open the door, staggered across the room with his struggling burden.

The piratical Bill flung the door open, and stood by grinning while Roydon literally flung his victim across the veranda and out on to the road. He loved the whole thing. It was so quick and neat, and such a remarkable change from the usual methods of that saloon. There was a rush to the windows to see what Snakes would do. But Snakes didn't move at once, and it was while they waited that Bill drew Roydon's attention to the sheriff and Jocelyn, who, passing at the moment of the man's ejection, had paused to ascertain what the trouble was.

Like all quick-tempered, good-natured men, Roydon's anger passed swiftly.

"All right, Bill," he said, with a short laugh, as he hurried out to meet them. "Thanks for opening that door."

Bill watched him go. The casual manner in which the younger man treated the whole matter was most unsatis-

factory. It was not his idea of how such things should be done.

"Thanks fer openin' the door," he murmured. "Well, he's a fool, he is. Snakes 'll call his hand, sure—ef he don't fix him."

In the meantime Roydon reached Jocelyn's side, while Joe had gone to see what had happened to the fallen Snakes.

"Oh, what have you been doing, Dick?" the girl greeted him. "He's hurt—I'm sure he is," she went on anxiously. "Please go and help him."

She was angry as well as alarmed. How could Dick mix himself up with a disreputable brawl at the saloon? It was so low, so like the rest of the men in Dyke Hole. And Dick made matters no better by treating the affair in quite an off-handed manner.

"He's all right, Jocelyn," he said indifferently. "Anyway, I'm not going to help him. He got off better than he deserved. All I'm sorry about is that you saw it."

His tone and his eyes were laughing. The girl's cheeks grew scarlet.

"So am I," she said shortly. Dick became serious at once, and she went on. "You—you ought to be ashamed of yourself. I——"

But the situation was saved by the return of the sheriff.

"He ain't hurt a heap; jest lit right onto his head," he explained contemptuously. "Guess that saved him. D' you find Bob Makaw?"

Dick was hurt at Jocelyn's unreasonable attitude.

"No. I'm going down to the Mission. I just looked in here on my way."

"Guess we'll git on, then," said Joe, glancing quickly from one to the other.

The indifference of these two men quite exasperated poor Jocelyn. She knew nothing of Snakes, or of the trouble that had happened. She only knew that the man was still lying where he had been thrown by Dick, and all her woman's sympathies were aroused.

"But that poor fellow," she protested. "I'm sure he's hurt."

Joe spoke with quiet decision.

"That's jest the a'mighty pity of it. He ain't. We'll git right on."

Jocelyn had no choice but to do as Joe said. She was very angry. She was angry with Joe for his callousness, and with Dick for the part he had played. But most of all she was angry with herself that she allowed Dick's doings to disturb her. What was he to her that she should care if he mixed himself up with saloon brawls? But the fact remained, and she was more upset than she admitted even to herself. Truth to tell, she felt very like tears.

They walked on in silence. And it was not until they came to the Mission House that Joe spoke. He pointed at Bob Makaw waiting with his team outside the door.

"You jest git right on with Bob, Roydon," he said authoritatively. "Guess old Sally Glades mostly needs pine an' spruce. An', I 'lows, you can't beat 'em fer elegant fixin'."

Dick accepted his dismissal and hurried away. He would have liked to make his peace with Jocelyn first, but—well, it might be better so. She was very unreasonable, he told himself. She knew nothing of the cause of the trouble, and hadn't even inquired before condemning him. Well—he couldn't help it. The moment he had gone Joe turned to the still angry girl.

"Say, Missie Jock," he said quietly, "I'd jest like to hand you a couple of words 'fore we git into the dec-ratin' bizness. Don't go fer to be sore with that boy fer his foolishness back ther'—"

"I don't call it foolishness, Joe," broke in Jocelyn hotly. "And I'm astonished at you, too. Foolishness!" she cried. "To knock a fellow being about in that way is the essence of brutality, and—and I wouldn't have believed Dick could so lower himself—if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Joe sighed resignedly.

"'Tain't brutality," he said, shaking his head in a melancholy manner. "It's jest foolishness, as I said. That's twice he's played foolish with that feller. Ef he's got to play with Snakes Addy, ther's just one way of doin' it—it's gun-play. He should ha' fixed him, an' fixed him good. Snakes has sure got two scores to settle up with

that boy now. An' if I know anything of fellers like him, he's goin' to settle 'em."

"What do you mean?" Jocelyn had suddenly forgotten her anger. She was afraid. If Joe spoke like that, Dick must be in danger—grave danger. She turned her eyes appealingly to the lean face of the man beside her.

"Jest nuthin'," he replied. "I was kind of wonderin' when women 'ud learn as ther's things an' things as can't be figgered out by folks of your sex, gal. Woman, I 'lows, is a proposition that can't be beat. She's sure got every-thing to her wot a feller ain't, which I mean, she's a morsel of delicate creation that needs a wad of cotton batten to kep her from the crushin', an' crowdin', an' bruisin' of this life; an' it's sure ev'ry feller's dooty to fix that cotton batten fer her. But she will butt in. Now, I ast you. Fellers don't butt in to them things which is the consarn of women? A feller don't care a heap fer swep-pin' a parlour? He don't go crazy to do a Monday wash up? He ain't bustin' fer to bake his own hash? You ain't seen the cuss who'd sooner talk fancy to his noo-born babby than set in to a game of dollar poker? An', I ast you agin, is ther' a man of intellec' on this airth that would slep of nights with his ha'r all screwed up in the best editorial effusions of a high-class newspaper? To all of which I says an emphatic 'no'! Say, that boy is mostly a man. We're mostly all men around Dyke Hole. I 'lows ther's sorts an' sorts. Wal, we has our ways of doin' things. Best leave it at that."

Joe finished up impatiently, and his great eyes were fiercely alight. There were moments when even his favourite, Jocelyn, tried his uneasy temper. He had no idea of the trouble between Snakes and his deputy. But he felt that any interference of Jocelyn's was out of place, and, in such affairs, not to be tolerated.

They arrived at the door of the Mission House just as Roydon and Bob Makaw drove off. Sarah Glades, full of business, was standing there flinging her final instructions after them.

Sarah's worn face was alight with enthusiasm as she greeted the sheriff, though, to be sure, her greeting of the girl was less cordial. She was brimming with the delight and importance of the moment. She had worked so hard

for the arranging of this temperance meeting, and, so far, all promised well. Now she was in the midst of her final preparations with a whole army of assistants at her back.

The army consisted of twelve of the married women of the town, who were at work on the floral decorations within the Mission House. Decorations were always necessary for any functions in the Mission House. The citizens never failed to wave the Stars and Stripes, and hang up a few yards of Turkey red, and litter the place with evergreen on these occasions.

The Mission House was one of the two principal buildings in the city. It was a two-storeyed affair—that is, it possessed two upper windows which threw light into a small gallery—of weather-boarding and shingle roof. It had a sort of spire which concealed a small bell, and which, like the rest of the structure, was considerably out of “plumb.”

Originally the place had been painted chocolate, with white pointings. Now a green mildew had produced an air of age and insecurity which the “list” to starboard perilously increased.

It had served many purposes in its time. It was built, as its name implied, for divine service, but the scantiness of worshippers in Dyke Hole forced upon those who had it in their control the necessity for what might be called a second string to its bow. Therefore it also became a schoolhouse for such children as had parents with ideas. From schoolhouse it was but a short step to church sociables and children’s public teas. Then it became a sort of public hall, where vigilance committees were held and Judge Lynch had, on many occasions, presided. Then Dyke Hole, in an access of gaiety, had found it necessary to dance, and as a dance-hall it found considerable favour. So, naturally enough, Miss Glades was not slow to see the advantages of this place over the saloon—the only other public building—as a setting suitable for such a purpose as hers.

Inside, it was a conglomerate sort of place. It suggested a lumber-room stored with disused church-pews, an assortment of second-hand schoolhouse furnishings, the residue of a kitchen after all the sound fittings had

been removed, some windsor-chairs of long service, and a curiosity dealer's collection of unwashed cuspidores.

When the sheriff and Jocelyn entered the hall the twelve women, in Joe's phraseology, "were raisin' hell wi' things." A tangled heap of spruce and blue-gum occupied the centre of the floor, and round this sat six of the assistants gossiping and weaving floral ropes for festooning the walls. Another woman was dividing her attention between a four months' old baby and brewing tea on a cracked cookstove.

One or two other ladies were standing on step-ladders, hammering the walls to pieces in their efforts to drive a few three-inch nails, and from which they quickly descended on the appearance of a man in their midst. Besides these, there were babies lying about in any such corners as the maternal mind considered they were in the least danger of being trampled to death. While over all hung that peculiar odourous atmosphere which ever seems to result from a blending of tea with a certain class of baby.

But neither the sheriff nor Jocelyn had come there to criticize. They had come to give any help that lay in their power. Therefore the girl appealed directly to Sarah.

"Now, please, put us to work, Miss Glades," she said cheerfully. "I rather fancy myself with a hammer and nails," she added, with a laughing glance at the disfigured walls. "Joe, here, can steady the step-ladder for me."

"That's very good of you, Jocelyn," replied Sarah, with a beam. "But you won't need anybody to hold the ladders. They're quite safe, I assure you. We've been working on them all the morning."

She had no intention of allowing the sheriff to hold a step-ladder for Jocelyn.

"You come with me, Mr. Joe," she went on. "If Jocelyn were to fall," she added, with a cackling laugh meant to be sparkling with girlish gaiety, "she would only come down on the evergreens."

"Jest so, mam," said Joe, his black eyes meeting Jocelyn's with a twinkle of amusement in them.

He felt that for once his leadership was quite secondary.

Here, at least, the spinster's authority was paramount, and he was merely one amongst the helpers. Not a leaf or festoon, not a cent's worth of Turkey red, not one single star or stripe could be set in place without her approval.

She took Joe under her care, while Jocelyn mounted the steps under instructions from one of the other women, who gladly vacated in her favour. She was determined to keep him at her side for just so long as he stayed in the Mission building. The other women should see that Joe's interest was with her work, that she, and she alone, was the object of his coming. As for Jocelyn, she was not going to let her monopolize him. No, this was her innings, and she meant to make the most of it.

"Now, Mr. Joe," she said, picking her way carefully amongst the babies to where a few planks had been laid on trestles to form a platform for the speakers at the meeting, "I want to know what you think about this. I was thinking that we might just step up on to this platform from one of the front seats when we have to speak. Now, we might put the harmonium on the platform there. Miss Baines, the school-teacher from Spawn City, is going to play a piece first. Then there'll be hymns, of course, and a little prayer which I have specially written for the occasion. Then comes the address, which I shall give. Then I shall call on any volunteers to say a few words, and, after that, you will say a few words. Then we'll have another hymn and another prayer. The hymn is a composition of Miss Baines'. After that I'll close the meeting with an exhortation."

"How?" inquired Joe, puzzled. "Guess I didn't jest get that."

Sarah smiled indulgently.

"Exhortation. An earnest appeal to those whose lives are overshadowed by the curse of drink."

"Ah." Joe nodded comprehensively. "I got that. Jest tongue-lash them till their heads buzz as a sort of final flourish."

He felt very serious. This woman always contrived to make him particularly low-spirited.

"You set an elegant programme, mam," he went on. Then he added reflectively, "You ain't doin' nothin' in the way of tea an' fixin's fer 'em? Seems to me tea——"

"A detail I hadn't considered," the spinster replied. Then, becoming expansive, she sat herself on the edge of the platform as near as possible to where Joe was standing. Forgetful of the rest of the women about her, and the expressive interchange of glances going on among them, she clasped her bony hands and turned her eyes towards the grimy roof. "I only seem to think of their poor lost souls," she went on ecstatically. "It's the soul—only the soul that counts. Ah, refreshment if you like, but it must be refreshment of spirit. It is the spirit that supports the body. Help them in spirit——"

"But ain't this a temp'rance flare-up?" inquired Joe absently. He was becoming bored.

Sarah's manner was sublime.

"And not the spirit part of our cause?" she demanded.

"Yes, of course, only I tho't—now tea——"

Sarah eyed him severely.

"We are at cross purposes," she said stiffly.

"Your langwidge ain't allus easy fer me, mam," Joe said apologetically. "You was sayin'——" He felt he owed her some encouragement after the unfortunate break he had made.

The spinster thawed at once.

"You understand me, Mr. Joe," she said at once. "You always understand me. The loftier the object, the more surely you understand. My life is devoted to the succour of those in need of spiritual aid. Let me save but one soul, and my life has not been lived in vain."

"That's dead sure, mam," said Joe heartily, glancing around him for help of a more worldly nature.

"Yes, dear Mr. Joe, I am a lonely woman. I tread my path regardless of the thorns about me. I have no one to lean upon for support. I have no mother."

Joe nodded sympathetically.

"Jest so, mam. They mostly has to die—some time," he observed consolingly.

"Yes, and we must learn to be strong—to live for others as well as for ourselves. That is my purpose. This force is my nature. I want to bestow on others that which has never fallen to my lot. I have never known a mother's love."

"Time enough, mam," exclaimed Joe sympathetically. "When you get married——"

"Oh fie, Mr. Joe," Sarah cried, her yellow features flushing to quite a becoming hue. Then she sighed. "I shall never marry, I fear. My mission seems to lie elsewhere." She paused, waiting for some sort of contradiction.

Joe stirred uneasily. He blamed himself for having mentioned matrimony. Sarah shook her head and, as he remained silent, went on.

"No, I fear I shall never marry," she said. "I should want so much in a husband. He would need to be brave, honest; his habits would have to be temperate. Education I should not be so particular about. I could educate him. I could see to his morals and habits. I would train him into the Path. He would be my infant. He would be my sole care. His life should be unstained, undebased, after I had taken care of his soul——"

"That's jest how I'd figger, mam," Joe broke in, hoping to check her flow of eloquence. His wild eyes turned on Jocelyn, who was still perched upon the step-ladder driving nails. He was wondering how he could get away. He was very depressed.

"You always understand me," Sarah went on impressively. "What a thing it is to find a man who understands! The woman you marry, dear Mr. Joe, will be thrice blessed indeed. Have you ever thought—do you ever think of—of matrimony?" She smiled archly upon him. Her faded eyes sought his. "I can see you in my mind's eye dandling your children upon your knee. I can see you, whole-hearted, happy, returning to your home after your labours of the day. I can see you lightening your happy wife's labours with your cheery laugh, your merry jest, your large, wholesome heart. I can see you at divine service kneeling beside your helpmeet amongst your offspring——"

"God's curse light on them blazin' ladders!" roared Joe with appalling suddenness, springing across the room to where Jocelyn, suddenly overbalancing, had fallen in a heap on the pile of evergreen.

He was beside her in an instant, and picked her up in his strong arms with a tenderness hardly to be expected of him.

"Are you hurt any?" he inquired gently, as the girl clung to him for a moment.

Jocelyn shook her head and tried to laugh. But she was pale and shaken.

Joe eyed her critically. Then he turned about with a dash of his usual fierce manner.

"Say, mam!" he exclaimed authoritatively. "We ain't goin' to have no more of these stunts. That pore gal might have got herself killed. Ef ther's any nailin' to do, you'd sure best git some of the boys to do it. Guess I'll git right along fer a drop of brandy."

A few hurried strides and he was out of the place, leaving the flabbergasted Sarah scarcely able to collect her scattered wits.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH BOB MAKAW CONVEYS WARNING

THE air was clearing at last. The forest fire in the hills had passed on to the other side of the watershed, and the mountain breezes had once more asserted themselves. Bob Makaw sat in silence behind his team, and Roydon, beside him, was far too busy with his own thoughts to attempt conversation.

In spite of his manner Roydon was a little puzzled, and a little worried at the situation that had suddenly sprung up between this man they called Snakes Addy and himself. He was not a good reasoner where his feelings were concerned, but he tried hard just now to understand how this antagonism had actually come about. Finally he had to admit that he was chiefly to blame. His own hot temper had brought it about. Yet it seemed to him that the man had gone out of his way to be offensive. His latest encounter was, of course, the result of the first. That was clear enough. So he supposed he had brought the whole thing on himself. He remembered that Joe had practically told him so. He couldn't help it. There was some instinct at work in him, and he knew that under similar conditions it would all happen over again.

He wondered if Addy had come specially to the village to look for trouble with him. He could not understand a man with so little else to do. It certainly looked like it. Well, he was able to take care of himself. Only he was more than sorry that this man should cause him to have a misunderstanding with Jocelyn. That was the galling thought. This low-down tough from the hills to come between them! It was exasperating. The thought roused him, and all his peaceful desire went out; he longed to run up against the man again.

He would treat him like the dog he was, next time. There should be no mercy for him. It never occurred to him that there could be any other termination to an encounter with such a man. His insular egoism was superb.

And Jocelyn had taken his part—this ruffian's. It was unthinkable. And yet it was like her. She was so gentle, so good. Her sympathetic nature always put her on the side of the defeated. Yes, after all, he would rather have it so. Some women would have sympathized with him, the insulted one; he smiled, and his good-nature returned. Jocelyn was right. What a cad he had been! And the thought sent him hot and cold. Of course, she didn't know his provocation, but that made matters no better. He must see her at the first opportunity and ask forgiveness. The whole thing now appeared in a different light. He told himself that he was to blame, wholly. He was certainly very much in love.

The wagon rattled its way along the hard sand trail. The silence between the men remained unbroken. Roydon let his thoughts run on, and they drifted to Joe and his two children. He found himself smiling now as he thought of the desperate Joe being credited with their parentage. This brought him to Snakes' announcement which coupled Kit with the sheriff. He wondered, and though the statement had been Snakes', he lingered upon the idea, speculating. She had brought the children in to Joe. He wondered why. Then, where did she bring them from? It was all very strange, very much of a puzzle, and he was not good at riddles—never had been.

The more he saw of Joe, the more he realized the peculiar twists and turns of his extraordinary character. He liked him. There was something so desperately honest about him. Desperate was the only word by which to describe him. He had come to regard him as the possessor of some sort of infallibility, and he felt he would sooner take his "yes" than another man's sworn testimony.

He wondered what Joe was doing about his affairs. He had been told nothing. He was quite in the dark. But that was Joe's way. Nor did he mind very much. He told himself that this was the result of his faith in the man, but, somehow, he had a feeling that there was a dash of indifference about it. Truth to tell, since meeting

Jocelyn, his enthusiasm to carry out George Raynon's will had slackened, or rather taken quite a second place in his thoughts. He knew it should not be, and he then and there determined to question Joe on the first opportunity.

The long road and Bob's silence let his thoughts drift over many subjects, but always they came back to the grey-eyed girl he had first met at the river. She was his horizon. She was his world. All else must give way, for he was in that condition of mind when reason and inclination are at war, when heart sweeps brain with its scorching breath, and destroys the last vestige of cold argument. He was hopelessly in love, and gloried in the fact.

His whole future was hers, if she would have it. What mattered the fortune that he had set out to win. He had five hundred pounds a year, and the strength and will of a healthy man to increase it. If she would marry him he felt that he could do anything, rise to any heights. He wanted her. He could conceive no life without her, for she was his ideal of womanhood.

And so he went on dreaming and thinking; going over the same old path of thought which every man in the course of his life has to tread. Weaving the same old stories; painting the same old pictures. The school of human love has never altered its curriculum from the days of Adam down to ourselves. In it are used the same old copy-books and primers, the same old pot-hooks and hangers. The results of such education alone are different. Each student learns and achieves according to his own nature.

It was the sudden shock of Bob's voice that roused him and sent all his carefully painted pictures tumbling about him. Bob's speech was his weak point, and its brevity was always a little disconcerting. He had a way of speaking in the midst of a train of thought of which his hearer knew little or nothing.

"Ther's suthin' to it, sure," he said now, with reflective emphasis.

"To what?" inquired the startled man at his side.

"What? Why, that 'i-dog Snakes, of course."

There was a quiet contempt for his companion's intelligence in Bob's retort.

"I didn't know," apologized Dick, smiling at the other's manner. "What is it?" he inquired, feeling that he had better appear to take an intelligent interest.

"He's around town. Ef you wus to git around some, you'd likely know."

Dick grinned.

"Yes, I have seen him. What of it?" he said.

Bob whipped up his horses, chirruped at them, and shifted his position. This man needed a lot of explanation.

"He's a hill tough," he said finally, as though that explained all.

"Well?"

Bob turned his sunburnt face on the other, and eyed him severely out of his half-closed eyes.

"Wal?"

"I don't quite understand." Dick was getting a little impatient.

Bob spat before answering. Then he drew a long breath, as though about to use an effort such as he had no desire to make.

"When the hill toughs git around town ther's suthin' doing," he said heavily. "He ain't the on'y one. I've see four or five. They don't show up a heap. But I've see 'em. Ther's suthin' doin', sure."

"You mean some—crooked work? Some——"

Dick broke off. Bob stared straight out ahead along the trail. They were nearing their destination, and his deep-set eyes were on the lookout for the best place to cut their cargo of green stuff.

He only nodded.

Dick found him very trying.

"There's nothing to be made in Dyke Hole, if they were to hold up the whole town," he said, with a laugh.

"That's jest it," retorted Bob.

"Well, then, I don't see that there's much to worry about."

Bob's manner was full of contempt.

"Guess you don't," he said shortly.

Roydon's impatience got the better of him.

"I wish you'd explain," he said peevishly.

But Bob had said all he had to say on the subject. He

pointed at a clump of young spruce to the left of the trail.

"That's our greens," he said. And try as he might Roydon could not get another word out of him.

They drove into the bush and pulled up. Then Bob got to work with an axe, and Dick, following him, did the loading. And when this was finished there came another long, silent journey home.

It was nearly sundown when they reached the Mission House, but the helpers were still at work. The two men unloaded, under the personal directions of Miss Glades, who at once assumed her most authoritative manner. When the last branch had been carried into the hall, Sarah turned to Bob.

"I want you to drive down to Ramford's store for ten yards of Turkey red, two bottles of mucilage, a spool of carpet-thread, a corn-broom, a pound of can——"

"Say, Roydon, I'm jest goin' to put the team up, an' put Joe wise to them things," Bob broke in, entirely ignoring her. And as he spoke he jumped into the wagon and drove off, leaving Sarah wildly gesticulating and calling him to return in her shrillest and most penetrating tones.

Furious at her failure to bring Bob back Sarah turned to vent her annoyance upon Dick's unfortunate head. But he, too, had beaten a retreat. He had gone into the Mission House to seek Jocelyn out, full of his purpose of making his peace.

Bob Makaw was a man of very decided views on all matters concerning himself. He never allowed himself to be drawn into argument with anybody. For one reason it required a deal of talking, and, for another, he had a way of making up his mind on all subjects concerning himself, and therefore argument, from his point of view, was useless.

He had two masters. The sheriff was paramount, and his own desires came second. Therefore, as he had no desire to run errands for Sarah Glades, and as Joe was not there to back her orders, he saw no reason why he should make the journey to Ramford's. Then, if he needed any other reason, he wanted to have one of his difficult talks with Joe.

So he drove to the barn where he kept his team, and

put the horses into the stable for the night. Then he crossed the green to the quarters. He found Joe stretched out on his bunk chewing tobacco as though he were hungry, and taking an intelligent interest in the movements of a large house-spider on the ceiling above him.

Joe took no apparent notice of Bob's entrance. He merely rolled his great eyes so that he brought him into focus for a second, and silently went on chewing. Bob walked over to the stove, and stood staring at it.

At last he stooped and shook down the ashes, and opened a damper.

"Had grub?" he inquired perfunctorily.

Joe shook his head.

Bob went over to the cupboard. He unstrapped his guns from his waist and deposited them on the top of it. Then he began to prepare a meal.

"'Bout them hill toughs," he said, as he cut off a large piece of bacon, and threw it into a pan.

Joe didn't answer. His eyes followed Bob's movements. He watched him fetch a dish of cold boiled beans and fill the pan up with them.

"They're around," the latter went on, as he arranged the pork in the midst of the beans. Then he added—

"Ther's suthin' doin'."

"I know."

Bob favoured his superior with a swift glance.

"You know?" he inquired. Then he went steadily on with his preparations. He set the pan on the stove and dropped a lump of discoloured grease into it. Immediately it began to splutter.

"You mean Snakes—an' the others?" inquired Joe indifferently.

Bob nodded.

"What's doin'?"

"Huntin' around loafin', I guess," Joe said unconcernedly.

"Why for?" Bob's question came sharply.

He stirred up the pork and beans with a dirty knife.

"Mebbe it's the fire in the hills," said Joe.

But Bob shook his head.

"'Tain't that," he said, jabbing the pork and turning it over.

"Wot, then?"

"'Tain't to do wi' them kids, is it?"

Joe sat up suddenly and sniffed at the food luxuriously.

"Nope."

"Whose is they?" went on Bob.

"Mine!"

Joe was on his feet, and all his indifference had vanished.

Bob was silent for a moment. He seemed to be thinking profoundly.

"I tho't mebbe——" he began at last. But Joe cut him short.

"'Tain't them, son," he said. "Nothin' doin' that aways. Wot's worryin' you?"

"Nothin'. On'y—guess I can't figger this thing. Ther's suthin' doin', sure." He finished up lamely, and with a sigh as though the effort of this conversation were too great a strain.

Joe watched the cooking for a moment in deep thought. Then he gave a short, hard laugh.

"Bob, my son, you oughter bin a lawyer feller, you put things that bright an' smart. Guess you'd make a real dandy epi-taph. How's this——"

"Bob Makaw
Sick an' sore
Died fer sure
Too much jaw."

Bob took two plates and divided the food he had prepared. He handed one portion to Joe, and sat on a box and began to devour the other.

"Guess it's elegant po'try, but I ain't dead," he commented between mouthfuls.

Joe frowned impatiently.

"Guess that don't cut no figger. Suit the corp afore he gits busy an' dies, an' he can't kick at things after, I sez."

"Guess I ain't a heap o' use for po'try," Bob vouchsafed sarcastically.

"Sure," observed Joe dryly.

The two men eat in silence for some time; both were slightly irritated. The sheriff was the first to put a side

his plate. Then he went to the water-bucket and dipped himself out a pannikin of water and drank noisily. After that he went over to his bed again and sat down.

"Guess, you're right, tho', Bob," he said, as though he had been thinking out the matter under discussion. "Them hill toughs is around. An' it ain't the fire. An' it ain't them kids wot's brought 'em. It ain't them things—an' it ain't nuthin' ord'nary. Now, you an' me, Bob, has worked together ever sence I come to Dyke Hole, an' we've handled a dandy show-down or two together. So I guess we kind of understand each other. Now, this thing ain't clear. I've an idee o' things, but wot we want is a lead from som'eres, an' that we ain't got. We jest got to sit tight. They're goin' to give us that lead, an' when we git it we'll know where we stand. Meanwhiles, I'd hev you let things go right on easy-like. Git around of nights, an' don't worry in daylight. The feller we got to figger on is Snakes. He's goin' to jump. An' when he jumps we're sure li'ble to git busy. D'you git that?"

"Yep." Bob nodded. He liked to hear Joe talk like this. These men quite understood each other. Bob knew that his superior had something in the back of his head which he didn't intend to talk about, and when such was the case he regarded things as perfectly satisfactory.

Joe took a chew of tobacco and his manner lightened. He seemed to have dismissed the matter from his mind. He rarely talked long on any thing that might be considered serious.

"Say," he went on, "that crow-bait, old Sally Glades, has ast me to do some talkin' at her temp'rance flare-up. Mebbe it'll jerk them boys up some if I take a hand, tho' I 'lows it 'ud take a heap, keppin' a duck to dry land. Howsum, I'll sure say a few words. But I wus kind of wond'rin' 'bout them fixin's at the Mission. Y' see, women gamble a heap on soc'ables an' things, an' I tho't, mebbe, it 'ud sort of ease their stummicks some to give them a turn around, 'fore them decorations is took down. Say, how'd a dance fix 'em? I've talked around old Moe, an' he's in, sure. We ken call it 'The Sheriff's' dance, an' I'm goin' to ast every blamed soul around the country to come right along an' shake a leg. We'll make it a dandy, slap-up affair as'll par'lyze folk. Ev'rything free, 'cept liquor.

That's wher' Moe comes in. He'll supply the feed free, an' gif it back on watered whisky. Everything else I'll pay fer. That air boy, Roydon, ken lend a hand astin' folk, an' seein' things reg'ler, an we'll make him floor-master. See? We'll make things hum, an' set folks talkin'. I'd like to give the women a peach of a good time. Dyke Hole, ord'nary, couldn't beat a fun'ral, but we'll set it a dandy gait at this lay-out. Say, Bob, you got sech an' a'mighty flow of langwidge, you might set word of it around, jest so's to let the women git their bits of flimsies fixed right."

The sheriff's sarcasm was quite lost on Bob, but he opened his eyes a bit wider than usual as he nodded his acquiescence.

"An' wot's the game?" he asked shrewdly.

Joe only shook his head.

"I ain't playin' no game," he said with a grin. "You get to it an' do as I ast. Guess I'm goin' along to see how them kiddies is fixed. I got Shaggy's gal with 'em, an' ther' ain't no use in trustin' a heap to any of his brood. So long."

He rose from the bed in something of a hurry and strode quickly out of the hut. It was as though he were anxious to avoid the silent question in his deputy's shrewd eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

DICK ROYDON TAKES THE PLUNGE

FORTUNATELY for Roydon, when Sarah re-entered the Mission House her attention was diverted before she came to him, and thus he was saved the outpouring of her wrath.

The women were now in the full swing of their work. Each had her allotted task, and each, as is generally the case in such village labour, conceived that her particular effort was all-important, and needed the most attention from the omniscient Sarah. Therefore she was constantly being summoned in several directions at once.

One good lady was nearly in tears over the decorations she had just set up on the wall. It was a gorgeously illuminated card, painted by Sarah's own fair hand, representing a bottle containing whisky, in which were floating a number of miniature dragons. And above the bottle, and below it, was indited the following warning: "Take heed, for the Serpent lurks hidden in the bottle."

"It don't seem right, Miss Glades," the complainant grumbled. "My man can't read, an' by the time he gets here he'll be loaded down with whisky. An' when he sees all them things a-wigglin' around in that ther' bottle it'll set him——"

"Do him good," snapped the spinster loftily. "He's got to get his lesson with the rest." And she moved on to the next call.

This time it was a different matter. Two cards were clashing, owing to lack of foresight on the part of the helper who had adjusted them. Above was a card stating that—"Water shall be turned into Wine"—a lure of Sarah's, with subtle meaning. But the unfortunate lady responsible for them had set another directly below it

announcing the fact, "Ice water in the bucket at the door. Hang the 'dipper.'"

Sarah set this matter right, and passed on to aid two others who were struggling with a large card, carefully inscribed in her best block lettering. This was being set up directly over the platform. It was highly illuminated, if its wording was somewhat curious—

"WHICH SPIRIT WILL YOU DRINK?

**MOE SELLS BAD WHISKY—WE DEAL IN THE SPIRIT
OF RIGHTEOUSNESS!**

HAVE A DRINK AT OUR EXPENSE!

WE DON'T WATER DOWN ANY—WE DON'T NEED TO!

OUR QUALITY CAN'T BE BEAT!

WE ONLY SUPPLY PURE SPIRIT!

DRUNKARDS WILL BE ASTONISHED AT ITS EFFECT!

SPECIAL LINE—OUR 'TEMPERANCE' BRAND!

TRY US! TRY US! TRY US! TRY US! TRY US! TRY US!

WE DON'T WANT YOUR MONEY!

WE WANT YOUR SOULS!

**GIVE US THEM—AND YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE DRINK
FOR NOTHING!**

THINK OF THE DOLLARS YOU'LL SAVE!

WE SAVE YOUR DOLLARS! WE SAVE YOU!"

It was a great effort. There was a suggestion of patent medicine about it, but then Sarah was quite modern in her ideas of achieving her end. She was of that disposition which believes in the roughshod methods of the quack, rather than the gentle healing of the real physiciar.

Thus it was, amidst the many claims upon her attention, she forgot her anger, she forgot even that Dick Roydon was in the room. Therefore he and Jocelyn, whose carelessness of the early afternoon had put her out of favour with the spinster, contrived to escape that good soul's eagle eye.

Dick found the girl seated in a deep recess on one side of the platform. She had bruised herself too much in her

fall from the step-ladder to do any more climbing, and had undertaken the task of making paper roses for the festoons of evergreens. She was quite by herself. Sarah's disfavour had somehow been reflected by the rest of the women, who, in consequence, held themselves slightly aloof.

This didn't disturb the girl. She didn't even notice it. She was quite content to do whatever work she could to help. She lived her life so much apart from the rest of her sex in Dyke Hole that she could not have entered into any of the gossip and chatter going on about her. She had nothing in common with these women. Good, warm-hearted creatures no doubt they all were, but they belonged to a class which she, however humble the life she now lived, had never been brought into close contact with.

Whatever else her guardian had left undone in his duties towards her, he had educated her well, and kept her from any intimacy with Dyke Hole's social life. Perhaps it had suited his own purposes to do so, knowing the besetting sin of curiosity which belonged to Dyke Hole. Perhaps, seeing that he was losing nothing by it, some dim spark of conscience had caused him to remember at least some of the injunctions of the girl's dying mother.

So she sat alone, twisting and turning and patting the gaudy paper into unnatural roses, and plying her needle with a deftness that soon brought her towards the end of her task.

A woman rarely finds it easy to forgive the man she loves for falling from the high place on which she has set him. It is not his fall that hurts her so much; that is easy enough to forgive when her love is once given. It is the rending and tearing out of her bosom her most treasured possession, that unquestioning, blind faith and trust she places in him. It is more than grief to her. It is something in the nature of a physical hurt. A woman's crowning glory is that blind faith which ever goes with her love; it is all-absorbing, it is the greatest part of her woman's nature; it is so great that a man might well go down on his knees and thank God that he—he is the recipient of so inestimable a trust.

Such was the feeling which stirred Jocelyn to resentment at Roydon's encounter with so low a ruffian as Snakes

Addy. She was terribly hurt to think that he could stoop to so low a brawl. The thoughts of it occupied her as she worked. She looked at it from every point of view, and for a long time she could find no excuse for him. But gradually the appeal of her heart made itself felt, and then all her reasoning went awry.

Suddenly it dawned on her that she knew none of the facts concerning it. She had not given him a chance to explain. How could she judge him so hastily? And then she remembered that even Joe had chided her for interfering in matters that didn't concern her. He didn't know the rights any better than she did, and yet he had refrained from any judgment on him. He had more faith than she had.

Her anger against Dick changed. She grew angry with herself instead. She blamed herself and drew comfort in the process of self-castigation. And after a while her sunny disposition began to shine out again from behind the storm-clouds of her anger, and, once the sky began to clear, every cloud was swept away with almost magical swiftness. She was so repentant. She found a hundred excuses for Dick. She was in the wrong. She must try and make it up to him.

Yes, she would let him see that she had been wrong, and he would understand and forgive. He was so kind; so big and strong. He hadn't one smallness in his whole nature. Again he was firmly set upon the pedestal, this time higher than ever. Now he dominated her whole heart's horizon.

It was in this mood that he found her now. And he had come to ask forgiveness. She looked up brightly as she heard his step. She knew it was his before she saw him. How could it be any one else, when he alone was in her mind? Her heart was beating a little more rapidly as she smiled up at him from her setting of paper roses. How strong he looked, and how his eyes could smile.

"Got back?" she inquired, for want of a better greeting.

"I believe I have," he laughed.

Then followed an awkward pause. Neither knew what to say next. Each was full of penitent thoughts, and was wondering how to express them.

"I want to——" began Dick.

"Dick I want to——"

They both spoke together, and both broke off at the same instant.

"I beg your pardon," said Dick. "You were going to say?"

"I beg yours," said Jocelyn demurely. "It was you who were——"

Then their eyes met, and they both laughed outright. It was such a happy laugh, and it rang out so distinctly in the deepening twilight of the hall, that several pairs of curious eyes were turned in their direction.

"I believe we were going to say the same thing," exclaimed Dick.

"I'm sure we were both going to apologize for something," laughed Jocelyn. "Didn't you recognize the tone?"

Dick nodded.

"I recognized my own tone. Mine was an apology all right. I always begin in that way."

"And so do I. Now look here, suppose we take it as said. Shall we? Apologies are so formal, and—and—undignified." The girl made a little wry face. "I was a beast to you to-day about that man, Dick," she went on hurriedly, forgetful that the apologies were to be passed as made. "I've no doubt you were quite right. A man like that ought to get a good thrashing, he's so ugly and dirty, and——"

"Yes, he's certainly a dirty rascal," admitted Dick. Then he laughed. "And, of course, that is sufficient excuse for thrashing any man."

He sat down on the edge of a bench. And having settled himself to his own satisfaction he asked permission.

"May I sit down?"

The girl felt so happy that she laughed again.

"It would seem so."

"And—oh, I want to help you with your work. If there's one thing I can do it's make paper roses. But I say"—Dick became serious—"apologies or no apologies, I must explain that business at the saloon. It wasn't just a bar-room row, as you may have thought. That man made a dead set at me while I was trying to satisfy the

curiosity of the folks in there about those children, and doing my best to save Joe's reputation. He said some filthy things about Joe which made me furious, so I just threw him out. You see, I feel I must tell you this, remembering that when I first met you I was still suffering from a similar malady—I mean the results of a fight. You'll be thinking I'm a most quarrelsome beast. And really I'm very harmless, if people will only let me alone. I mean well—awfully well; really I do."

"Of course you do, Dick," Jocelyn smiled. "You mean so well that your friends are not going to be treated disparagingly in your hearing. And you're going to end up by getting the contents of a heavy revolver in your—your digestibles."

Their eyes met. The bright grey ones had suddenly become very serious. There was a look of anxiety in their earnest depths, in spite of the smile which accompanied the girl's words. There was a good deal of a mother's nature in Jocelyn. All her girlhood had been passed in responsibility, until now it had become part of her nature. She felt very wise when she was talking to Dick. He was so boyish, it seemed to her. He made her feel almost old.

"Yes, I know. I'm foolish, I suppose," he replied, with a slight perplexity puckering his brow. "But for the life of me, when it comes to a row, I can't bring myself to using a gun. It seems so cold-blooded, so inhuman. And really you can give a fellow such excellent punishment with a good solid fist."

Jocelyn nodded her golden head sympathetically.

"I know," she said. "I think I should hate you if you took to the same brutal way of disputing as these men do. It's not that. I'm thinking of what is going to happen to you. They would think no more of shooting you than they would of shooting a dog. When will you learn that civilization begins and ends just precisely where the laws of a country can be properly administered? Once you leave the railroad, and lose sight of a uniformed policeman, human nature reasserts itself in just such a manner as the passions of men dictate."

"Very nicely put, Jock," cried Dick, with a happy laugh. "What a clever little head it is. Where on earth did you get such philosophy in this glorious city? You'll

make me afraid of you, if you go on like that. Civilization is merely another name for the police force. But what would you call Joe?"

"Joe?" Jocelyn's smile was full of love and pride.

"Yes. He's sheriff, I know, but——"

"Joe's the bravest and best man that ever undertook a forlorn hope. If you'd only known this place before he came." The girl shook her head in hopeless horror. "Joe is doing the work of an entire police force. And he's doing it with a heart of gold beating under the savage exterior he displays to our little world."

"Happy Joe."

Dick had picked up one of the roses lying on the floor, and was apparently examining its manufacture.

"I wish he were," said Jocelyn, with a sigh. "He deserves to be. It seems very hard, with a character such as his, that poor Joe should go through this world without a particle of education, and condemned to live swamped as he is in such an ocean of sordid brutality."

Dick was thoughtlessly pulling the rose to pieces.

"Ah, that's where an all-wise Providence comes in," he said seriously. "If Joe were a man of education, of delicate upbringing, do you think he would be fit for the work he's doing? But Joe certainly has his happy moments."

"Yes. The children—for instance."

"More than that. I've watched him. Joe loves these people." Dick paused. Then he went on slowly, as though he had thought out each point carefully, "Joe wouldn't forego his work here for untold gold. He means to civilize this place in spite of itself. And—and—there's some other attractions about the place which I can't make up my mind about," he finished up lamely.

"For Joe?"

Dick nodded.

"You mean some——?"

"Some—female."

"How do you know that?"

Jocelyn was all interest.

"That's just it, I don't know it," replied Dick, with a shake of the head. "I only feel it."

It was Jocelyn's turn to shake her head.

"I think you're wrong. I've never seen Joe pay any woman attention." Then she laughed right out. "It's

too funny," she explained. "Joe making love! Oh dear! But—I wish Joe would make love to me."

Dick did not reply for a moment. The rose in his hand was almost reduced to a complete wreck.

Presently he raised his eyes to the girl's face. Her deft fingers were still at work upon her roses; they had not ceased at his coming. She was intent now upon her occupation. And Dick had full opportunity of studying the charming, decided profile that was turned to him.

What a wealth of golden hair she had coiled at her neck, what delicate, healthy, rounded cheeks; there was no touch of art about her anywhere. The simplicity about this girl was wonderful to him. But it was not that that set his pulses beating so feverishly now; it was not her beauty, which was quite ordinary; it was something else, something that spoke to him out of her frank honesty, something which spoke in her silence, her very presence.

He was no sentimentalist, he was no student of character; he would himself have admitted his lack of cleverness in that direction. It was simply that she appealed to his now greatest characteristic, his open-hearted, simple-minded honesty of purpose. He felt there were no dark corners in the child's mind, corners which could not be looked into and loved. He told himself that here was a fair, perfect flower of God's creation, growing alone, pure, unpretentious, clean and straight upon a refuse-heap of hopeless ignorance and brutality; and—and he wanted to pluck it, and take it to his heart.

"Joe and I wouldn't be friends if he did," he said in a low, earnest tone.

The girl's fingers suddenly became still. She looked round with a start, and then she as suddenly resumed her work. Only this time her fingers worked more rapidly, and with less skill.

"If Joe wanted to be your friend, he would be so in spite of you," she said, with an awkward laugh.

Somehow she felt glad of the dusk. Dick dropped the remains of his rose on the floor, and his hands clasped a little nervously.

His voice shook as he spoke.

"There are some things even your friend Joe couldn't do. If he made love to you he could never be my friend."

There was a nervous emphasis in the words, and, for once, Jocelyn had no reply for him.

She was annoyed with herself. Why should she feel so stupid? Dick was only making fun. But her heart was hammering in her bosom, and she could not steady her pulses. She wished Dick wouldn't talk like that; she told herself that it made her angry.

"Nobody could be my friend who made love to you, Jock." Dick went on clumsily. Then he hesitated. "Shall I tell you why?" he asked at last.

But Jocelyn had suddenly dropped her roses on to the pile, and made to rise from her seat. For some reason she could no longer sit there. She was possessed of an unaccountable terror, and longed to get away. It was unkind of Dick to talk like that.

Dick caught her arm and gently forced her back to her seat. He was less nervous now.

"No, no, you needn't go yet. Listen to me, Jock. I want to tell you. I have wanted to tell you for a long time. I think I could kill any one who made love to you. No, I don't mean quite that. But I should hate them, because I love you myself. I love you and want you, dear."

The girl sat quite still. Dick was holding her hand, and, without thinking, she let it remain in his. She was not capable of thinking just then. A tumult was going on in her bosom which she did not understand, and did not try to understand. All she knew was that she felt ridiculously happy, and now had no desire to leave him.

"I'm not much of a fellow," Dick went on, in a stupidly apologetic fashion. "Not very good, and not very bad. Sort of mediocre." He smiled nervously. "Not half good enough for you. I s'pose I'm bad tempered, too—but I mean well, and I'd try to make a good husband. I'll never fight again, if you don't want me to. I'd let any fellow thump me on the nose, if you'd only marry me—really I would. I—I say, Jock, do marry me. I've got—how much is it?—\$2500 a year. It's not very much, but it'll keep us in bread and cheese——"

For the first time Jocelyn turned and looked shyly at him. And the smile she gave him nearly made him shout with happiness.

"But I don't care for cheese—Dick," she said.

"Then you will marry me?"

How he drew the conclusion it would be impossible to say.

"Oh, Jock, I do love you so badly. I do indeed. You sha'n't have cheese if you don't want it. Just say you'll be my wife, there's a dear."

He reached out and caught her other hand, while one arm slipped round her waist.

But Jocelyn drew back. The dusk hid the scarlet of her face. She remembered in time the other workers in the hall. Fortunately they were well screened by the decorations about the platform.

"No, no, you mustn't," she cried nervously.

But Dick had become urgent.

"Yes, you will, won't you? Kiss me, Jock."

"No, no—not here."

"Then you will marry me, darling?"

There was no answer. Dick seemed to understand, for he suddenly leant forward and forcibly drew her to him.

"Then I'm going to kiss you," he said decidedly.

And he did.

Suddenly there was a flare of light. Sarah was lighting up the hall. Dick released the girl with a jump.

"I don't care now," he said happily. "They can light up all they like. They can turn on a whole blessed aurora borealis if they want to. But you haven't told me you love me, sweetheart."

The girl smiled at him shyly, and shook her head.

"But you do?"

Still Jocelyn only smiled.

"Tell me. If you don't I shall think——"

"What?"

"I don't know. That it's Joe."

"Don't be absurd, Dick."

"Then tell me," he demanded.

"Of course I do."

Dick suddenly made another plunge to kiss her, but she avoided him this time.

"Dick, I shall go home if——"

The threat had its effect. Dick sobered at once.

"I shall come up and see your guardian to-morrow," he said.

"Yes—I suppose you must."

At the mention of her guardian all the happy light had suddenly died out of the girl's eyes.

"What is it, Jock?" Dick asked anxiously.

"Nothing, only——"

"Don't you want me to see your guardian?" he asked.

"It isn't that."

The girl shook her head, but her smile was a little plaintive.

"I was only thinking," she went on. "I do wish mother were alive. I feel I want her more than ever now. You see, Dick—oh, I don't know, only I'm so happy that I—I—oh, why haven't I a mother the same as other girls?" she finished up pathetically.

Dick was all sympathy at once. The almost childlike appeal in her voice touched him more than he knew.

"You were very—fond of her," he said, not knowing how to express himself.

"Yes, yes. I was very small, but I remember her so well. She was so good. You see, she married twice. I don't remember my father. He was her first husband. He had something to do with mining. There was some trouble between them—I mean mother and my father. I don't know whether he died, or whether she divorced him. Mother never used to speak of him to me, and then my step-father was so kind, and mother was so fond of him, and I was so young, I never inquired anything about him. You don't know what it means to a girl to have a mother when she—she becomes engaged." She stumbled over the words in delightful confusion, and Dick made a movement as though to take her in his arms again. She checked his impetuosity.

"Yes," she went on, more composedly, "I suppose you had best see my guardian, as a matter of form. But, Dick, are you sure you ought to marry me—want to?"

She looked at him with such a delightful smile in her happy grey eyes that he could hardly contain himself.

"Want to? Heavens, child, that doesn't half express it. Want to?" he cried, so loud that Jocelyn was forced to hold up a warning finger. "I'm just—er—silly, mad

crazy—anything you like—to marry you. And as for 'ought to,' darling, there's no question. I'd marry you if—if the—yes, if the heavens fell in."

This seemed to be sufficient, for Jocelyn suddenly let her hand fall on the one Dick had stretched out towards her, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Do you think you had better tell Joe?" she asked him demurely.

"I should rather think I had. I——"

"Hush! Here comes our dear Sarah," Jocelyn interrupted him warningly. She rose quite suddenly as the spinster came up. "I've finished all the roses, Miss Glades," she said quite calmly. "Dick, here, helped me. Isn't he clever? I don't think I can stay any longer, though. There's supper to see to at home. Can you spare me?"

Sarah's keen eyes glanced from one to the other.

"Certainly, my dear, and thank you," she said. Then she turned to Dick. "But *you'll* be able to stay, Mr. Roydon, won't you? Mr. Joe said you could help——"

But Dick had not the least intention of remaining.

"I'm awfully sorry, but—you see, I'm going to see Miss Leyland safely home. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll send Joe along if you like."

And it was that happy last thought that saved him the rough edge of Sarah's tongue. She answered quite sweetly.

"Thank you so much," she murmured. "I shall be so glad of his help—so very glad."

She passed on quickly, it might have been to escape the smiling eyes of Jocelyn. Anyway, the young lovers were left free to make good their escape without further interruption.

"That was a lucky thought of yours, Dick," Jocelyn said, when they were out of the hall.

Dick laughed, and, in the darkness, put his arm about her waist.

"For us. I wonder what Joe'll say."

"I wonder," said Jocelyn, turning her face towards him.

Dick stooped and kissed her before she could turn it away again.

"I don't know, and, what's more, I don't care," he laughed.

CHAPTER XX

HOW DYKE HOLE'S TEMPERANCE MEETING BROKE UP

ROYDON did not tell Joe of his good fortune until three days later, the day appointed for the grand temperance meeting.

There was a sudden, and, to Roydon, unaccountable, rush of work in Dyke Hole's peace department. He was packed off to the hills to watch, and keep careful account of all traffic passing over certain trails, and this lasted for three consecutive days and nights. Furthermore, his work demanded absolute secrecy. His goings and comings had to be as carefully made as though he were a scout in an enemy's country. What it all meant he did not know, and he was far too wise now to question his superior.

Joe, too, was busy. The only time he was visible to his assistants was at sunrise, when all three of them partook of a frugal breakfast. Bob Makaw alone seemed to have an easy time. He never left the town, simply loafing his time away with the loungers in Moe's bar, or any other place where the villagers foregathered.

Thus it was that the young lover's chance to impart his confidence only came on the evening of the temperance meeting. He and Joe had finished their supper, and while the latter was preparing himself for the affair, Roydon, who was to be merely one of the audience, sat himself astride of a chair and smoked. Bob Makaw had not shown up, for which the lover was heartily thankful. He waited until Joe had finished splashing in the washing-bucket—Joe was always noisy at his ablutions—and then began with some caution.

"That trail-watching finishes to-day?" he asked carelessly.

"Surely," Joe replied, from amidst the folds of the dirty hand-towel.

"A good job, too," exclaimed Dick, with satisfaction. "It gets on my nerves. I like to be doing something——"

"One of them fellers wot ain't easy 'less he's thrashin' around like a bull 'a fly-time." Joe held out the saturated towel. "Here, you sure best hang this wher' the sun'll git it to, or we'll hev to git it laundered."

Dick took the towel and laid it on the bench outside while Joe removed his chapps. When he returned to his seat the other was fumbling in an old kit-bag. Finally he drew out a soft cotton shirt.

"Clean shirt?" Dick observed, with a smile.

"Leddies," replied Joe significantly. "I was kind of thinkin'," he added, a moment later, "this yer shirt an' a drop of hair-grease, these yer moleskins an' top-boots, a noo silk han'kerchief, an' jest a coat 'ud sure be an elegant outfit to hand 'em a bunch of langwidge in."

Roydon smiled at the man's little vanity. He nodded.

"What about a collar and tie instead of that silk handkerchief? I've got plenty."

The sheriff's fierce eyes met his, and his glance had the effect of checking all further suggestion.

"Dorg-pups needs collars," he snapped, as he dipped his fingers into the fat in the frying-pan, and proceeded to oil his lank hair with it.

Roydon watched the operation with interest. Joe was very thorough. He smarmed and rubbed at his hair until it shone. Then he took a comb and raked it back off his forehead, so that the loose ends hung well down the nape of his neck. This done, he put on his old blue serge coat and strapped his guns about his waist.

"Thought of your speech yet?" inquired Roydon.

"It sure don't need a heap of thinkin' tellin' folks to quit Rye an' git aboard the water-wagon," he said contemptuously. Then he went on more gently. "My job is jest to help that pore crittur of a woman out in her misguided work. She'll do the talk. I'm jest goin' to see the folks don't play no monkey tricks on her. 'Tain't her fault she's queer 'bout them things. But she's goin' to git a fair show down, if I'm sheriff."

Somehow Roydon felt a little small beside this man.

He was going to help this woman, not because he was in sympathy with her efforts, but simply that the great golden heart Jocelyn had spoken of would not let him stand by and see her struggle unaided with her hopeless task.

It was this realization that made him suddenly throw all caution to the wind. Knowing Joe's peculiarities of temper, and his almost parental regard for Jocelyn, he had intended to approach the announcement of his engagement with some tact. Now he blurted his news out like a guilty school-boy.

"I've—I've asked her to marry me," he said. Then he corrected himself. "Not Miss Glades—er—Jocelyn."

Joe very deliberately seated himself on the edge of his bed. He took a fresh chew of tobacco, and solemnly rolled it round in his mouth. Then he lounged back, nursing one knee in his clasped hands.

"That's how I figgered," he said at last.

"You knew?"

"Yep. Y' see, she's ast Bob fer you nigh six times a day fer the last three days."

"I see."

There was a long pause. Dick sat staring at the stove. Joe's wild eyes were fixed steadily on his face. His expression was sphinx-like.

Dick was forced to break the silence.

"She's promised to be my wife. It's a serious thing, you know," he said ingenuously. "I'm not half good enough for her, I know. I——"

"That's how most folks sez," replied Joe dryly. Then he leant back luxuriously and became expansive, which Dick felt was a good sign. "Marryin' is ser'us. It's so almighty ser'us it ain't no wonder youngsters an' fools jumps right into it so easy. But it's mostly that aways. That feller Adam an' pore Eve, 'cordin' to the Book, they must ha' got hitched up together 'fore they'd got their milk-teeth, so ther' don't seem to be no kick comin' any-ways. Howsum, your case is more mature-like, an' I won't say but what I'm glad." Then the man's manner suddenly changed. He leant forward, his fierce eyes burning.

"See right here, Dick," he cried, with tremendous in-

tensity. It was the first time he had ever addressed Roydon by his first name, and it spoke volumes for his feelings towards him. "I ain't preachin'—I ain't goin' to tell you the rights of this thing, like some sky-pilot. I ain't even thinkin' of your side of it. You're a fool someways, but you got a tidy hunch to you, an' you're a man. It's jest that air gal."

He paused, but went on almost immediately.

"It's her," he proceeded, his voice deep with feeling. "That gal is jest the nickiest bit of female natur' around these parts. She's that good she sets you gropin' around wonderin' how it comes she's fixed on this dump of a city. You ain't fit to shovel her snow, you ain't; I ain't never see the man as was. But you got her, an' got her good. I've see it fer days an' weeks, an' I give it you right here, lad, ef you wus anything but a man you wouldn't be going to get her. I'd see to that."

His jaws snapped viciously. Then he went on with more kindness in his tone.

"Say, marry her, boy; marry her good an' quick, an' take her out of this. Take her out of that bum lawyer's hands. He's jest killin' the heart of her. An' when you got her, jest git right down on your knees an' thank the good Gawd fer handing you what you don't deserve, you nor any other man. An' treat her good—treat her good. That gal I couldn't love more ef she wus my own flesh an' blood, an'—an' I'd kill the feller as didn't treat her good!"

Roydon sat fascinated while the man talked. It was not his words, it was not even his sentiments. It was his manner. There was something so tremendously, but simply, earnest about him. Even his final threat provoked no resentment. It was just part of him. And the man listening knew that he meant it literally, and felt glad that it was so.

He had no answer for him. He felt like wringing Joe's claw-like hand. But he knew the man's ways, and refrained.

Joe rose from his seat. He had finished.

"We'd best git on to the Mission," he said, as though nothing unusual had passed between them.

He moved towards the door, and Dick followed him in

silence. As they passed out Joe paused and turned to him.

"Say, boy," he said, "ther's suthin' doin' around. An' I ain't clear as to the natur' of it."

Roydon was in a recklessly happy mood, and took no thought for anything.

"A good thing, too," he laughed. He felt that nothing would be more congenial than some sudden call upon his overflowing energies, and that was the possibility he read in his chief's words.

Joe's features creased into one of his rare smiles. It was this youngster's spirit that had appealed to him from the first.

"Wal, I guess ef things git busy, it sure ain't goin' to be a tattin' bee. It's them dogone hill toughs, an'— Ah, here's Bob. Come right on."

Dusk was closing in rapidly. As they started across the green Dick saw Bob Makaw coming towards them.

He seemed to be in a hurry. He was breathing hard, and his manner had lost something of its usual stolidity. As he halted he pushed his prairie hat back from his forehead with a jerky movement, like a man disturbed in spite of himself.

"It's to-night, boss," he said, as though Joe must know all the rest of the thought in his mind.

"Eh?"

"It's at that meetin'," Bob went on significantly.

"Wot's at the meetin'?"

"Why, they are. They're all there."

"Who?"

"The hill toughs."

"Ah."

The three men stood silent for a while. Then Joe turned to Roydon.

"We'd best git on, then. They're waitin' fer us."

They moved on together. And it was not until they had nearly crossed the green that Bob Makaw contrived to get out another word.

"You ain't goin' ther'?" he said, indicating the Meeting House.

Joe kept on.

"I'm goin' to ad-dress that meetin'," he said quietly.

Bob clicked his tongue impatiently. Then he established a record for himself in the way of speech.

"You're gettin' 'bug,'" he said; which was another way of telling his superior he was mad. "Them toughs is waitin' on you. That's what they come there for. They're goin' to do you up. I located the hull thing. When you go to speak on that air platform, they got you on a cinch. They'll blow your carkis full of holes."

"You're talkin' some, ain't you?" inquired Joe sarcastically.

Bob allowed the remark to pass. His brain was formulating another question.

"Then you're goin'?" he inquired.

"Sure."

"Then I best be doin'."

Bob suddenly dropped back and moved off in an opposite direction. He was gone before either of the others were aware of his intentions. Dick put in a word of expostulation.

"Look here, Joe," he said, "are you going to stand up there to be shot at by a lot of desperadoes, any one of whom would reckon it a big thing to shoot you up?"

Joe shook his head.

"'Tain't that. Bob's gettin' foolish. He ought to be takin' soft food. Ef I wusn't to git around, an' jest see this thing thro', they'd guess I wus scairt to death of them. Wot then? Why, jest this. They'd take me fer sech an easy mark I'd git done up by some kid without a whisker to his map. No, sir! I'm sure goin' to give it them hogs good an' hard. I'll talk 'em that straight they won't have a steady hand among 'em to hold up a gun."

There was no gainsaying him. Joe knew his business as sheriff, and his argument, if a little vainglorious, was fairly sound. Dick realized this, and refrained from further expostulation. He felt there was nothing else to be done but join in the affair quietly, and keep his eyes very wide open. He knew that Joe, recklessly courageous as he was, had the subtlety of a dozen men, where his own calling was concerned. Well, he would be there to do what he could. Joe shouldn't want for a man's help.

They were met at the Mission by Miss Glades and Jocelyn, and several other women. Sarah was all in a

flutter of excitement. If one might judge by her volubility, and the light in her foolish eyes, this was the greatest moment in her life.

The sheriff seemed to understand something of this, for he yielded willingly to her blandishments. He even allowed himself to be carried off to the back entrance of the building, which communicated directly with the platform erected for the speakers. The rest of the women followed them, all except Jocelyn, who remained to speak to her lover.

"Oh, Dick, it seems such a long time since I've seen you," she exclaimed reproachfully, when the others were out of hearing.

Dick smiled down upon the pretty oval of her upturned face.

"And to me, too, dearest," he said. "But really, it wasn't my fault. Didn't Joe explain?"

"Yes, but—couldn't you have sent me a note?"

"I never thought. You see, I hoped to see you each day, and so—"

"Oh, bother!"

The girl's exclamation broke from her involuntarily as some one jostled past her into the building. She was pushed into Dick's arms, who caught her and held her while he looked after the "clumsy brute" furiously. The man was just passing in through the doorway, and the light of the hall revealed his familiar outline. The angry blood surged to Dick's brain, and he released the girl to dash after him. But Jocelyn had seen and recognized the man too. It was Snakes Addy.

"No, Dick; not again," she said, hastily catching him by the arm. "No, please," as he tried to release himself. It was her tone that calmed him.

"The brute!" he finally exploded.

The girl only laughed at his anger.

"When will you learn?" she cried. "But I mustn't waste any more time on you," she went on happily. "You see, I am to sit on the platform to support Miss Glades. I feel quite important."

But Dick did not respond to her mood. He suddenly remember what Bob had said. The platform—Joe would speak from it, and—and Jocelyn would be sitting there too.

"But you mustn't sit up there," he declared in his sudden apprehension. "No, no, I won't have it," he blundered on. "You must sit with me."

The girl laughingly shook her head.

"But I can't. You see, I've promised Sarah. Besides—think of the glory."

Dick's anxiety drove him to impatience.

"Glory?—rot!" he exclaimed sharply. "I insist that you sit with me."

It was an unfortunate speech, and brought swift resentment from the girl. Jocelyn's pride was up in arms in an instant.

"I equally insist that I sit up on the platform, Dick. And I hope, when the lecture is over, you'll be better tempered."

She gave him no opportunity to reply, for she darted off after Sarah and the others, and left him standing, half bewildered between his fears for her safety and his mortification at the fresh quarrel his own ill-considered words had brought about between them.

But his fears took the upper hand. Of course he should have been less hasty, but she was foolish to get angry. He would have explained. To think of her sitting on that platform when Joe was speaking. It was simple suicide, he told himself. Supposing a stray shot—but the idea was too terrible.

He stood there uncertain what to do for the best. Finally he made up his mind that there was nothing else left him but to go in and secure a seat as near the platform as possible.

But in this matter disappointment awaited him. The room was nearly full, and, to his mortification, he was forced to sit on a bench just beside the door, where the drinking-water was placed. The women occupied all the front seats, and those in the rear of the hall were pretty well packed with men. He recognized all his acquaintances of the village, and noticed a large reinforcement of strange faces in his immediate vicinity.

For the moment Jocelyn was forgotten, and he found himself examining these strangers closely. Amongst them, he concluded, were the hill toughs Bob had spoken of. They were a low-looking lot, anyhow. Their unkempt

hair and whiskers, and their general air of uncleanness, from their serge shirts to their weather-stained moleskin trousers, stamped them in his mind as well named by the silent Bob. Most of these men were obviously armed, too, and they certainly looked capable of doing the deed Bob suspected them to have in contemplation. For a while he couldn't find Snakes Addy, but at last he discovered him sitting on the other end of his own bench, directly under one of the few lamps that illuminated the place.

It was a curious scene, and one such as only a place like Dyke Hole could produce. The tawdry decorations had a depressing effect in the gloom of the half-lit hall. There were not more than eight oil lamps, and these only threw out a very uncertain, dull, yellow light.

But to Roydon it was chiefly the audience itself that interested. The women were certainly curiosities in their rusty Sunday gowns and strange headgears. Gathered here, and packed closely together, they presented a spectacle not easily forgotten. Out in the daylight, seen singly in the village, there was little to draw attention to their evident poverty. But here the whole thing suggested a second-hand wardrobe in the slum of some big city; even the odour, whether it came from the men or the women, was there.

But the performance was beginning. Miss Baines, the simpering school teacher from Spawn City, pranced across the platform to the harmonium. She sat down and began a gymnastic performance with her legs on the bellows, and set them creaking and wheezing under the might of her muscular effort. The instrument shook, it rocked; then, when Dick thought the bellows must really be at bursting point, she suddenly crashed her fingers down on a handful of notes, and the overture began.

Miss Baines was quite interesting while she played. She was very determined. And under her hands the instrument whimpered in a plaintive minor, it groaned in a rasping bass. It cried out in an agony of crescendo, and howled in vast, double-handed chords. She went on without mercy, her great strong hands clutching at its yellow keys, and jerking violently at the rattling stops. And all the while she pumped away at the bellows with

her heavy-soled boots, and banged the "swells" with her knees, till every part of the poor old instrument rattled in protest. At last the crash of the finale came. It came with both hands and a final spurt of the lady's feet. The instrument tottered under it, and the sheet of manuscript fell into her lap. It was over. And Dick felt that it was to the glory of Dyke Hole that the instrument had withstood the attack.

Miss Baines bowed herself to a seat, and then a procession of ladies, headed by Miss Glades, mounted the platform and took up their positions. Dick was thankful to see that Jocelyn had selected a seat well screened by the staunch old harmonium.

Sarah, acting under the sheriff's advice, had abandoned her intention of opening the meeting with prayer.

"It ain't no use," he said, "in handin' prayers out to the boys. It's sure like fillin' 'em up with soup 'fore they gits their vittles."

And Sarah bowed to his more intimate knowledge of the Dyke Hole flock.

So now she stepped forward to her task. Just for a second her nervousness was evident in the shaking of the paper she was clutching in her hands. Her breath seemed short, for her lean bosom heaved painfully. But with her first words confidence returned. She began quietly, as was her wont, but soon she leapt at them with the full tide of her eloquence. She hammered them with a flow of language as red hot as a molten torrent. She accused them, she threatened them, she shrieked at them, she almost cursed them. She never once eased up in twenty minutes. And then she only desisted because outraged nature asserted herself, and cut off her vocal supply.

There was some applause from her "confederates," as Roydon called them, on the platform, but an ominous silence in the audience effectually damped their ardour. Apparently it was not Sarah whom they had come to hear, for when, in a hoarse whisper, she introduced the sheriff as the next speaker, the buzz of comment that followed plainly showed where the audience's real interest lay. Joe was the "star" of the performance.

He stepped on to the platform from behind a curtain of hunting, and came straight to the centre with swift,

aggressive strides. He had no nervousness. These people were his, he was their shepherd. When he spoke they must listen. And this was expressed in his manner as he took his stand.

His black eyes swept the audience as he stood with his hands jambed deep in his jacket pockets, by which means he concealed the great, ivory-butted guns at his waist. He began at once.

He threw an angular bow at Miss Glades, and another at the audience.

"Your servant, mam," he drawled. "Leddies, gents, citizens all, I bin ast fer a few words on the subject of liquor." He paused. But almost instantly, like a sprinter, he jumped off the mark. "Now, wot, I ast, is the use of liquor? Say, it's jest an instrument of hell to bust up homes, an' fer drivin' women to onnateral langwidge, an' cow-hidin' their men-folk. Ther' ain't nuthin' to it but that. An' I'd like to say right here it's got to quit in Dyke Hole."

Some one coughed in the audience as he paused, and his restless eyes shot a severe glance in the direction the sound came from.

"Now, I ain't no high-brow slinger of hot air on any subject, an' most certinly not on the liquor proposition. But I want to tell you folks as ther' ain't no more use to it than astin' a locomotive to blow off steam after firin' it up with a can full of clam chowder. Say, did ever you see a feller huntin' insect's nest hatin' to find 'em? That's Rye whisky ev'ry time. Rye'll pickle your carkis from your corns to the hay on your roof, so you wouldn't know your stummick from a tanning fact'ry. I've see fellers that soused in Rye whisky they've had to be took off to the bug-house howling around like she-coyotes in snow-time——"

Another fit of coughing interrupted him. He glared.

"Say," he observed sarcastically, "that feller's coughin' bad. Guess he needs poulticin' some." Then, after a dead silence, he went on. "As I wus sayin', I've see things as 'ud choke a hog off a swill bar'l, in the matter of liquor. Ther' wus one feller got the notion he wus a pay-telephone——"

A further fit of coughing disturbed the meeting. The

ladies stirred impatiently, with a sound like the fluttering of hens in an ash-pit. Joe's eyes lit fiercely. But he waited, while a titter of laughter amongst the men exhausted itself.

"He got the notion he wus a pay-telephone, I said, 'fore that cough worried in," he went on coldly. "He went around with a bell astin' folks fer ten cents. Ef any fool give it him, he'd light right off to the saloon ringin' his bell like a locomotive gettin' into a depot, an' if he didn't, he'd jest sit around an' curse through one of them tin megaphone fixin's, tell they shut him in the bug-house. But them's jest circumstances. I've see one of them guys as preferred gettin' around on a slack wire 'stead of takin' the sidewalk. He got \$10 a week in a cirkis, and handed it all to the s'loon boss reg'lar. He never got on that wire wi'out a souse of Rye enough to drown a full-sized whale, an' the way he did it was to take the middle wire no matter how many he see under him. He lasted quite awhile. Then one day he tried a diff'rent wire, an' they pieced him up into a corp so he'd fill a soap-box. All the side-show freaks chipped in, an' the fun'ral wus real swell."

For the fourth time the sheriff was interrupted by a fit of coughing, and he lost all patience.

"I'll ast that feller to git——" he began. But he didn't finish. What he intended to say was lost, for, simultaneously, a number of figures leapt on to the benches, and, in an instant, every light was extinguished.

For a moment Joe stood, his volcanic anger at bursting-point. Then, as a terrific uproar arose at the far end of the hall, and he heard a shout for help in Roydon's voice, he made for the back door, where he ran into the arms of Bob Makaw, who was waiting with their horses ready saddled. The silent deputy was moved to rapid speech.

"Here's the hosses. I got 'em here early. I guessed there'd be trouble an' we'd need 'em. We want ev'ry second. They got a start on us."

"Who?" Joe snapped, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"Them toughs. They got him, and have drove off like mad in a buckboard."

Without a word Joe swung his horse about, and he and Bob rode off at a gallop.

"They're ahead," said Bob. "Hear 'em?"

The faint sound of galloping horses and the rattle of buckboard wheels, away on down the southern trail, were plainly audible.

"Come along," said Joe. And the two men urged their horses into a race.

But the buckboard had a good start. The trail was smooth and broad, and, by the sound that reached the pursuers, the team was being driven at a breakneck gallop. Still, it was not to be supposed that a driven vehicle could get away from two such horses as the sheriff and his deputy were astride of. And so they slowly gained ground.

But the start the buckboard had made the race a long one, and the pursuers covered more than five miles before they were able to discern the dim outline of the flying vehicle in the star-lit darkness.

"Open out, Bob," said Joe, edging off to the left of the trail as they drew near.

Bob obeyed in silence, and took the right.

"Let that mare of yours have it," Joe called to him.

They both spurred hard for a final rush, and, in less than five minutes, Joe's fierce shout held the driver of the vehicle up.

"Hold them plugs!" he roared, as his horse's nose drew abreast of the buckboard's hind wheels.

The man on the driving seat promptly threw his weight on the reins, and flung his horses almost on to their haunches. They stood shaking and panting in a perfect fog of sweat, while he laughed round into the sheriff's face.

"Say, sheriff, wot's gettin' yer?" he cried derisively.

There was a moment's ominous silence while Joe looked over the outfit. The buckboard was empty. His eyes came back to the driver, and his fury at the trick played on him sounded in the rasp of his voice.

"I want you, Snakes Addy!" he said from behind his levelled gun. "You're just comin' right back. Put up your hands! Bob, get his guns."

The laughter died out of Addy's face. But he obeyed the summons.

"What's the game, sheriff?" he inquired, weakening.

"That's jest what I'm goin' to find out, son," replied Joe dryly. "Ther's a penitentiary yearnin' fer you, an' it's got a tidy hangin' outfit to it. I'll sure make things clear to you when we're back in Dyke Hole. Meanwhiles, Bob, jest take that buckboard an' git a holt on the lines. Guess I'll take your mare."

If Bob were slow of speech he was a man of dexterity and swiftness in his calling. Snakes found himself relieved of his guns, and with a pair of irons on his wrists, almost before he was aware of it. Then, in a few moments, the little party were silently making their way back to Dyke Hole.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WOLF AND THE LAMBS

DICK ROYDON was gone, vanished, spirited away, as surely as daylight shadows vanish under the pall of night.

Dyke Hole was left staring and dismayed. But its dismay was not at the disappearance of Roydon. It was at the thought of the ease with which the kidnapping had been done, right under the sheriff's very nose. That was the whole point with them. The men from the hills had deliberately waited to commit their outrage under the nose of the one man of whom they were supposed to live in dread; and, where the matter of dealing with crime and criminals was concerned, whom every citizen in Dyke Hole had come to believe infallible, and whose simple word was their law. Their idol had crashed to a million pieces. It was Bob Gauvin who clearly described the position in the plainest phraseology.

"Mr. Joe 'll sure be right up agin it after this," he said to his faithful antagonist, "Dyke Hole" Bill.

And Bill, with his ever-ready spirit of contention, had straightway negatived his remark.

"Tchah!" he exclaimed. "Your liver's dead white, Bob. Sheriff ain't begun."

And it was Bill's optimism that proved. Within an hour every reliable citizen in Dyke Hole received a peremptory order to assemble, and, in another half-hour, every mother's son of them was out in the saddle, scouring the country in all directions. Joe knew the temper of his people. He knew better than to let them foregather at Moe's and discuss the affair. He needed no telling as to his own position in the matter. As Bob had said, he was up against it. He had not only to rescue Roydon,

but he must gather up the threads of his own damaged prestige and hold them in a firmer grasp than ever. He must enforce instant discipline in his people. Thus it was Dyke Hole's majority spent a night, and most of the next day, in the saddle.

The immediate arrest of Snakes Addy had been the saving clause for Joe, and helped to hold the voice of criticism in check. He was a prominent member of the hill gang, and Dyke Hole felt that at any moment a startling denouement might occur. Every man was ready, from force of habit if not from personal regard, to follow the sheriff's lead; but let him fail them, and they would turn on him like a pack of ravening prairie wolves.

So, for the moment, they reserved their judgment. They were uncertain. If Joe came out on top they would live to regret any hastiness in that direction. If he went under—well, there was time enough for that. They obeyed him now in sullen silence, ready to show their teeth at a moment's notice. And of all this Joe was perfectly aware.

Dyke Hole did not see its sheriff again until the following evening about sundown. Then he rode into the village, his great horse jaded and foot-weary. But if the horse was tired its rider showed no such signs of weakness. Joe sat easily erect in his saddle, his fierce eyes burning with that peculiar fire which the men of the village had long since learned to regard as a danger-signal not to be lightly disregarded.

He was greeted with an excessive cordiality at the saloon as he rode up, and, to those understanding the methods of this people, this was a bad sign. After the greetings had passed Ripley Boyle, who had not been called upon for duty on account of his age and profession, and who had consequently spent the interim of waiting in the hotel, voiced the thought of the entire company.

"Any word of 'em, sheriff?" he inquired.

Joe scanned the eager questioning faces about him. What he read there found no reflection in his own expression. His stern face was coldly commanding. All his latent force was backing the steady glow of his eyes.

"That boy'll be around in a day or two," he said, with quiet assurance, "or," he added grimly, "ther'll be a pretty hangin' in these parts."

For a second there was a dead silence. Then Boyle again put a question, but this time more doubtfully.

"You mean Snakes Addy?"

"I mean every blazin' hill tough around these parts." Joe's eyes were fixed on the pasty face of the lawyer with such intensity that the little man shifted uneasily and allowed his gaze to wander. "And," he added, as an afterthought, "I'm goin' to do that hangin'."

Somebody laughed in the crowd, and Joe's eyes flashed in the direction. But the faces he encountered had no laughter in them. Then he turned back to Boyle.

"Wus you astin' any more questions?" he inquired, in a manner which made the lawyer wish he had not made himself quite so conspicuous. The conciliatory smile he returned was very feeble.

"Guess not," he said. "No need to question you, sheriff. If there's a man here knows his work, it's you. Only——"

"Only?" Joe took him up short.

"Just nothing."

The sheriff made no reply. He simply turned his horse away, and let the weary beast amble slowly on in the direction of his hut.

There was no yielding in this man. He had been a whole day and a night in the saddle, yet, when he reached the hut, he sprang lightly to the ground, limber, almost cat-like in his agility. He off-saddled and rubbed his horse down, and then turned the poor brute out to roll and graze. And this he did without one change of expression. There was neither hope nor despair in that lean face, just a stern moulding which looked incapable of expressing any emotion.

He watched his horse till it had taken its roll, then he turned and put his head in the doorway of the hut.

"Ho, Bob!" he cried. "I'll be right back in an hour."

An answering grunt from within satisfied him, and he turned and strode away towards the far end of the village.

The sun was down, and the chill of the approaching fall was in the evening air. The village was very still, and, but for the group still clustering about the saloon veranda, appeared quite deserted. Joe crossed the market place, his eyes cold and hard. He looked neither to the

right nor the left. It was as though he had no thought for anything but his own set purpose. The men on the veranda were watching him, yet he seemed to be quite indifferent to their presence. Ripley Boyle, resentful after his recent snubbing, drew Bob Gauvin's attention.

"Going to hang them all, is he?" he said, with a venomous laugh.

Bob looked hard into the little man's fat, cherubic face.

"That's how he said."

"Yes—said."

"Dyke Hole" Bill interferred.

"Feelin' mean, you law feller, ain't you?" he said, with a harsh laugh.

"Feeling pretty good," responded Boyle quite cheerfully. "I was just wondering how Tombstone Joe will feel if he doesn't make good."

"He's got to make good," said Bob seriously. And there was a light in his eyes that set the lawyer grinning with malice.

"That's it. He's got to make good. If he don't—what then?"

There was an uneasy stir on the veranda. Dave Bless from his position, leaning against one of the posts, answered him.

"If he don't he'd best git right out quick," he said. And the murmur of approval which followed his remark displayed the general feeling on the matter.

There was only one dissentient voice, and that was the piratical Bill. Whether it was his innate antagonism to any expressed opinion, or his belief in the sheriff, it would be impossible to say, but his words came decidedly and unpleasantly.

"Say, an' if he don't? Wal? Guess he's made gophers of you that long it don't signify. You'll sure all jump when Joe barks. You make me sore laffin'."

His face was serious, there was no sign of levity about him. And somehow there was no retort forthcoming, not even from his adversary in debate, Bob Gauvin. What he said was true, and, though it was distasteful enough, these men knew it. To a man the element of rebellion was in their hearts, but Joe must fail, and fail badly, before they would take heart to overthrow him.

They all remembered on' well the incident in the sheriff's hut, years ago, when he had held them all up and relieved them of their weapons.

In the meantime the object of their criticism made his way towards the hut where the two children had been lodged ever since their unexpected arrival in the village. He was within a few yards of the place when he suddenly changed his mind and crossed over to Ramford's store. Something had roused him out of a long deep train of thought, which had nothing to do with those small souls he was visiting—something which had given his thoughts a fresh trend and softened the fierce fire of his eyes. He was only in the store a very few minutes, and came out stuffing a small paper parcel into the pocket of his serge jacket.

That visit to the store had quite changed him. The great eyes had lost their wild fire and the mouth its harsh set. He was almost smiling, not physically, but some kindly thought, some tenderness of feeling, had come uppermost and found expression in his eyes. Maybe it had been different had he encountered any of the villagers. But the place was deserted. There was no one to witness this display of the man's gentler mood.

He reached the hut, his ears straining for a familiar sound. There was none, and he hesitated. Perhaps the little ones were in bed. He knew it was about their time, for Jocelyn insisted on sundown as their bed-time.

The hut was small, square and squat. Its roof gaped here and there, and the weather-boarding of its walls was badly split and shrunken. But it was weather-proof, although dilapidated. Even the "lean" the whole structure had, suggesting as it did an immediate collapse, was not really serious. It had stood thus so long that it was impossible to attach any importance to such defects.

If the outside displayed such signs of decay, the inside was far more promising. Joe's purse had been liberally used, and a woman's eye and hand had directed matters. Jocelyn had spared neither trouble nor expense, and the result was at least comfort and a certain tasteful femininity in the general scheme of decorations.

The whole place, it consisted of but one large room, had been scrubbed, ceiling, walls and floor. There was a good-

sized bedstead occupying one corner, and this was sheltered by a large curtain of cotton material. Also, within this alcove were a wash-stand and an iron bath, with various other toilet requisites.

The rest of the place had been fixed up into a sort of kitchen-parlour-playroom, with cookstove and cupboard, a table for meals, several chairs, and a few rugs, and the walls were carefully arrayed in pictures cut from papers and books, and pasted up with an eye to interesting the infant mind. The two windows were covered with neatly made curtains of some sort of chintz stuff, and a row of flowers, growing in pots, decorated the sills. It was humble, homely, neat and clean, and the atmosphere was certainly comforting.

Joe pushed open the door with a caution that was quite absurdly foreign to him. He looked as out of place in that simple little home as a wolf at a christening. He was smiling as he crept in through the half-open door, and his smile was expectant and gentle. He edged his way in and stood for a moment listening. The place was very quiet and still. He tried to catch the sound of the sleepers' even breathing. There was none. He moved a step forward, and as he did so he heard a smothered titter and rustling on the bed; the curtain was suddenly snatched back, and two laughing, shining faces were thrust out at him.

"Oh, uncoo!" rang out the delighted greeting in chorus. And the man grinned back at the two little figures in their red flannel night-clothes.

"What, kiddies, you abed?" he exclaimed, as though surprised. "Wal, now, who'd 'a' tho't."

The next moment both children tumbled headlong from the bed and ran at him. He picked them up in his arms and pretended to scold.

"Say, wot you doin', you chunks of daylight. I'll jest have to tell Missie Jocelyn 'bout this. You out of bed, you sassy monks? Say——"

But his scolding was quite without effect.

"We tho't it was her come back," piped little Sally.

"But we're glad it ain't," said the boy ungratefully.

"We're glad it's you."

Joe kissed them both and carried them back to the bed,

where he sat down beside them. Willie promptly began a deliberate search of his pockets. Sally was less greedy, or perhaps, with feminine tact, she contrived to conceal her feelings. Her little brain was certainly full of some news which she promptly proceeded to pour into Joe's ready ears.

"Ain't you sorry fer pore Missie Jock?" Sally exclaimed, her eyes wide and serious. "She's jest been cryin', an' a-cryin'. An' I cried, an'—an' so did Willie——"

"Didn't cry," exclaimed the indignant Willie, still groping in Joe's pockets.

"Did. I see you. There was water in your eyes, an' it trickled into your milk when you was drinkin' it, you Willie."

"Didn't cry," persisted Willie, continuing in his search.

"Wal, wot wus to it?" inquired Joe, to stop the discussion.

"I dunno, uncoo," said Sally. "I dunno sure. I ast her, an' ast her, an' she wouldn't say. Then she wented out, an' told us to stay a-bed till she come back."

Joe's face had lost its smile.

"An' when's she comin' back, Sally?"

"Soon."

The child had one arm about the man's neck, and was twisting and untwisting a lock of his black hair with the other.

"Then she ain't back yet," Joe said musingly. "Pore gal, pore gal."

The wide eyes of the child grew misty. Joe's sympathy was too much for her gentle heart. Her brows drew together, and two great tears rolled down her thin, flushed cheeks.

"Is—is—she s-sick?" she spluttered tearfully. "I—do—I-love her, uncoo, I do-o-o-o."

The tears fell fast, and Joe had no idea how to comfort her. He took her in his arms and kissed her and talked to her, but the fit of crying kept on. He reassured her, telling her that Missie Jock wasn't ill, only she'd lost a friend and didn't know where he was, and that he was going to find him for her, sure. But his comfort was quite unavailing, and it was left to Willie to bring about

the cessation of his sister's grief. He suddenly let out a "Whoop!" and drew the parcel out of Joe's pocket.

"Candy!" he cried in an ecstasy of delight. Sally's sobs ceased instantaneously, and, in a few moments, like the sun of an April sky, her smile broke out through the tearful clouds.

"Sure," cried Joe, in his relief. "Ther', I clear fer-got them candies. Say, kiddies," he went on, watching Sally's face anxiously, "we'll hev a tea-party. Set you right ther', Sally, and you, Willie, you hunch on to that ther' piller, so." He set the pillow for Willie, and Sally was sitting beside him on the bed.

"Now," he went on seriously, "you'se givin' this yer tea-party, Sally, so git a holt on the bag of candy an' pass 'em right around. No grabbin', Willie," he expostulated, as Sally, laughing with delight, handed the bag to her brother. "Jest you git a holt on one of them. Ther', that's how folks do in sassiety. Now you, Sally; ther', that's it. No, I don't fancy no candy. Guess I'll jest hev a chaw. Folks don't allus take candy in sassiety. Some folks chaws t'baccar."

The man watched the bag pass to and fro between the children. Every gentle thought in his mind was centred upon them; this was one of those rare moments of delight that made his life possible. His love for these children was the keynote to his complex character, a keynote that was never allowed to be struck with the sharp eyes of Dyke Hole upon him.

He let them eat till he deemed it advisable to stop them, but he had not the heart to do so as soon as the maternal instinct of Jocelyn would have done. He had no idea of caring for their small internals properly. He sat there basking in the sunshine of their chatter, entering into their interests like a very child himself. But, after a while, as Jocelyn had not returned, he began to think it was time that he left them to their sleep. So, with surprising weakness, he let them take two more candies each, and ordered them to their bed.

"Say, kiddies," he said suddenly, as though the thought had only just occurred to him, "this yer tea-party's got to quit. Folks in sassiety never takes more'n haf-an-hour over tea, I guess. We'll jest have two more cups each,

hey?" He gave them each two of the biggest chocolates he could pick out. "Ther', now I'm goin' to be the chore-man an' fix the tea-things into the cupboard. So."

He put the bag of candies in his pocket. Then he caught Sally in his arms and bundled her up and put her into bed, and then, with pretended severity, chased Willie in beside her. Then he tucked them up with all the care of a mother, and stood looking down at them as though he would devour them with his great hungry eyes. The observant Sally abruptly drew attention to them.

"Say, uncoo, ain't you got funny eyes? They's like a cows," she said, gazing up at him with childish frankness. "Willie says they ain't eyes. He says gran'pa Martin allus called 'em lamps. They ain't lamps, is they?"

"Silly kid," interrupted the wise Willie, "lamps burns."

"They doesn't when they's blowed out," retorted Sally. "Do they, uncoo?"

Joe was constrained to reply.

"Course not. Now you git busy an' slep some. I'll sure git in a heap of trouble keppin' you awake, when Missie Jock comes back."

"No fear," remarked Willie. "Say, uncoo, we ain't to go to sleep till she comes back. She's goin' to teach us to say suthin' she calls 'prayers' when she gits back. Is it a game, uncoo? Ken you teach us?"

"Course he ken teach us," said Sally sapiently. "Uncoo knows ev'rything—heaps an' heaps. You teach us 'fore she comes back, uncoo."

"That'll be dandy," put in Willie. And both children were out of bed again, and Sally's thin little arms were round the man's neck in an instant.

But no answering smile was forthcoming from Joe. He was painfully alarmed, and somehow he found it difficult to look into those innocent eyes gazing up into his. Never in his life had he been placed in such a predicament, never had he been caught at such a disadvantage.

For a moment his thoughts sped back to scenes he had not looked upon since the days of his own childhood. The red plains were all around him again. He saw the endless sage brush, the stragglng bluff, and the tumbled adobe hut that was the setting from which he first saw

the light. He saw the attenuated figure of his old mother, with the same great hungry eyes which she had handed down to him. He saw the old book, the only book she ever read, and he remembered that it was the Bible.

He could call to mind how she would hurl quotations from it at him, and how she would read the book aloud at nights till, from the very dreariness of her voice, he would fall asleep. The whole picture came to him now, and he groped in his memory for the words of a prayer which he felt must, at some time, have been taught him.

But nothing came, and the children were still waiting. He felt he could not fail them, must not fail them, and yet— He recalled the various preachers he had heard, and, to his regret now, he remembered how they invariably sent him to sleep, their words passing over him and leaving him unimpressed. What could he do? He regretted now that he had not let Sarah Glades open the temperance meeting with prayer. That might have helped him, had he only foreseen this position.

Then something suddenly came to him. It was just a flash. Where had he heard it? No, he hadn't heard it. It was a card in the Mission House, and it began, "Our Father—" Yes, it was a prayer, and he tried to recall the words he had read on it. They had struck him at the time, and he recollected how he had thought then that the Man who wrote them must have been a real white man, and one who knew what he was talking about. If he could only remember them all.

"Ain't you goin' to teach us?" inquired the artless Sally.

"Course he is, kid," said Willie, with boyish superiority.

"Well, why don't you begin, uncoo?"

Sally's wide eyes fixed Joe's with a gentle fascination. He gulped hard, for something seemed suddenly to have risen in his throat.

"Why, 'tain't zac'y a game, kiddies," he said heavily. "No, 'tain't a game. It's jest suthin' ev'ry good kiddie ought to learn, so when you grows up you ken teach other pore kiddies wot don't know. It's sure one of them things wot makes grown folks act squar', makes 'em do what's right, 'stead of gettin' around tellin' lies, an' stealin', an' generally actin' dirty. Nope, I sure wouldn't

call it a game nowadays. It's jest a few words to the good Gawd as makes you feel good you've sed 'em, an' act good, cos He's heard 'em, an' is real pleased with you cos you sed 'em."

"An' you'll teach us, uncoo?" begged Sally.

"Bully," exclaimed Willie, without full understanding.

"Wal, I don't rightly know as I learned the rules of it good. Lestways, I ain't played it a heap lately. You sure git mussed up ef you don't kep in good practice."

"But you're good, uncoo," expostulated Sally.

"Sure," added Willie.

Joe shook his head.

"Not good. But mostly I try actin' squar'."

"I wants to be like you, uncoo," said Sally softly.

For once in his life the sheriff's hand shook as he caressed the mousy hair of the little girl. He was shaking from head to foot. At that moment he felt that he hated himself and all his world, his very existence.

"You'll be better'n me, I guess, little gal. Yes, I'll sure try an' teach you. An' if I ain't got it jest right, why I guess we'll git Missie Jock to fix things. She's good, an' knows it fine. Here, set right up on your knees. You, too, Willie. Ther', that's it," as the children knelt on the bed in front of him. "Now, set you hands together, so." He clasped his clawlike hands in front of his face. "Yep, that's how. Now, jest shet your eyes tight, an' don't go fer to open 'em till we finished."

The two little red-flannelled figures remained kneeling in front of him while he racked his brains. The perspiration stood out in great beads upon his forehead. He would rather have confronted the muzzles of four fully loaded guns than have faced those four tightly shut eyes.

"Now, this is jest how we begin," he said presently. "You ken say the words after me. See?" The eyes opened, and both children nodded assent. "Now, shet your eyes tight."

When the eyes had once more closed he began in a voice rendered doubly harsh by his emotion.

"Our Father," he said, and paused while the words were repeated. "You got that," he went on, to give himself time. The children repeated again, and he was forced to explain.

"Not them words, kiddies," he said. "Now agin. Our Father," he began a second time. The children repeated the words once more.

There was a faint rustle at the door, but Joe was too intent on his task to notice it. Jocelyn was looking in through the half-open doorway with wide-open, wondering eyes. She stood quite still. The man's tall figure loomed hazily in the evening light, and the sight of it thrilled her with an emotion which set the tears of sympathy welling into her eyes.

"Our Father," repeated Joe for the third time, "who lives right up ther' in heaven, blessin's on yer name." He paused while the children repeated the words after him, and Jocelyn crept in and stole close up behind him. His task lay heavily upon him, but he meant to struggle with it to the end.

"Hallowed be Thy name," whispered the girl in his ear. Joe never stirred, only he experienced a boundless relief.

"Hallowed be Thy name," he corrected himself.

"Thy kingdom come," Jocelyn went on.

"Thy kingdom come," echoed Joe, with the children re-echoing it after him.

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread," Jocelyn's voice had become louder, and children and sheriff took the words directly from her, so that it seemed as though Joe, as well as the children, was receiving his first lesson in prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil; For Thine is the kingdom, The power and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen."

The last sound of the final "Amen" died out, and a long silence followed. The children waited for more, and Joe, too, was uncertain. But as Jocelyn remained silent, he gently unclasped the small hands from before their faces and bade them open their eyes.

"Guess that's most all, kiddies," he said. Then he added in a constrained tone, "Kind of makes you feel good, eh? Wal, guess Missie Jock's right here to fix you in bed, so I'll git goin'."

Jocelyn had to silence the chorus of protest at this announcement, and, for the next few minutes, she was

occupied in bestowing the children safely in bed. After that she found Joe sitting outside on the doorstep. She had closed the curtains over the windows to shut the dying evening light out of the room, and now she closed the door behind her and sat down beside him.

For some moments there was silence between them. It seemed as though neither knew quite how to break up the awkwardness of the moment. Thankful as he was for Jocelyn's timely help, Joe, was keenly ashamed of his own ignorance. It was he who spoke at last.

"You bin cryin', gal," he said, without any preamble.

"No—I—I——"

"Them kiddies told me."

"They told you?"

"Yep."

"God bless their little hearts."

There were fresh tears in the girl's grey eyes. He looked straight to his front.

"You needn't to cry, gal," he said almost brusquely.

"Oh, Joe, I—I—can't help it."

"You needn't to cry," I said, he went on roughly. "You're sure goin' to git that boy back. Sure as my name's Tombstone."

Jocelyn caught him by the arm as he rose to go.

"You are sure, Joe?"

"Yep," he said, releasing himself.

"But they'll kill him," she exclaimed in a horrified whisper.

Joe was standing facing her. His lean figure towered in the growing dusk. His face was stern, and his eyes glowed like those of a hawk.

"They won't," he said. Then he turned away and moved off a step. But he paused and looked back. "Say," his voice was harsh and jarring, "I'd sure be glad fer you to write that prayer onto paper," he said slowly. "I've kind of took a notion to it."

And he was gone before the girl could frame her reply.

CHAPTER XXII

SNAKES HAS AN INTERESTING HALF-HOUR WITH THE SHERIFF

JOE left the girl comforted. He had given her no details, no reason for his assurance of Dick's safety. But that was his way. And Jocelyn, understanding his peculiarities, accepted it. She felt almost happy as she returned to her seat on the doorstep to await Maud Sarah's return for the night. Joe had promised that Dick should return to her, and her faith in her friend was such that she never doubted for a moment.

Meanwhile Joe went back to his hut. Curiously enough, though his object had been to comfort her, he had not even a thought for the girl now, or the man whose fate still seemed to be hanging in the balance. Even the two children, who were as the sun of his life, were, for the moment, forgotten. He was thinking of that prayer he had just heard, and wondering why he had never come across it before.

His religion, even to himself, was an unknown quantity; as a matter of fact, he had never before thought of religion. And he was puzzled how such a condition of things could have come to pass. It was the beauty, the simplicity of the words that now struck him, nor could he make up his mind which it was that had affected him most—the words themselves, or the reverential tone of the girl's voice as she recited them.

He felt shamed, and he didn't understand why. He felt that somehow he had missed something in life that might have made everything different. Somehow, it seemed to him, he had hitherto lived only by the force of his brute nature; driving, forcing, forgetful that there was a gentler side to life under which the soul of man might expand and bask in the sunlight of spirituality. It had cost him a lot

to ask Jocelyn to write out that prayer, but he was glad he had done so—very glad.

By the time he reached the hut something of his thought had found reflection in the softening of his hard features. He was quite unaware of it. He was not fully aware of any alteration in his feelings, except that the prayer, in his own phraseology, had made him feel "sort of anyhow."

But even this feeling passed as he paused to raise the latch of his door. It would almost seem as if the touch of the cold iron had once more sealed up the springs of religious feeling which had been set flowing. Inside the hut he knew that the faithful Bob was safeguarding a prisoner who would shortly have to answer to him in a way he little dreamed of.

He pushed the door open.

Bob was in a chair facing him, with his feet on the stool. His heavy face was dull and apathetic. The room was much the same as usual in its general air of untidiness. The remains of a meal lay scattered about, the cookstove, as usual, was choked with ashes. The wash-bucket stood full of soapy water. Possibly it was this condition that made it home to these men.

Snakes Addy was lying full length on the sheriff's bed. He was shackled with a heavy chain by one leg to the foot of the bed, and by one arm to the head of it. It was harsh treatment, but then Bob Makaw was at one with his superior, and had no sort of sympathy for his prisoners. He was a practical, unimaginative sort of fellow, always thorough, always to be relied on. His orders had been to hold Snakes Addy, and—well, he had held him, that was all.

The sheriff stepped inside. Snakes lifted his ferret eyes to his face, and then dropped them again. Bob stirred in his chair as though about to speak, but apparently thought better of it and re-settled himself. Joe moved over to the fuel-box and seated himself on its edge. He was in full view of Snakes' crafty face, and he gazed at it for some moments in disconcerting silence.

At last he helped himself to a chew of tobacco, while a grin spread over his face.

"Guess you're a neat proposition," he said at last, in that slow, drawling way he used when one of his fiercest

storms lay behind his words. "Say, ther's a heap of dirt behind them mean features of yours, Snakes."

Addy changed his position so that he faced the sheriff.

"Set these chains loose an' I'll talk you, sheriff," he said sullenly. "That job of a feiler has kep me trussed here sence ever you took me. You ain't got nuthin' up agin me, so wher's the right fer these?"

Joe glanced at the heavy shackles as though considering. Then he glanced at Bob and nodded.

"Loose 'em," he said coldly.

Bob rose heavily and unlocked the chains. Then he returned to his seat and closed his eyes. Addy sat up and stretched his limbs. He felt his ankle and wrist, and rubbed them. Then he sat with his elbows on his knees, and his mean face resting in his dirty palms. His face was almost bestial. He had no forehead to speak of, and his eyes were set so deep and so close together that he looked positively apish.

"Wal?" he questioned, and the word somehow bared his yellow teeth, and gave him a currish snarl.

Joe allowed a moment to elapse, while his restless eyes studied the man's evil features.

"You got a cur'us repitation around these parts, Snakes," he said at last. "An', seemin'ly, folks has you sized up good. It's said you're mostly allus ready to stir up a heap of trouble, an'—an' squirm clean out, an' leave other folks to get the racket. I ain't sure but they're right."

"Guess you're yeppin' some, ain't yer?" the man retorted truculently.

"Mebbe that's so. It sure makes you mad you've jest got to set an' listen, don't it? You see, this is my shack, an' you're jest visitin'."

There was a pause. Bob's eyes remained closed. He was very much like a good watch-dog. Joe's grin remained fixed. He was rather enjoying himself.

"What are you holdin' me fer?" inquired Snakes.

Joe took his time answering.

"Wal, it's jest this. Ther's that feller Roydon, who happens to be a dep'ty sheriff of this county, bin took off by you an' your gang. Now he's sure a law-officer, an' it's a mighty ser'us thing when folks gits monkeyin' with a law-officer. It's so mighty ser'us ther' ain't no tellin'

but what the President of the United States is li'ble to git mad about it an' do things. Now, when I wus down Arizona way, Wild Bill Fraser, he wus sheriff of Placer County, got it good from a gang of toughs who'd bin that fool-headed they laid fer him fer weeks. Wal, Pres' got busy, he wus awful riled. Y' see, Wild Bill wus sure a dandy, an' Pres' needs his sort in a tough country. He jest sent a reg'ment of cav'lry, an' shot up the district. Sez he, to himself, 'I can't locate the feller as shot pore Bill, so I'll give 'em a tol'ble lesson.' Say, ther' wasn't a tough left in that distric' when Pres' called his boys off. I ain't got a notion to scare you, boy, I'm sure on'y showin' you how it is monkeyin' with a law-officer."

The sheriff took up a position of greater comfort, nursing one knee in his clasped hands, and leant back as though he had no idea of cutting this interview short.

"This racket ain't any of mine," said Snakes, with a shrug. "Guess you're wastin' hot air."

Joe shook his head.

"I never waste nuthin'—not even hot air."

Snakes stirred impatiently.

"Quit it then," he demanded, "an' let's hear what's itchin' you."

"Sure."

"Wal?"

Snakes sat up.

"Guess Pres' is kind of busy wi' 'lections an' things jest 'bout now, an' don't notion gettin' mussed up with Dyke Hole any, so I don't figger to worrit him. I'm goin' to see this thing clear thro' myself. I sure ain't goin' to let the circuit courts butt in neither. I'm jest goin' to straighten the hull thing my way. Savvee?"

"Sure you do," Joe went on after a pause, during which Snakes remained silently expectant. "Now, seems to me the position's mostly this aways. Ther's Roydon bin took by your folk, an' you bin took by me. Wal, I don't figger your folks is bustin' to feed him, an' kep him in no sort of fancy luxury. You ain't goin' to hev him set up in a dandy shack, an' give him ham an' eggs three times a day. Wal, I sure ain't no use fer treatin' you that aways, neither, so things levels theirselves some. Ain't that so?"

"Tchah!"

Joe's peroration was getting on his prisoner's nerves. Besides, he conveyed a subtle threat in the grin which had fixed itself upon his hungry features.

"Ain't feelin' good?" he inquired gently.

"Your talk 'ud sicken a hog."

"Jest so," observed the sheriff dryly.

"Guess you got suthin' lyin' back of it. Git to the finish, man. This ain't no Mission House. S'pose you ain't no Bible tracts around you?"

Snakes' attempted sarcasm did not hide his real feelings.

Bob opened his eyes and fixed them on the sheriff for one brief, contemplative second, then he closed them again.

"Finish?" said Joe interrogatively. "Finish?" he repeated. "Wal, seems to me ther's sure two kinds of finishes to most ev'rything. Ther's a good finish, an' a mighty bad one, jest as the cat jumps. Which 'ud you notion gettin' to?"

Snakes' beady eyes settled questioningly on Joe's face. And what he read there seemed to settle a decision he had been struggling to arrive at for some time.

"Say, sheriff. It don't seem right fer you to do all the talk," he said, endeavouring to emulate the other's manner. "You wus figgerin' this was my racket. You wus figgerin' I wus hep to wot they done to that foreign guy of yours. Guess you hit the blind trail. But I ken put you wise."

"That's how I wus figgerin'," put in Joe, with an air of credulity.

"Ef I tell you this thing, wher' do I stand?" Snakes inquired craftily.

Joe considered.

"On velvet," he said at last.

There was a decided smile of relief on Snakes' face as he proceeded.

"Wal. It's Kit," he said at once. "This is Kit's work, sure," he said, with vicious emphasis. "'Six-shooter' Kit had got to git back on you fer that James business, an' she's done it. She's sure goin' to do that boy up. She's goin' to do you up, later. Say, that gal has swore to do up Dyke Hole. An' she'll do it. I ain't had nothin' in this 'pot.' Not a chip. The Mission was

packed wi' her men, an' I jest come around to see things. When they got busy I lit. You wus ther', an' sure I guessed you'd git doin'. I got my team ther' an' lit, an'—wal, ther's nothin' else to it. You got me while them fellers hit the trail. Guess they'll do him up. Maybe they done him up by this."

There was another pause. Again Bob's eyes opened. This time they glanced at Snakes' face. From there they slowly passed over to Joe's. Then they closed again, and he sighed contentedly.

"Guess he's in a pretty bad fix, Snakes, my boy," Joe said, with a touch of gentleness in his voice. "I didn't jest guess she'd be that mean. Still, she's a woman, an' you can't never figger how a woman's goin' to do. So she's likely done him up," he finished, musing. "That's mean. Terrible mean. But he ain't in no wuss fix than you. No, she'll jest hev to git right to it an' hang you."

Snakes sprang to his feet.

"Eh? You—"

"Set!"

Joe pointed at the bed. His command was quietly spoken, but there was that in his eyes which enforced it. Snakes sat down again; his face had suddenly turned a sickly grey. He laughed harshly.

"You can't do it, sheriff," he said thickly.

"It on'y needs rope," Joe replied easily.

"But—but you said if I give you the truth I'd——"

"Be on velvet. Jest so. But I guess velvet ain't the best sort of fixin' to git standin' around on."

The two men looked into each other's eyes. It was the shifty eyes of Snakes that were averted first.

"You can't bluff me, sheriff," he said slowly, and with some attempt at lightness. "You can't do it. You're sheriff, but you ain't judge on the circuit."

"That's wher' you're talking foolish, Snakes," Joe replied. A subtle change had come over his manner, a change which carried a terrible conviction to his prisoner. "I'm goin' to hang you jest as sure as pork don't grow on pine trees. I'm goin' to hang you, jest as sure as that boy don't git right back here in seven days, unhurt, an' treat decent. I'm goin' to hang you with my own hands, an' with a rawhide rope, ef it's the last thing I ever do in Dyke

Hole. You ast for a finish, Snakes; well, you got it sure. It's the bad finish, an' you found it. But I swar before the good Gawd that's jest wot's goin' to happen, ef that boy ain't around as I say."

Joe's great, strong teeth snapped. Snakes stared at him and essayed to speak. Then he changed his mind. He cleared his throat instead. Joe turned to Bob, whose eyes were now wide open.

"Bob, you'd best fix him again," he said sharply. "An', Bob, ther's jest seven days before I hang that guy. Seven, mark that. Now he's got his show-down mebbe he'll hev word to send around to his friends. Wal, you ken see to it Shaggy Steele needs a job. But it's up to you he's ready fer hangin' this day week."

While Joe was talking the silent Bob was busy replacing the shackles on his prisoner.

Snakes offered no word of protest. He knew that resistance of any sort was worse than useless with these men. Besides, his brain was teeming with rapid thought. For once in his life he seemed to have left his tracks uncovered, and the hounds were upon him. Nor did he quite understand how it had all come about. The one thing he fully realized was the fact that Joe had adopted a course of action which had never come into his calculations. He would have laughed at such a threat in any other man, but somehow, outrageous as it was, there was a certainty, a convincingness about Joe that already made him feel the rawhide rope tightening about his neck.

When Snakes had been secured Joe beckoned Bob out of the hut.

"You got that?" he inquired.

There was a flicker of a smile in Bob's shrewd eyes.

"Sure," he replied.

"Makes you laff the way they're scared when they're goin' to git hanged, don't it?" Joe went on seriously.

"When you bluff 'em that aways," said Bob, with an uneasy glance at his chief.

"Eh?" Joe turned sharply.

The two men eyed each other steadily.

"It ain't no bluff," said Joe fiercely. "Ef Roydon's done up, I'll hang that dirty crook with my own two hands, jest as sure as ther's a red-hot hell yearnin' fer his filthy carkis."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHERIFF PAYS A CALL

As time went by the undercurrent of rebellion looked like surging to the surface. The people of Dyke Hole were much like a pack of starving wolves. With them, as with the wolves, it would be better to be the laggard, ambling along in the rear of the pack, than the leader who falls by the way. In their eyes the sheriff had fallen, and now they were hungrily licking their lips, ready to tear him limb from limb.

For years they had rendered a grudging obedience which he had forced from them by sheer force of character, but it was a yoke they resented, and were ready to fling off at the faintest glimmer of opportunity. That opportunity seemed, at last, to have come. And the ferment was ready to break out into desperate eruption.

Moe's bar, as might be expected, was the hot-bed of sedition, and it was here that Joe's name was first ridiculed with coarse pleasantry; then, as the underlying feeling gained courage and strength, it was sneered at, treated to a scathing contempt, and, finally, anathematized with a boldness that would have been impossible only a week before. To hear these men talk, one would have thought that the last man in the world they had to fear, the last man in the world who had a claim on their loyalty, was Tombstone Joe.

For the moment the saving clause in the peace of the city was the animosity, the individual antagonism, that existed amongst the people. If Dave Bless offered an insult, with the sheriff for its object, he was promptly called down by the lawyer, Boyle, whose knowledge and flow of language always enabled him to reduce the veterinary surgeon to a metaphoric pulp. So it was between the redoubtable Bill and Bob Gauvin. Although with

them there was generally less language expended and more brute force. And so it was with all the rest. There was no unanimity among them; and thus the powder-train of their savagery lacked the spark to spring the mine.

Moe, of them all, had nothing to say. His it was to wait; always to wait. Hitherto he had found that course pay him, and he was a man who, at all times, liked to be paid. Besides, he had more insight into things than these fire-eaters. He did not see that the attack in the Mission House had lowered Joe's prestige in the least. How, he would have asked, had he voiced his thoughts, could Joe, suddenly plunged in darkness by the simultaneous extinguishing of the lights, hope to cope with a gang of desperate ruffians working a preconcerted scheme?

While this condition of ferment was going on, the object of it all remained quite undisturbed, and apparently oblivious to the feeling that had suddenly risen up against him. He went on his way without glancing either to the right or to the left. What he saw, what he understood of the condition of things, no one could say. He probably saw a great deal with those restless eyes of his; and if he did, he held the villagers of so small account that no attitude of theirs could disturb him.

He had their measure as surely as a tailor measures his cloth, and though, deep down in his heart, there was undoubtedly a warmth of feeling for them, he knew just when and how to use the cane, like the father of an unruly family of boys, or as a shepherd's dog knows when to use his teeth around the flock. Nor would he spare them if chastisement were necessary. But, like the sheep-dog, he would herd them to satisfying pastures and the shelter of their pens.

It was the second day after the arrest of Snakes Addy that Joe rode out towards the hills. The sun was not yet past the meridian when he walked his horse across the market-place. He sat the animal straight-backed, yet easily, for, though he had been bred to the saddle, he had never fallen into the easy lounge of the cow-puncher, and even in this small matter his character was curiously displayed.

Once beyond the outskirts of the village he leant for-

ward, and, touching his horse's flanks with his spurs, set off at a hard gallop. And as he went an eager light crept into his dark eyes.

Horse and master were well atuned. The beast never flagged. It kept up a steady swinging gait, and the miles were rapidly devoured. The state of the trail made no difference. Hill and valley, it was all the same. The faithful beast was as hard and unflinching as its master, whose hand alone would check the pace.

As the hills grew bigger Joe eased his horse; but even then it insisted on climbing the almost precipitous ascents with that generous eagerness which is the horse's crowning glory. At last the horseman turned off into a side cattle-track, which cut its way down a narrow avenue of dark pine trees.

He was nearing the object of his journey. He smiled as he gazed about him. There was something now in his whole bearing suggesting an unusual buoyancy, a pleasurable anticipation. And it remained with him until he came within view of a long, low, thatched building.

The place looked like a farm, but that it was shut in amidst these dense pine woods, with only sufficient break around it to form a fire-guard. There was a considerable barn and several other outbuildings. There was poultry scratching about, several cows were quietly feeding in a corral, and the homely gruntings and snortings of the pigs, somewhere in the rear of the place, fairly completed the impression.

Joe took in every detail with an interest he did not attempt to conceal. There was no need for concealment here. There were no onlookers. He was amidst the virgin solitude of the hills, with only the whispering voices of the pine trees about him.

As he came into full view the house showed quite large. It was no shack or shanty, but a considerable dwelling, built of trimmed logs, set laterally and carefully dovetailed. The windows and doors were machine made, and painted a brilliant white, and the thatch of the roof was perfect. There was an atmosphere of prosperity about this woodland home, and a trimness which gave a decided assurance of the good taste and energy of its owner.

Joe drew rein at the open doorway. A large dog, half

wolf and half collie, thrust its muzzle out at him and stood snarling. He paid no attention to the animal, but alighted at once and loosened the cinchas of his saddle. Then, gripping the horn, he swung it clear of his horse's back. His arm described a wide semicircle, and the saddle fell full upon the dog as the brute came stalking him from behind. There was a howl of angry fright, and the animal fled precipitately to the safety of the doorway, where it snapped its great teeth at him like castanets.

Joe turned with a grin and beheld "Six-shooter" Kit standing beside her dog. In an instant he was bare-headed.

"Your servant, mam," he greeted her. Then, as Kit stood without answering his salutation, her beautiful bold eyes drew an explanation from him. "Guess this is a party call, mam, so I off-saddled."

"Party call?" Kit laughed in his face.

"That's how I sed, mam."

Joe turned his horse loose and watched it roll.

"So I s'pose you expect to be asked into the parlour?"

Kit said, her eyes lighting derisively.

Joe turned and surveyed the woman's fine figure, but without rudeness. To him she was very beautiful. She was a type quite common to the prairie, tall, lissome, muscular. Her face was clean cut and healthily tanned. There was a strength, a reliance in her whole bearing which appealed to his manhood, while yet her sex was delightfully pronounced in the delicacy of the contours of her figure. Again he mentally admitted to himself that she was a "grand woman."

He lifted his loose shoulders indifferently.

"Guess the good Gawd sure give us a heap of fresh air around these hills. I ain't bustin' fer no parlour-settin'."

Kit sat herself down on the sill of the doorway, and her dog nestled its ugly head in her lap.

"That suits me," she said coldly.

Joe selected a protruding tree root, seated himself opposite her, and leisurely nipped a chew of tobacco off his plug.

The woman was on the defensive. She was speculating as to this man's object in coming. In whatever light she regarded him, he was sheriff of the county to her, and a

man whose local reputation made him one to be seriously considered at all times. He had said he was paying a party call. Well—although the fact of his coming made her coldly serious, there was something in the idea which amused her.

"A party call," she said presently, as he remained silent, "generally has entertainment for its object. Go ahead, and let's see how we can entertain each other. I haven't any cakes an' wine, but there's a supply of beans and bacon in the house."

Joe shook his head.

"Ther's talk," he suggested. "Folks mostly talk at party calls. An' gener'y a heap more'n nessary," he added dryly. "Party calls," he went on, "wus mostly fixed up fer the purpose of sayin' things wot ain't true 'bout folk wot never did you a notion of harm, an' wot ain't ther' to defend theirselves, an' is, consequent, easy marks. Them as ken do it best is reckoned entertainin', an' is sure ast to most ev'ry sort of sociable goin'."

Kit smiled.

"Is that the entertainment you propose?" she inquired.

"Wal, no, mam. Can't say it is."

Joe paused, and his eyes turned thoughtfully to the dark pinewoods about them.

"Guess ther's things as 'll likely int'rest you, though. Y' see," he went on, looking straight into her eyes again, his own lighting with some slight animation, "you're kind of livin' secluded up in these hills. Sort of shut out o' sassiety. Now, Dyke Hole's bin mighty busy lately. It's goin' to git a sight busier soon."

"And you've come to tell me just how busy it is, how much busier it's going to be?"

Kit's smile was very shrewd as she caressed her dog's ugly head.

"Guess I sure tho't it 'ud be civil," Joe returned.

"You're always civil, sheriff," the woman murmured, lowering her eyes to hide the smile in them.

"Wal, y' see, it don't cost nuthin'—bein' civil."

Joe was quite unaffected by her manner.

"How are those—children?" inquired Kit suddenly.

Joe became all interest once.

"That kind o' 'minds . . . mam, it never come my way

to thank you fer huyking them little bits along to my shack. It was a fine act, mam. An' I 'lows I ain't fergot, and ain't never likely to forget. I filled in the details of wot you did. It wus real noble. Say, it's partly fer that I got along to-day."

Kit shook her head.

"You aren't clear, sheriff. I don't see how there needs to be 'party calls' on that score. I wasn't thinkin' of you when I got a holt on those poor kiddies."

"Mam," said Joe earnestly, "I didn't jest figger as you wus. You wus thinkin' of them bits of sunshine. Which, I sez, it wus the woman in you."

Kit impatiently pushed the dog away. The tone of their conversation was not to her liking.

"Well, and what's all this news you've brought? You didn't come here to pay compliments. Let's hear it, man. You and I are not on the same side of the fence. Well?"

The man didn't answer for a second or two. He seemed to be deliberating. Kit watched him closely.

"Guess ther's things an' things doin'," he replied indifferently at last. "Dyke Hole's worried some. The boys is on the buck, an' don't reckon I ken run things. The women is tryin' to force water down their men's throats. We're hevin' a dandy fine leg-shakin' at the Mission House day after t'morrow, an' I'm sure goin' to hang Snakes Addy come the end of the week. Yep—guess ther's things doin'."

Kit allowed her dog to return to her side, and sat caressing him again.

"Folks is queer," Joe went on. "Now, ef you'd asted me, I'd ha' tho't I could run Dyke Hole as easy as meltin' snow in summer. Dyke Hole don't seem to be no sort of proposition to set you hollerin'. Guess I ain't took 'em right. Guess I'll hev to git a fresh look around— Eh?"

Kit had interrupted him with a look.

"What are you hanging Addy for?" she demanded sharply.

Joe shook his head.

"He's one of the hill toughs."

Kit laughed angrily.

"But what's he done?"

"Jest nuthin' as far as I know."

"Well?"

The woman's tone was indignant. Joe shrugged.

"I'm jest beginning with him. Guess I've got to hang 'em all. Y' see, the boys are on the buck. So I'm figgerin' a pretty bit of hangin' 'll sure kep 'em amused. You never nussed a babby, mam? You've allus to get 'em laffin'—then you don't hev no trouble."

Kit propped her handsome angry face in her hands, and set her elbows upon her knees. She was staring into Joe's face without any attempt to conceal her feelings.

"You came to tell me this. Why?" she demanded sharply.

"Jest a 'party call,'" Joe murmured.

"Tchah! This is a bluff, sheriff. You hanged James, I know, and I warned you you were in for trouble. Now you've come here to tell me you intend to hang Addy, to put the laugh on me. Well, see here, Addy is nothing to me. If he were to hang it wouldn't hurt me. I have nothing to do with him, any more than I had to do with James, or the rest of the hill men. They're just hill men and I'm a hill woman, and we all go our own ways. But because we're more or less outlawed I suppose there's a tie between us. You've promised to hang Addy—for nothing. I promise you you sha'n't. If you're going to pacify Dyke Hole that way, I guess you're away out. You haven't got that baby laughing yet, sheriff."

Joe looked concerned, and shook his head mournfully.

"That's so, mam," he said. "Wal, I'd hate fer them dif'rences to butt in an' spoil harmony. Snakes is a pretty low-down feller, an' ain't wuth a thought from a woman like you. Still, you got your 'pinions, sure. Meanwhiles, till I set about hangin' Addy ther' ain't no reason in the world fer bein' unfriendly-like. I'd ha' liked to ha' stayed around here longer, mam, you're that entertainin', but, y' see, ther's a powerful heap fer to do, wot with the boys buckin', an' the women tryin' fer to set their men on to the water-wagon, an' then this yer dance at the Meetin' House. Say, you'd never think what a heap of fixin' one of them sociable dances needs. Guess I'll hev to git goin', sure."

Joe rose. While he went to get his horse Kit sat staring after him moodily. Her handsome eyes were frowning. For the moment she looked the woman she was reputed to be. All her beauty was hidden under that moody frown.

Joe returned with his horse and quickly saddled him up. He never once looked at the woman on the doorstep. It almost seemed as if he purposely avoided encountering her gloomy eyes. Neither spoke. He tightened the cinchas. He bent down and felt his horse's front legs. He examined the fit of the bit in the animal's mouth. He seemed full of a seemingly unnecessary care for the beast.

After quite a long time he put his foot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. It was then that Kit looked up. The frown had gone, and she was smiling. But it was not a pleasant smile. Joe saw it and considered. There was a nervousness, a forcedness about the smile, and the bold, brown eyes did not look as directly into his as was their habit. She rose, and came a step towards him, her heavy guns swinging from the belt at her waist. Nor did the man attempt to hide his admiration.

"What nonsense is this dance you talk about, sheriff?" she inquired almost brusquely.

Joe turned in the saddle.

"Wal," he said, with a thoughtful smile, "it's jest a real slap-up, dandy sassiety racket. Y' see, Dyke Hole ain't never had a pertickler swell leg-shakin'; jest nigglin' hoe-downs an' sech, that's all. Bein' sheriff it needs that I make it kind of high-toned. Leddies free an' gents gratis, an' all welcome. Say," he added, with a quiet cunning, "it'll set 'em easy in their minds—kind of smooth things like. Savvee? Then, after that, the hang——"

"To set the baby laughing."

Joe nodded. Kit suddenly turned back to the house. At the door she paused and turned about. Her face was cold. The last pretence of a smile had gone from it. Joe's eyes were intent upon her.

"Well, you haven't set that baby laughing yet, sheriff," she hurled at him. "And, take my word for it, you never will."

She vanished indoors, her dog close at her heels. Joe sat for a moment looking after her. Then he turned his horse away and moved off towards the main trail.

"That babby's goin' to laff, sure," he muttered as he rode away. Then his admiration for Kit once more found expression. "Say, ain't she a grand woman?" he said aloud, as though addressing the whole of the forest world about him.

CHAPTER XXIV

DYKE HOLE PREPARES TO DANCE

DYKE HOLE's opinions were always strong, even violent, while they lasted. But they rarely lasted, except in the matter of the undesirability of any sort of physical work. There is no doubt but that its people were largely guided in their decisions by that portion of their anatomy controlled by their gastronomic senses. After the first rush of verbal revolt against the rule of the sheriff had spent itself, and their stomachs, as it were, had appeased their craving for the venting of a long bottled-up spirit of rebellion, a certain doubt, like the fluctuations of a weathervane before a change of wind, set in. There came an air of uncertainty, of disquiet; a doubtful silence.

Where men had shouted aloud their contempt in a torrent of red-hot invective, it now became apparent that they rather desired to avoid the subject of Joe's failure at the Mission House, or if they spoke of it at all, it was to the accompaniment of a negative shake of the head, and a knowing wink, which said plainly that they knew something if they only chose to speak.

The truth was, Dyke Hole had been forced to return to its unwilling allegiance. It had fallen again under the commanding influence of its sheriff.

It was not Tombstone Joe's way to wait for trouble to come upon him. He always went out into the open to meet it, never failing to select a sound vantage ground on which to fight his battles. He was very busy in this direction now.

His first move had been to summon Bob Gauvin to his presence while that individual was in the midst of a seditious harangue before an interested and sympathetic audience in the saloon. The deputy, Bob Makaw, was the bearer of the summons, and he was not the man to be

lightly refused in the execution of his duty. The result was that Gauvin went off to the great man's presence promptly, if unwillingly.

The redoubtable cricketer was away from his friends some time; and when, at last, he returned a change had come over him. The boys wanted to know the particulars of his interview, but no information was forthcoming. He curled up into a heavy silence, from which he moodily refused to be drawn.

Nor could he be induced to continue his seditious talk, but rather seemed as though he were anxious to forget that he had ever said anything at all. The only sign he gave, and one that inspired his friends' curiosity without satisfying it, was to order a lone drink of Rye at the bar, drink it down at a gulp, set the glass down noisily, and exclaim, as he walked out—

"I'm a dogone son-of-a—— if that don't beat the band."

Then, like a bird of evil omen, Bob Makaw came again. This time his cold eyes fixed themselves on "Dyke Hole" Bill, and, under their magnetic stare, aided by a short, sharp command, Bill, too, departed, spirited off to the presence of the sheriff. He, too, was away some time; he, too, came back; he, too, remained silent, and finally avoided his friends.

After this came a summons for others, including Dave Bless, Pete, Shaggy Steele, Sladie Joyce and several more, until a dozen men had been walked off by the silent deputy, and returned again in safety to the fold at the saloon, but changed to a group of sternly silent men.

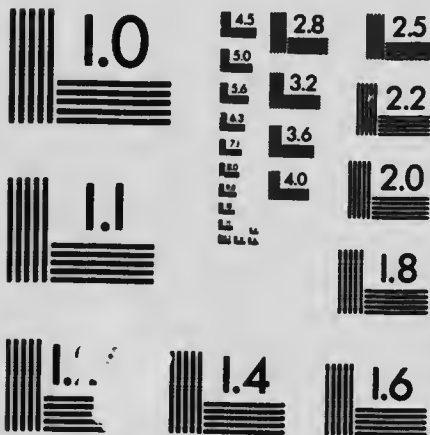
The result of all this was curious. A wave of depression suddenly settled upon the saloon. The place became as quiet as a deadhouse. Where, before, everybody had been anxious to air his views with regard to the sheriff, now they all seemed to have become suddenly uncomfortable under the recollection of what they had already said. They seemed afraid of everybody, distrustful of everybody, even of themselves.

That night Moe did a bad trade. The lawyer, Boyle, was the only customer, and he, for some reason, was drinking harder than ever. He seemed nervous and worried. The new turn of affairs was decidedly curious and suspicious.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

Moe was always philosophical on such occasions. He could wait. A revulsion would come, and when it did come he would more than recoup himself. So he polished his glasses again and again, and carried on a desultory conversation with the lawyer, who was steadily approaching a condition of drunkenness that he hoped would leave him a margin of control over his limbs to permit his final climb home to the house on the hillside.

The morning of the sheriff's dance dawned, bringing with it a considerable fluttering in Dyke Hole's dovecots. The women were busy with needles, with irons, with wash tubs, with benzine. Every woman in the place had an extra bit of washing out on her line that morning, and "Dyke Hole" Bill, chancing upon Bob Gauvin, who was amusing himself on the outskirts of the village with a little revolver practice, driving nails into a log at twenty paces, remarked upon it.

"Never see sech an a'mighty heap of frills an' things around Dyke Hole before," he said. "Looks like Noo York sassiety gittin' ready fer a swell weddin'."

Bob paused in his shooting.

"You're talkin' foolish," he retorted, loyally contrary. "Noo York sassiety don't never washen their fixin's."

"Don't never——?"

Bob bestowed a pitying glance upon his adversary in debate.

"Say, wot's the use'n tellin' you nuthin'?" he sneered. "Now, I ast you, ken you see one o' them swell dames settin' up to her eyes in suds, an' hangin' her bits out fer the folks on Broadway to figger out her laundry mark. Pshaw." He turned and gazed at the somewhat coarse texture of the frills staring at him from an adjacent fence. "Ther's jest one thing allus queers me tho'," he went on thoughtfully. "Set a woman gettin' ready fer a party, an' she allus washens them sort o' fixin's. She don't never seem to worrit over her outside clothes nuthin'."

He proceeded with the reloading of his gun, while Bill pensively looked on.

"Most women-folk is queer," the latter replied sapiently. "On'y some's queerer than others," he added, by way of a brilliant afterthought.

Bob returned his gun to its holster with an impatient jolt, and looked into Bill's hard face with fine contempt.

"You're bright," he vouchsafed, and moved off in the direction of the saloon.

About noon Bob Makaw returned to his quarters and sat awaiting Joe's coming. He had spent a busy morning, as well as a busy evening the day before. On him had devolved the labour of setting the Mission House in readiness for the evening function. Bob was not up in the niceties of such preparations, but he understood that seats would be required, a wash-bowl or two, soap and towels. Also wax must be strewn on the floor. Then, too, he realized that a cloak-room must be prepared for the ladies, and a place set apart for infants in arms. All that was simple enough, but it took some time in preparing, and it was past noon before he had finished. Moe took over the place from him. He was setting up his temporary bar in a shed erected for that purpose just outside the main entrance. Moe's task was easier. He simply looked on and directed. He never lacked for helpers.

Responsibility fitted Bob Makaw, he was very thorough. While all this work was on his hands he still had charge of Snakes Addy. He had bestowed his prisoner in safety, with Shaggy Steele set as turnkey, in the old log lock-up which, under Tombstone Joe's forceful reign in Dyke Hole, had been almost abandoned as superfluous.

Now he was waiting for his final instructions, and sat cleaning his revolvers. He had taken them to pieces, and was holding the screws in his hand, looking about for a safe place to deposit them.

Espying a sheet of paper on the floor under the table, he picked it up. There was some writing on it. His first glance told him that it was in his chief's laboured calligraphy. Curiosity urged him, and he paused to read. Nor, by the expression of his face while he read, was there any mistaking the opinion he had of the matter he read there.

"No wummin ken ever
 Effeckshully sever
 Her natur from unto her acts.
 She'll cowhide her feller,
 Ef he kicks her she'll beller ;
 Which is femi-nine, foolish, yet facts."

Bob shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and, laying the paper on the table, deposited his greasy screw upon it.

"He's 'bug,' sure," he muttered pityingly.

A moment later Joe came in. He came in a hurry, and with such an unusual air of cheerfulness that even the stolid Bob was set wondering.

"Kind of late, Bob," he said, with a grin of self-satisfaction. "Sure longer'n I figgered." He glanced down at the clay stains on his boots and riding breeches and shook his head. "Dandy fine soil up there," he grinned. "Full o' body, eh, Bob?"

But Bob had no understanding for any pleasantry.

"Wher'?" he inquired indifferently.

"Why, up ther'—the graveyard."

Joe's tone was sharp. Bob contented himself with a nod, and his chief went on a little peevishly—

"Things up ther' needed fixin'."

"Fixin'?"

"Sure."

Joe seated himself on the bed and began to search his pockets.

"Them four 'spares' I dug awhile back," he said, "they wus haf full of loose dirt. We'll likely need 'em. So I got busy an' cleared 'em out."

Bob's inquiring eyes met the other's in a mute inquiry.

"Yep," Joe went on, "them four graves. It'll be easy droppin' two corp into each. Y' see, I most allus give 'em plenty of breathin' space, but things up ther' is gittin' cramped.

"See here," he went on, producing a folded paper from an inner pocket, "these yer are the reg'lations fer the dance. You ken cast your eye over 'em an' see if I gotten 'em fixed right. Guess you're sure quick at sech things," he concluded dryly.

Bob took the paper without a word, and spread it out on the table. For two minutes he laboured silently through the misspelt writing of his superior. Joe watched him impatiently, waiting for that approval which authorship always craves. But Bob always took his own time, nor did he hurry now. He struggled through each regulation

and fully digested it. Then he turned back to the beginning and, taking each one singly, read it aloud with the intention of passing comment.

"Reg'lations," he read out. "Ain't that kind o' high-toned? Now 'Rules'——"

"Guess this is to be a high-toned lay out, anyway," Joe snapped, his black eyes making a complete circuit of their sockets. He wasn't looking for criticism. "Guess 'Reg'lations' goes."

"Now this yer," said Bob, taking the first rule. "'All drinks is spot cash. Moe ain't givin' no credit. His slate's full. No gent to bring his own liquor. No bottles allowed in the dance room.' That seems clear, on'y——"

Joe spat.

"Ther' ain't no kick comin' to that," he said irritably. "We don't want no bottles around, an' if drinks ain't to be took in the dance-hall, it's li'ble to save a heap of trouble."

"'Fellers is ast to kep their boots on,'" Bob read, going on to the second regulation. "'It's li'ble to make their dancin' awk'ard, but it's best fer the comfort of the company. It 'ud be taken friendly fer fellers to wear noo socks.'" Bob paused and began to comment. "The boys'll kick——"

"Say, ther' ain't goin' to be no kickin'," interrupted Joe sharply.

And Bob proceeded.

"'Chawin' terbacca wi' leddies around ain't done in sassiety. It's li'ble to muss the floor, which has been scrubbened at great expense,'" Bob read in his heavy way. "Now that——"

"Is most nessary," broke in Joe. "Ther's fellers in this yer city with manners as wouldn't be a circumstance in a hog-pen. How's the next?"

Bob's patience was wonderful.

"'No. 4. Fellers ain't to shout around 'bout the leddy they favours. This ain't no beauty show, an' sech conduc' in li'ble to cause confusion. Fellers breakin' this rule will be dealt with by the sheriff personal.'" Bob glanced up at Joe. "Ain't we goin' to pool fer the prettiest gal——?"

Joe's tone expressed his pity for his companion.

"Say, this ain't no half-breed 'hoe-down' nor farmer's barbecue. This is a swell funshun fer Dyke Hole sassiety."

"Ah," replied Bob quietly, "I hadn't jest got that. 'No. 5,'" he went on at once. "'Any dogone son-of-a-gun caught sneakin' grub at supper ll be shot on sight. Fellers bringin' gunny-sacks ain't to be 'lowed in. The milk supplied at the supper is fer tea an' coffee. Winmin ain't to fill their babbies' bottles with it. Feedin' implements will be counted before the departure of guests. This ain't to say things of nobody. It's jest to save argyment.'" Bob paused. "Strong, ain't it?" he inquired.

"Wal, yes," Joe agreed. "But, y' see, Dyke Hole needs handlin' peculiar. We'll let that go."

"Six," read out Bob. "'No leddy ken come without a feller, an' likewise the other way around. No feller to dance more'n six times with his leddy friend. Fellers with hog notions had best not git around. Dyke Hole ain't a hog-ranch, an' don't notion hogs worth a cent. This ends same as reg'lation four.'" Bob opened his lips to comment, but Joe anticipated him.

"We'll take the next," he observed coldly.

Bob turned again to his work.

"'No. 7,'" he went on. "'The 'foresaid rules ain't no sort of hossplay. They're dead grt. This yer is to be a sassiety ball, an' no sort of low-down whisky souse. Ther' ain't to be no langwidge nor shootin'. Gents treadin' on other fellers' feet, an' mussin' any leddy's fixin's, will apologize without cussin'. Dancin' to be fair heel an' toe. Leddies 'll refrain from loopin' up their dresses, an' any other stunts li'ble to give offence to the pertickler. No one is allowed to cuss the fiddler. Any mule-headed buzzock who guesses the sheriff ain't no right to hand out these yer reg'lations will be shot."

Joe sat back chewing in a self-satisfied manner. The light in his eyes was good to see. He was brimming over with good feeling at the success of his effort. He could see no flaw in his regulations.

As Bob seemed in no hurry to make further comment, Joe's swift-rising impatience presently began to stir him.

"Say," he began, with a questioning glance at the paper, "there's jest one thing I kind o' fergot. We might add 'Hail, Columby' or 'Yankee Doodle' to them. I

'lows it 'ud make it official lo' in'. How d' you think to that, son?"

Bob shook his head with funereal gravity.

"Guess you missed suthin', sure. But 'tain't that," he said. "Now this 'By Order.' Whose?"

Joe's eyes took hold of him as though he were about to exterminate him.

"What d'ye mean—whose?" he asked sharply.

Bob laid the paper aside and picked up the chambers of the revolver he had been cleaning, and ran a searching eye down the barrels.

"Jest nuthin'," he said slowly. "On'y you ain't signed 'em. An' I'd hate fer the folks to hev any doubt like. Y' see——"

Joe sat up and grinned sarcastically.

"Psha!" he exclaimed. "They sure an't goin' to figger you did them reg'lations. There's fancy words in 'em."

Bob nodded. He was satisfied. He went on silently with his work, the sarcasm quite lost upon him. He put his gun back in its holster and filled his belt with ammunition. Then he slipped some spare cartridges into his pockets. Joe watched him thoughtfully. Suddenly he hospitably held his plug of tobacco out to him.

"A chaw?" he inquired.

Bob shook his head.

"Things is fixed down ther'?" Joe went on, indicating the Mission House.

"Sure."

Bob lit his pipe.

"An' the boys is wise?"

"Sure."

Bob's head was rapidly vanishing beneath a pall of smoke. Joe grinned.

"It'll be a swell party," he said presently.

Bob only nodded.

"You've got things good?" Joe went on again. "Ther' ain't nuthin' doin' till I git around. When I git around we git busy, quick."

Bob gave another nod.

"Ther' ain't to be nuthin' but jest per-lite dancin' an' elegant conduc' till I git around. Jest dance—an' dance. Get it?"

"Sure."

"Ther's the women. You fixed it so the boys kep 'em clear? We don't want their fixin's mussed any." Joe gave a harsh laugh.

"That's so."

There was a pause. Then Joe rose from his seat.

"Wal, guess I'll git a swill. Say," he paused and turned back to his deputy with another of his peculiar grins. "I'll sure hev to borry one of Roydon's swell shirts an' act the dude."

But Joe's facetiousness did not communicate itself to his companion. Finally Joe paused at the doorway.

"You ken talk, Bob," he said pleasantly. "Gee! But you'd ought to be a politician——"

"Sure," said Bob. And there was a twinkle in the deep-set eyes which followed his chief as he passed out of the hut chuckling.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SHERIFF'S COUP

DYKE HOLE was at supper when Tombstone Joe set out for the Mission House. His roving eyes detected not one solitary unsightly human object disfiguring the picturesque tranquillity of the evening scene. The ruddy sunlight was over all, and a wonderful peace reigned everywhere. His appreciation and satisfaction were very evident, and his mood was at its best and lightest.

Yes, he felt very well satisfied with the way things were going. His plans, so carefully laid, promised to work out well. For one brief moment his throne had tottered under him, and he felt something of the uneasiness which is supposed to assail a crowned head. But all that was past. To-night was to be the crowning night of his reign in Dyke Hole. This was his kingdom, his one possession, and he meant to cling to it with all his strength.

He breathed deeply of the crisp mountain air; his step was elastic, his movements full of that wonderful vitality which never seemed to desert him. Just now he was quite happy, for he loved Dyke Hole with the love of possession, he loved it also with the love of the artist for the beautiful, he loved it for its lawless people.

The Mission House was not deserted as he expected to find it. Moe was at his bar keeping guard over his liquor. He knew his customers, and took no chances. He was shining glasses as Joe came in.

"Howdy?" he greeted him cheerfully. "Things fixed?"

"Sure," nodded Moe.

The little man had divested himself of his Prince Albert coat and vest, and stood resplendent in a clean boiled shirt, with its accompaniment of black bow-tie, which

made him look almost gnomish. His forehead shone with a mixture of perspiration and hair-oil.

"Spot cash to-night," said Joe warningly.

"Sure. Ther' it is." Moe pointed at a placard set up over the bar. The clumsy chalk capitals spelt out, "Cash up no tick."

Joe nodded.

"Got your gun?" he inquired presently.

"Two—an' the Winchester."

"Good. Guess you'll likely need 'em."

Joe turned away into the dancing-room, leaving Moe speculating as to the possibilities of the forthcoming dance. He laid down his glass-cloth and examined the loaded chambers of his guns.

In the dancing-room Joe came upon Jocelyn.

"I hope I'm not trespassing, Joe," she said guiltily. "I—it was only curiosity brought me here. I wanted to see how things looked. I do hope you'll have a successful evening."

Joe's thin lips twitched.

"Guess things is sure li'ble to be sat'sfact'ry," he said.

"Say. You ain't goin' to git around?" he asked anxiously.

"I haven't been asked—mayn't I come?"

"Guess you ain't bustin' to hoof it with—them?" Joe inquired, eyeing her narrowly.

"No—I shouldn't come, anyway." The girl shook her head. "Only I wanted to know why you had left me out."

"Wal, ther's a whole heap of argyments I could give you agin it, but on'y one as 'ud be the truth. Guess I'll jest say this: I don't want you around. Mebbe you won't need to ast questions to-morrer."

The girl moved a step nearer to him and laid one small, brown hand upon his arm, and looked wistfully up into his face.

"Is it—is it something about Dick?"

But Joe shook her off roughly.

"I said you wouldn't need ast questions to-morrer."

"Then it is, and you won't—you want to keep me in suspense."

Joe seemed about to leave her without answering, but he changed his mind. There was something he could not resist in the appeal of her sweet grey eyes.

"Say," he began, with that harshness which was always his way when forced to speak against his will, "don't you worrit, gal. I sed that boy 'ud be around, an' around he'll be." Then his manner became more kindly. "Ther's jest one thing I can't stand fer to see. It's them roses of yours fadin' an' fadin'. Say, I on'et said a promise to you which didn't happen out right. Wal, I ain't promisin' nothin' no more, see? Say, I on' wuss'n a Dago when it comes to promisin', seems to me. We pore human critturs is mean things anyways, an' don't amount to nuthin'. We jest think the sun sure couldn't kep itself warm ef it wa'an't fer us gittin' around an' bankin' the fire with cordwood. The good Gawd dumped us down wi' two legs, an' two han's, an' a headpiece, an' we sure fancy we're the whole thing in creation. Seems to me ef He'd set us brayin' it 'ud likely saved confusion. But that's aside the point. Wot I sez is, I ain't promisin' nothin' more, gal—I ain't, an' that's a fac'. I done with promises. They're jest a downhill track with a mud-hole o' dishonesty at the bottom. So I quit. But I swar to you right here, your man's comin' right back to you, ef I have to blow every tough in the hills to hell to git him, see? I ain't promisin'. I'm sure jest statin' Bible fac's."

All Joe's manhood was shining in his wild eyes, and the girl, listening, was convinced and took comfort.

"Thank you, Joe," she said simply. And somehow she found it impossible to say more.

"You'd best git to home, gal," he went on at once. "An' don't put your face into the village till to-morrer mornin'. I got things to fix."

There was no denying him, and though Jocelyn longed to stay, taking comfort from the mere fact of his presence, she knew him well enough to recognize the impossibility of it. He didn't want her around, so, reluctantly, she took her departure.

When she had gone Joe walked round the hall on a tour of inspection. No detail of the preparations escaped his sharp eyes. He made one or two small changes. There was a screen standing before a door which led to the room allotted for the babies. He folded it up and removed it from the room. There was a curtain which half concealed the place where the fiddler was to sit. This he arranged

so that no one could shelter behind it. The harmonium he pushed tight up against the wall. The alterations made were trifling in themselves, but they were those small things such as a skilful campaigner would attend to.

Having thoroughly satisfied himself, he looked about for a sufficiently prominent place to set up his list of regulations. Finally he selected the door between the bar and the hall. Here he nailed it up, and returned home to his shack.

Everything in Dyke Hole seemed hurried that evening. The usual supper was devoured hastily and without interest. The women were flustered, and the comfort of the men suffered. It was one of those occasions when the women said, "You must make do," and the men had to sup off "remainders." They growled, but they ate. The growling of their men-folk never much mattered to the women of Dyke Hole, and just now the only thing that really mattered to them was their own preparation for personal adornment.

The men who could afford it stopped at the saloon. And even here there was an uncomfortable slackness. Mavis was going to the dance, and cared little whether she waited on the customers or not. The Chinese cook, too, was in the same condition of unrest. Besides all this, the bar was closed during Moe's absence down at the Mission House. Altogether there was nothing so calculated to thoroughly disturb Dyke Hole as this dance.

Guests began to arrive at the Mission House shortly after sundown. They had come to dance, and dancing was so rare with them that they meant to begin as early as possible and finish only when their weary limbs refused duty.

And what a gathering it was! To the most ordinary intellect it was evident that the cleaning process had been shirked at the last moment by the male portion of the guests. But the women made up for it, and might well have hired themselves out as advertisements for horse soap. Their faces rivalled their eyes for brightness, and shone with an almost painful brilliancy. They, at least, had done their best to brighten things up. Possibly the knowledge of their men's shortcomings had urged them to a supreme effort.

The only preparation the men appeared to have made was in the dressing of their shaggy heads. Most of them had dug deeply into the grease-pot and applied it to an extent that might have made it possible for their flowing locks to serve as candlewicks. Nor had they forgotten their firearms, the belts of which sagged at their waists with the weight of ammunition.

They moved heavily, with that slow, solemn measure one associates with a funeral. Their drooping, slouching shoulders and mournful faces damped the best feminine efforts at gaiety. There was only one thing that could possibly lift the pall of utter misery by which they seemed oppressed; it was the pernicious spirit dispensed by old Moe, though it is doubtful if, in the interests of peace, the result would have warranted the experiment.

The procession into the ball-room was interesting. The women came with their society pose in full bloom. They smirked and bowed to each other, feeling that all the usual familiarity would be out of place. Nobody should say they didn't know how to behave on such an occasion. Most of them carried babies in their arms, done up in starched bundles, which they bore in triumph to the room set apart for their safeguarding.

The hall was lit much as it had been for the temperance lecture, namely, by coal-oil bracket-lamps, only, in addition, in case of emergency, there was a black bottle with a candle set in its neck placed in every available spot. Of course, as at the temperance function, Turkey red and evergreen held place of honour in the decorations. But some genius had contrived further festoons of coloured paper chains. The floor had certainly been scrubbed, as the reek of the atmosphere indicated, and wax, like a thin fall of snow, had been carefully spread over its uneven surface.

The accommodation for the fiddler was a large table in one corner, the legs of which were carefully concealed under a fall of Turkey red. And all the benches had been set against the walls to give a maximum floor space for dancing. Supper was to be taken outside in the open, as is the case at a Western barbecue. A long table was already set with plates, and knives, and folks. The more delicate refreshments, such as layer cakes and things of

a similar nature, were not yet set out. In spite of the rules, it would not have been safe to distribute these until the actual time for supper arrived. A few yards away a large bonfire was already alight, over which a young pig was roasting, suspended from an iron tripod. This department was under the direct charge of Moe's Chinese cook.

Comment on the elegance of the preparations was the general topic of conversation as the guests assembled. The women eulogized the sheriff's thoughtfulness. It was described as "real bully," "fine an' dandy." Some called him a "top-notch feller," others said he was "real sweet," and so on.

Bob Gauvin frankly declared that the whole thing was well done, only unfortunately "Dyke Hole" Bill happened to be within hearing.

The latter promptly disputed the point.

"Bob, ther', makes me tired," he said witheringly. "Say, Bob, you'll pay fer ev'ry bite you git into your stummick in the price you hand over to Moe fer your liquor."

Bob grinned and shook his head.

"Guess you need schoolin', so you ken read, Bill," he said pleasantly. "Moe's got a notice set up on his bar. Ther' ain't no slate at this yer hoe-down."

"Wal?" inquired Bill sarcastically.

Bob laughed loudly.

"How many drinks ken you hand out bills fer?" he inquired jubilantly.

"Jest as many as you ken, I guess," retorted Bill sourly.

"Jest so. Guess we'll be mighty dry 'fore we're thro'."

Everybody laughed at Bill's discomfiture.

But though the women were so delighted at the prospect, there were some of the men who had doubts about the whole thing. Tombstone Joe giving a party was so unusual. Ripley Boyle was one of these.

"Seems queer," he said, and his remark happened to be made to Dave Bless. "I can't see through it. Joe's trying to curry favour, it seems to me."

Dave shook his head.

"'Tain't that, I'd say," he observed shrewdly. "Joe's

mighty deep, an' you never ken see wher' he's headin'. Say, you've see an ol' hen drivin' fer her nest of eggs. I 'lows she'd cover a ten acre patch 'fore she locates it, if folks is around. Wal, that's Joe. But, same as that ol' hen—he'll sure hit his nest."

The list of regulations quickly drew attention, and the men grouped round it. Beyond a few grunts that might have meant anything, nobody commented upon them. They all seemed to take them as a matter of course, and, after reading them, distributed themselves into corners, and, with every appearance of morose boredom, waited for things to begin.

There was a decided lull until the fiddler began to tune up his fiddle. Then an atmosphere of returning life slowly pervaded the scene. The women were sitting around on the benches in the hall, and the men were outside in the neighbourhood of Moe's bar. As the fiddle rasped, Dave Bless lounged over to the bar, taking Pete with him. They took what Dave called a "warmer." The celebrated wicket-keeper, Sladie Joyce, slouched shamefacedly into the hall, and grinned his way across to where the women, like a cluster of timid hens, were waiting to be chosen for the dance.

The movement having been started by these intrepid pioneers, others followed suit. All those who had the price of a drink took "warmers," and then passed into the ball-room.

Presently the dancing began. And what dancing it was! There was a clumping and creaking of boots, a tittering of female laughter, and an accompanying growl in men's voices; and everybody danced as they felt they would dance, regardless of all but their own enjoyment. In two minutes from the start of the fiddle a farmer's jig was in full swing, and the atmosphere grew thick with dust, and pungent with that unpleasant human odour which is the sure accompaniment of such a function.

But so far the host had not put in an appearance.

Ripley Boyle had made his way to the bar, and propped himself against it. He was well into his second drink. He was not a dancer, but he had a very particular interest in things just now. He was very worried, and tried to disguise it under a cloak of cynical gaiety.

"Joe not here yet," he said. "Guess he's busy." He laughed unpleasantly, and Moe understood him.

"Joe'll be around—when it suits him, I guess," he replied, as he breathed on the glass he was wiping.

"Maybe it won't suit him," Boyle said, with another grin.

Moe looked at him contemptuously.

"You mean—the boys is up agin him?"

"Well, he ain't popular."

Moe gave his glass a final angry polish.

"You give me a pain," he said, turning away as a great rattle of wheels sounded outside the door.

"Folks drivin' in," said Boyle, but Moe took no notice of him. He, like the rest of the people in the bar, were eagerly watching the door.

Suddenly it was flung open and a number of men, laughing, loud-voiced, hustled in. The party consisted of eight men escorting one woman.

The former were unremarkable except, perhaps, for their unusually villainous appearance, while the woman, on the other hand, drew everybody's attention at once. She was strikingly handsome, with a tall, well-developed figure. Her dress was good, though gaudy, but not out of keeping with her swarthy beauty. Her colouring might have been that of a creole, or a half-breed, while her great dark eyes might have rivalled in beauty the most perfect eyes in sunny Spain. Amidst the women of Dyke Hole she stood out a queen.

"Regulation 6," murmured Boyle, in Moe's ear. "Wher's Joe?"

The significance of his remark was unmistakable.

Here were eight men accompanying one woman, and the former were all fully armed. It was a situation that pleased the spleenful lawyer, and he moved away from the bar, and made his way into the dancing-hall, that he might see whatever there was to be seen. He wondered, as he went, where Joe might be hiding himself.

Boyle reached the ball-room before the new-comers, and made his way to an obscure corner, where he took up his position. Dancing had ceased for the moment, and he looked about for the sheriff. Joe had not yet shown himself.

The new-comers lounged into the room. The woman led the way, leaning on the arm of one of her escort, the rest following her noisily. A hush fell upon the room. The men of Dyke Hole, solemn-eyed, serious, had eyes only for the male portion of the party. Their women-folk stared openly at the woman. She certainly caused a sensation, and, without doubt, her style and beauty some heart-burnings.

Now followed a general movement. The men already assembled left their women and slouched about the room. Their eyes were furtive, and their movements appeared to be uncertain. The woman, with her partner, walked to one end of the room and sat down waiting, while the rest of her escort stared about them, laughing and talking, their glances scanning the females already present, as though they were seeking likely partners. Gradually they separated, and, in a moment, they were lost amidst the throng already assembled.

All this the little lawyer watched with interest. There was something about these men, their assurance, the insolence of their manner, which made him wonder. Then suddenly he heard the voice of the sheriff talking to some one outside in the bar.

He drew back into his corner as far as possible just as the sheriff entered the room. The sudden appearance of Joe brought him a measure of enlightenment. He remembered Regulation 6.

The sheriff strode into the ball-room. His eyes swept the assembled company, and finally settled upon the woman and the man sitting at the far end of the room. His appearance was unique. He was wearing a clean white shirt of Roydon's, and, for the first time, Dyke Hole beheld him without the familiar ivory-butted guns which usually swung at his waist. He bore down upon the solitary couple, smiling amiably, and paused within three yards of them. He began to speak at once.

"Mam," he said, with an elaborate bow, "ther's sure a heap of things in this life as makes a feller cuss. They're things he ken help an' things he can't. Jest now I'm cussin' both, like a Mississippi pirate Y' see, ther' ain't nuthin' gives me greater pleasure in life than seein' your lovely face an' figger dec'ratin' the benches of this yer

dance-hall." This with another gallant bow. "Now one of the things I'm cussin' like mad I could 'a' helped. It's them reg'lations. Speshully number six. Y' see, sech-like things has to be kep'. I made 'em; an' I'm sheriff."

The woman smiled at him curiously.

"What's it about?" she demanded. "I've seen no rules."

"Course you ain't," replied Joe readily. "A leddy like you ain't no call fer worriting over sech fool things as reg'lations. 'Tain't natteral. That's fer them as made 'em."

The woman became impatient.

"Well, get on, man."

Joe remained quite unruffled. The lawyer, watching, understood that calm, and his interest changed to keen excitement.

"Wal, mam, reg'lation six says no leddy ken git around this dance without a man. One man one leddy, an' t'other ways around. Now ther's eight men come along with you, which is nasty on the boys of this city. So we'll kep the harmony of this yer meetin' by astin' seven of 'em to high right out the way they come."

The lawyer suddenly gripped the bench on which he was sitting. He had been so intent on the group near him that he had forgotten all the rest. Now a commotion arose. The other seven had detached themselves from the crowd and stood gazing at the sheriff. It looked as though they were awaiting a sign from the woman. It was only for a moment, however, for each of the seven was covered by a Dyke Hole man. There was a flash of guns, and a muzzle was thrust up against the ribs of each stranger.

Joe was still addressing the woman, but his tones had changed, and his words evidently intended for other ears.

"Them seven boys of yours, mam," he said sharply, "'ll put up their hands. Guns is nasty things, an' has a way of makin' a mess if they ain't handled careful. Hands up!"

The quiet of the room was broken by an echo of the command in the voices of the men holding the strangers covered. The men's hands went up reluctantly, and each

was carefully disarmed. And the next moment they were hustled out of the room.

It was all done so neatly, with so little fuss. Joe's organization had been so complete that from the first there could have been no doubt about the issue. The lawyer realized now that, from the moment of the entrance of these strangers, the drop had been held on them by those Joe had selected for that purpose. He realized now the meaning of those summonses, when each man had been sent for separately, and the secrecy they had maintained ever since. This visit had been calculated upon.

As the seven disappeared, the room became so silent that it seemed as though the people in it were afraid even to breathe. Then the sheriff began again.

"I 'lows, mam," he said quietly, "under ord'nary circumstances you'd hev a bully time dancin' right here. The boys is dead gut on sech beauty as yours, an', though I ain't much at dancin' myself, I'd hate to have missed the pleasure an' honour of your company. But, y' see, bein' sheriff, ther's a heap I got to do which sure turns on my stummick."

"Well?" There was a fierce resentment in the monosyllable which seemed to be literally wrung from the angry woman. Her bold eyes flashed furiously, and she sprang from her seat. "Get through with this foolery," she cried. "I came here to dance. Your hossplay with the boys is enough. I've no more patience."

"Hossplay. Jest so," said Joe quietly, his eyes alert and belying the ease of his manner. "As I sed, mam, I'm sheriff." He drew a paper from his coat pocket, opened it, and began to read. "Thomas Brown, known as 'Juicy' Brown, an' the leddy, known as 'Six-shooter' Kit, wanted fer holdin' up the Spawn City silver stage. Brown fer shootin' an' killin' the teamster an' guard. Kit fer bein' accessory before."

The woman started. Before Joe had finished his reading the man at her side was on his feet. Suddenly he made a move to draw. But even as his hand went to his gun a shot rang out, his arm dropped to his side useless, and a bullet crashed into the woodwork behind him. The next moment Bob Makaw strode up, grim and silent, his smoking gun in his hand. He quietly relieved the fiery

Brown of his weapons, and stood aside, while his victim fell back in his chair to nurse his wounded arm.

Joe went on as though nothing had happened.

"Mam," he said, quite gently, "it ain't fer me to show you no dis-respec', seein' you're a leddy. But ther's these two warrants, an' sev'ral more fer your boys. I 'lows it's mostly a hangin' job fer some of 'em. Duty's duty, an' I'm goin' to ast you to hand over the gun you got in them dandy skirts of yours, 'fore it gits doin' things."

Kit's face suddenly went scarlet with fury. Her bosom heaved, and her eyes flashed fire.

"Doin' things? Gee!" she cried, in a high-pitched staccato. "Lay a hand on me, you fool sheriff, and it'll be your last moment on this earth. Ther's no low-down skunk in Dyke Hole goin' to take 'Six-shooter' Kit." She suddenly whipped out a heavy revolver from a pocket in her skirt. "Put 'em up!" she cried. "Put 'em up just as high as your arms 'll let you, or I'll blow your soul to the glory you're yearnin' for!"

The terror of the hills stood revealed. A gasp went round the room. The men and women of Dyke Hole had closed round, reckless, in their excited curiosity, as to where the woman's shot might fly.

For a moment Joe stood quite still. Nor did his hands go up. His deep-sunken eyes held hers. They were glowing with that peculiar fire which was almost magnetic in its intensity. Suddenly he took a step forward.

"God!"

Some one in the crowd had been driven to the exclamation in the nerve-racking excitement.

The madness of his act drew something very like a groan from everybody who witnessed it. Life and death was a game even the women were used to, but this——! In that breathless moment Joe's words purred with a wonderful gentleness.

"Mam," he said, "I ain't never dealt with a woman before, an' it sure comes queer now. Say, you're goin' to put up that gun. It ain't fer sech dandy han's as yours. But if you're so minded you ken do me up, an', bein' a leddy, I 'lows you're welcome."

He took another step. The gun still remained silent. Every eye was on the woman. Joe held one hand towards

her. Suddenly the woman's arm began to shake! Her face became ghastly pale. The fiery eyes lost their fierce anger, and became dull and lifeless. All the rage in her seemed to have died out, and an ominous pucker drew her fine brows together.

Joe came yet another step nearer. His hand lifted higher.

In the gentlest fashion possible it closed upon the great barrel of Kit's gun. It remained there for a second. Then her grip relaxed. Her arm suddenly dropped to her side, and the weapon was left in the man's possession. There was a heart-broken sob, and the next moment her face was buried in her hands, and she dropped into her chair in a flood of tears.

The "terror of the hills" was, after all, a woman. And somehow the men and women looking on forgot to laugh. Perhaps their sense of humour was not acute; perhaps they were men and women enough not to see any humour in the situation.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SHERIFF TURNS INQUISITOR

JOE spent a busy night. The affairs down at the Mission House were only the beginning of his work. He had contrived to startle the people of Dyke Hole into the frame of mind he desired of them, he had re-established himself in their eyes; but these matters were only the necessary beginning of what lay before him. There were pledges to fulfil. There were his assurances to Jocelyn, and to Dick Roydon himself. Besides, there was all he owed to Dyke Hole in his position as sheriff.

He left the dance to finish itself as his guests chose. He had no further interest in it. Kit and her men had fallen to the bait he had held out, and he was satisfied. Now there was the business of housing his prisoners. This was a matter that was quickly settled. A shack adjacent to his own was commandeered, and the men safely bestowed there under a strong guard headed by Shaggy Steele.

A far more delicate matter was the disposition of the redoubtable Kit. For a moment Joe was at a loss. But inspiration came to him when he beheld the heartbroken condition of the woman.

They were at his own hut. Kit was sitting on one of the hard Windsor chairs. All the old spirit seemed to be crushed out of her. She was no longer weeping, but an unutterable despair weighed heavily upon her, her fine figure drooped as she sat there, and it seemed as though she no longer had the courage to raise the lids of her handsome eyes. It was a pitiful sight, and one that might have stirred even the most unsympathetic.

Joe dealt with it in characteristic fashion.

"Kate," he said very, very gently. They were by them-

selves in the hut. "Them old Wyoming days is a long ways off, but they ain't so far as they'd seem. I sort of mind a gal ther' as wus death on straight talk. Seems to me she ain't as diff'rent now as she'd like to think."

The woman gave no sign, and he went on.

"So I'm jest goin' to ast her right now to say clear out she ain't fer skippin' out, an' I'll trust her. Ther's a shack yonder, wher' them two pore bits of kiddies lives, an' Missie Leyland, as never set two eyes on you before, looks after 'em. You ken go right over ther', an' you'll find fixin's to make you comf'table. Will you say that word?"

Kate made no movement, and her eyelids remained drooping.

"Ef you don't say 'no,' Kate, I'll take it you mean 'yes,'" Joe went on, helping her with wonderful tact.

Still there was no sign from the woman. Joe rose from his seat.

"Good," he said quietly, "then we'll git right over."

He moved to the door and waited. He didn't look again in the woman's direction, but just waited patiently. Presently he heard a sigh. Then Kate rose from her seat and came towards him. And he promptly led the way to the quarters he had offered her.

At the door of the hut he stood aside for her to pass in. It was a critical moment. Kate paused, she seemed to hesitate, then she stepped forward and disappeared within the doorway. And as she passed him the man fancied he caught the sound of her voice. It seemed to him that she murmured the words, "Thank you."

The moment the door closed behind her he turned sharply away, and a few minutes later, when he encountered Bob Makaw, he made up for his recent gentleness.

"You got those boys ready?" he inquired sharply.

"Sure."

"They'll be outside the old lock-up right after I get in there?"

"That's how you said."

Joe turned on the patient Bob fiercely.

"I ain't astin' what I said. You got your orders. See 'em done right, or——!"

"Sure."

Joe's manner had no power to ruffle Bob in any way. They walked along in silence towards the place where Snakes Addy was confined. They were nearly there when the "deputy" put one of his brief inquiries.

"Them warrants?" he asked.

Joe glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes, and at the same time made a peculiar sound that might have been a chuckle. But Bob's imagination did not go far enough to make him understand.

"Them?" he said, and paused. Then he went on, "Guess they's jest papers—blanks."

"Bluff," nodded the other comprehendingly.

It was not until they neared Snakes Addy's prison that Joe spoke again.

"See to it they things I said happen out right," he said sharply. "An' you best be around when I'm thro'."

Bob departed while Joe went on and unlocked the heavy door. The rusty lock grated and the hinges creaked as he pushed it open. He paused at the threshold and peered within. There was no light except a faint glimmer of moonlight which struggled in through two slits of windows set high up in the walls. The sheriff snorted as the unsavoury smell of the place struck his nostrils.

He produced a candle from his pocket and lit it, placing it on a small shelf just inside the door, then, in the glow of the yellow light, he glanced about him. The place was quite empty except for the wretched Snakes crouching in one corner, in a position which suggested he had been endeavouring to sleep. There was no furnishing of any sort. There was not even a pile of straw or hay for the prisoner to sleep on; nothing but bare concrete walls, and floor, and ceiling.

If Joe had a gentle corner in his heart for anything on earth it was not for his prisoner. He took a positive joy in the man's condition and discomfort. But he did not appear to notice him. He simply stared about him as though in amazement at the bareness. Then with a grunt he turned back to the door and closed and locked it, and removed the key.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Ain't this a dump. 'Tain't fit fer a sick hog. Gee!"

He received no response.

"Say, Bob oughter know'd better," he went on, walking to the centre of the floor and still looking about him, purposely avoiding the crouching prisoner. "Ther' should be a pile o' hay, an' a bucket of water with a dipper. Guess we ain't used it fer so long. That's how it comes. Mebbe Bob's fergot. Tho' I 'lows it don't signify now, anyway. I reckon it's too late."

The prisoner's crafty eyes had suddenly opened. He turned his head, and was staring questioningly up at the lean figure standing over him.

"What you mean—too late?" he asked harshly.

The tone was savage, but the question itself suggested some apprehension. In the candlelight it was difficult to judge the man's mood by the expression of his evil face.

"Hah, you're awake," Joe said casually.

"Guess ther' ain't no sleep in his durned hole."

"Why, o' course not. It's t' bumpest hole I ever see. Say, Bob sure ain't no sort of manners. Gee, a bit of hay wouldn't ha' cost two cents."

"Bob? Tchah! This ain't none of his. Say, sheriff, ef it's hangin', git to it. I'd treat a hog better ef I was goin' to slit his throat."

"Sure you would. Guess I feel that aways too, but——"

"Wal?"

There was undoubted anxiety in Addy's tone now.

"I jest come right up from the dance at the Mission to give you—warnin'. Y' see ther's things doin'."

"Eh?"

Snakes suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Oh, ther' ain't a heap to tell," Joe went on in a tone the gloom of which he contrived very well. "Y' see, that business of Roydon kind o' broke up the confidence the boys has allus had in me. Kind of made 'em think I ain't got no grit. Y' see, they're pretty tough here in Dyke Hole. Wal, since they heerd tell 'bout them fellers in the hills hangin' that boy they're that mad they're dead set on lynchin' you clear out of hand. I've sure done all I could. I told 'em as I was goin' to hang you, but they wa'ant satisfied. Y' see, it's jest that confidence they lost in me. Sez they, an' I don't say but what their argyment ain't dec'd right from their side, sez they, 'An' what if the

hill men git around? Sheriff or no sheriff, you got to hand him over.' Wal, I talked, an' Bob talked, but it jest ain't no sort of use. It's lynchin' they want, an' lynchin' they mean to have. So——"

Snakes sprang to his feet.

"They can't do it. They ain't got no right. Ther' ain't no proof. I ain't laid a hand on that feller. Prove it!"

Joe watched his man's face working. His own face was desperately serious.

"Wal," he replied, as though considering deeply, "o' course that's so in aways. But that ain't the argyment. Y' see, word's come in as them fellers has hanged pore Roydon. Wal, I 'lows anyways you sure got to hang on the day I said. But the boys is riled. It's this lynchin'. They're goin' to fix you theirselves. They ain't waitin' fer me. Sez they, 'He's got to hang to-night, an'——'"

"To-night. God——!"

There was no doubt about the man's terror now. Even in the dim candlelight his features were positively green.

"S-sh!"

Joe held up a warning hand. A low murmur of voices came to them as the two men stood listening. He looked startled, and glanced apprehensively at his prisoner. Then he moved swiftly over to the door and tried the lock. He also examined the hinges. He listened again. The murmur had grown louder. Then the sound died out. It was as if a silence had fallen as the lynchers drew near to the prison.

"It's them," exclaimed Joe, in an intense whisper.

He had turned from the door. Addy was standing in the middle of the floor. His eyes were stony with terror. His temples were hammering. Every faculty was straining under the horror of the moment.

He had no words. There was one thought only in his mind. These men were coming for him. To lynch him. He shook, he was paralyzed, and his whole body vibrated with the nervous tension.

It was Joe's voice that at last broke the silence. His eyes were on the door, but he was watching Addy to see the effect of his words.

"It don't seem right no ways," he said. "Yet I can't

see how—— Y' see, them hinges, an' that lock, they're good an' strong, but they ain't a circumstance if the boys git busy. Guess I can't do nuthin'. Didn't guess I could when I come along."

"But you must. You're sheriff. I demand the protection o' the law."

The man's voice was hoarse. He even stumbled in his speech.

Joe shook his head with a perfect assumption of hopelessness.

"Nothin' doin'," he said, "I jest got around to give you time. When a feller's goin' to git hanged ther's most allus a passon around, who sez things to him, an' kind of makes things right, so he'll git some sort o' chancet—after. Wal, we ain't got no passon now, sence the boys got after passon Ferrers. I 'lows it's a'mighty hard on you. Guess it's s' up to you to fix them things fer y'self. So——"

The voices outside had started again. They were louder and nearer, and Joe broke off to listen. The steady plod of feet was plainly audible too. There seemed to be a great number. Addy's face was deathly. There was a cold sweat of terror on his forehead. His hands were clenched, as though to keep himself from c. Joe lost nothing of his terror.

Suddenly the voices rose to what sounded lik . . . angry roar, and one voice heavy, almost bull-like in its power, rose above the rest. The words were indistinct, but the angry tone was unmistakable.

Addy started.

"That's Bob Makaw's voice," he cried. "Is—is he with 'em?"

"Can't jest say. Mebbe he's tryin' to head 'em off. Still—y' see it's sure dang'rous settin' out to head 'em off. He might ha' joined 'em. I can't say tho'."

There was another silence inside the prison after that. Outside the voices grew more and more violent. Then, after a while, there came a lull. Only one man seemed to be speaking. He seemed to be addressing the others. Addy moved nearer the door, trying to hear what was said. But the words were indistinct. Every now and then the speaker was interrupted by loud, brutal laughter,

and expressions of approval which set the listener shuddering.

Joe was watching him.

"Say, Addy, you got to hang anyways, I 'lows, but lynchin' an' hangin' by law is sure diff'rent. It jest makes me sweat when I think of lynchin'. Y' see, the law does it quick, an' ther' ain't no sort of sufferin'. With lynchin' it's hell. I ain't no use fer some all-fired cuss stiflin' a feller's windpipe, an' dancin' you up an' down like some cirkis show. It ain't human. It ain't right. But ther', wot ken I do? I give you warnin', so——"

Suddenly a terrific uproar broke out just outside the door. The man had finished speaking, and there could be no doubt but this was a shout of acclamation. The tumult was suddenly followed by cries of "Lynch him!" "Lynch him!" and, as though to emphasize their purpose, there was a terrific crash on the door, followed by a heavy thud on the ground. Some one had hurled a stone.

"Say," cried Joe, in apparent alarm, "they got stones. They're devils, sure. Stones—gee!"

Addy turned upon him. For a moment it looked as though he were about to attack him, such was the frenzy of his movements.

"Sheriff, he ain't hanged," he cried. "I swar' he ain't. He's jest as safe as tho' he wus right here. They can't do nothin' with him till I git out of this."

A shower of stones struck the door and set it shaking. Joe shook his head. Raising his voice so that Addy could hear him above the tumult going on outside, he said—

"That ain't no sort of use anyways."

"I tell you he ain't hanged, sheriff," Addy reiterated, now whining in his terror. "He's at Spawn City. He's held up by two of the boys, Bat Kershaw an' Pill Lasker. He's down ther' in a shack back o' Kershaw's saloon. They got to hold him till I git along."

He was forced to almost shriek his story at the sheriff, the hammering at the door and the shouting outside became so deafening.

"An' wot's he took for?" roared Joe back at him.

For a moment Addy hesitated. Then a couple of pistol-

shots rang out and two bullets tore their way through the roof of the prison.

"Guess I'll hev to git out of this," cried Joe, turning to the door.

But Addy suddenly flung himself in his way, and fell on his knees in a paroxysm of craven fear.

"Out of this," Joe bellowed. "Out of this, you dogone son-of-a——. I ain't standin' fer sech scum as you. Ef it's lynch, it's lynch, an' I'll be saved a dirty job." He seized the man by the arm and flung him violently aside, and moved swiftly to the door.

But Addy persisted. He grabbed him by the knees and held him.

"Fer Gawd's sake, sheriff, don't open that door," he cried. "Wot I said is Bible truth. He's ther'. Hold me here till you see. It was that law feller, Boyle. He offered us two thousand dollars fer the job."

Joe made no further attempt to move.

"Tchah! Boyle ain't got two thousand beans."

"It wus fer some other feller, sheriff. Fer Gawd's sake don't let 'em! Hear 'em! Hark!"

The crouching man buried his head on his arms as though to shut out the din.

Joe suddenly seized him and dragged him to his feet.

"Say, git right back in your corner, an' I'll see what I ken do. Who wus that other feller?"

Joe held the man, gripping him as though by sheer force he would wring the truth out of him.

"Who?" he demanded fiercely.

The man hesitated. Then, Joe's hold tightening, he cried out—

"I don't know, an' that's Gawd's truth. Boyle flashed the bills, an' I didn't ast."

"He paid you?"

Addy shook his head.

"No. But he had a heap of greenbacks."

Suddenly Addy found himself released and flung into his corner as though he were something unclean.

"Guess we'll see," Joe snapped, and proceeded to unlock the door. He blew out the candle, and, pocketing it, left the prison.

For one instant as he opened the door the din of the

crowd outside was appalling, then, as he closed it behind him, a sudden silence fell.

Joe stood for a moment staring about him in the moonlight. In front of him stood four of the boys grinning sheepishly, and the stern-faced, serious-minded deputy, Bob Makaw. "Dyke Hole" Bill had a pile of stones in front of him. Dave Bless held an improvised megaphone made of tin in one hand, and his revolver in the other. Sladie Joyce was also carrying a megaphone, while Bob Gauvin had some sort of instrument, made of card-board, through which, by growling more or less loudly, he was able to get the effect of a number of voices rising and falling as passion swayed them. These, with the united power of their lungs, formed the lynching mob which had driven their victim in the lock-up to confession.

Joe grinned as he turned to Bob.

"Say, you boys ken sure raise more hell 'n fi' minutes than a hull railroad o' locomotives gone plumb crazed. You fellers ken git back to the dance ef you're feelin' that aways. You Bob, I'll need. Guess you'll git right over to Spawn Ci. "

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SHERIFF EMBARKS ON A PEACEFUL UNDERTAKING

TOMBSTONE JOE saw his deputy and the four men who were to form his posse on their way to Spawn City. Then he turned back to his hut and seated himself before the cold stove. Helping himself to a large chew of tobacco he propped his feet up and gave himself up to meditation.

He had not finished his night's work yet, but required ten minutes in which to think.

He had rarely in his life found himself up against a problem over which it was necessary to deliberately sit and think. His peculiar wit had a knack of jumping swiftly at his necessary course of action, and his extraordinary alertness and energy invariably carried him through. But then his work had hitherto lain in a direction where the subtler problems rarely found their way. Just now he was confronted by a matter in which his energy and alertness could not help him.

He thought very hard. He became so absorbed that the moments slipped away rapidly, and the ten minutes he had allowed himself grew into half-an-hour before he was aware of it. But his decision was reached at last, and he sprang from his seat. He had not found the matter easy. To judge by the expression of his face it had been anything but easy. His lined forehead was moist with perspiration, and his great rolling eyes wore an expression of anxiety that was quite foreign to them.

He moved to the door muttering, and his words suggested that he had not yet contrived to banish all doubt.

"Tain't no use in settin' your nose to a hog-pen an' kickin' at the smell of pig," he said. Then he glanced into the broken looking-glass and smoothed his greasy locks. "The feller as judges a woman fer what she seems is sure an elegant kind of fool."

Having eased his nervous condition with these reflections he passed out of the hut.

It was a perfect moonlit night. The air was warm and scented with the pine and spruce odours so pungent in the late summer. The village was quite quiet, except for the distant scraping of the fiddle, and the faint sound of voices down at the Mission House.

He directed his course across the green towards the far end of the village, but somehow his gait had lost its customary aggressiveness. He walked hurriedly, and there was a lack of assurance in his movements. Two or three times he stumbled over the unevennesses of the market-place, and once, even, he stopped and turned back as though abandoning his purpose altogether. But these were only moments when his nerves played him tricks, and he finally drew up at the hut where the two children were lodged.

It was just as he was about to knock that a fresh fear beset him. The house was in darkness, and a possibility he had not calculated upon occurred to him. He was just about to beat an undignified retreat when the door was cautiously opened from within, and his prisoner on parole stood in the doorway.

Kate had not yet made any preparations for retiring. She had spent the time since her imprisonment sitting nursing her outraged feelings into calmness, and endeavouring to estimate the hopelessness of her position. She had become calm, coldly, icily calm, but sleep was impossible.

When she saw who her visitor was she drew back and would have closed the door in his face. But Joe held it, and his voice arrested her.

"Mam," he began, becoming formal in the nervousness of the moment, "it's sure late fer a 'party call,' but as I'll likely git busy to-morrer, I guessed it was nessary right now. Ther's things to be said that can't wait fer sech things as etikay, or any other French fixin's. With your permission I'll step right in—after you lit the lamp."

The woman's face was very pale, but the moon reflecting its light in her handsome eyes revealed no sign of her recent tears.

Her answer came quite coldly.

"If you've anything to say, you can speak right here. The kiddies are asleep, so I ain't lightin' no lamps. I'll close this door an' sit."

She pulled the door to and seated herself on the step.

"Well?" she went on, as Joe made no attempt to speak.

It was an awkward moment. But it was only the sheriff who seemed to feel it. He had so much to say, but found it difficult to make an adequate beginning. He found himself cursing his folly, but the process did not help him in any way.

At last he was forced to take the plunge.

"Kate," he said, in a tone that was meant to be light, and only succeeded in jarring the woman's already strung nerves, "you ain't under arrest. You ain't never bin."

What sort of effect he expected his announcement to have it would have been difficult to say. Certainly her reply took him utterly aback.

"That don't signify," she said without emotion.

She didn't even take the trouble to look in his direction.

"But I read the warrant. I sure took you."

Kate's shapely shoulders lifted in cold disdain.

"You needn't remind me of your—brute tricks. You let 'em all see it."

Joe grinned. This was more the atmosphere he desired. The woman went on, staring straight out in the direction of the Mission House. She never once glanced his way.

"You wanted to show these folk your power, your nerve, so you chose a woman to do it on. Gee, you're a great man. Say, what a big man you are! Guess it's real smart puttin' a bluff on a woman."

Joe felt the blood run to his head. Such scathing contempt was too much. Her words hurt him like the sear of a hot iron. As she ceased he began quietly. His impulse was almost volcanic, but he held himself in check.

"A woman's a mighty queer thing. Ther's jest as many kind as ther' is females around, an' they've jest as many sides to their natur' as ther' is skitters in spring-time. Their argyment is jest as sound as a fry-pan with-

out no bottom, an' they look on things with as much reason as a squintin' mule. It wus your bluff, an' I called it."

Kate looked up.

"Then it ain't no use settin' up riddles to a woman," she said.

Joe shook his head.

"Ther' ain't no riddle."

He drew a photograph from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it and examined it closely, holding it so that the moonlight fell squarely upon it. She was still looking at it when she replied.

"Where did you get this?"

There was a peculiar tone in her question.

Joe's face was quite serious now. And in his voice had crept an eagerness quite foreign to it.

"Guess it was give me by a gal down Wyoming way," he said gently. "Seems to me we wus friends them days."

The woman's eyes lifted to his.

"Don't beat around the bush," she exclaimed, with what seemed unnecessary harshness. "It's my picture."

"Ther's things writ onto the back."

Kate turned it over and read the doggerel she found there.

"This ain't no doggone epitaph,
It's jest a rhyme wot's pretty rough,
Kit's sed it wi' a mockin' laff,
The man's my man wot calls my bluff."

There was a silence between them for some moments. Kate finally broke it.

"Pretty," she observed contemptuously.

"Not pretty. It's jest truth," said Joe quietly.

The woman laughed angrily.

"Tombstone Joe—poet," she added derisively.

"Ther's more to it than that. Them's your own words—rhymed."

It was Kate's turn to become serious. Something was beginning to dawn on her. She looked up at him again, but almost instantly her eyes dropped, and she stared at the picture.

"Guess I called that bluff last night," Joe said deliberately, and waited.

Receiving no answer he went on.

"I reckon it's plumb up to you."

"You reckon a mighty lot," said Kate stingingly, as he waited. "An' when you finish reckonin', what's the sum?"

Joe smiled grimly.

"The sum? Wal, it seems to me when a woman sets the toon most ev'ry feller's got to git busy dancin'. An' when she sets the gait ther' ain't no more use tryin' to head her than a bunch of cattle on the run. Y' see, most ev'ry woman gits tired runnin' 'less ther's a man around tryin' to stop her. Wal, Kate, you put up that bluff same as you put up that bluff holdin' up the silver stages. An' you've run on an' on, an' a dandy fine run it's bin. You've had a hull heap of fellers tryin' to head you, an' you've had a slap-up time. But, y' sec, I've called your bluff. You can't run no farther, for I've got a holt I ain't lettin' go. It's up to you to marry me."

"Marry you? Gee!"

Joe winced at the woman's scorn, but his retort came on the instant.

"An' you're goin' to."

Kate looked him unflinchingly in the eyes now. All her womanhood was up in arms. Joe waited for a moment, but as she offered no reply he went on.

"Wal, Kate, gal," he said gently, "that's how it is. An' mebbe, when you've tho't things out, you'll see it that aways too. Guess you're too good a sportsman to back down after sech a bluff. Seems to me I remember a gal down Wyoming as stood by ev'ry bluff she ever made them days, an' I don't seem to figger she's changed sech an a'mighty heap now."

The woman's eyes flashed angrily.

"Since you can remember so much, you may as well remember this. If there's any marrying, you'll have to do it by the brute force you are so fond of using."

"Ef it's nessary, I ain't goin' to kick," Joe replied calmly.

Kate's whole attitude was enough to damp the ardour of any ordinary lover. But Joe's methods were peculiar.

His ardour, if it could be called such, was beyond the reach of any coolness or damping process. He had not come to plead. Kate was to be his wife. He had made up his mind, and he was sheriff.

Kate suddenly rose to return into the hut. She had had enough. But Joe laid a detaining hand upon her arm. She shook him off; but nevertheless she waited.

"Say, Kate," he began, in a friendly tone. "We'll jest quit them things fer awhile. Ther's a thing about you sure worrits me a hull heap. Et don't seem to fit in no-ways. It's 'bout this boy, Roydon. He's a real good boy, an' I don't see wher' you got it up agin him. He ain't run foul of you no-ways I ken see. Still, you see fit to send them boys of yours around to jump him——"

"Jump him? You're mad. You're more fool-headed than I thought. Who's jumped him?"

Kate's surprise was quite unfeigned. Joe, watching her, realized that his information was news to her. Instantly he became alert and watchful. But his manner remained the same.

"It wus them boys of yours jumped him anyways, an' I tho't mebbe you was wise to it. It don't signify no-ways. He's safe. I located him, an' Bob Makaw's gettin' him right back. He'll be along by sun-up, I guess. Y' see, I figgered it wus your frolic. But seein' it's news to you makes it queerer still. Set down, gal, an' I'll give it you so you won't git gropin' to understand things."

In spite of herself Kate was interested. She sat down.

"Who were the boys?" she inquired.

Joe watched her, speculating.

"I can't rightly say who got han's on him. But Snakes Addy was at the business end of it. An'—an' I got him safe."

Kate nodded.

"Yes, I know that. So that's why you took him?"

"Sure. See here, that boy's a dude from across the pond. He's a decent citizen, if he is a Britisher. He's out here on a mighty cur'us job. He ain't got no parents, but the feller that dragged him up wus a feller belonging to these parts back in the old days. Y' see, George Raymon wus one of the first to find pay silver in these

parts, an' made a mighty fine pile. That wus the feller as dragged him up."

Kate was leaning forward listening carefully to every word he said. Her interest had become strangely intense.

"Yes, yes. Go on. Tell me of him." Her eagerness was at variance with her recent attitude, and astonished the sheriff. He went on very deliberately.

"Wal, this feller, George Raymon, is dead. He died worth millions of bills, which, I take it, he'd made out of silver. Y' see, he owned a claim som'eres around Spawn City. A mighty rich claim. Fer some reason he quit it, but never give up his rights to it. Wal, as I sed, he died, an' he left this claim to a daughter of his, who was lost, too, an' the rest of his fortune he left to this boy so long as he'd find that mine an' find that gal, an' hand one over to t'other. That's wot he's here fer; an'—they jumped him. Seein' you ain't had a hand in it—wal, ther's on'y one thing to it. That mine's at the bottom of it, sure. An' seein' ther' ain't more'n two or three mines that even one of them minin' engineer fellers 'ud call rich in these parts, an' they're around Spawn City, I guess we're goin' to locate it. Mebbe the gal 'll be diff'rent. Howsum, ther' it is——"

"I wish I'd known of this before," Kate broke in. She seemed to have suddenly forgotten all her resentment, all her troubles of the moment, she was so absorbed in the story of the mine.

Joe grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess we're most allus feelin' sore that aways."

Then he became serious, and stared at the woman's handsome face as though he would read the thoughts passing behind it.

"An' if you had, Kate?" he went on a moment later.

The woman stood thinking deeply. It seemed as though their entire attitude towards one another had changed. Certainly there was no longer any anger or antagonism in Kate's manner. It suddenly seemed to have been forgotten in a greater purpose, a matter which had so long been in her thoughts that it had become almost part of her nature. She was thinking rapidly, and the rush of her thoughts carried her swiftly to a decision, a decision which was arrived at through no sort of logic

or argument, but simply because, before all things, she was a woman with all a woman's unreasoning love and hatred.

"You ain't answered," said Joe, as Kate still remained silent.

She looked up at him, and her eyes were smiling. There was a strange mixture of friendliness and derision in that smile.

"You're sure you'll locate that mine?" she asked.

"Dead sure."

"Soon?"

"T'morrer."

Kate stood thinking again.

"Well, Joe, you're a queer sort of man. You're a bit of a brute, and I'm not sure but what I thoroughly hate you. But you've stumped me right here for a bluff I was fool enough to put up once when some fellers got worrying me. Well, I'll hand over to you on one condition."

Joe's face answered her before his words came. He beamed.

"An' the condition?"

"Get that mine, an' hand it over to the young feller, an' I'll marry you if—if it kills me."

Joe stood staring at the woman hardly believing his ears. Here was a riddle that puzzled him beyond words.

Kate roused him out of his stupor.

"Well?"

"Say, gal, shake. You're a bully sport. You're a gran' woman. An' Gawd help the dogone son-of-a-moose who's got that mine."

They shook hands on the bargain.

Then Kate turned to the door

"I'll sleep to-night, after all," she said, and vanished into the hut before Joe could say another word.

After she had gone he stood where he was for some moments longer. His love-making had been of a curious type, but he was not a lover in the ordinary sense. Kate represented to him all that was beautiful in womanhood. He cared nothing for her past career, he cared nothing for anything except that she had promised to marry him. He had been determined that she should do so anyway,

but she had given her promise voluntarily, and that—
well——

"You never ken tell wher' a woman's goin' to fetch up," he said to himself, as he moved away. "She'll head straight fer a cut-bank, an' it's a cinch she'll fall an' break her headpiece, then whist! an' she'll switch, an' you'll find her settin' in a tater-patch, setting her sky-piece straight, an' hopin' ther' wa'an't no fellers around to see her till she done it. Gee, she'll look real elegant around a cookstove!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SHERIFF SWINGS HIS BATTLE-AXE

THE sun had just risen. The heavens were brilliant, and the air was heavy with perfume. All the earth lay wrapped in a delicious peace. Tombstone Joe was sitting on his doorstep.

He had passed a strenuous night. There had been little sleep for him. A seat in his chair before the stove, and odd half-hours of dozing; that was all the repose he had had. Now he was waiting for the return of Bob Makaw from his journey to Spawn City. His dark eyes were heavy, and looked more gloomy than usual, probably through lack of sleep, as he stared out along the trail over which he expected his deputy's return.

After a while he turned from the trail into a fresh direction. A woman's figure was hurrying towards him from an unexpected quarter.

It was Jocelyn; and he wondered. She was coming from the hut where the children were housed, also Kate. His wonder died out when he remembered the latter; and a twinkle of amusement crept into his eyes as he watched her draw near.

The girl was clad in a neat white dress. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, and her pretty eyes were eagerly expectant. When she saw the sheriff sitting on his doorstep she broke into a gait that was almost a run, and waved a hand to him. Joe responded. Then, a moment later, she came up.

"I'm so glad you are up, Joe," she exclaimed breathlessly. "I hoped you would be. Anyway I intended to rout you out. I've just been over to the children to get things fixed, and met—— Tell me, what is it? What does it all mean? Who is she?"

Joe rubbed his chin, half quizzically and half thoughtfully, with the palm of his hand.

"When a gal gits astin' sech a heap of questions, the last is sure the one of consekence. She's daddy come into the dance last night. She come a long way, that far she couldn't git right back. So I give her shelter with them bits of kiddies. Y' see——"

"Oh, I see. She told me I'd better come to you for explanations. You see, I didn't know what to make of it. I found her playing with the children as though they'd known her all their little lives."

"Tho't some one wus buttin' in on your——"

"No, no. It wasn't that," Jocelyn broke in hastily, when she saw Joe's grin. She couldn't have him think she was jealous. "But you haven't told me who she is?"

Joe hesitated. The girl watched him, and thought she had never seen him looking quite as he looked now. The change was undefinable, yet she thought it was something about his eyes. There was a brightness in them, something so like a smile, so delighted. She wondered while she waited for him to speak.

"Wal," Joe said at last, "her name's Kate. She's a friend of mine. I knew her in days back ther' in Wyoming. Say, I'd take it good ef you'd be friendly by her. An', say," he added earnestly, "ain't she a grand woman?"

Jocelyn speculated for a moment. His manner was bringing enlightenment to her.

"I see," she said at last. "Joe, what does it mean? You—no, I won't ask any more questions." She gave him a wise little smile, her eyes bright with interest and pleasure. "Your face gives you away," she went on. "But I'll listen if you like to tell me."

Joe turned back to the Spawn City trail; and suddenly he gave a great sigh of relief.

"Guess ther' sure ain't no hidin' nothin' from a gal with eyes as bright as yours, Missie Jock. You're too quick fer a bum sort of pirate like me. But I'll gamble you couldn't tell by the sound of them hosses' hoofs, without turnin' round, who's all in that crowd gallopin' into this yer village, as though hell wus blowin' hot air after 'em. Don't turn your head."

The girl kept her face to him. But her eyes were wide, and staring as though she would read right down into his rough, volcanic soul. Suddenly she gave a start. She darted at him and caught his lean shoulders with her two brown hands. The horses' hoofs were thundering towards them.

"Joe, Joe," she cried, in the wildest excitement. "It's him. I know it is. Thank God! Oh!" She had suddenly swung round to see for herself. Dick Roydon was riding beside Bob Makaw on the lead as the horsemen dashed up.

"Dick! Dick!" the girl cried, rushing towards the horses.

The next moment Roydon was out of the saddle, and, regardless of the onlookers, caught the girl in his arms. Then it was that the sheriff's voice, harsh and violently commanding, rang out.

"Wot in hell is you'se fellers settin' around ther' for, grinnin' like a pack of mangy wolves? Light right out of here, you Dagos! By the great makinaw, I'll give you suthin' to grin fer, you scum! Git right over to the s'loon till I come. And don't go fer to show your frowsy features around here agin! Git!"

Bob Makaw and Joe were mounting the path which led to Boyle's house on the hillside. It was still early morning, and few people were astir in the village below. Bob walked wearily. His left arm was bandaged just above the elbow, and there was an ugly seam on his left temple where a bullet had grazed him. The man was wounded and almost dead-beat, but he followed his chief with something of the fidelity of a dog. Bob never reckoned he was beaten so long as he could stand on two legs.

"So they give you a busy time," said Joe casually, as his deputy came to the end of his story of how he found and rescued Dick Roydon in Spawn City.

The story was simple, but took long in the telling because Joe demanded every detail. They had located Kershaw's saloon, a frowsy bar and gambling hell on the outskirts of the place, well isolated from the rest of the town. Bob promptly held the place up, but found a tough gang there. There was a desperate fight, in which three

men were shot dead, and three of Bob's party, including Bob himself, were wounded. However, they captured the place and took Kershaw and his partner, Pill Lasker, both of whom they had brought on to Dyke Hole.

The rest was easy. Dick Roydon was discovered, a prisoner in a barn at the back of the saloon, under which there was a large grain storage cellar. He had not been too badly treated, except that his food had been scanty and poor. Bob learned from Kershaw that they were waiting for instructions. That they were holding the man till they heard from Snakes Addy, and that they were expecting a good round sum of money for their trouble. They had heard from some of the boys of Snakes' capture by the sheriff, and didn't quite know how to act, but, in view of what they had already done, and their prospective reward, they had decided to hold on to their prisoner until such time as more definite information of Snakes reached them. These ruffians were ready enough to speak, once they were in the power of the sheriff.

In answer to his chief's comment, Bob shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Guess so," he replied.

"That's eight an' two's ten, an' Snakes makes eleven," said Joe. "Guess if we send 'em to Anaconda they'll sure fill the gaol ther'."

"An' the ledly?" inquired Bob. "Kit?"

Joe glanced round at him sharply. But Bob was blankly serious.

"Wal, I can't jest say 'bout her. Y' see, tho' I don't hold with 'em, ther's them reformatries an' things wher' she could learn a bit of cookin'. I'd think she'd make elegant hash. Mebbe they has sewin' bees. She's got a'mighty fine hands fer sewin'. Guess I'd fancy a few flannel shirts fixed by them hands. Gee!"

He became thoughtful, and fell into a pleasant reverie. Bob favoured him with one penetrating glance out of his deepset eyes, and quietly put Kate as a prisoner out of his mind. Words were quite unnecessary to him. Like most silent men, he had wonderful perception.

"Your arm pretty bad?" inquired Joe presently.

"Jest nuthin'."

"Likely you'll be fit, day after t'morrer?"

"Sure."

Joe nodded.

By this time they had arrived at the lawyer's house.

"Best git around the back door," Joe said, pausing.

Bob passed on without a word, and the other waited until he had disappeared round the corner. Then, without any ceremony, he mounted the veranda and entered through the front door.

In the parlour he glanced about him. He had only been there on a few occasions before. The place was sufficiently unfamiliar to him to make it interesting. He saw what he recognized as Jocelyn's handiwork. The crochet antimacassars on the chairs, and the ribbon "tidies" scattered about to soften the hardness of the plain furniture. There were her books, a few well-worn volumes on a shelf, all of which he knew had been read and re-read by the girl. A large work-basket occupied the seat of an arm-chair. It was full of what women call "mending." The whole atmosphere of the place spoke of Jocelyn. It was all so spotless, so neat, so homely.

The thoughts the sight of the room brought him set him frowning. His fierce eyes shone with an angry light, which boded ill for the object of his search.

He crossed the room without any attempt at concealment, and passed noisily through the door leading to the back part of the house. Nor did he pause till he came to Ripley Boyle's own bedroom. He flung the door wide open and strode in.

"Hey, you bladder of marrer fat!" he roared, the moment his eyes fell on the recumbent bulk of the lawyer snugly disposed beneath the blankets. "Git up out o' that! Git right up! Hey!"

Boyle rolled over and blinked sleepily at him, and let his puffy eyes close again.

Joe reached out and caught the bedclothes. In an instant the bed was stripped, leaving the flannelled figure exposed. He grabbed the man by his shoulder, and dragged him into a sitting posture in a state of angry bewilderment.

"What in——!"

But the lawyer's wrath carried him no farther. He had awakened sufficiently out of his drunken sleep to recognize the disturber of his slumbers.

THE SHERIFF SWINGS HIS BATTLE-AXE 309

"Eh?" he inquired, rubbing his eyes and staring up at the intruder.

"Git some of them things on," Joe commanded, pointing at the tumbled pile of clothing on the floor.

Boyle hesitated. Then he reached for his trousers and slid awkwardly into them. By the time this was done he was wide awake. And with wakefulness his anger merged into apprehension.

He tried hard to be particularly dignified, and only succeeded in producing a sarcasm which displayed the fear underlying it.

"Well," he inquired, with a sickly smile, "to what do I owe the honour of this visit?"

The sheriff, staring down at him, ignored the question. He was considering the unhealthy picture the little man made in his flannel underclothes. Presently he moved to the far end of the bed and sat down.

"Guess you sure hate rollin' out of them blankets this early," he said. "Say, bed's a dandy thing fer decent citizens, calc'lated to set lazy folk lazier, but it's desprit bad fer crooks."

Boyle looked up from a struggle with his socks.

"Which heading do I come under?" he inquired, still sarcastic.

"The last, I guess."

The lawyer paused in the act of adjusting a pair of string-mended suspenders.

"What d'you mean?"

His pasty face had become pastier. There was even a greenish tinge in the puffy skin.

Joe was in the midst of biting off a chew of tobacco. He completed the operation and shrugged his shoulders.

"Jest nuthin'. I've come 'bout young Roydon. Y' see, he's my dep'ty." Then he added, half pityingly, "Say, you must sure ha' fergot a heap of law."

Boyle turned to the looking-glass to brush his hair.

"What—what are you driving at?"

"When a law feller gits mussin' hisself with a crook like Snakes Addy, an' takin' a hand in holdin' up a dep'ty sheriff, seems to me he's gittin' the law by the heels—which is the wrong end fer him."

There was a moment's silence. Boyle was brushing his

hair with an assiduity which, considering its scantiness, seemed unnecessary.

"Go ahead, sheriff," he said, after a dry swallow. "You're—you're amusing."

"I'm most generly amusin'," observed Joe imperturbably. "So amusin' I've tho't of quittin' the sheriff bizness an' runnin' a cirkis. Still, it's good settin' Dyke Hole laffin'. Guess they ain't got a heap to laff at. Sort o' charity, ain't it?"

"You certainly make me laugh," Boyle said, with desperate seriousness.

"I sure noticed that. I like folks laffin'. I like 'affin' myself. Say, I laffed fit to bust, an' so did Bob Makaw—he's allus laffin'—when Snakes Addy told me as you'd offered him two thousan' dollars fer to git hands on young Roydon, an' pass him over to Spawn City. Made us laff you havin' two thousan' dollars. Say, ain't it a bully gag?"

They neither seemed to see the humour Joe pointed out. There was not a sign of a smile on either face. In the lawyer's, particularly, there was something very like panic.

Joe leant back, his hands behind his head. Boyle now faced him, and forced himself to an air of bravado which would not have deceived a child.

"You're on the wrong trail, sheriff. I know nothing of Addy's doings. I've no doubt he's trying to shield himself, and, knowing your antipathy to me, has selected me to fix the blame on. As you say, it's—it's rather a joke me offering two thousand dollars to anybody. By jinks, I wish I had it to offer."

"It don't signify." Joe looked round for a spittoon. Having located one, he hooked it towards him with his foot, and expectorated. "Y'see, Roydon wus took fer Marc Osler. It wus his two thousan'. You wus jest actin' fer him."

"Did Snakes say that?"

"Nope."

"Who then?"

"Guess I did."

"You?"

The lawyer sat down suddenly. His bravado fell from him with almost comical abruptness. The sheriff's manner

THE SHERIFF SWINGS HIS BATTLE-AXE 311

was so peculiarly quiet and deadly that it had got hold of him.

"We got young Roydon back, so ther's jest the matter of sendin' you an' Snakes up to Anaconda to fight it out at the Circuit Court. That's wot I got around fer."

Boyle stared.

"I'm sendin' Snakes right away, but seein' the circuit's jest through, an' don't git around agin fer six months, it kind of seemed hard sendin' you along to put so much time in with a lot of toughs like Snakes in the Anaconda gaol. So, you bein' a citizen of Dyke Hole, I jest tho't the lock-up right here 'ud do."

"The lock-up here!" Boyle sprang to his feet and began to pace the room. But Joe's voice brought him to a stand almost at once.

"Yep. I 'low it ain't jest a fancy place, speshully seein' winter's gittin' around soon. But, y' see, Missie Jocelyn ken see you sometimes, which I take it 'll make things easier. Course we can't hand you Moe's bar. Guess you'll ride the water-wagon fer six months—which ain't wi'out ad-vantage to your stummick. Not a drop of liquor, mister, fer six months. It'll sure do you a heap of good. Guess Moe'll be mad 'bout it, tho'. I'd say you're sure one of his best customers. Still, it'll be in the cause of temp'rance."

"Temperance be damned! I won't stand for it! I tell you you daren't lock me up on such a trumped-up——"

"I guess it is trumped up?" broke in Joe, abruptly rising from his leisurely attitude, and standing right in front of him. Boyle backed away. "Say, it is trumped up? It is? You miser'ble dreg of bad whisky, you're comin' right down to that ther' lock-up, an' you're stoppin' ther' six months—without no drink 'cep' water!"

The lawyer stared helplessly up at the towering figure. Terror and cunning blended oddly in his expression. He was thinking rapidly. He knew the sheriff would carry out his threat, unless—— He thought of the comfort of his lazy life under the care of Jocelyn. He thought of his pleasant evenings at the saloon. Moe's whisky was bad, but six months on water would be worse, unless——

Yes, there was an alternative, and he knew it. And

that was why Joe had come, and had talked so much, emphasizing the discomfort of the lock-up. That was why Joe designed to keep him in Dyke Hole instead of sending him to Anaconda with the rest. By a great effort he steadied himself. It was not the first time he had been in a tight corner.

"Of course there's an alternative to all this," he said, with an assurance he did not feel.

Joe's face was a study. There was a glimmer of some sort of humour in his fierce black eyes.

"If you're meanin' ther's a way out fer you I sure can't hold out no sech hope," he said. "You can't go fer to bribe an American citizen—sech a thing ain't never bin known. An' I calc'late you ain't got bills enough to buy a judge of the United States Court."

But Boyle was paying no attention. He was calculating his chances. He was far too shrewd not to understand that he was in this man's power. He had known that from the moment Addy was taken, that is, if Addy was forced to speak. But he also felt that he had a winning card to play, and was perfectly aware, from the sheriff's mention of Marc Osler, that he, too, knew it. Well, it was a way out of his difficulty, the only way out. It would rob him of his present means of livelihood, but—

"It's all right, sheriff, you got me beat," he said suddenly. "My hands are up. Sit down, an' I'll tell you what you want to know."

Joe turned to the bed and sat down.

"You're a bum proposition, anyways," he said, with a very real contempt. "I never see a crooked law feller with grit. All of 'em's ready to squeal quick when they git up agin it. Fellers as ain't got the savvee to push their thumbs up when the drop's on 'em is sure natur's fools. But I like them sort of fools. They're the men as makes hist'ry fer sech pore critturs as you to read."

"That sort of talk don't do any good," replied Boyle coldly. He was feeling more sure of himself. "I've got what you want, so you'd best take it. If I can make you forget you've got that damned lock-up it's all I want."

"Guess that's 'cos you can't squeeze no more."

Joe's retort rapped out bitingly. Then he added—
"Git goin'!"

THE SHERIFF SWINGS HIS BATTLE-AXE 313

The lawyer was silent for a moment. But an impatient move on the part of the sheriff set him going.

"Roydon's looking for old George Raymon's mine," he said. "You're behind him—helping. I'm not going to even guess what you hope to get out of it, if he succeeds in finding it." The man's sneer was full of venom. "I know where that mine is, and can prove it. You have an idea where it is, and who is running it, but you can't prove it. You've got the drop on me through that cursed Addy, and you're using it to squeeze me. It's you doing the squeezing. Marc Osler is running George Raymon's mine; has been running it ever since old George quit. He's made his pile out of it."

The man paused. Joe made no comment. He gave no sign of any interest beyond the fact that he was listening.

"How do I know?" Boyle went on, chuckling wickedly. "Why, because my father was George's lawyer and held all his papers. You see, George quit suddenly, why I don't know, and Marc Osler, being his foreman, went on running the mine, supposedly in George's interests. He daren't even make an attempt to get those papers, or he'd have give the game away. The papers I speak of were the titles of the mine, and George's private papers, such as birth certificates, marriage papers, and such things as that. Well, my father had no instructions about the papers, so he kept them carefully until such time as he heard from George. He never heard. Then he died. Say, he wasn't a crook, though he was a lawyer."

Joe expectorated as the other waited for comment. As none was forthcoming he went on—

"Well, when my father died there wasn't much left, but what there was came to me. We had a good practice in a way. There's no use in going into too many details. It so happened I didn't concern myself with George Raymon's affairs for some years. You see, I knew very little of them. Then one day I lit on those papers. I looked through 'em. I was in need of money badly at the time, so badly I was ready to get it where and how I could. Well, in looking through those papers it occurred to me there was money in them—for me."

Joe made a peculiar noise with his tongue, which the lawyer was quick to interpret.

"Best say it," he observed cynically. Then, as Joe kept silent, he proceeded. "No? Well, I saw money in them. You see, George had been away years, and Marc Osler, I concluded, had been getting a pile out of that mine. George was practically forgotten by people, and so many changes had occurred, they happened rapidly in those days—Spawn City had been built since George's going—that I seemed to see how the land lay with Marc Osler. He was quietly absorbing that mine. I went to him, having first made clean copies of all the old man's papers—to suit myself——"

"Forgeries!" interpolated Joe.

"Forgeries, if you like. I told him I received word from George Raymon about his mine. Told him he'd have to give an account of his stewardship. He was quite calm. He understood at once. He asked to see the letter, and I—I just grinned at him. Well, the rest was easy. After a little talk I sold him the papers for five thousand dollars in cash, and a pension of one thousand dollars a year. We arrived at it in this way. The five thousand was for the papers; then there was old George's daughter to be provided for."

"Missie Jocelyn?"

"Sure," grinned the lawyer. "Then I give him the papers——"

"The forgeries?"

"Yes, and within a week he knew them to be forgeries. He raised hell, but couldn't do anything. I told him I wasn't such a fool as to let him have the real ones, seeing he'd got to pay me that pension. Well, the rest is easy. When young Roydon come along, and you let me know how things stood, I put Osler wise. There was only one thing to be done. Roydon must be got rid of, and Osler wanted me to do the job. I refused to actually do it myself, but, for a consideration, I promised to get some one to hand him over to any one he chose to name in Spawn City."

"He meant murder," said Joe savagely.

"Guess so," replied Boyle easily.

"An' you wus helpin' him?"

"To hand him over."

There was a moment's silence. Then Joe spoke again.

"You durned skunk!"

"Guess that's a matter of opinion."

Joe calmed again.

"You've still got those papers?" he demanded.

"Maybe I have—maybe I haven't."

"You're meanin'—the Circuit Court?"

The two men eyed each other, and the lawyer began to grin. He felt sure now. He knew he was safe.

Joe was thinking rapidly.

"If you ken show them papers—no forgeries—to me in front of Marc Osler, an' 'll be ready to hand that story out again to him, you ken hev your whisky, an' pizen yourself jest wher' an' when you notion. An' the sooner the better."

"No Circuit Court?" said Boyle cunningly.

"Nope."

"An' you'll keep Osler's hands off me?"

"He won't hev han's fer no one when I'm through."

"I'm on."

Ripley Boyle heaved a sigh of relief. Joe sat favouring him with an ugly stare.

"You sed Missie Jocelyn wus George Raymon's daughter?" he said at last.

"That's how I said," the lawyer grinned. "You needn't take my word. Ask Osler, he'll put you wise."

He grinned on until Joe's harsh tones suddenly sobered him.

"Git ready to go right over to Spawn City wi' me in two hours," he said sharply. "Hev them papers with you. It's the only chance you'll git."

"Square shake, sheriff?"

"You'll hev them papers, or——!"

The lawyer's recent satisfaction died out. He knew he was at this man's mercy. Those papers were his only safeguard. Once the sheriff laid hands on them— He was not so sure that his cunning had served him as well as he thought, but he was forced to acquiesce.

"All right," he said sulkily.

Joe turned at once to the door.

"Ho, Bob!"

Bob came in, silent, inscrutable.

"Say, Bob, you won't leave this gopher fer two hours."

He's to get some papers, an' be ready to go with me to Spawn City. See to it. An' ef he gits playin' monkey tricks drop him in his tracks, same as any other vermin. Law fellers an' gophers, they ain't worth hell room, neither of 'em."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SHERIFF GETS A SURPRISE

It was noon when the sheriff, accompanied by Dick Roydon, the lawyer, Boyle, and Bob Makaw, reached Spawn City. Only two of the party knew the object of the visit. Both of the deputies were kept in ignorance. Bob accepted it merely as part of his duty, and, weary as he was, with no thought of protest in his head. Roydon, after his recent experiences, was only too delighted to find himself following the leadership of his chief again.

He was glowing with the pleasure of his freedom. He had spent probably the happiest two hours of his life immediately after his arrival in Dyke Hole. Basking in the perfect happiness of Jocelyn's companionship, he had heard a great deal of what had taken place during his absence. She told him all she knew, giving vent to all her own anxiety on his account, telling him of her dread for his safety, and the staunchness of Joe in the matter. How never for one moment had he rested until he was satisfied that he, Dick, was safe, and of his own ability to restore him to her.

Now his imprisonment was a thing of the past Roydon revelled in the girl's tenderness and solicitude for him. It was all so delightful, and he was in such a beatific condition that there was little doubt but that he in no way attempted to make light of his recent troubles. The girl's sympathy was far too sweet to forego any of it, and she was only too ready to lavish it. He took it all and wanted more, and he would probably have spent the rest of the morning basking in the warmth of her smiling eyes, had it not been for the return of his chief with orders for him to saddle up a fresh horse at once.

And now he was once more outside the scene of his

recent imprisonment. He looked out upon the straggling town as they galloped down the hill to the ford of the little river which bounded the place on the hither side and wondered at the importance of the place in the eyes of Dyke Hole.

It was a dingy, mean-looking sort of two-storeyed edition of Dyke Hole, without any of that place's natural beauty. It was busy. It was commercial. And in consequence it was unkempt, dirty, and the unpainted wooden mine buildings, and the vast mounds of mine *débris* gave it a hopeless look of squalor, which suggested, only too surely, the vicious condition under which the inhabitants of this small mining town, on the fringe of civilization, wallowed out their existence.

At least three of the party were glad to see their journey's end. All Roydon's interest lay behind him, and he was longing to return to Dyke Hole; Bob Makaw regarded their arrival as another step towards the comfort of his blankets, which he hoped eventually to reach. With Boyle it was a matter of being saddle-sore. Their arrival meant to him some measure of physical relief. He had been forced into the saddle quite against his will.

As the horses entered the water at the ford, Roydon questioned his chief.

"What's the game now?" he inquired.

Joe chuckled. His manner was unusually light.

"We're sure goin' to stir up a patch of muck an' fancy we're settin' the hull earth shakin' to its roots," he said gleefully.

Dick smiled back at him.

"I should say there's plenty of mud to stir up there," he replied, nodding his head at the city. "It's the worst ever. It can beat anything on earth, eh?"

Joe lifted his eyebrows.

"Mebbe it is, mebbe it ain't," he said doubtfully.

"Sure, it's allus that aways. Ev'ry feller as makes a brick thinks ther' ain't no flies on to it. He'll tell you that brick ken lick creation. But it jest goes in wi' a heap of other bricks, made by other folk, an' the lot sets up a mighty fine buildin'. An' ev'ry folk sez it's jest the greatest buildin' proposition ever. Then a piece of lightnin' gits busy, or some Dago sets an oil lamp to it,

an' fires it, or suthin' gits doin' inside the earth an' sets things shakin'. That ther' buildin' ain't a circumstance—it's jest a pile of ruins. Then we cuss an' cuss. Say," he suddenly turned and pointed away to the left at the distant peaks of the Rockies rearing their snow-crowned heads to the brilliant sun-lit heavens, "get them works of natur'. Makes you sure feel like one of them crawly things at the wrong end of a telescope."

Before Roydon could answer him the farther bank was reached, and the sheriff set off at a hand gallop in the direction of the grey stone buildings of the Lucretia mine.

Marc Osler was seated at his desk. But he was not working. He was leaning back in his chair staring blankly at the opposite wall. He was thinking hard. For some days he had been expecting a visitor from Dyke Hole, but none had arrived. Though he rarely moved abroad he always knew what was going on about him. The affairs of the district concerned him so very nearly that he contrived that he should be notified of everything of consequence that happened. He had heard of Addy's capture. Now he wanted to hear more. That is why he was expecting a visitor from Dyke Hole.

Since the capture and hanging of "Tricksy" James there had been practically no stage robberies, so he should have been well enough satisfied. Perhaps he was. Certainly no one could have told from his expression. His stony blue eyes gave no indication; his lean, lined face told nothing. But then he was usually an emotionless sort of man. His face was always well controlled, so well that his features seemed to have lost their mobility entirely.

He reached out suddenly and let his hand fall on the bell on his desk. Immediately his dyspeptic-looking clerk pushed his head in through the doorway.

"If any one comes from Dyke Hole, send them in at once," he said. "On no account keep them waiting."

"Yessir."

"And don't let anybody wait around while they are here."

"Nosir."

The clerk still waited.

"That'll do. No; don't go to get your dinner till I tell you, unless some one comes. Then you can go after sending them in."

"Yessir."

"That'll do."

The man withdrew. Within two minutes he was back again, and pushed his face round the edge of the door.

"Mr. Boyle from—Dyke Hole, sir," he announced.

"Well? Show him in."

The clerk retired, and the faintest glimmer of satisfaction softened the steel blue of the silver king's eyes. But they promptly hardened again and resumed their sphinx-like expression as he heard footsteps approaching.

The door was pushed open and the lawyer stepped gingerly in. His gait was only partially due to trepidation. He was very saddle-sore. But suddenly the sheriff loomed up behind him and hustled him forward, and somehow the combination of these two together had anything but a pleasing effect upon their host.

"My man said Mr. Boyle," Osler remarked quickly.

"That's how I told him," replied the sheriff at once, seating himself on a chair that stood against the wall to the right of the desk.

"You told him?"

The silver king's eyes shone like glare-ice.

"Jest so."

"Then I suppose this interview is of your seeking, rather than Boyle's?"

"That's how."

"Ah."

There was a moment's silence. Osler moved some papers off his blotting-paper. Tombstone Joe noticed that the desk was well littered. Several drawers on either side of the man were open. There was an air of business confusion in the display. His eyes wandered on to the lawyer. The little man was wearing a worried look, for Osler's eyes had suddenly settled themselves on his face. Joe began to experience a feeling of real enjoyment.

"Well, Mr. Boyle," said Osler formally, "what can I do for you?"

The lawyer's eyes fell before that blank stare of inquiry.

Then he glanced over at Joe. There was no assistance in that direction. Joe was watching the other.

Suddenly he blurted out his reply.

"Nothing that I can see. You've landed me into the most doggasted hole I've ever been in, and——"

"I?"

Joe suddenly made a peculiar noise that might have been a chuckle. It drew the attention of both to himself.

"You sure have," he said, addressing Osler gravely.

"You set him plumb between the pen'tentiary an' givin' you away. Guess he hated the tho't of pen'tentiary."

Osler's face expressed perfect bewilderment.

"I don't think I understand," he said slowly. His eyes had dropped to the drawer at his right hand.

Joe lost nothing. He gave himself a twist in his chair and let his right elbow rest on its arm, so that his hand was close to his waist.

"Guess you best make things clear," he said to Boyle.

But Osler suddenly turned in his direction, and his movement was surprisingly alert.

"Perhaps you'd better do so, sheriff. You see, this is my office, and you gentlemen have both come here bringing with you a tone I—well, I'm not quite accustomed to. You seem to be responsible for the visit, so perhaps you will explain."

"Why, yes."

Osler leant over, regarding the sheriff with his chin propped in the palm of his left hand. His right hand was gripping the arm of his chair.

"Boyle's sure in a fix," Joe said pleasantly. "It's this ways. Ther's the pen'tentiary jest yearnin' fer him by reason of hevin' qualified, gettin' my dep'ty Roydon roped by a pizenous lot of hoboos from up the hills. They got him right along here to Spawn City, an' dumped him in a cellar under the barn back of Bat Kershaw's joint, ways out on the east side. He wus dopin' out two thousand dollars to them kids fer their frolic, which I 'lows made me laff some, seein' he couldn't raise the dough fer to hand a leddy friend an ice-cream soda. Wal, I sure butted right in an' set Roydon hurryin' back to Dyke Hole, Bob pushin' the gun music in the faces of Ter-

shaw an' Lasker till they squealed, an' come right back along too."

Osler gave no sign. His eyes never wavered from the sheriff's face.

"And what's this to do with me?" he inquired, as the other paused.

"That's jest how I'm astin'," said Joe at once, if anything more pleasantly still. "Y' see, Roydon's a bully feller. Old George Raymon shed his pile on him, as mebbe you'll remember. On'y he's sure got to git back the old man's mine fer his gal. Guess he put you wise to that hisself—you bein' old George's friend in them way back days. Wal, that bein' so, the feller burrowin' that mine has got to hit a hot trail when he gets busy, an' I calc'late sech is li'ble to set him hatin' hisself. Now, mebbe he'd sure dope out two thousand as easy as siftin' sand fer to lay finger on young Roydon, when the moon ain't shinin'. This yer lawyer feller sez he would—an' did, an' I'm guessin' fer once in his unholy life he's handed truth—seein' the Lucretia Mine is sech a heap rich."

As he finished speaking a curious thing happened. Osler laughed. It was a short, sharp laugh, as hard as the pale blue eyes he now half closed.

"A delightful story," he said calmly. "Well thought out and typical of—I won't say you, sheriff—but this lawyer man, Boyle. Of course, this visit is for—blackmail."

Joe shook his head and kept to his pleasant manner, but his eyes rolled in that curious way of theirs when he was stirred.

"Nope," he said. "That's sure agin the law. Nope, 'tain't blackmail, 'less it's sech to ast you to pull stakes an' 'light out of the Lucretia Mine. Y' see, it's a question of law. Lucretia belongs to George Raymon, an' since he's passed over, his gal needs it."

Osler never stirred a muscle. Joe's eyes actually had a smile in them. Here was a man he appreciated. He was a fighter, subtle, shrewd, deadly. And the sheriff knew it, saw it in the calmness, in the half-closed eyes, in the very attitude of the man.

"So it's not blackmail," Osler said. "You want me to

hand over the mine to this—this impostor, without proof. You are mad, sheriff—harmlessly, but nevertheless mad. You ought to be looked after.”

“You’re likely right,” replied Joe, quite unruffled. “But you’re sure overreachin’ your stride. I didn’t say ther’ wa’an’t no proof.”

“You have proof?”

Osler sat up. He drew a paper towards him as though to proceed with his interrupted work.

“Right here!”

Osler gave him one swift glance. Then he reached towards a book, but changed his mind. Instead, he leaned forward, and in doing so dropped his right hand upon the open drawer.

“Here?” he said, with an air of incredulity.

There was a sudden movement. Joe had darted towards him. He was standing right up against the desk, leaning across it with the muzzle of a gun thrust close into Osler’s face.

“Here!” he said coldly.

Osler sat immovable.

“I ain’t yearnin’ to fuss,” Joe proceeded incisively. “But jest set dead still, or you’ll sure git lead pizenin’; an’ I’d hate to send you hellwards fixed that aways.”

Osler was far too old a hand in the country to disobey such an order and under such circumstances. He remained perfectly still, his pale eyes lifted to the other’s threatening face.

Joe reached over and withdrew a large Colt revolver from the drawer. Then, having ascertained there were no other weapons lying handy, he put up his gun and moved back to his seat.

“Guess we’ll git on with the music,” he observed quietly. “I ain’t ter’ble fond of guns ’less I’m makin’ the play myself.”

But he was talking to a different man now. Every shadow of Osler’s cold manner had suddenly deserted him. His eyes were blazing. He sprang from his chair and paced the floor, his hands clenching nervously, a demoniacal rage distorting his features. He was a living fury.

“By God! you shall pay for this, you sheriff,” he cried

in a voice made thick with the rage consuming him. "You think you're going to bluff me—me! You're not! By heavens you're not! I'll gaol you as sure as my name's Osler! You're—"

He broke off, his fury choking him completely. He moved about the room like a madman, his eyes blazing their malignant fury on his two visitors.

The sheriff made no attempt to check him. He waited, sitting with his revolver lying across his knee ready for any emergency.

The emergency came. Osler sprang towards the door. But he was stopped by Joe's voice.

"Hell's yearnin' fer your carkis. You'll sure git ther' if you make that door," he cried sharply.

Again Osler found himself looking into the muzzle of Joe's gun. He stepped back, and finally dropped into his chair. And slowly his eyes dulled to their wonted lustreless stare. He realized the uselessness of resistance.

"Well?" he questioned presently.

"Wal?" said Joe.

"Say what you've got to say, and get out. What's the price?"

Joe shook his head.

"Still barkin' up that tree. Ther' ain't no price."

"Then there's nothing doing. What are you going to do with your proofs? Put them before the courts? I'm ready."

"Mebbe you ain't jest wise how you're fixed," said Joe. "You ain't got no titles to this yer mine. You'll hev a charge agin you fer attemptin' to git away with young Roydon—who has. An' we got a sight heavier pile behind us to fight with than you have. So you're up agin a toler'ble proposition. You can't win out no ways. It's our cinch. You ken fight an' fight, an' we'll call your hand to your last bean. After that ther's the pen'tentiary gapin' fer your carkis. That's our side. Agin that you ken jest hand this yer mine over to the gal, Missie Jocelyn, this yer law feller's ward, who's old Raymon's daughter, an' clear out with the pile you've made. Roydon got thro' with a hull hide, so he ain't feelin' sore 'bout things. Anyways, he's marryin' Missie Jocelyn, so the hull thing'll fix itself jest 'bout as old Raymon would

ha' fancied. I'm putting things jest as they stan'. I don't reckon you need Boyle, here, to go over the details. They're likely familiar."

Osler had so far recovered himself that he very nearly smiled. Joe saw the suggestion, and watched it curiously.

"No, I don't want the details," he said, his eyes turned upon the little lawyer, whose face was now wearing a nervous grin. "Supposing I was to hand over this property—just supposing—it would go to this little scoundrel's ward?"

"George Raymon's gal—sure," corrected the sheriff, wondering.

Osler shook his head.

"Can you prove her heirship?"

"We got the papers," said Joe, with unnecessary emphasis.

Osler turned on him swiftly. His eyes lit again with that tremendous fury.

"A nice game, sheriff," he said fiercely. "You're putting up an elegant piece of knavery. You think to put me out to suit your own ends, yours, and this young Roydon's. You want to get possession of this mine to hand to that girl, because she's going to marry Roydon. Keep it in the family. I suppose you'll get a good thing out of it, too. Eh? makes you sore," as Joe's volcanic temper suddenly rose, and he sprang to his feet. "Hear me out, and I'll wager you find yourself disappointed. Jocelyn Leyland isn't Raymon's daughter any more than you are. It said she was on those papers I bought from this blackleg lawyer, but they were forgeries—forgeries to obtain from me the pension he needed. I bought those papers knowing full well that the birth certificate of that young woman was a forgery. He didn't know I knew it. But I was ready to buy anything, so long as I got the title to the mine. But when I got the papers I found them all forgeries. That doesn't matter now. What does matter is that from the time of Mrs. Raymon's disappearance I followed her trail. I never lost sight of her until she died. After that I kept an eye on the daughter. Under the circumstances I expected no trouble from her.

"But that's where I was wrong. The trouble came sure enough, as it always does where women are concerned. Her mother must have told her the story of her trouble with her father before she died. Well, after her mother's death this she-devil"—the man's bitterness became more and more intense now as he proceeded—"left Wyoming and came up here. And since then I have known no peace."

Suddenly a grin of triumph, mean, vengeful, spread over his face, and even the bitter rage went out of his tone.

"You'll find, if the proofs you claim to have are genuine," he cried triumphantly, "that you will have to hand over this mine to the greatest tough and outlaw in the country—'Six-shooter' Kit. Her name is Kathrine Raymon. Now put your bluff through, Mr. Sheriff."

For a moment Joe was speechless with amazement. It was the first time in his life that he had been so absolutely, thoroughly flabbergasted. But it was only for a moment. He turned on Boyle with a dash of his old ferocity.

"Them papers," he demanded.

Boyle opened a bundle he had in his pocket and drew out a birth certificate and handed it to him, but not without some trepidation.

There was the name right enough. "Kathrine." Joe stared at him. Now he understood a good many things he had puzzled over before. Now he saw why Kate had established herself in the hills to plunder the silver stages. She was helping herself to her own and her mother's property. Now he understood the passion underlying the silver king's demands, that he, Joe, should rid the country of the hill terror. Now he understood Kate's own sudden change of attitude towards himself, and her promise to marry him. His astonishment was not unmixed with chagrin. He was not as smart as he had always believed. Osler's voice struck unpleasantly on his ears.

"Not such a succulent pudding as you thought, eh?" he said with a sneer.

It was the sneer that jarred. Joe's volcanic nature could not resist such provocation.

"It's an elegant puddin', well fixed with a seasonin' o'

dollars," he said swiftly. "Guess I'm marryin' that leddy. She's back ther' in Dyke Hole waitin' around fer me now. Wal?"

Osler and Boyle stared stupidly. Joe stood up. It was a great moment. The consciousness of his own mastery of the situation shone out even in his pose. He strode over to the desk and leant his folded arms on the top of it.

"Wal?" he inquired of the man on the other side of it. "Is it fight? Or—— Guess we're ready."

There was a long pause, during which the millionaire sat silent. He was thinking hard, but his face was quite expressionless. Once he turned and glanced out of the window at the works below. It was as though his whole heart was clinging to that mine which he had held so long, and which had yielded him such profit. Joe became impatient.

"Wal?" he said more sharply.

Osler looked up, and the unutterable hatred in his eyes was the expression of a beaten man. He shrugged.

"I quit," he said.

"Good." The sheriff straightened himself up. He turned to the lawyer. "Hand over them papers, you lyin' son-of-a-moose."

Boyle reluctantly parted with his treasured possession.

"Now, go an' tell Roydon an' Bob to step up here."

The lawyer hurried out. When the door had closed Joe turned on Osler.

"You'll jest git back with me to Dyke Hole, an' you'll stop right ther' while things is fixed. Ther's a hull heap of law business needs puttin' thro'. Meanwhiles young Roydon ken set here an' kep things going. The mine don't need to quit work."

"But——" Osler was on his feet to protest.

"Ther' ain't no 'buts,' mister," replied Joe, with an ugly grin. "I'm jest seein' to things, as they sez, in the int'rests of the future Mrs. Tombstone Joe."

CHAPTER XXX

"MATE" FOR THE SHERIFF

PROBABLY never since the old days, when Dyke Hole was the headquarters of the prospecting industry at the time of the silver boom in that part of the country, had the village known a busier time than that which followed Roydon's safe return from the clutches of the "badmen" of Spawn City.

First of all it was stirred to enthusiasm when the news came of the way Kershaw's dive had been "held up" by Bob Makaw and his posse. The sheriff's astuteness delighted them, his praises were sung by everybody, even those who were usually most heartily against him. But the matter that set them agog with real excitement was the news which reached them after Joe's return from Spawn City, accompanied by Marc Osler.

All the actual details of what passed at that visit were rigorously kept secret, but a story was handed to the people for the purposes of allaying their curiosity and establishing a satisfactory reason for Osler's appearance in the village. Joe himself handed the story out in Moe's bar. He told the people that Roydon, disguising his real purpose, had come to Dyke Hole to purchase silver property. That he was immensely rich, and, after a long period of negotiation, which had been interrupted by the kidnapping affair, he had succeeded in purchasing the Lucretia Mine. Joe talked in millions as easily as he would have talked in cents, he supplied elaborate detail, graphic and dramatic, to all of which Osler's presence in the hotel gave satisfactory colour. Dyke Hole writhed with excitement, and for days Roydon supplied far more whisky to the population than Sarah Glades approved of.

The transfer of the mine was a tedious affair. With the

permission of Carter, George Raymon's executor in England, Roydon took possession temporarily, so as to excite no suspicion. Later, of course, the property would be handed over to Kate. The whole thing was arranged in the form of a purchase. The business of it took nearly six weeks to put through, but at the end of that time the air cleared, Osler left Dyke Hole for the East, and Roydon was established proprietor of the Lucretia Mine.

Then it was that Dyke Hole swarmed about him in search of billets; soft, easy billets that carried liberal emoluments with a minimum of labour. Roydon did what he could for them, but Bob Makaw, who silently stood by asking for nothing, received the plum. He was given both a lucrative and responsible post in the mine, which kept him in close contact with his employer.

Besides all this, there were other matters of moment happening. There was Kate's comfort to be seen to. She could not stay in Dyke Hole with the story of her past on every lip. So, after much discussion, Joe's bride-elect made up her mind to return, for the present, to her home in the hills, taking Jocelyn and the two children with her. Jocelyn had no desire to live any longer under the roof of such a despicable rogue as her guardian had turned out to be.

He, too, was disposed of, but more summarily. He must be kept quiet, and Roydon, who now had access to his own fortune, promptly pensioned him off on condition that he left the country never to return. Ripley Boyle made no demur when he knew the size of the pension, and left at once, glad enough to shake the dust of Dyke Hole from his feet.

Then there were the prisoners. Their disposal was a more awkward matter, and taxed all the sheriff's ingenuity. He could not release them in an ordinary fashion, and to send them to Anaconda meant risking the exposure of the whole of the Spawn City transaction, which, to say the least of it, had been irregular.

Finally, he decided that release was the only thing for them, but that it must be done judiciously. To this end he prepared a number of warrants for robbery under arms. Then he took each prisoner singly and read the charge over to him, pointing out the tremendous penalty awaiting him.

He explained the hopelessness of their cases, but finally assured them that he was no executioner, that he was not one to drive men down. He was simply there, he told them, to reduce the district to a clean, law-abiding community, using only such means as was absolutely necessary to pacify the country. He intended to give them a chance. He would give them three days in which to leave the State. If they were found, or heard of, within the borders of Montana after that time they would be shot on sight. They were provided with horses, saddles and bridles, and told to go. Each man was told separately and dispatched before he could communicate with the others; each man was treated as a case calling for special leniency, and was given to understand that this was so, receiving an assurance that all the others would certainly hang. Joe was also careful to allow three days to elapse between each departure. In this way he got rid of them all.

The only man he did not trust in this way was Snakes Addy. He dispatched him under the charge of Bob Gauvin to the border, where he was turned loose, and threatened with death if he ever showed up in Montana again. Then he notified all the authorities along the border of the man's undesirability.

It was all thoroughly illegal, very risky, and hardly calculated to further the public welfare, but it answered Joe's purposes. Besides, he was a born gambler, ever ready to take a chance, and loving a big bluff well carried through better than anything else in life.

He satisfied Dyke Hole with the news that Bob Gauvin had taken the whole bunch to Anaconda to await their trial at the circuit in six months' time. Thus he was given ample respite.

Three months later the country was in the grip of the terrible northern winter. Snow everywhere; on the plains it was a foot thick, where it would remain growing deeper and deeper until the late spring should release the land from its frozen bonds. The mountains and foothills stood out white and ghostly; the forests, those black, primæval pine forests, buried under a virgin pall, the mighty boughs mourning beneath the weight of their wintry burden. And everywhere reigned that wondrous silence, cold and wintry,

only broken at long intervals by the hunger-cry of the wolves and coyotes. Everything was hibernating. Man and beast alone showed active life in those long, dreary months.

The Lucretia Mine in Spawn City, with the rest of the smaller mines, was closed down until such time as the ground should once more become workable. So, for the time, Roydon was released from his duties.

He was spending the afternoon at Kate's home up in the hills. Jocelyn and he had the parlour to themselves, for Kate was busy with her household duties preparing supper, the hour for which was approaching.

Jocelyn was very little changed. Perhaps that independent spirit, which years of care for her guardian had fostered in her, was less pronounced than it used to be. Now she had some one to lean on, some one who could help her, some one strong and reliant. And she was woman enough to love to lean upon a strong support, even though he was perfectly capable herself. Whatever her early life had made her, she was a tender, loving woman who, before all things, knew how to appreciate a man's honest love.

She and Dick were occupying one chair, or, rather, she was sitting on the chair and Dick was balancing himself on the arm of it, and supporting himself with his arm about her shoulders. For some time past she had been making a pretence of sewing. Now she turned to him with pretended severity.

"I don't know how you expect me to sew, Dick," she said, looking up at him with eyes that smiled in spite of herself. "You're waggling about there like—there!"

Dick suddenly overbalanced and nearly dragged her to the ground. He sat laughing up at her idiotically. They both laughed, and it was good to hear them.

"I'm going to help Kate with the supper. I've had enough of you," Jocelyn declared in the midst of her laughter. "And—" she added threateningly, "I sha'n't come back until Joe arrives."

Dick was on his feet in an instant.

"Oh, I say, Jock," he cried appealingly. "Don't go. I'll promise to be good. Really I will. Do stay."

The girl promptly returned to her seat. She had had no intention of going.

"There," she said. "Now get a chair and sit over there by the stove and tell me all about the people. No"—as Dick began to protest again—"I insist!"

Dick drew up a chair reluctantly, and thoughtfully warmed his hands at the glowing woodstove.

It was a comfortable room. If the furnishings were plain, there was a delightful atmosphere of freedom and comfort about the place. The walls were mud-plaster and whitewash, but there were plenty of pictures and ornaments to disguise them, and though the chairs were mostly plain wooden things, deft fingers had supplied them with most comforting cushions. The earthen floor was strewn with rugs, while a great wooden settle along one wall was simply smothered in skins and cushions. Jocelyn loved the place, and Dick, too, felt that it was by no means to be despised.

"Well? What do you want me to tell you?" he inquired presently.

"Oh, I don't know. Tell me of old Sarah Glades. Does she know that Joe is going to marry Kate?"

Dick laughed.

"I don't know. Don't suppose so. But——" he broke off.

"But what?"

"She's left Dyke Hole."

"Left Dyke Hole?"

Jocelyn's interest made her forget her sewing. Dick grinned.

"Yes. I say, p'raps she's had her dismissal from Joe."

"Silly boy. You're laughing at me."

"Truth, I'm not. Maybe she's given Dyke Hole up. It didn't respond well to her efforts. Still, I'm sure Sarah's attraction was Joe. I wonder if she *did* propose to him."

"Hush, I can hear Kate coming. Don't say anything before her. She's very jealous of Joe. She pretends to be indifferent, but——" she held up a warning finger. "I know! Kate was in love with him before—before——"

Dick nodded.

"I say," he laughed, "I wonder how he proposed? I should have loved to have heard him."

Jocelyn stared at him in pretended indignation.

"I dare say he managed it better than you did, sir," she exclaimed.

"I'll bet he didn't propose at all," returned Dick impatiently. "Just ordered her to marry him. That's much more likely."

"You're a wretch," the girl cried, and they both laughed.

Kate came in in the midst of their mirth. She was very much changed. She looked even handsomer now than in the days of her wild life of lawlessness. But she was very much subdued, and her fine eyes had lost a great deal of their old boldness. She looked gentler, more womanly, so much so that any one would have had difficulty in recognizing the celebrated "hill-terror" of the past. Jocelyn declared, in private to Dick, that it was the care of the two children that had changed her. She might have been their own mother, she said, her love for them was so great. But Dick had other ideas. He declared that she hadn't got over Joe's treatment of her at the dance. Perhaps they had both missed the real reason.

"Now you cheerful souls," she greeted them, "you've just got to find fresh quarters. I want this room for supper. The kitchen's full of washing."

Dick rose at once.

"All right, Kate. Come on, Jock, we'll go and join the washing."

Jocelyn made no attempt to go. She withered Dick with a glance, and turned to Kate.

"Can't I help you, Kate?" she asked.

The other glanced meaningly at Dick.

"You can't, my dear, thanks," she said briefly.

"That takes you off, Jock," laughed Dick.

But Jocelyn was not so easily taken off. She promptly began to lay the table, deliberately taking the things out of Kate's hands. And as the latter beat a retreat, she turned on Dick and commanded him to go on with his news of people.

"How's Bob Makaw doing?" she inquired.

"Fine. He's quite wonderful. I've got him to give up his old prairie costume. Not without a great deal of persuasion though. But he insists on wearing his revolvers. He won't give them up. And he's just as silent as ever.

I tried to make him talk once. I demanded an explanation of why he had 'sacked' one of the men the other day. I thought he couldn't get out of a long explanation. All he said was, 'He's punk.' And with that I had to be satisfied."

"I really don't think he could talk if he wanted to," said Jocelyn seriously.

"I'm sure he couldn't. But what that fellow thinks—ye gods!"

Jocelyn looked round the table to be sure she had set it properly.

"And Shaggy Steele?" she inquired.

"Still the father of fifteen—or is it sixteen," Dick laughed. "The domestic peace of his establishment is still doubtful. Tite is still gathering information. Poor little Tite."

"Poor Mrs. Steele," added Jocelyn. "And the boys?" Dick shook his head.

"I don't know. I hear Moe's bar still flourishes, so——"

"Yes—I suppose they won't alter."

"'Dyke Hole' Bill and Bob Gauvin have declared a truce since they have been made Joe's deputies. They ride rough-shod over their old pals. Joe says they're the men for the work."

"They were the best of the bunch," Jocelyn declared. "I'm glad they've taken a step up. Hark! That's a horse outside. Joe!"

Dick ran to the door and flung it open. The rush of cold air set them shivering. Jocelyn, looking out into the darkness over his shoulder, just made out a dim figure dismounting from a horse. The next moment the tall form of Joe loomed up, and his harsh voice broke the silence.

"Howdy, folks," he cried.

Jocelyn seized his hand and wrung it.

"What an awful night, Joe. Frozen?" she inquired.

"Nope, little gal, thankee. Hollo, Dick, boy. Where's Kate?"

"In the kitchen. I'll fetch her, Joe," Jocelyn declared.

"And I'll go and fix your horse," added Dick.

Joe found himself alone. He strode over to the stove, his quick eyes noting what he considered the elegant preparations for supper. He removed his fur mitts and wiped

the frost out of his eyes. Then he removed his fur coat and flung it across a chair. He stood over the stove and warmed himself, and presently, turning his back to it, heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction. His every movement, every glance of his great cavernous eyes, bespoke something of his happy mood. He stood contemplating the snowy cloth of the supper-table, and the well burnished knives and shining forks laid for the meal with appreciation. So Kate found him when she came in.

"Say, Kate, kind of high-toned, eh?" he observed, nodding at the table.

Kate came over to him. She paused, hesitating. Then she held out her hand. Joe saw the movement, and it was his turn to hesitate. He looked at the woman, then at the hand. Finally, he quietly drew out a plug of chewing and bit a piece off. Kate hurriedly withdrew her neglected hand.

"Yes, we're high-toned," she said, with a queer glance, half of resentment, half of amusement, at the lean figure of her man. "Y' see we're rich now."

"An' consekent our frills has sure got to be laundered?"

"Sure."

There was nothing but amusement in Kate's eyes now.

At that moment Dick returned from the barn and, simultaneously, Jocelyn re-entered from the kitchen.

"Supper," the girl announced.

It was a quiet meal. Jocelyn and Dick did most of the talking. Joe seemed unusually quiet. Kate looked after the others' wants, and this was no mean task, for all had an ample appreciation for her cooking.

It was not till the meal was nearly finished and Joe had negotiated several pieces of pie and topped off with a huge drink of steaming coffee, that he sat back and his tongue loosened up. He began at once in that authoritative tone they all knew so well.

"Kate," he said, addressing himself pointedly to her, "I bin ways over to Anaconda an' got the license. We're goin' to git mar'd this day week." Then he turned to Dick. "I got your license. Guess you sure best git busy that aways too."

There was a dead silence. Then Dick smiled weakly.

"Thanks," he murmured.

Jocelyn turned and stared at him.

Then Kate, glancing across the table, caught Jocelyn's indignant eye and smiled encouragingly.

"Guess you had a good journey?" she inquired of Joe.

"To Anaconda?"

"Sure."

"Hit a blizzard, an' took cover at Chloride."

"Ah. That's too bad."

Joe glanced doubtfully in Kate's direction. She kept her eyes on her plate, but there was something suggestive of amusement in her tone. Joe had noticed it. He saw no cause for levity. To him marriage was a very, very serious matter.

"Guess you fixed things with the parson all right?" inquired Kate presently.

"Sure."

"An' what time is it to be?"

"Guess we'll git over ther' the night before," said Joe, with decision. "You gals ken stop at the Spread Eagle Hotel. Kind of mean place fer you, but it's sure the best they got. I 'lows I took the best rooms, which is punk, anyways. The—the cere—ceremony 'll happen 'bout eleven o'clock. The passon was mulish on the point. Most of them sky-runners is mulish on chu'ch fixin's. I doped him out a wad fer his char'ties, but he didn't weaken any. Y' see I'd fixed on evenin' fer doin' the hitchin'."

"I see," Kate nodded. Her eyes obstinately continued to smile.

Joe beamed on all three. He had broken the ice now, and felt more comfortable.

"Wal?" he inquired.

"Well?" responded Kate, with a desperate attempt to keep a straight face.

"Y' see, I ken git leave. Winter's allus slack," Joe went on complacently. "Soon as we're running double, guess we'll git over to 'Frisco. Then we'll git along to the Grand Canyon an' dope in time ther' awhile. After that we'll come along through Arizona, an' up Wyoming way, an' git around here come spring. That fix you, Dick? An' you, Jock?" His self-satisfaction was delightful.

"It sounds fine," said Jocelyn amiably, while Dick

watched her narrowly. "It would be a lovely trip, only Dick and I haven't decided when we are going to get married," she went on with a blush. "In fact, we thought, we hadn't quite decided, of course, that England would suit us. Dick thinks of going on ahead, when he's handed over the mine to Kate, and making the arrangements there. Then I should go over, and he'd meet me, and we should get married in London. After that we'd go to Europe for a—a long trip. You see we have nothing to keep us here."

"But——" began Joe in volcanic protest.

Kate now broke in on him.

"That's fine," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Of course Joe and I won't be able to get married yet either. I intend to sell the mine first. Then he's got to give up his official work." Her eyes were dancing with fun. "That'll take quite a longish time. I'd figger somewhere around spring would fix us. Then," she went on, turning upon the astonished sheriff and speaking with great decision, "I think I, too, should like to go to England. I've a great notion to see a bit of that old world before I settle down on—the ranch—I'm going to buy."

Dick smothered a roar of laughter, and sat spluttering and coughing into his handkerchief. Jocelyn's face was hidden in her cup. Joe was at a pitch of angry bewilderment.

"But them licenses? I fixed things!" he blurted out. Then his wild eyes glared round the table and came back to his rebellious *fiancée*. He calmed at once, and went on with great dignity, "Mam," he said, "seein' I'm marryin' you——"

Kate promptly laid a plump brown hand on his arm.

"Oh no, Joe, I'm marrying you," she interrupted him sweetly.

"It don't matter nohow——" he began again.

"But it does, Joe,—dear."

Kate let her fingers slide down to the nervous hand lying on the table. She squeezed it gently.

"You'd best give me those licenses," she went on.

Joe stared at her helplessly. But that hand-squeeze and the sweetness of her eyes had mollified him. He handed her the papers with some reluctance, and Kate promptly

threw them into the stove. Joe was on his feet in a second.

"Say, them papers!" he cried.

Kate put up a hand to his lips, but Joe brushed it aside. She stood facing him. Jocelyn and Dick, clutching each other by the hand under the table, were revelling in this battle for supremacy.

"It's got to be as I sez," cried Joe authoritatively. "I ain't leavin' Dyke Hole—I'm sheriff!"

"Just so, Joe,—dear. You're sheriff," said Kate, with something approaching maternal tenderness. "But you won't be when—when you're my husband."

FINIS

