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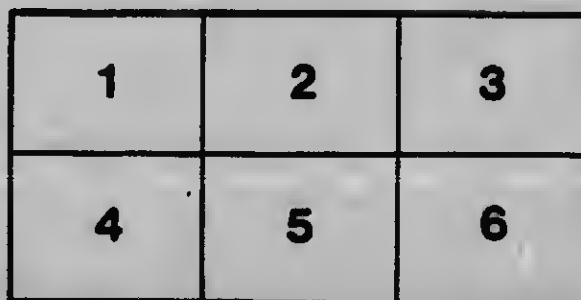
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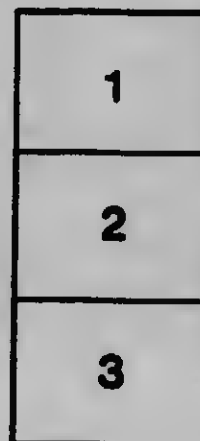
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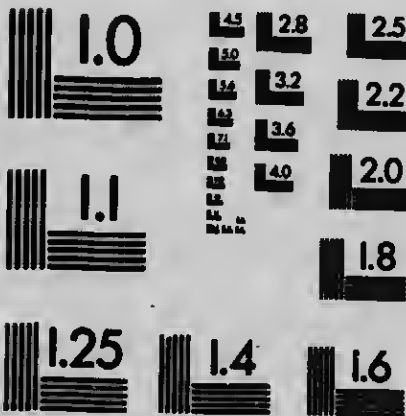
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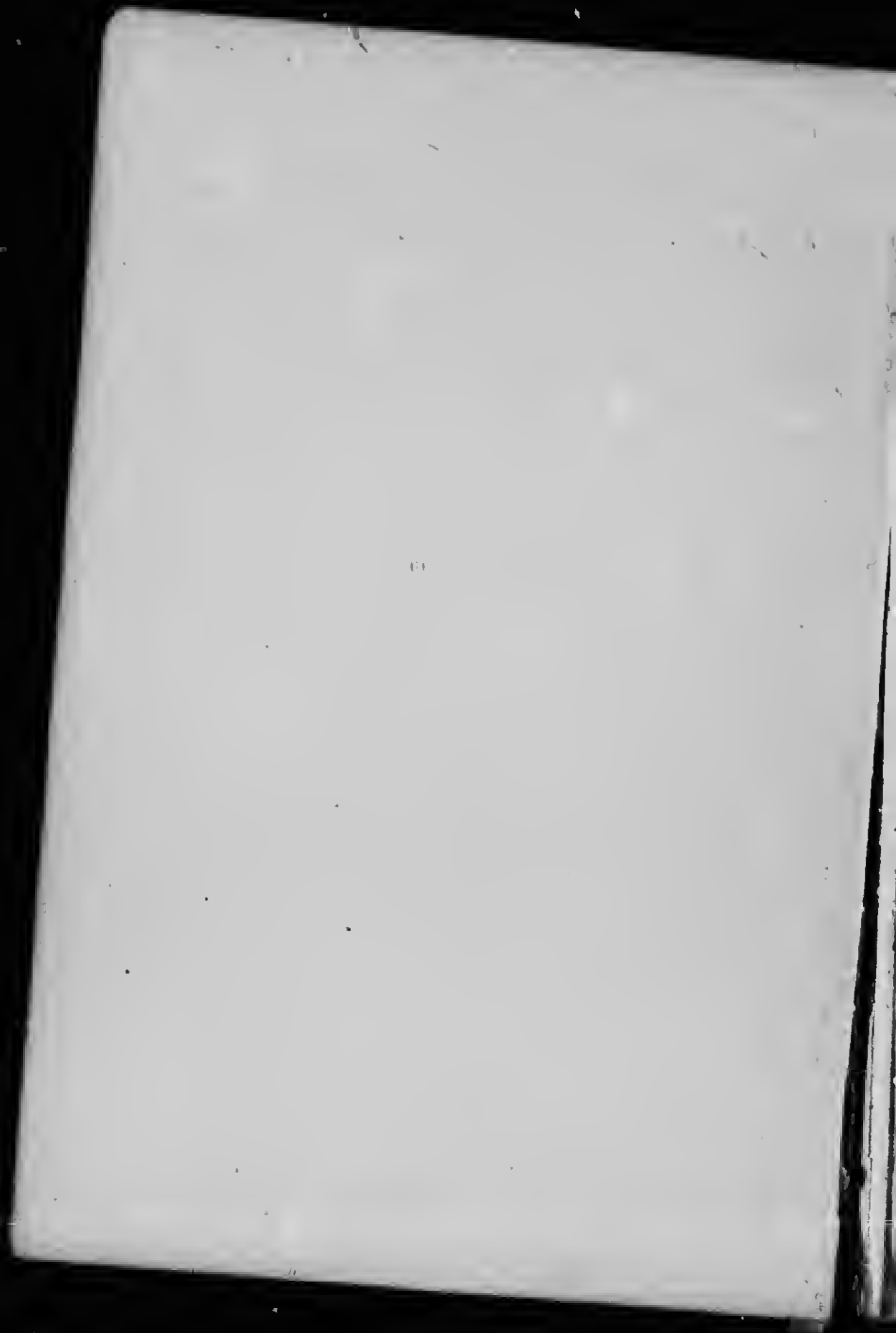
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THE RAINBOW CHASERS





The Rainbow Chasers

of the Plains

PITSON

"MAN OF THE WEST"

ILLUSTRATIONS AND DRAWINGS
BY ARTHUR L. FARR

AND HALL

1904



The Rainbow Chasers

A Story of the Plains

BY

JOHN H. WHITSON

AUTHOR OF "BARBARA, A WOMAN OF THE WEST"

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM DRAWINGS
BY ARTHUR E. BECHER

TORONTO
LANGTON AND HALL

1904

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*TO MY BEST, KINDEST, AND MOST SEVERE
CRITIC*

FLORA JOSSELYN WHITSON

As to this Book

DOVE-TAILED facts, woven together and broidered with fiction, constitute no inconsiderable part of this book. The narrator might add further concerning many of the things herein written, "All of which I saw, and part of which I was"; and, with an exception as to the garniture of fiction, he still would be within the strong corral of truth. He not only knows that the Rainbow Chasers existed, he was one of them. The life history of Christine, more tragic even than here recorded, was heard from one who knew. If Dick Brewster — a story must have its hero! — did not do all the things with which he is credited, what matters it? He would have done them, for that was his way. So of the other people who walk this paper stage. The deep woods of Arkansas still feels the bite of the booming, whining, hungry saw. As for the plains, they are still there, wind-harried, miragy, sun-kissed, often sun-blistered and blizzard-swept, just as when the Rainbow Chasers hunted over them so wildly for the pot of gold. You may see them yourself, if you will, between the one hundredth meridian and the foot-hills. The Arkansas, sleepy-eyed in its lullabied bed, still hides away beneath its gray-white coverlet of shifting sands ten months of the year, then be-

comes a ramping terror, swollen and loud-voiced, when the melting snow pounds at the mountain walls with icy fingers and breaks through the iron gateway of the Grand Cañon for a breathless race across the gray plains. And the pot of gold? It may be there, too, at the end of the shining rainbow, as the Rainbow Chasers thought, and some day other Rainbow Chasers, more sane and with lava blood cooled by experience, may dig it from the black soil. We believed it was there, in the 'Eighties.

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"He leaped to his feet in spite of Blake's efforts to keep him down"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"The next moment he had the deputy sheriff by the throat"	<i>Page 32</i>
"Told his story with such natural pantomimic gestures"	" 206
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THE
RAINBOW CHASERS
A STORY OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I
WITH HEART ILLUMINED

BORN of fire of sun and wine of dew, the world is new made continually, when the early summer days lengthen and the mornings open red like the lips of a rose. But only when the heart itself is brightened and warmed is there recognition of this. Then one knows how good a thing it is to be alive, hope grows strong, and horizons lift.

Dick Brewster, sitting on a plow beam on the edge of the world thus new made, new made especially for him that morning, felt all this, even though his thoughts were of other things. He saw the red morning burning like a crucible above the deep Arkansas woods; saw the diamond shine of the dew; saw the lift of smoke over the wood-choppers' camp, where it moved and swayed, a wind-twisted ribbon of blue against the bright bronze and copper of the painted east. He heard the slow "cluck, cluck," of the striped ground squirrel on the rail fence across the road,

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the raucous caw of the vagrant crow hurrying to the river cornfields, and the querulous scolding of the bare-footed boy, with the sunburned legs and the torn straw hat, who was prodding the sleepy cows up to the stables for the early milking.

There was a cloud stain here and there in the gaudy east, just as there was on the sky of his inner vision. If he had been in a mood for philosophizing he might have drawn an analogy between the stains of the outer and the inner sky and asked himself if either were likely to roll together by and by into a black ball of storm-warring tempest. He might have seen, too, that the cloud stains over the silent woods were as bright as the sky itself, and but added to its beauty, and so have reached the healthful conclusion that clouds are good for skies, even if they do no more than mark the contrast between speckless azure and mottled threat of storm.

Dick Brewster did not philosophize, nor even reflect. He was not thinking of any of these things — sky, or dew, or ground squirrel's clucking, though he saw and heard them all — but of certain events of the night just past, and of an early morning ride down the white ribbon of road past the little frame house that nestled in the shadows of the big trees. His horse was now in its stall, munching its feed of shelled corn, and he had walked back a short distance along the white road, to sit musing on the broken plow beam that rested on the rim of the new world. Why had he taken that purposeless ride? The answer was in the little house.

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As he looked at the house now, a snarl of smoke sprang up from the chimney as if in haste, and floated in a tenuous spiral toward the sky, which was changing from pearl gray to pink overhead.

"They are always early," was his thought; "as early as the squirrels or the crows, or as I am. I wonder if she would have been glad to see me?"

He shifted his position on the plow beam and looked about, letting his gaze rest finally on the grander structure at the top of the hill above him. This house was large and roomy, with a plethora of wide piazzas and rotund bay windows overlooking the woods and the wide-reaching river bottoms. Moreover, it was his home—the home of his father. Some of the light of the morning died out of Dick Brewster's eyes as he looked at it.

The ground squirrel, disturbed by his change of position, dropped like a streak of mottled sunshine between the rails and disappeared, to appear again on the fence a few yards below, where it regarded him with alert and beady eyes. The querulous boy had vanished into the big stables. High on its tower the motionless windmill began to shine like a burnished shield as the full flush of the red sunlight touched it. The deep calm of early morning lay on everything. Only the clucking of the ground squirrel went on, but even that seemed to be a part of the great silence.

Dick looked once more at the little house with its spiral of smoke, and his face warmed again

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into a smile of pleasure. Events of the recent past crowded on him: the pressure of a hand at parting; the touch of full lips; the clasp of a girlish waist in the maze of the noisy dance; the defiance of convention and of his father; the exultation over discomfited rivals. His heart burned like the morning sky. He had said, "I love you!" and the new world was murmuring in his heart as well as in the heart of the awakening morning; the light of the new world shone in his eyes and face, as it did in the flaming harbingers that burned above him.

To be in love is to have the world recreated and to feel that you yourself have just begun to live. Dick Brewster whispered to his inner consciousness that he was in love, — in love with the daughter of that ancient Norwegian, Gustav Borg, who drove one of his father's log teams, and whose mental processes and halting speech were as slow and ponderous as the movements of the oxen themselves. And, being in love, there was no opposition he could not hurl down, no wall of disapproval he could not surmount. Youth, when it is hot-headed and restive, and withal in love, or when it fancies that it is in love, which for all practical purposes is the same thing, is the new type of Alexander, able to conquer the world.

"We had fine times last night," he said to himself as he sat thus musing, the warm glow in his face. "She danced with me much more than with any of the other fellows. I did n't get to see her when I took that ride awhile ago — knew I could n't, of course, though I could pass

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the house and look at that; but if I go down I can get to see her now."

He took a nickel from his pocket and studied it. Then he flipped it into the air, boyishly.

"Heads, I go; tails, I stay away."

The coin dropped into the dew-wet dust at his feet.

"Heads!" he said, almost triumphantly, and rose from the plow beam.

He took a step down the road, then stopped in hesitation.

"I'm a fool, I guess!" he muttered, flushing. "She would n't want to see me this early."

He turned about and looked up at the big house. A man carrying a milking-stool came out of one stable door and entered another. Dick Brewster moved in the direction of the stables.

The sunshine caught him full as he walked slowly up the hill. He seemed to walk out of the shadow into it—a bronzed, lusty young fellow, with clear gray eyes and a well-poised head. The gray eyes looked a bit tired, but they could be wide-awake, and keen and determined as well; the sharp angle of the jaw emphasized that. In addition, there was a somewhat reckless and dare-devil swing of the muscular body, together with a suggestion of self-will.

"If Dick was n't heady, he would n't be the son of his father!"

That was the opinion of Joe Barton, the chief "hand" at the saw-mill. The "headiness" of Colonel Brewster was the talk of the county.

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The increasing sunlight, revealing more and more the figure of Dick Brewster as he walked with swinging stride toward the stables, showed a mass of very light, almost tow-colored hair under the soft, crushable, black hat. That hair would be by and by as dark as his father's had ever been, but just now it had a certain juvenility of appearance that was not at all pleasing to Dick Brewster himself. He was no longer a boy, was his thought; why then this head of tow, as if the years of childhood had not yet fallen from him? Nevertheless it was still one of his most marked possessions, a badge of that world of inexperience in which he still lived and wherein he did foolish and inexcusable things.

Arriving at the stables Dick swung open the door that had received the man and the milking-stool and looked in on a familiar scene. A broad-shouldered man of thirty was sitting on the stool, his muscular hands sending two streams of milk with a noisy sound into a bright tin milking-pail. The boy who had driven in the cows was similarly engaged. A row of cows, heads secured by stanchions, filled the contracted space. Permeating all was an odor of hay and warm milk.

"Hullo!" said Dick, as he closed the door after him.

His voice was cheery, and he addressed the man as an equal.

The latter looked up but continued his work. His hat was off and his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. The face he presented was as cleanly shaven as that of the youth who stood by the

closed door, and his heavy black hair showed the effect of oil applied to it liberally; the previous evening.

"Devil of a fine time we had last night," was his answer to the greeting. "The only trouble about fun o' that kind is that you don't want to quit, — never; and next mornin' you feel like you 'd been run through a thrashin' machine."

"I'm feeling all right."

Dick took a milking-stool from a corner and sat down on it near the door.

"Mebbe if you had to knock into the work of a mornin', like this, you would n't. So, there!" This last to the cow.

He turned to Dick again.

"Anderson 'll be lookin' fer you, I reckon," he prophesied, with a short laugh. "He was chewin' nails last night."

Dick's gray eyes hardened.

"Was he saying anything about me?"

The boy stopped his milking to listen; he knew there was bad blood between Jed Anderson, the young deputy sheriff, and Dick Brewster.

"Well, he was sizzlin' hot; an' when a feller is a fool an' mad at the same time, you know he's li'ble to spit out more'n he really means. 'Twas what he done, though, more'n what he said. When he seen you walk out with th' calico on yer arm, like a kid luggin' his prize home frum school, I thought he was goin' to pull his gun on you right there. He held in, though; but when you was gone he said a few to his friends that were n't purty, an' then straddled his horse as if he 'd been sent fer to arrest

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a man t'other side the county. I give a yell when I seen him go; an' I reckon he'll want to take it out o' my hide next time we meet. But it was worth it.

"No offence," he said, when Dick did not answer. "You ast me, you know!"

Dick Brewster sat in meditation for a little while, then rose slowly.

"That's all right," he apologized, as if he felt this to be the milker's due. "As for Anderson, he can go his way and I'll go mine, and our roads need n't cross unless he wants them to. If they do, though, that's his lookout. When I set out to do a thing, you know that I do it, Bill."

He pulled open the door and stepped out of the stable.

"I know that all right!" the milker muttered, again tinkling the milk into the pail between his knees. "When you do start out, Dick Brewster, hell and high water can't hold you, no matter what you're goin' fer."

He caught sight of the face of the boy.

"What you grinnin' about, like a 'possum?"

"Nawthin'," said the boy, bending again to his work.

Outside, Dick Brewster looked down at the little house at the end of the road, then glanced over the wide leagues of woodland, which stretched like an interminable green field below the bald, high clearing that held the big house and the stables.

The sun had risen fully, but wisps of black clouds were flying across its face.

CHAPTER II

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK

COLONEL JOHN BREWSTER sat alone at the table in the long, low dining-room. He was a grizzled, aggressive man, with stern gray eyes set deep under crags of bushy eyebrows. The table was laid for three. Through the window near the colonel could be seen the gleaming shield of the windmill. The sunshine came in at this window, and sifting through the leaves of Virginia creeper that bound it about, made a swaying, uncertain pattern on the floor.

Colonel Brewster took out his watch, snapped it open, and looked at the time. The frown increased under the craggy brows and deepened the crows'-feet in the corners of the aggressive gray eyes.

"Late!" he grunted. "Both of them late!"

Then a door opened at one side of the room, and a quiet old lady, looking remarkably like her brother, the colonel, came softly into the room and took the chair at the opposite end of the table. One chair was still vacant. She glanced across at the colonel.

"Where's Dick?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she protested, as if she had been accused suddenly of stealing him.

Colonel Brewster lifted his voice.

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"Liza, where's Dick? Or did the rascal get in at all last night?"

Mam Liza came into the dining-room, smiling, a dish in her hands. Mam Liza always smiled. For that reason she remained on good terms with the colonel when no one else could.

"Law sakes, I dunno!" she said, in answer to his shouted question. Then, with some reserve of hesitation: "I done seed 'im down at de end o' de hill 'while ago. He mus' 'a' been up pow'ful ea'ly. Out on dat young black hoss 'fo' I poke mah head into de kitchen. Dat black gwine tuh th'ow 'im an' break his naik 'r his laig, nex'. I tol' 'im so messe'f yist'day."

"Likely he didn't get in at all last night," observed the colonel, frowning at Mam Liza. "There was a dance over at Upton's, I understand. And if he went he came home with Borg's girl. This must stop, I tell you!"

Mam Liza placed the dish on the table with deference, as if to assure him that this conduct on the part of Dick Brewster would certainly be stopped, so far as she was able to stop it. Mrs. Talbot, the colonel's sister, looked at the window where the loom of the Virginia creeper was weaving away with its shuttle of sunshine; she merely looked and said nothing.

Perhaps she was thinking of Dick Brewster. Perhaps, — and this is more likely, as she was used to the colonel's clatter, — she was thinking of other things — of the past, and the home in Michigan, from which she had come some years before with the colonel, to this home in the edge of the Arkansas wilds. Dick had come then, too; and

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Bill Potter, who was now out in the stables with the cows, and who because he had come from Michigan with the family was considered almost one of it, even though he was but a servant — as much of a servant as Mam Liza.

Those years in the Arkansas woods seemed very long to the quiet woman who was staring at the small panes of that window, where she seemed to see in the shifting red sunshine, as in a magician's mirror, the things of long ago.

She had put behind her the comforts of the old home in a small town in Michigan for *this*. The colonel's sister always emphasized the "this," even mentally. Of itself it was not very descriptive; but to her it meant isolation, negroes, Arkansas poor whites, wet, malarious woodlands, lack of any kind of society; everything, in short, except the things she had been accustomed to in the old life. Sometimes, when she thought of it, she did not wonder that Dick was a "trial" to the colonel. But then she herself was a "trial" to the colonel. Mam Liza was. Everybody was.

The colonel's greatest "trial," perhaps, outside of his legal ones, and they were many, was the rival saw-mill of Vance Sullivan, farther down the river.

Next to Sullivan's saw-mill as a source of irritation was the fact, recently noted, that Dick was "becoming interested" in Borg's girl. Even the colonel's sister could not condone that. Neither could Mam Liza. To Mam Liza the Borgs were "po' white trash," and that was worse than "niggers." It did not matter that Christine Borg was quite attractive, with the deepest violet-

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blue eyes and silky hair like spun gold; she was not the sort of girl a member of the Brewster family — the Brewster heir, if you like, — should consort with. Why! He might even begin to think, if he had not already done so, that he could marry her.

In consideration of this terrible possibility, no doubt this "trial" should be given precedence even to Sullivan's saw-mill.

Next in order, if the colonel's "trials" are to be catalogued like books in a library, was Chris Miller's saloon down at Ransoms. Dick did not go there very often, as the colonel had taken pains to find out, but only once was too often, and he knew that Dick had been there once. That was after their quarrel of a week before. They had quarrelled, if that is the proper word where a father lashes with stinging whips of words and the son listens sullenly without saying anything much in reply. After the quarrel Dick had ridden on the black over to Chris Miller's, where, it was said, he had done things which no right-minded young man would ever do, and had come away with a reel in his gait and with pockets depleted by the gamblers who made it their business to pluck the log cutters, the workmen, and the log haulers of the mills.

Then there were legal "trials" innumerable! But that brings up a subject so vast that it can be no more than touched on now. There was the long litigation between the colonel and Sullivan over the "devil's fence" separating their leagues of woodland. The colonel had built his fence first, and would not permit his saw-mill rival to

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connect with it. As a result, Sullivan paralleled this fence with another not a yard from it; and the fences of rails, expensive so far as the cost of labor went, ran thus side by side for miles. Legal battles had grown out of it. But why multiply instances? Colonel Brewster would have told you that he was of all men the most imposed upon by his neighbors and by the entire community. Because of this his legal business was so large that Squire Pennypacker, an excellent civil lawyer by the way, gave it almost his entire attention. But there! — the records of the county court may still be consulted. Perhaps you will even find in them the remark of the legal wag who was opposing Pennypacker in court one day, and who said, speaking to judge and jury:

"If Colonel Brewster would stop quarrelling with his neighbors for a year, Squire Pennypacker and this court together would almost go out of business."

To return to the dining-table, the colonel and his sister, and Mam Liza. Scarcely had the colonel voiced his disapproval of his son Dick when the colonel's sister withdrew her gaze from the shifting light of the window, and letting it fall on the door leading out upon the piazza saw the door open and Dick himself appear.

Dick Brewster came quickly into the dining-room, his face darkening as he observed the grim visage of his father, and took the vacant chair without a word. Silence followed, disturbed only by the shuffling feet of Mam Liza. Dick cast his eyes down to the white cloth.

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"Out again last night!" said the colonel, as if he were growling grace.

"Yes," said Dick, quietly and softly, as if he were saying, "Amen."

The colonel looked across at him. The colonel's sister stared again at the window. Mam Liza shuffled into the kitchen. The room was silent. The very silence seemed to invoke the colonel to an explosion.

"Why don't you speak?" he roared, his bushy gray brows quivering, as he brought his hand down upon the table with a thump that rattled the china. "You were at Upton's again and came home with Borg's girl! Is n't it so? Don't sit there like a wooden Indian! Is n't it so?"

Dick Brewster looked at his father. Their eyes met. Dick's face was pale; his father's red, angry, and warlike. He was a warlike man in every fibre, as the members of his old Michigan regiment which he led with honor through the great Civil War would have informed you, such of them as still lived. They would have informed you too, probably, that the colonel was a severe disciplinarian and swore at his men like a pirate when they displeased him. But he was brave also; they would have said that. And in proof they would have told you with flush of aging cheeks how he led the storming, with hat off and dark hair flying, in the second day's fight at Pittsburg Landing after "old Grant had been licked out of his boots."

"Yes, it's so!" said Dick, firmly, not flinching before his father's stern gaze.

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from

Upton's?" the colonel demanded, his voice harsh and strident. "And didn't I tell you to keep away from Borg's girl? I'll discharge that old fool this very morning. This very morning, sir! He shall go, bag and baggage, boots and breeches; I won't have him about any longer."

Dick almost smiled.

"Then he'll go to Sullivan's," he said, but he said it very quietly.

"Let him go—let him go!" the colonel roared. "Let him go to Sullivan's; I don't care where the devil he goes. Do you hear that? He shan't stay under any roof that I own, not another day. Let him go to Sullivan's."

Dick did not answer this outburst. It was useless to argue when the genial colonel once had lance set and war-horse dancing; he would have his tilt then, if the heavens came down on him. Dick had lived long enough to learn that.

"And you—you!" the colonel fumed, breathlessly. "If you speak to that girl again, if you go near her, if you have anything to do with her, you shall leave this house. Do you hear that, sir?"

Dick looked up again. The pallor had gone out of his face.

"Isn't she a nice girl?" he demanded. "They're poor, of course; but you were poor before you got that land in Michigan, and—"

"Is Borg what you call a gentleman—is he a—"

"He is honest!"

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"An ignorant old clod-hopper — an ox-driver! And her mother! Look at her mother — a poor white! Why, even a nigger would think twice before associating with one of them. And you're a Brewster! My God, Dick, what a jackass you are! What do you want to go with that girl for? What can you see in her? The daughter of a poor white and an ignorant old Norwegian who likely can't write his own name. And you a Brewster!"

Dick's face began to flush. The quiet old lady, the colonel's sister, though she still looked at the window where no breath of air now stirred, seemed to feel the rush of storm clouds.

"Sir, what can you see in her?" the colonel demanded, beetling his craggy brows and eyeing his son fiercely. "Don't you know that you're a fool?"

"Perhaps I am," said Dick. His voice was raised a trifle and his eyes were hot and shining. "Maybe I am a fool — only time will tell that, I fancy; but what I see in the girl makes me determined to marry her. If she will have me," he added a moment later.

The colonel stared in speechless rage. Mam Liza, who had re-entered the dining-room, said afterward; that she "'spected tuh gracious de cunnel was gwine tuh fall right down by dat table in a pocoplectic fit." But the colonel did not fall. Instead, he roared, his voice shaking with a wrath that could not be expressed:

"Then get out of my house, you ungrateful dog! Defy me, will you? Get out of my house!"

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"Certainly!" said Dick, rising.

His voice was shaking, too, but he held his anger in some sort of restraint, a thing the worthy colonel could never do.

Then he walked to the door, and through it out into the new sunlight warming the piazza.

"And don't you come back!" the colonel threw at him, much as he would have thrown a boot-jack at an offending beggar.

CHAPTER III

THE ANODYNE OF THE BIG WOODS

DICK BREWSTER did not look at the sun, nor at the clouds now veiling the glow of its red disk, but strode across the piazza with face set sternly. He let himself out at the paling gate and walked on with a stiff, hurt air, turning at last into the white road. He was very angry, and had a wrathful and suffocating sense of injury and harsh treatment. It was not a new feeling.

Day was fully abroad in the land, and its advent was being greeted by a boisterous stir and hurry of work. An axe rang on the edge of the clearing. At the stables oxen were being yoked in pairs and hitched to heavy log wagons. The boy who had been in the milking shed was riding a horse through one of the wide stable doors. The harness chains jingled musically, and the boy ducked his head and curved his back as he rode through the low doorway. Potter was coming round a corner of the hay barn leading a cow by a rope.

The look of defiant anger died slowly out of Dick's face as he descended the long slope of the hill. Thoughts of his father's harsh words were being superseded by thoughts of the events of the night before. His eyes rested on the

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little frame house down by the big trees. They had no human planting, those trees. They had flourished lustily through many a leafy year before the saw-mills came to ravage the forests. They dwarfed the little house and made it seem even more insignificant than it was.

Dick walked more slowly and looked at the house as he came to the path that led from the road into the depths of the woods, but he hesitated only a moment; then passed on into the umbrageous, summer-scented tunnel, whose roof was the green canopy of thick-set boughs and whose floor was the soft black earth.

Through centuries trees and leaves had died to make that carpet of velvety mould, and sprays of sunshine had mottled and pencilled the soil there even as now through each of the wonderful years of those wonderful centuries. Young hearts hasten feverishly. But the earth is ponderous and time is long; nature is patient and does not hurry. It will not hasten the ripening of a single golden apple, no matter how frantic the haste of the one who would eat of it. Men have seen this from Eden until now; they will see it forever, but it will not move them.

Somehow the great Arkansas woods,—rank on rank of giant oaks, shaggy-coated hickories, lordly poplars with heads in the clouds, tall and graceful maples, stately gums and shadowing beeches,—seemed to take Dick Brewster to itself with tactful sympathy. He loved the woods. He had been in it or near it, in Arkansas and Michigan, all his young life. It seemed almost a sentient thing, like a river.

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It was vigorously alive, — those sturdy trunks, arching limbs, breathing leaves, and feeding roots told him that, — as much alive as he was himself. It had moods sombre and bright, playful and angry. It sang when loving winds wooed it and roared in wrath under the rough lashings of a gale. It smiled in the sunshine and brooded silently when gray clouds hung low and sullen. The warm bright spirit of the woods began to creep into his heart; and when a mocking-bird sang in an open glade, rocking and carolling on the topmost twig of a slender ash, his heart began to carol with it as when a boy, and the sunshine seemed to brighten again behind the clouds.

The arched-in pathway fringed out like a tattered sleeve, ending suddenly on the margin of a black bayou. Tall sycamores stood here. With their upper limbs white and bare, their trunks clothed in cinnamon bark, they were in appearance not unlike tall bathers dressing after a dip in the waters at their feet. Farther along where the swamp lay dark and forbidding, cypresses, lovers of the ooze, had waded in to their knees.

Dick turned aside toward the edge of the clearing; and, as he passed along by the bayou and the swamp, frogs plumped into the water, and little black turtles slipped from shiny wet logs and swam away with soundless paddling of claw-like feet.

Beyond the clearing was one end of the great cornfield. In the early morning light the crow had flown to it as to a feasting ground, though there was as yet no nodding plume of pollen-dusted tassel nor enticing red corn silk to warrant

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a belief that he could find a breakfast there. He, or one of his fellows, was sitting in pensive silence now on the high dead bough of the time-worn butternut, that stood out in the edge of the field as if, feeling the decrepitude and helplessness of old age, it had chosen to withdraw from its comrades of the forest.

In rows made crooked by many interfering stumps and deadened trees the corn stood breast high, sturdy, and dark green. The shine of the dew was still on the broad, strong blades; and down in the flagons formed by the whorl of the topmost leaves, and in the little green cup at the base of each blade, the sunshine warmed it into rosy wine, fit draught for some lusty god of the morning.

Along the margin of the cornfield and the stump-filled clearing that opened out beside it Dick Brewster began his daily task. It was something to have work to do. But he could think while he worked; and he was thinking energetically as he took an axe and some keel from a nook by the cornfield fence, where he had previously left them.

Like much of the thinking of the world, which apparently is quite useless so far as results go, his thinking brought him nothing. He tramped round and round in a beaten circle like the animals which toil in the horse-power of the threshing machine.

He was but an epitome of the world in this. The world hurries on, pluming itself; it counts the notches in the blazed trail; it lifts axe to cut another notch marking an advance, when lo! a

notch is already there. It had passed that way before but had forgotten it. Still the world, and man — for the world is but many men, who are after all very much alike, — believes nearly always that progress is being made and is happy.

So Dick Brewster, tramping his little round of thought, had much comfort and cheer. Always at the end of the circle determination hardened and wavering stopped. He had chosen his highway and he would walk in it. He would do that both because he wanted to and because he had been resisted. He was very young.

As he thus thought, he went from tree to tree along the edge of the clearing. Such of the trees as he deemed fit, free of wind-shake and blight of any kind, he set the axe to, chopping out a clean gash that let the sap run. These trees the choppers following after would fell and saw into logs for the hungry saw-mill. It buzzed in the distance like a droning bottle fly, filling all the woods with a hungry whining. Now and then coming to a cord of wood stacked up and propped neatly, he would verify the measurements with a ruler taken from his hip pocket, and if they were found true would mark with the keel on the ends of the cord sticks to show that the wood had been inspected and accepted.

As the noon hour approached and the sun had grown hot and the air in the pentwoods close and steamy, Dick Brewster put away axe and keel and walked by a familiar path to where the log cutters were at work. They were brawny, half-clad negroes, all of them. The crash of falling trees had sounded thunderously at intervals throughout

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the morning. Now the log cutters were driving cross-cut saws through the logs with easy, rhythmic swing, chattering and laughing as they toiled.

They greeted the son of their employer with due deference, though they yah-yahed and ki-yied with great freedom while they talked with him, a thing they would not have done in the presence of the colonel, whom they held in awe.

"Hot work!" said Dick, to one whose face was adrip.

The answer came with a laugh:

"Always hot in dese yeah woods, Boss Dick, w'en 'tain't winteh time."

Three yokes of oxen came crashing through the underbrush, dragging after them one of the heavy log wagons. The driver, sitting on the wagon hounds unmindful of the jolting, bellowed at the oxen in slow speech, and swung a long-lashed ox-whip with his muscular red hands. The hickory whip-stock was short but the lash was of such wondrous length that even from the hounds he could cut blood from the rumps of the wheel yoke, if he so minded. The driver was Gustav Borg.

"Haar! Coom roun' — coom roun'! Wo, haw! Wo, haw, Yack!" he bawled, snapping the whip until it popped like a pistol; and the trained and obedient yoke in the lead swung round, drawing the wagon up alongside a giant log of poplar.

That done the big Norse disengaged himself from the hounds, climbed to the ground, and saw Dick standing with the negroes.

Borg was a big, rough man, with sky-blue eyes and fair hair, a very Norse giant, but for all his bellowing voice as inoffensive and mild as the veriest deer of the Arkansas woods.

"Mighty beeg log, that!" he said to Dick, lifting a skid and propping it against a squat and heavy hind wheel, where he secured it with a section of log chain.

"Yes," said Dick, "but I guess you can load it all right."

"Oh, I can load it! It make good lumber, too, that log."

He set another skid in position against a front wheel, and dropping down on his muscular knees began to dig out a hole beneath the log to draw the loading chain through, pawing away earth and leaves like a grubbing gopher.

"I'll help," said Dick, "and then I'll ride up to the mill with you."

"Sure!" the Norse grunted, as he scratched away.

Dick unhooked the two forward yokes of oxen, and carrying the end of their trailing chain drove them round to the side of the wagon opposite the log, where he turned them until they stood ready in place. Borg had by this time pushed and pulled the loading chain through the tunnel he had burrowed under the log, and bringing it across the wagon he hitched it by the big hook to the chain which Dick held. Then he threw some chock sticks into position on the wagon to keep the log from rolling too far, and taking up his long whip stepped to the side of the oxen that were to do the loading.

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The wheel yoke were still at the wagon tongue. They had no interest or part in the work now going on and had begun a placid cud chewing. Some of the negroes were looking on, taking this opportunity for a bit of rest; others swung again to the saws, whose metallic "swang, swang," rose in a harsh sort of music.

"Haar!" roared the big Norse, throwing out the long whip-lash until it cracked with pistol-like reverberation. "Coom, Yack; coom, Bright — coom!"

"Pop!" went the whip again. The oxen lunged into the yokes, shoulders down, heads low and swinging. They bent to the task, urged by loud commands and repeated explosions of the whip-lash; leaves and moist earth spattered backward from under their split hoofs; then the great poplar log began to rise from the ground, rolling up on the slanting incline of the skids chained to the wheels; and rolling higher and higher as the commands and explosions quickened and the oxen tugged with many writhings and swayings of horned heads, it climbed the skids and over into the notches ready to receive it, where it was stopped by the chock blocks. Then it lay prone on the big wagon, ready for its one journey to the saw-mill.

"Good work!" said Dick approvingly, thinking of Christine as he looked at Borg.

"Pooty good," Borg acknowledged, with a slow grin in his straw-colored beard. "But I bring some beeger logs than him to the mill. You see 'em, I think."

"Yes, I've seen them; you know how to load a log if any one does."

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Borg grinned again.

"My trade!" he said, and began to disengage the chains; and Dick, thinking of what his father had said of Borg, drove the two yokes of oxen round to the place from which he had brought them and hooked them in front of the wheel yoke.

When the log was chained and boomed securely, Borg climbed ponderously to the top of the big load. Dick swung up behind him. Some of the negroes yah-yahed to him again, effervescingly. Then Borg swung his long lash with a roaring shout, the drawing chains tightened, the wheel yoke threw their great bulk against the bows, and the wagon with its heavy load moved away over the moist ground and out to the log road which led to the mill that seemed to whine hungrily for it off in the distance.

The men talked as the slow oxen plodded on over the gullied log road; talked of logs, of trees, and the mill; of oxen that would obey and of others that would do nothing of the sort; of the probable number of feet of lumber the log would cut, and of other kindred subjects, but not of Christine; yet Dick saw that all was well, — that the colonel had not discharged Borg nor hinted of it.

"He knows that Borg would go straight to Sullivan's mill," was Dick's conclusion, "and Borg is too good a man for him to lose. He's the best log hauler and the best manager of oxen in the Arkansas woods."

Then his mind turned to Christine, whom he did not think at all like Borg, and to Christine's

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mother, greatly unlike either of them. Yes; he would have preferred some other parentage for Christine!

"But I'm not going to marry the family!" he said to himself, almost savagely. "So what does it matter?"

Still he could not help feeling that somehow it did matter, even that it might matter a great deal in the long run; but he would not admit that this could be so. It ought not to matter. That was the thing. And he rashly concluded that what ought not to be would not be, or at any rate that it could be blinked or ignored in some mysterious manner. As for himself he was wealthy, or he would be if his father did not disinherit him, and he did not think it would actually come to that, no matter how his father might now rave of dreadful things. Wealth is a fairy wand. He would wave it; and the beauty of the backwoods, daughter of Norse and poor white, would come forth like a princess of the blood, resplendent in silk attire, with a knowledge of fashion and refinement and all things needful at the ends of her beautiful fingers. She would be a lady and should work no more; the prodigal would be received and there would be rejoicing; and even Borg would cast away long-lashed whip and plebeian manner and forget the great woods and the mild-eyed, toiling oxen.

It was a gay dream, and Dick spun at it as busily as a spider as he sat on the big log behind that cracking whip and talked aimlessly and amiably with his prospective father-in-law.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CROSS-ROADS

AS Dick slipped down from the poplar log at the mill, he saw Jed Anderson sitting his mettlesome bay horse close beside the creaking log carriage which was just then rolling back from the saw.

Anderson was perhaps thirty years of age, black-mustached, swarthy, with small, burning black eyes. He was reputed to be a dangerous man.

Anderson looked at Dick malevolently, seemed to hesitate, then drew his horse back from the mill shed, and rode slowly away without a word. Always before, he had spoken. This was a bad omen.

"He's a fool!" thought Dick, glancing after him and noting the seedy black coat with which the young deputy sheriff hoped to give himself an air of respectability and importance. "I suppose he thinks I cut him out, and so he's got it in for me; as if a girl has n't a right to choose her company! Well, let him bubble over; I'm not caring. And if he wants a fight —"

He turned toward the mill; he did not care to be seen staring at Anderson. Many of the mill men, possibly all of them, knew of the trouble which had arisen at the dance, when

Dick stepped in ahead of the deputy sheriff and led Christine out on the rough board floor at Upton's. Perhaps Anderson had been talking about it there in the mill!

Borg was climbing heavily down from the log. The boy who had helped in the milking up at the stables was wheeling damp and fragrant sawdust away from the spout of the carrier. His barrow loads breathed of the slaughtered trees, as crushed wild-flowers breathe of the fields from which they have been rifled. In the mill shed, a negro swinging a keen, double-bitted axe was chopping up green slabs for the furnace. Joe Barton, head sawyer, whose freely expressed dictum was that Dick was "'z heady 'z the cun-nel!" stood, one hand on the lever of the saw carriage, the other on the wooden handle connected by a wire with the engine throttle, ready to send the log against the invisible teeth of the whirring saw. Other men, whose duties were to load the carriage, drive the "dogs" with clanking blows into the logs, and roll away the slabs, stood in their places.

"Hullo!" said Dick, speaking to Barton, while Borg and an assistant began to pry the poplar log off the wagon. "How's everything moving?"

"Right peart," Barton answered, looking at the white oak log on the carriage instead of Dick. "I taken count this mornin' 'n' I'm guessin' that we-all will beat the record this week, ef good logs keeps a-comin'."

He pulled on the wooden throttle handle and with the other hand shoved the lever that set the log carriage in motion. The fluttering exhaust

began to roll in the tall pipe like a drum, and the engine, quickening its speed, sent the saw round with redoubled energy. The whirring, invisible teeth struck the oak.

"Gr-r-r-r—ang-g-g-g—whang—ang-r-r-r!" It rose in a high screaming whine as a knot was encountered — "Kaing-eye — iing-ng — eye — eye-ng!"

A demon was raving, screaming, whining for the life of the trees — an inexorable demon, never to be appeased while the poplars kiss the sun and the oaks grow tall in the big woods of the Arkansas lowlands.

A great slab was ripped off the side of the oak log and went sliding over the wooden rollers toward the man who swung the slab axe, and the exhaust slowed down as the carriage retreated.

Barton rested his foot on a block beside him, while the log handlers plied their clinking calling with axe and dog.

"Anderson wuz doin' some cussin' ter Jim Thompson jes' afore you come," he said in a low voice to Dick. "I don't want ter say nuthin' ag'in him, 'n' I wuzn't tryin' ter ketch th' p'ticklers, but he wuz shore a-r'arin'. He's hot 'bout thet bizness over ter Upton's, 'pears like; anyway, thet's what I made outer it. He's er-goin' ter lick yeh, he says; lick yeh out'n yer boots. I would n't let 'im. Not thet it's any my bizness; but —"

The log was ready, and whatever else he said was drowned in the roar of the exhaust and the rattle of the carriage as the log was hurled once more upon the saw.

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Dick glanced about. Some of the men were looking at him. The discovery flushed and angered him. What right had these men, or anybody, to be talking of these things? he asked himself with a sense of hot wrath; wondering how much, if anything, Borg had heard, and if gossip of the threats of Jed Anderson had reached Christine.

The saw ate through the log, and the carriage rolled back again with its diminishing burden.

"Two can play at that game," he declared, in the lull, to Barton. "Anderson is a fool — a big fool!"

"Yep; I taken the same notion mesself. He's more'n a fool — he's a cussid idjit. But look out fer him."

For a time Dick stood talking with Barton in the intervals between the fluttering roar of the exhaust and the suggestive whine of the great saw. Then he left the mill and turned homeward.

As he swung along the path with easy stride, thinking of Jed Anderson, of Borg and Christine, he beheld out beyond the thinned trees at the point where the main road crossed the little path a man on horseback.

"Anderson!" he said, and the blood waved into his face. "I suppose he is waiting for me. Well," he set his teeth hard while his jaws assumed a pugnacious angle and his gray eyes began to glitter, "he can see me, all right, if he waits long enough! I don't go out of my way for Jed Anderson nor any other man."

Then he walked straight on, with square shoulders thrown well back, head erect, eyes shining.

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As he came thus out into the sunlit opening, Anderson, who had been watching the narrow path as the hunter watches the runway of the deer, put heel to the flank of the mettlesome bay and rode toward him, his right hand holding a black-snake whip.

"You darned 'ristocrat, I'll l'arn yer a lesson in manners!" he exclaimed, and the blacksnake whistled through the air.

Dick Brewster jumped aside with a springy leap. The blow intended for his face fell on his shoulder. Anderson swung the whip for another blow.

"You hound of hell!" Dick roared, and leaped at him with the spring of a panther.

The next moment he had the deputy sheriff by the throat and was dragging him from the saddle.

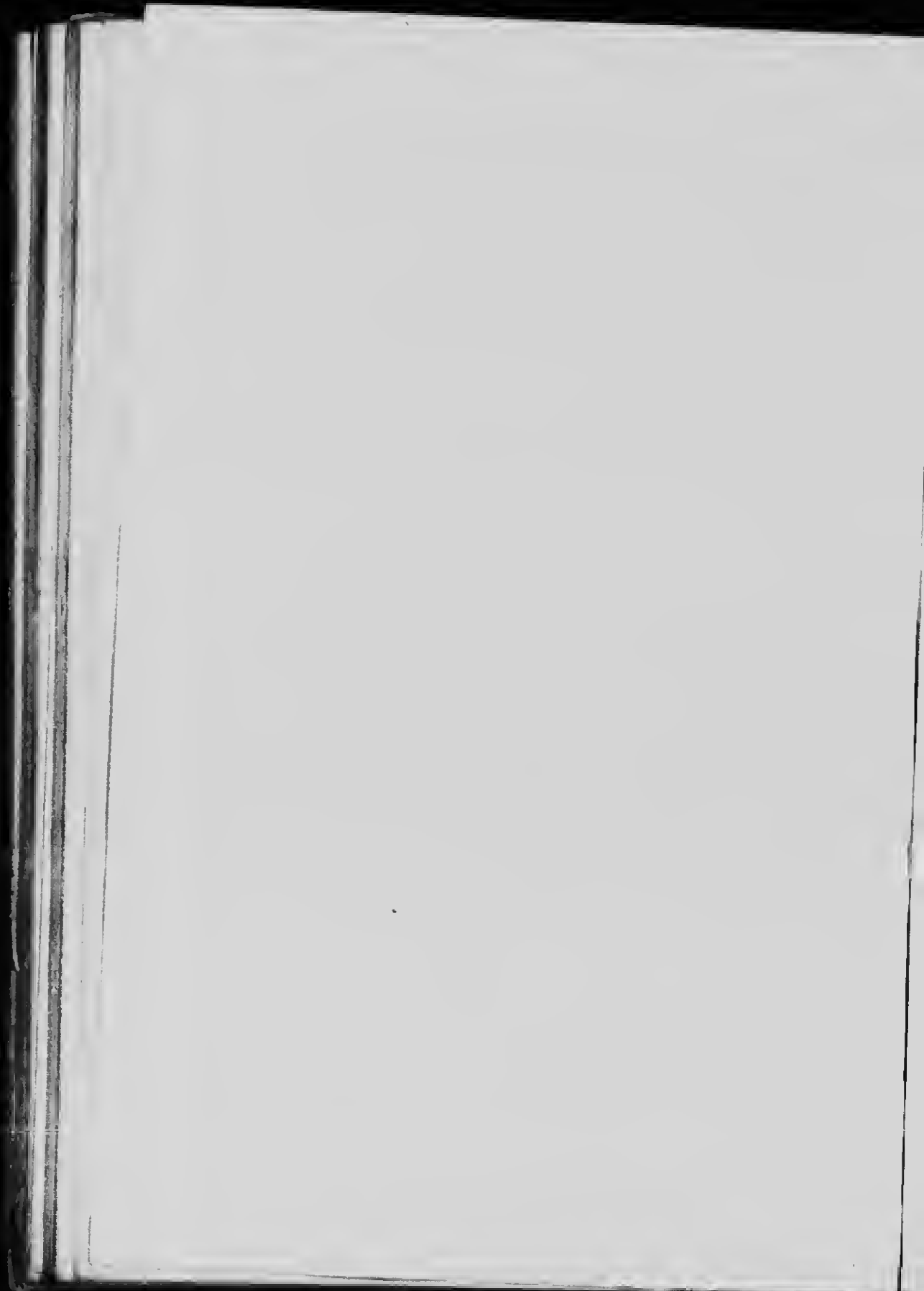
"Curse you!" he howled, hurling Anderson to the ground.

The shaken deputy, surprised by the quickness and lightness of Dick's movements, tried to scramble to his feet, and was knocked backward by a blow in the face. Before he could recover Dick secured the whip and stood over him. The bay was snorting in terror at the side of the road.

Dick lifted the whip to cut the deputy across the face; and Anderson putting up one hand as a shield reached back with the other to draw his revolver. Dick's whip hand hesitated, stopped, fell, and the blow was undelivered. The movement was followed by a laugh harsh and unmirthful.

"Get up, you piece of carrion!" he said contemptuously. "If you were a man — but, bah! I've heard a good deal about your blustering and





your fights, but I've taken your measure. You're a coward. Get up."

Anderson glared at him. The dark face was pale, except where a bruise showed red on one cheek; but the glitter had not faded out of his eyes. His hand still reached for the revolver.

"Lift that pistol," Dick threatened, "and I'll cut your face in two! Get up! Stand in front of me if you want to fight me! You won't do it!"

Jed Anderson lay for another moment, still glaring; then his hand came falteringly away from the pistol butt. Something in those gray eyes made his soul feel small and weak. He put his hands to the ground and rose slowly.

"You're soopler 'n I reckoned," he said, as if speaking to another and not to Dick, "'n' you jumped quicker; but I'll hev your heart's blood fer this yit."

He moved stiffly toward his horse.

Dick stood looking at him, the blacksnake in his hand.

"Jed Anderson," he said, "if you ever try to lay hands on me again, or interfere with me in any way, I'll kill you!"

Then he flung the whip at him scornfully. Anderson, setting foot in the stirrup, mounted heavily and rode away. The whip lay where it had fallen in the dust of the road.

"The hound!" Dick muttered, looking after him; then became aware that Borg moving homeward had walked upon the scene and no doubt had beheld and understood all.

Borg passed on without a word.

Dick watched him sway out of sight in the midst of the trees. He had intended to go home. Now, leaving the whip untouched, he walked back along the path over which he had come.

The sun, red as in the early morning, was sliding down the western sky when Dick Brewster walked out of the woods again and set his feet in the direction of home. When he came to the road that wound past Borg's he turned into it. He was thinking of Christine. He had thought of her all day, and now he was determined to see her.

Yet he halted as he was about to advance past the dogwood. He had stood under it one evening when it was white with bloom and had talked with Christine. He always recalled that talk, inconsequential though it was, whenever he came to the dogwood. And it was Christine's voice that stopped him now. He could not see her but he could hear her words distinctly; and a heavier voice, that of Jed Anderson. Christine was talking airily and laughing, as if pleased by something said by the deputy sheriff,—some flattery, probably.

"Now, Jed Anderson, you know that I don't believe anything of the kind; so there, now!"

In imagination Dick saw the pretty toss of the head with which this was said. He would hear no more; a great and sudden rage filled him. He was thankful for the screen of the dogwood; and whirling round he walked quickly along the road, and mounted to the crest of the hill by another route.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTINE

CHRISTINE BORG was pretty. No one knew this better than herself. From her father she had received her blue eyes, her fair, white complexion, and her gold-yellow hair; from her mother a certain alertness and brightness, a lithe, slender form and natural grace of carriage. The roughness and heaviness of Borg had been softened and refined away in her; so, likewise, the "poor white" characteristics so noticeable in Mrs. Borg. A lustrous thing comes sometimes from the fusion of two unattractive metals. It may be of even less value than the originals, but its undeniable beauty will strike the eye of the beholder; and beauty, spite of iconoclasts and pessimists, is never valueless and seldom undervalued.

Christine Borg was thinking of her beauty as she stood, frowning, by the small window which gave a view out over the untidy garden toward the woods. In spite of the frown, all things pertaining to herself were very much as she would like to have them. The story Borg had brought home with him to dinner the day before was not even an exception, though it had taken the taste out of the food for Borg himself. She had a certain feminine sense of satisfaction in the feeling

that two men, each a leader in his way, had warred over her. There were not many girls in that section whose beauty was sufficiently pronounced to provoke such a thing.

Stepping out into the tiny yard she plucked a spray of wild rose from the scraggy bush by the fence and set it in the coil of her yellow hair. Then returning she removed the apron she had been wearing while engaged in certain prosaic duties connected with the simple household economy of the Borgs, fitted her blue jacket about her graceful form, and surveyed herself in the square looking-glass.

In the drawers of the bureau below the looking-glass, and in a dry-goods box trunk which Christine had upholstered gorgeously with bright calico, were her clothes, her cheap jewelry and ornaments, together with a dozen or more photographs and tintypes of young men. Some of these young men when asked by the local artist to "smile and look pleasant" had worn their hats and held cigars between their lips to make them look manly. One had posed statuesquely, with left hand in breast of long-tailed black coat and right hand levelling a cocked revolver which was presumably loaded. This hero was Jedediah Anderson, the deputy sheriff; and he had given her that warlike tintype only the week before. Now he was fighting over her!

Christine pulled open the bureau drawers and pondered on these treasures, after she had assured herself by a long survey in the looking-glass that the wild rose set in her yellow hair was becoming and that the blue jacket fitted her slender form to

perfection. Among the collection of pictures was a photograph of Dick Brewster, who looked straight out at her, with keen eyes, the mouth firm, lips compressed, chin aggressive — a sturdy, combative youth. Some notes he had written to her were also in the drawer, and these she re-read. She had read them a dozen times, but she gained pleasure from each perusal.

At the other side of the room near the opposite window, from which she could look up at the big house on the hill where Dick lived, was a hair-cloth sofa, somewhat worn, alas! but sure enough hair-cloth. The second-hand dealer at Ransoms where it had been purchased would tell you that. Christine after coming back from Smith Morgan's had never rested, nor given her father any rest, until that sofa came into the little house nestling by the big trees. And it came in state on Borg's cumbrous ox-wagon, a very Juggernaut, to be bowed down to and worshipped.

It was at Smith Morgan's in Brownsville, the county-seat, that Christine had first seen a hair-cloth sofa. Morgan was "a 'ristocrat," and had a piano and "imported" carpets, curtains of lace at the windows, and a big stone dog chained up to a stone post before the door. The dog held an iron ring obediently in his stone jaws. This was for the minister, Judge Spencer, and other "quality" to tie their horses to when they came to make calls. Christine had told of the marvel of that stone dog, until it almost seemed to the good souls of the Brewster neighborhood that she held some sort of proprietorship in it and gained merit thereby.

The three years which Christine had spent at Morgan's had not only opened her eyes to the beauties of stone dogs and hair-cloth sofas, but to many other things as well. She had not been Mrs. Morgan's "servant" — that was too much like "niggers"; she had been her "help," and "help" can always see things if things are there to be seen.

Christine Borg had seen, and what is more than many in like positions do she had heeded. It was not long before she discovered that the speech of the backwoods is not comely on the lips of beauty. Mrs. Morgan told her that one day. Not in so many words to be sure, but Christine understood. Forthwith she began to discard as rapidly as possible the dialect that had been her chief disfigurement; and she had succeeded so well that the change was regarded as little short of the miraculous by other girls who were not so adept at making quick transformations.

Christine Borg, standing before the bureau rummaging among her treasured tintypes, letters, and ribbons, thought not of these things, except, perhaps, in a remote way as touching the attractive picture of herself in the mirror. She was thinking of Jedediah Anderson, sheriff's deputy, hero of the revolver tintype and the blacksnake episode, and of Dick Brewster, whose father was even richer than Smith Morgan, and who but two nights before had whispered, with an awkwardness which spoke of juvenility quite as much as his tow-colored hair, that he "loved her." She did not think of the awkwardness, if she had noticed it; she remembered only the words.

Other young men had whispered things like that to her, but the impression had not been the same. Yet the fact that not only Dick Brewster but other young men had been so impelled gave her a sense of triumphant power. This knowledge of power might become a whip of scorpions, or merely a silk leading-string. That would depend on the manner in which it was used. It might become, too, and there was black danger in the possibility, the soul menace of the girl herself.

A triumphant feeling of power grew within her as she fumbled among the articles in the bureau drawers. She could rule men. That was her discovery. They would fight over her and for her. A Brewster and a sheriff's deputy had fought over her but the day before! Do not think too lightly of her in her frivolity. Queens intoxicated by that sense of power over men have fluttered favors which have set knightly lances in rest and rolled corpses in dust and blood before many a castle casement.

Christine put away her treasures with a sigh. When she had done so she went to the mirror and again admired the glory of her thick yellow hair, the tint of health in her velvety cheeks, the bits of sky-dome set in her violet eyes. She frowned at the mirrored reflection, questioning why Dick Brewster had not been to see her that day or the previous evening; but she had no fear. She looked through the window at the big house and smiled. To marry Dick Brewster would lift her from her present humble position and place her amid the surroundings she secretly longed for. There would be no more dishes to

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wash, but plenty of purple and fine linen in that plane of life of which she dreamed. Her cheeks glowed with the thought.

A long time she stood looking at the big house. Far beyond it was a rim of hills, a spur of the Ozarks, impurpled by the evening light. She knew there was confusion and trouble in that big house, and all because of her. The raving of the colonel had whispered itself through the walls, and everybody knew that he was threatening Dick in his usual way. But everybody knew, too, that the colonel would do nothing, could do nothing, for Dick was "heady." Dick would have his way in the end. Christine was sure of that. And she was sure of Dick, not because of what he had said to her, but because of the manner in which he had said it, the trembling in his voice, and the light she had seen in his eyes as she whirled with him beneath the smoky lamps at Upton's.

After that long survey Christine would have put aside the blue jacket and the wild rose spray from her hair, but that her mother, uttering some exclamation, informed her that a young man was coming up the white road beyond the dogwood.

"Dick!" she thought, with a little thrill of exultation.

Then with damask cheeks flushing and heart palpitating with a sense of triumph, she sat down very deliberately and began to unlace her worn shoes, replacing them with the new pair, the low ones she had worn to the dance. Dick had complimented those shoes and the little feet they

incased, so she would let him see her wearing them again.

After that there were more glances in the mirror by the fast-fading light and some further changes, and by the time the young man came up to the gate Christine was ready to receive him. Before going to the door she heard her mother speaking to him in welcome. He had said something complimentary, that was clear; and Mrs. Borg, like the coy damsel urged to the piano stool by the admirer who assures her that she can sing like an angel, was demurring. Christine, listening the while, did wish that her mother could speak like Mrs. Smith Morgan! For this was the fashion of Mrs. Borg's high-keyed demurrer to what was, perhaps, a well-meant compliment:

"Mebbe I look it; I dunno! But I know I feel might pindlin' 'n' triffin' these days. Been makin' soap this aiffternoon, 'n' I'm about ter drap. There use n't ter be nobuddy c'd beat me soap-makin', 'n' now ef I run lye 'n' work roun' th' soap kittle half er day er so seems lack my back's plum broke in two. But I got ter do it. An' land sakes, I'm ust ter it! Been ust ter it a good many y'ar now — kase why, I jes' hev ter git ust ter it — Christine won't do it fer me. She's too much lack her pap — stan' roun', never knowin' what ter do, ner how ter do it, twell I tell her."

Christine frowned and chewed angrily on the hair-pin she had thrust into her mouth, having taken a sudden notion that her hair was not as becoming as it might be.

Mrs. Borg would not let Christine do heavy work like soap-making, even when Christine was willing; she wanted her to be "a lady." She had said so many times to Borg, and many, many more times to each of the gossiping women of the Brewster neighborhood. Ladies, Mrs. Borg had heard, were averse to labor, very much so, and could do no work of any sort without provoking a multiplicity of aches and ills. Princesses, who were, she believed, still higher "quality," were even more pronounced in their disabilities; for somewhere in her childhood, barren as it had been of legend or literature, she had heard a story which set forth the fact that a princess, one of the sure-enough kind, not only never did any work, but was so very particular and hard to please that if so small an object as a pea chanced to find lodgement beneath the downy coverings of her bed she could not sleep a wink through a whole night because of it. In that way it had become known that she was a real princess.

Unfortunately for the perfection of the parallel, Christine could sleep like a doll wherever she dropped. But she was beautiful enough to be a princess and therefore a lady.

As Mrs. Borg unloaded her ills on the young man at the gate, Christine, having subdued her yellow hair and assumed her brightest smile of welcome, came out of the door. She looked blank at first when she saw that the young man was not Dick Brewster, but Jed Anderson. That Dick was not there almost amazed her and it quite angered her. But she hid the anger under

a pretty affectation of being pleased at sight of the dark face of the hero of the revolver tintype.

"I reckoned I'd come over 'n' see ef you would n't like ter go over ter the quiltin' bee at Bradford's?" he invited, in his most engaging way, flicking a fat, black cigar round in his fingers, now holding it between thumb and finger and then between his first and second fingers, to show how adept he was in this sort of athletics. Since becoming deputy sheriff and receiving "fees and mileage," he smoked always fat, black cigars; before that opulent time he had been forced to content himself with a "Missouri meerschaum" and home-grown tobacco.

Christine thought of Dick, her face flushing again in spite of her self-control; and that flush, which Jed Anderson mistook for a blush of pleasure, seemed to be some sort of fire which fed the anger that had flamed up in her heart when she knew the caller was Jed and not Dick Brewster. Dick ought to be there himself inviting her to the quilting; and because he was not there she would punish him by going to the quilting with the deputy sheriff, and so show him that she was not to be trifled with.

It might bring about another fight between the two young men, but that was not her fault; and, anyway, it would teach Dick that she knew her rights. She wanted to demonstrate and to use her power just a little. This had been her desire ever since she came to the knowledge that she possessed it; for of what use is power if one may not have the delightful thrill of complacency and self-congratulation which its possession should

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rightfully entail! So she smiled upon Jed very sweetly, assured him that she would be delighted to accept his invitation; and with the glow fading out of the sky and the dusk coming down, they walked out along the white road together, laughing and talking loudly.

Both were sure of their triumph; Jed because he was overreaching the youth whom he considered his rival, Christine because she felt that she was displaying her power. Yet Jed's sense of triumph was least alloyed. In the note of triumph which sang in the heart of Christine Borg there was just a little quaver of fear and uncertainty which hummed hauntingly in the music like a minor chord. And she was hurt too. Dick had not come.

CHAPTER VI

THE FOOL AND THE TRAGEDY

AS Christine Borg and Jed Anderson swung out of sight behind the dogwood and then into view again, Dick Brewster was descending the hill from the big house. The heavy artillery of the colonel's wrath was still volleying in his ears. The colonel had just demanded of him, with screaming asperity, if he meant to go to Borg's again; and he had said with as much icy coolness as he could assume that he did. Then he had come away from the house and walked down the hill.

The sight of Jed Anderson and Christine, as they appeared from the concealment of the dogwood, whitened Dick Brewster's face and choked his throat. He stopped and stood staring with eyes becoming bloodshot; he trembled and grew weak. He knew where Christine and Jed were going; he had meant to go there with her himself. He had been late because of the quarrel. He saw it all now, or thought he did. Jed Anderson and Christine had made arrangements for this walk together to the quilting when he had overheard them talking by the gate the evening before. She did not care for him, Dick Brewster, not in the least. He had been a fool for ever thinking that she did.

He stood still, not even taking the trouble to conceal himself from them if they looked that way, stood until they vanished from sight down the dusty road in the gathering darkness. Then he reeled to a seat on a log by the roadside. He felt blind and weak, and deep down in his heart there was a sting as of a mortal hurt.

He wanted to cry out like a child, and his heart cried out in the gathering gloom though his lips were silent. He began to contemplate wild things, boyishly. Thoughts came of other girls of the neighborhood, and he was almost on the point of rising and setting out to seek one whom he might induce to accompany him to the quilting. He pictured how he would stalk into the house where the quilting was being held, this girl on his arm, and how he would pretend not to see Christine and her escort, and would laugh and be light-hearted and gay to outward appearance; and would she not then be touched? It was so strong a temptation that he almost struggled to his feet intending to carry it out. Many a foolish young fellow with heart madly aching has married some girl for no better reason, and regretted it all the years after.

As usual of late when things had gone very wrong with Dick Brewster he set out by and by for Chris Miller's. The scent of the foul place seemed to reach him across the spicy odor of the woods and drew him irresistibly. Not that he liked to drink; and as for card-playing, he was such an amateur that he was invariably beaten. But there was a false life and gayety at Chris Miller's that deadened unpleasant thoughts,

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and the liquor sold over the sloppy bar had power to fire his heart and his emotions and make him disregard for a time the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

So he turned his steps toward Chris Miller's, and because his soul was very bitter and heavy, he whistled gayly as he swung along, that whoever chanced to see or meet him might remark on his gayety and not be able to say afterward that he was depressed. For of course knowledge that he had been snubbed by Christine, and that she had gone to the quilting with Jed Anderson, would be all over the neighborhood before morning. But he would not let any one see that he cared, and he would be jolly and gay at Miller's, and he would whistle as he went!

The big clay road curved round nearly two miles before it reached the shabby town of Ransoms, where Chris Miller had his saloon, but there was a shorter way by following the lumber railroad. This ran direct to Ransoms from the saw-mill. It was not a real railroad, with steel rails and expensive rolling-stock, but constructed privately by the colonel for the purpose of getting his lumber speedily and cheaply to the little town where there was a real railroad that bore it away to the distant markets.

The square wooden rails of the colonel's road made good footing for a walker, much better than the road-bed itself, which was full of holes; and walking these rails with firm, sure step, though the light was so poor, Dick Brewster thrust his hands deep into his trousers' pockets and whistled till the woods rang with the pleasant melody.

It was early when he reached Miller's, so early that very few men were inside. But Miller himself was there, fleshy-faced, low of stature, with dull, heavy eyes, and a scanty growth of light hair—hair so light that it almost resembled in color Dick Brewster's heavier tow. Miller was bare-headed, had his sleeves rolled up over his red arms, and wore about his big waist a snowy apron fresh from the hands of his German wife, who was also his laundress.

Miller was mopping the bar with a damp cloth as Dick entered the doorway. He stood behind the polished bar, backed by a glittering array of glasses and bottles. The room was lighted by a chandelier holding six coal-oil lamps, the chandelier depending from the middle of a gorgeous rosette of tissue paper into which the swarming flies gathered nightly. There were tables in the room and many chairs. In two of these chairs men were lounging and smoking.

There was another room beyond this, not so tidy or well kept, though the neatness of the first room could not be boasted of. This second room, filled also with tables and chairs, was reserved for negroes, and drinks were conveyed to it through a little gateway opening at the end of the long bar. When business was brisk and many negroes were in this room Miller had an assistant. On this night the second room was still empty and the assistant had not yet put in an appearance.

"*Wie gehts!*" said Miller, with his customary smile, and stopped his work. "How you vas, eh?"

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"So, so," said Dick, advancing to the bar. He felt his stature increase. This beaming German met him as a man.

Miller did not invite him to drink. He did not need to; he knew that would come in due season, and he could wait. Dick Brewster, the few times he had been there, had been a good customer and did not count his dollars. And it was something to have a Brewster step over the portals of his saloon. It gave the place standing and tended to silence those clamorers who called the saloon a "nigger hole" and a disgrace to the community.

"Canadian Club," said Dick, stopping before the bar.

He did not know much about whiskies, but he knew that Canadian Club was good; he had been told so and he had tried it. It made him feel warm and comfortable and also strong and courageous. And besides by promptly naming his liquor he escaped the imputation of being a greenhorn.

"Zhure!" said Miller, nodding an approval; and taking down a long-necked bottle he poured a drink into one of the thin whiskey glasses. Dick tossed it off, trying to conceal a wry face; then greedily swallowed the water which those wise in such things called a "chaser." He flipped a coin on the bar, and Miller, dropping it into his till, shoved across the change.

"Fine evening," said Dick, leaning on the bar and pushing the change into his pocket. "Likely to be many in to-night?"

"Oh, zhure!" said Miller, beginning to scrub

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at the bar again. Dick had more than once wondered why this everlasting scrubbing and mopping did not wear a hole through the paint. "Dis ish Saturtay night, you know; a beeg crowd always on a Saturtay night."

"Then I'll drop in again."

He felt uneasy, and knew that his face was flushed. During all the whistling walk to the town it had been burning in the evening wind like fire. It grew even hotter as the liquor drove the blood through his body in pulsing waves.

He strolled now down the dusty street, past the winking lights of the cheap little stores where the loafers lounged. He thrust his hands with characteristic attitude into his pockets, and whistled. At the edge of the town an owl hooted at him from the woods, "You fool! you fool!" But he did not heed the ribald scoffing of the bird of Minerva, and went back by and by to Chris Miller's.

The evening habitués of the place were gathering; they stood leaning against the bar, drinking, talking, smoking, some stirring a bit of sugar into their liquor, slowly and unctuously with anticipatory enjoyment. Some were lounging in the chairs and on the long bench by the wall talking politics and spitting with much accuracy of aim into the sawdust boxes provided for this target practice. Most of them Dick knew, and they greeted him as if he were Jocund Day standing tiptoe on the misty mountain. He helloed to them familiarly with a wave of the hand, and intimated to Miller that he would take another of the same kind, with a little sugar this

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time, to be in fashion with the dilettanti stirring and clinking pensively.

Dick took a cigar too, fumbling over the cedar boxes for a mild one. He was not much of a smoker, but his limited experience had informed him that he could stand a good deal of nicotine when he mixed it with whiskey. Having selected his weed he pushed the boxes toward the loungers by the bar, thus hinting a generous wish that they would make a selection and smoke with him; whereupon some of the men in the chairs and on the bench came forward, seeming to deem the invitation general. Then Dick paid, and lighting his own cigar began to smoke and talk, all the time thinking of Christine and of Jed Anderson. The cold dead ache was still in his heart; the warming liquor seemed not to be able to drive it out.

It was ten o'clock when Jed Anderson came into Miller's. Christine had quarrelled with him and they had returned early from the quilting. He did not know why she had quarrelled, but while all things were going well, as he thought, she became irritable. She made it appear that the fault was his when it was wholly hers. The truth is Christine was not having the joyous time she had anticipated. Something of regret and remorse troubled her. She had expected to go to the quilting with Dick, and the little whip with which she had thought to lash him when she walked away with Jed was falling across her own shoulders.

So she and Jed had quarrelled and had come away early, and Jed had walked over to Miller's,

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as he did now almost every night since his official elevation.

Dick was sitting at a card table with Hank Wilson. He was losing steadily to Hank, and having got down to the bottom of his purse was signing I O U's with the recklessness of young men who find it quite easy to squander the hoardings of their fathers. He did not see Jed at first, in fact did not know that the young deputy sheriff was there until the buzz of talk and Jed's voice brought him the notification. Then he looked up and away from the fan of cards in his hands, a glitter in his hot gray eyes. Their glances met and for a moment they stared at each other, — a stare that was broken by Jed, who turned to the bar and began to puff his thick black cigar into life at the blaze of the cigar lighter.

"Speakin' er *hawg* killin'," he said, in a loud voice — hog killing having been apparently the subject of the intellectual conversation in which he had been engaged with a young farmer — "thar hain't nary thing 't I like better 'n to draw a bead on a durn, no-count hawg, 'n' drap 'im in his tracks."

His face assumed a wolfish look, and his vehemence seemed to be wholly unnecessary.

Though Jed had not spoken to Dick nor at him, Dick Brewster knew that he was the "*hawg*" meant by the young deputy. For a moment the fan of cards shook in his fingers and he appeared to be on the point of jumping to his feet and accepting the challenge; then he controlled himself and sank back into his chair.

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"It air yore play," said Hank Wilson, studying his "hand" and moving the cards about in it to suit him.

Thus recalled to the game, Dick threw down a card, though he scarcely looked at it or knew what it was. Then he began to smoke energetically, as men do when they are nervous.

His eyes were very big and bright, and his face much flushed with liquor. He called for another drink, as he sat in his chair, knowing that his legs would wobble and betray his condition if he rose to walk to the bar. The excitement of the game and the effects of the whiskey had deadened the chill in his heart, and he had almost ceased to think of Christine when Jed entered and stirred up the dregs of that bitter memory. Hence there was an added demand for more liquor and more card-playing, that he might forget, forget, and be gay.

Hank Wilson, his own glass ordered some time before almost untouched on the table, looked craftily at Dick from time to time as the playing went on. Only pretending to drink himself he had urged Dick on in his foolish course, that he might the more easily fleece him. Thin-framed, iron-muscled, stoop-shouldered, with quiet, dark eyes and the face of a bird of prey, a man of forty—this was Hank Wilson, one of the best known men in the community and also one of the most feared. He was a man of many quarrels, one of his latest having been with Jedediah Anderson.

He looked at Dick covertly as if striving to read the thoughts behind those red eyes and

flushed features. And the voice of Jed Anderson went on stridently and with evil and cruel innuendo.

"He air a-talkin' 'bout you," said Hank, by and by, stowing another I O U in the pocket of his vest. "He ain't sayin' it out straight, but he air intendin' ter argify th' fac' thet you air a shore-'nuff hound pup. You kin hyar 'im, ef you 'll listen. Nare man thet walks cyan't talk thet air way 'bout me 'thout hyarin' frum me. Ef ther swell of his head keeps er-growin' won't be any hat store in Arkansaw kin fit him out at all bimeby, I reckon."

Dick threw a card upon the table quietly; he had been slapping them down with needless vehemence of gesture and manner, after the manner of enthusiastic amateurs.

"I hear him," he said steadily. "He does n't scare me. If he comes fooling round me —"

Hank had played, and Dick put down another card with the same steady quiet.

"What?" Hank questioned, covering the card and drawing the pile toward him. "I hyar tell thet you drug him off'n his hoss, out in ther road; but ef he should come at ye in hyar, now?"

A fiendish look came into Dick's face.

"What would I dò?" he exclaimed, looking across at the man who was robbing him. "What would I do? If he makes a pass at me in here to-night I'll kill him!"

Then the play went on. He had not said the words very loud, but they had reached others besides Hank Wilson.

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Eleven o'clock came, then midnight. The room had thinned out. For an hour the occupants had been departing one by one. Not more than a half dozen were left now. Among these were Dick, Jed, and Hank Wilson. A fourth was the saloon keeper, Chris Miller.

"Puttin' hisself up ez bein' better 'n other folkses — a man thet never airnt a dollar o' his own!" Jed was saying, all too evidently referring to the youth who was playing cards with Wilson.

Jed had been drinking, too, to raise his courage. Hide it as he would, from himself even, he feared this young man who had shown such rage and such Titanic strength that day when he pulled his assailant from his saddle and hurled him down in the dust of the road. But now Jed's frequent potations made him forget his fear and added to the growth of the bully in him.

Dick Brewster looked up with a quick motion that lifted his end of the little card table.

"If you're meaning me by that," he said, "you're a liar! I've an idea that I've earned as much money honestly as you ever did."

Jed started toward him, throwing back his coat as if to slide out of it, but he was caught by one of the men and held raging, just as he desired to be.

"Let him come on," said Dick, sitting by the table. "The hound, let him come on! I was easy with him when he came at me before, but this time I'll kick his face off. Just let him come on if he wants to."

Jed roared like an angry lion and threw him-

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self to and fro, but his friends were easily able to hold him, for his ranting was largely pretence. The men seemed to recognize this by and by and released him. He subsided against the bar and called for another drink, and his friends walked out of the saloon.

It was late and Chris Miller wished to close up his establishment. Some of the extremists of Ransoms complained because the saloon was kept open sometimes after midnight, and in addition Miller did not like the noise and fuss of a fight. All these things tended to give his place a bad name, even in Ransoms. For these reasons he wanted to put out the lights of the coal-oil lamps, close the saloon, and let the flies roost undisturbed in the meshes of the tissue paper rosette. He announced this wish gently but firmly; and having thus impressed it on his patrons he waddled from behind the long bar, cleared out the negroes from the back room, and going out at the rear door began to put up the shutters there for the night.

Hank Wilson stacked the cards in a neat pack, pulled open the table drawer, and put them away; then, feeling in his vest pocket to assure himself that the I O U's were all right, he too went out of the saloon by the front door.

Dick Brewster still sat by the table. His head was the soberest part of his body. His hands felt thick and clumsy when he lifted them and his legs were weak. He wondered if he would be able to walk home. He knew he could not do so without making a track fit for

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a worm fence in his swaying walk. Jed Anderson, not half so intoxicated, stood by the bar, apparently unwilling to leave before he had whipped his enemy and redeemed his reputation for courage.

"War you a-strikin' at me when you said 'liar' thet way a while ergo?" he asked suddenly, staring at Dick. "Kase ef you war all hell cyan't keep me frum killin' you!"

Holding to the bar with one hand he searched in his pockets for a knife. He drew it out, a big dirk, and threw its case on the sanded floor.

Dick looked at him steadily, at the same time grasping the table with both hands to draw himself up.

"Yes, I meant you!" he said, with unquailing frankness. "You've been talking about me all evening; I've heard you. You're not only a liar, you're a big coward!"

Hank Wilson, after going a few steps into the darkness, had turned back and was now close by the front door. He heard the words and looked craftily through the window. Throughout the evening, while concealing his real feelings, he had been wishing that a fight would come between Dick Brewster and Jed Anderson. He believed that Dick would be more than a match for the sheriff's deputy, and in the depths of his soul he longed for the deputy's undoing.

Dick drew himself to his feet, with the assistance of the table. Outside, at the back of the house, Miller could be heard banging the heavy shutters into place. Knife in hand, Jed Ander-

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son, his lips curving cruelly and vindictively, began to creep across the floor.

"I'm er-goin' ter hev yeour hear's blood fer thet!" he declared.

Dick steadied himself beside the table, his hands upon its smooth surface. His legs were weak and shaking. His eyes, big, bright, and hot, looked unwaveringly at the advancing foe-man. His only movement was to sweep a faltering hand across his face as if to brush away something that hindered his sight.

Jed Anderson took advantage of the motion, and leaping forward struck with the dirk. It was a murderous blow, but it did not reach; and Jed fell back, to manœuvre for another.

Dick began to walk toward him, boring him with those hot, bright eyes. He swayed as he walked, though his steps gained in steadiness as he left the table behind.

"I'm er-goin' ter kill you; I s'pose thet you onderstan' thet!" Jed declared again. "Look eout, fer now I'm a-comin' fer you!"

Dick stopped, swaying, as the deputy hesitated; then fumbling in a pocket he also drew out a knife—a pocket-knife, with a big blade, which he used in the woods. His thumbs were thick and clumsy, and when they failed him he drew the blade open with his teeth, biting at it savagely.

"Come on," he said, in a thick voice. "Damn you; come on!"

By the window Hank Wilson watched alone in the darkness. Out at the back of the building the saloon keeper rattled and jarred the shutters.

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"Come on!" Dick invited again; for Jed, ducking forward and back, was retreating before him.

As Jed retreated thus toward the door, Dick advanced, his walk a ramshackle movement, like the forward rolling of a wagon with wheels loose and wobbly.

Anderson feinted in front; outside, with face against the window-pane, Hank Wilson watched as if fascinated.

Then Anderson struck again; but being still too much afraid of the knife in Dick's hand his blow fell short and he retreated once more.

At the door he waited while Dick reeled on. There he made a final thrust with the dirk. Dick plunging at him with a bellow of wrath answered with a stroke of the knife. As he delivered it he caught his toe clumsily against the projecting door-sill and was hurled upon Anderson. They fell backward down the steps together. Dick, swaying and lurching to save himself, dropped lumpily. As he fell thus he swung half round, hit the back of his head against a post, and struck the ground in a senseless heap, the knife shooting out of his hand.

Jed Anderson, shaken badly by his fall but still furious, lifted himself on his elbow at Dick's side, glaring into Dick's whitening face. A curse came from his lips and he raised the dirk. In another moment the thin, long blade would have been plunged into Dick Brewster's body.

Chris Miller's heavy feet could be heard at the rear of the saloon bearing his puffy body into the room the combatants had just quitted. Hank

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Wilson, hesitating, heard those heavy steps, and his hesitation ended. With quick motion he caught up Dick Brewster's knife; with one swift, sure blow he set the blade deep in Jed Anderson's heart; then he fled away softly into the darkness.

CHAPTER VII

CAST OFF

SITTING on a low cot in the log jail at Ransoms, Dick Brewster shivered as he looked about. Day had come after a night of horror, but its coming could not cheer him. His head throbbed with a roaring pain; his eyes, dull, bloodshot, lustreless, sought the floor instead of the window-slit which let in the light. His out-thrust chin, lacking its old aggressiveness, rested in one hand, the arm being propped by the shaky knee. A thirst which no water could quench tormented him continually.

"The cowards!" he whispered, as he glanced toward the door. "Cowards, all of them!"

Not all had been cowards, however. The wild mob which had tried to storm the jail—a mob composed of friends and followers of the dead deputy sheriff—had been held in check chiefly by the unflinching courage of one man. That man was Joe Barton, head sawyer of the Brewster mill, who, cocked revolver in hand, had stood with a few others before the jail and cowed the mob by the recklessness of his daring. But for Joe Barton, Dick Brewster would not have escaped death.

Dick could still hear the mad raving of the mob as it panted for his life. It had clamored

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and yelled as the hounds do when they close in on the doomed fox; it had cursed and raged as reckless men do when an obstacle interposes suddenly between them and the goal of their desires. Those yells and fierce, wild demands still beat in his ears. And he heard the voice of Joe Barton, strident, stern, commanding, ringing out in the vernacular, with ominous threats that compelled obedience.

Defeated, baffled, the mob had streamed away with the coming of day. But it seemed that those cries of wrath, murderous in their intensity and hellish in their lust for blood, would never cease to ring in the ears of the youth who sat on that prison cot.

The belief that he was a murderer had sobered, then horrified him. A thing had happened which he could never have thought possible. Even now it did not seem possible. He wanted to wake up and shake himself, and assure himself with a relieving laugh that this was a dream, a nightmare, horrible but unnatural, and therefore untrue. But as often the realization came back with conclusive force. He had fought in drunken fury; he had struck with deadly strength, spite of his drink-palsied arm; the deed was done! He was a murderer; he had looked into the face of the man he had slain, and had seen the knife, his knife, in that man's heart. Yes, he had killed Jed Anderson; killed the man he had said he would kill—said so without really meaning it.

The whole pitiable, sorrowful, bloody tragedy pressed its memory down on his throbbing brain

like a weight. He had struck Jed, reeling in the doorway, at Chris Miller's; then having delivered the fatal blow, they had reeled out of the place together, down the steps, and he, with head pounding against the post, had fallen insensible. That was the way he remembered it.

There Chris Miller had found them. There Dick regaining consciousness had assisted Miller to drag the murdered man back into the saloon. Miller was wild-eyed, with purplish face whitened to the color of chalk. He had babbled incoherently, chiefly of the ruin that would come to his place; and Dick, weak, sick, numb in every nerve, and with brain seemingly fired of hell itself, had stumbled in blindness down to the Ransoms jail and surrendered himself without a word. The jailer, who was also the town marshal, not understanding him but thinking that he was crazed with drink, had locked him up. Then the mob had come, roaring its rage; and Joe Barton had appeared, the one heroic figure in all the black, accursed picture.

Dick tried to think of something else, but could not; he could not take his mind from that horrible drama at Miller's even long enough to fix it in any intelligent way upon the girl who, indirectly and innocently enough, had mixed the pit-lighted colors and prepared the smoky canvas for the painting of the murderous scene. He pitied her dumbly as he pitied himself. Beyond that he was not yet able to think.

The morning lagged like the interminable ages; the sunlight on the floor took a century to crawl from one board crack to another. Dick

did not look up at the sunlight where it streamed through the narrow window. To have done that would have been to awaken thoughts of that other morning, red and glorious, when his young heart climbed into the glowing sky, like Jacob's angels scaling the ramparts of heaven. Hope had been breathingly alive then; now it was dead, and he had cast it from him.

The marshal came in once during the slow swing of those interminable ages, and asked him what he wanted for breakfast. Dick stared at him with dull, red eyes, then roused, comprehending.

"Nothing," he said, and noticed that the voice with which he answered was the voice of another.

Then the marshal went away grinding the key in the lock of the jail door, and the slow centuries crawled on again.

By and by there was another stir at the door. Dick did not even look up this time, nor did he look up when feet shuffled into the room. But soon he became aware that the marshal had departed, and that his father was sitting before him on a chair which the marshal had provided.

A wave of confused and remorseful feeling swept over him when he saw his father sitting there. Colonel Brewster's face was white and drawn, as if the old man suffered great pain. He leaned heavily on his cane as he looked at his son. Dick shivered, straightened his square shoulders, and tried to speak; he did not know what to say, though, and felt almost a sense of relief when the words refused to be uttered.

The colonel was much agitated; Dick saw a

tear roll slowly down one white cheek and drop on the hands pressed tightly across the head of the cane. By and by, controlling his emotions by an effort, the colonel spoke.

"Dick!"

Dick stared at his father, waveringly.

"Dick, this is no time for words between us," said the colonel, speaking slowly. "I am unable to believe what I now see, and I am unable to believe what I hear. You are a Brewster, and a Brewster never yet reddened his hands in the blood of any man," — he hesitated, thinking of his war-time experiences — "except, perhaps, in recognized and lawful warfare, when fighting against the foes of his country. The time has not yet come when a Brewster can commit such a crime as murder. So I am unable to believe this thing they tell me."

Dick tried to speak again, and again failed.

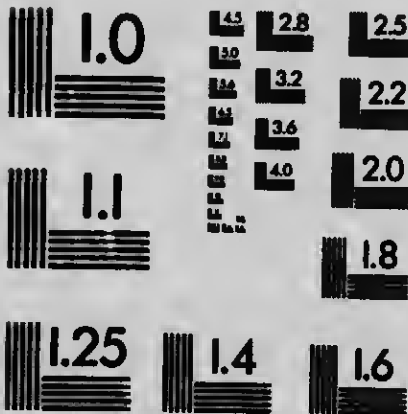
"I have money, Dick," the colonel went on, "and property which will bring money. I am your father, and therefore your natural defender. I am willing, ready to defend you to the last dollar of the Brewster money and the last drop of the Brewster blood; but—" he hesitated, searching Dick's flushed and fevered face, — "I want to know that you are innocent! Tell me you are innocent, my boy; and no matter what any man says or any man swears I will stand by you and fight for you to the end."

The lips and the words trembled; the hands shook heavily on the gold head of the cane. Dick did not answer. Whatever else he might be, he was never a liar. He had done everything



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in the past openly, even defiantly; he was no sneak and he was no sniveller.

"You have hurt me, Dick, many times, more than I can tell, but you have never concealed things from me," the crushed old man went on. "You will not lie now, and I know it, not even to save your life. That is why I have asked you this question. I want you to tell me that you did n't do this thing — that it is a mistake! I have refused to believe that it is anything but a mistake. They say you threatened to kill that man, and that now you have killed him. You were drunk, — drinking; I can believe that; but, Dick," the voice quavered and broke, "I cannot believe that you are a murderer!"

Dick moved uneasily on the cot, shifted his position, crossed his hands, tried to speak, and failed again.

Colonel Brewster stared hard at him, then lifted his hands from his cane. The shakiness was going out of his body and out of his iron heart. Slowly he rose to his feet.

"It is true, then!" he said, sternly, looking at his palsied son. "You did kill that man! You are a murderer! It's true, then!"

Dick sank back on the cot, dumb, miserable. When he spoke he dropped his head into his hands.

"Yes, it's true! I killed him, but —"

Colonel Brewster stiffened visibly. Something of the old glitter came into the eyes under the craggy brows.

"Then I renounce you," he said, hoarsely. "You are not my son! Never yet was a Brew-

ster a murderer, and you are no Brewster. You will be hanged for this, and you ought to be!"

He turned about, and lifting his chin walked to the door with military tread. There he hammered peremptorily with the gold head of the cane; and when the marshal came to let him out he stepped away stiffly, soldierly, without a word. Condemned men have walked that way when going out to look into rifles loaded for their execution.

Dick Brewster threw himself down on the cot, covered his eyes with his hands, and lay there; and again the slow centuries crept on, marking their snail-like advance by the line of sunshine crawling from crack to crack across the jail floor.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DREAM AND THE AWAKENING

AS in a dream Dick Brewster rose from his cot and stood up when the marshal entered with men at his heels and called Dick's name. As in a dream he stepped from the jail and walked in the midst of these men to the station, whence he was to be taken to Brownsville six miles away. The engine of the train whistled as he walked down the long platform, the marshal, arm linked in his, stamping along by his side. Probably only a certain sense of the unfitness of it had kept handcuffs from Dick's wrists. The marshal felt sure in consideration of the events of the previous night that Dick Brewster would not try to escape. And then there were the concealed revolvers of the deputies bulging the tails of their coats!

A great crowd had gathered at the station. The people made way for the marshal and his men, some sullenly, some silently, some with low hisses and threats. Dick looked calmly at them. This was a part of the dream — these frightful faces that jeered and jabbered at him. He seemed not to see them, not to hear the low calls, the hoots and hisses that at another time would have stung like gadflies.

Mounting with steady step to the platform of the car when the train had stopped, and facing

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half round to the crowd, he became for the first time aware that in that surging mass, of whom half had been a roaring mob during the darkness of the night, there were some who glanced at him in kindness and sympathy. Chief among them was Joe Barton, the head sawyer. In the crowd about Barton were the mill hands and some of the negro log-cutters with whom Dick had talked and chaffed that day in the woods. It was so long ago, that day! It was part of another life in another century.

Beyond the crowd, standing quite alone, the sunshine filling with yellow light his thick, straw-colored beard, was old Gustav Borg, the father of Christine. His big bulk and broad shoulders loomed above the others like a Norway pine above scrubby second-growth.

Only for a moment did Dick Brewster let his eyes wander over that jostling crowd; then he turned and walked into the car, the hand of the marshal still tightly gripping his arm. Even that, all of it, was part of the dream; and the dream continued while the train rumbled away, its whistle screaming through the woods. The dream continued even after the heavy doors shut him in the county jail at Brownsville.

The next day—the riotous throb, the numbness, the deathly lethargy, the faintness gone out of head and heart—Dick awoke. None of the things of those wild and moving visions had been even part of a dream. They were all true, horribly true. And with this awakening came that realization which comes to every one of us some time or other, of the irrevocableness of the past.

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That realization is so harsh and hard, so crushing in its cruelty of fact. To know that what is done is done, that it is bound up forever in the sheaf of life's deeds; and that no tear however sincere and penitent, no heart sob however choking, no prayer, even, though we lay our mouths in the dust and cry aloud like David at the memory of Uriah the Hittite, can change what is unchangeable, can loose the bands of finality and take that one deed out of the sheaf, and place it all green and growing again in the fields of life and the future. No, not even the prayer of an archangel could compass that!

Having thus awakened, Dick Brewster stood by the grated jail window and looked out into the streets where lived and moved men whose hands were not red as his were. He heard them laugh and talk and jest, untouched by a thought of the terrible irrevocableness of everything. Surely they did not know that a thing done can never be undone! Standing thus — the day was long and he had time to think — he thought of his past, of his father, of Christine; more than all he thought of Jed Anderson. He wondered how Christine regarded him and was sure that he was utterly condemned in her sight. How his father regarded him and his crime he had heard.

Dick thought, too, of what might be coming to himself. He had not been afraid when the mob bayed like wolves round the jail at Ransoms; but now he was afraid.

As his fear grew, he began to think over his crime in its legal aspects. He had been, at in-

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tervals, reading law in the office of Squire Pennypacker, the Ransoms lawyer who attended to his father's multitudinous and tumultuous legal business. Dick had done that, not because he liked the law or had any ambition to become a lawyer, but because Colonel Brewster, in view of the fact that his litigations were endless, wanted to have a legal head in the Brewster family. It would be a paying investment, the colonel fancied, like the ownership of a Hambletonian of undoubted wind and speed when the landed gentry and the leading farmers are entering their horses for the races at the annual county fair. So Dick had read law with Squire Pennypacker; and had forgotten almost as much as he read, in his dreamings of the shade-and-sun-haunted woods and of the joyous night gatherings where he met the rustic beauties of the town and neighborhood.

Now, beginning to quake as he looked into the future, he tried to brush up his law reading and discover his legal position. He had not meant to kill Jed Anderson; there had been no deliberation or malice in it, and those were parts of the legal crime of murder. Yet, and here was the root of the difficulty he foresaw, he had said he would kill Anderson. There would be a trial by jury; and what might not a jury, and particularly an Arkansas jury, do in such a case?

He was floundering in this maze when the sheriff came in and behind him Squire Pennypacker. Pennypacker was a stooped, tall man, with a thin, unimpressive face, from the lower tip of which was suspended a wispy beard that wagged up and down in a ridiculous way when he

talked. But his voice was kind as he spoke to Dick, looking at him steadily through his gold-bowed glasses as the sheriff retreated and left the lawyer and the prisoner alone together.

It was a boyishly youthful face and figure that Pennypacker saw, in spite of the broad shoulders and physically well-knit frame, an almost juvenile figure with wholly juvenile hair. And yet no one would have thought of calling Dick Brewster a boy, scarcely even a youth; he himself would have thought of it least of all.

Dick's heart warmed at sight of the lawyer. He wanted to step forward and take the squire by the hand, kindness seemed so strange a thing now! The squire, perhaps divining the wish or moved by sympathy, extended his hand. Dick clasped it with boyish fervor.

Pennypacker sat down on a chair, Dick taking all that was left, a stool, placing it where he could get a good view of the squire's face. Then Pennypacker began to talk, slowly and adroitly, as if he were questioning a witness. Presently he spoke of himself, and of why he was there.

"You ought to have the best criminal lawyer that can be brought from Little Rock," he said, "but he can't be had without a good deal of money, and I'm a poor man. You have n't anything you could sell? You're past age!"

"Twenty-two," said Dick. "No, I have n't anything but my gun and some books and clothing and fishing tackle and such like. They would n't bring anything worth while. I could n't sell the black, for though I've claimed him he really belongs to father."

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"Your father is n't going to like it to have me dip into this case," said Pennypacker, judicially, pulling at his wispy beard, "and I'm not a criminal lawyer," he went on. "But in a sense you belong to me, through reading law with me, you see, and I'm going to stand by you. I made up my mind to that this morning when I heard what the colonel had done. Says I to myself, 'Squire, here's your chance to do a noble deed!' I have n't done many. 'Likely you'll lose the colonel's business, if you do,' I says to myself, 'but, anyway, I'll do it, come flood or come drought!' — financially speaking, you know; and here I am to advise you and to do what I can for you."

Dick, his heart warmed as he had thought it could never be warmed again, was about to express his thanks and his gratification; but the squire went on, pulling at his beard and settling heavily back in his chair, which he tipped until it rested against the wall. Thus sitting he crossed one leg over the other and swung the free one to and fro.

"In the first place, you understand, you're not guilty!"

Dick half started from his stool, but the squire waved him back.

"The law holds every man innocent until he is proven guilty. As for this charge against you, you're to talk to no one, understand, — no one whatever about it. When the trial comes on you will plead not guilty; and then I will do the best I can for you."

"But I am guilty!" said Dick, almost fiercely. "I don't remember much about it, except that

I was drunk and there was a fight; but Jed Anderson is dead and I killed him!"

Pennypacker swung his pendent foot to and fro slowly.

"You will keep that to yourself," he commanded. "They've got to prove it, and perhaps we can make something of the fact that no one saw the thing done. Anyway, we'll claim justification — that you had to kill him to keep him from killing you. His dirk was found there on the ground by the steps of the saloon. He struck at you with that?"

"Yes."

"Then you killed him in self-defence. We'll stand to that. No one saw it and they haven't anything but circumstantial evidence; we'll deny everything; and we'll make them prove it, every iota of it."

He wandered away from this subject and began to talk of other things, after the strange fashion of lawyers, coming back finally to the events that led up to the fight at Chris Miller's, hoping to surprise Dick into taking another view of the matter by approaching it thus from a different viewpoint. And he was so adroit withal that but for a sturdy common-sense Dick might have been led to believe that his crime was not so black as it had seemed.

Dick was not deceived nor self-deceived; yet when the squire went away he certainly felt brighter and more like himself. He began to hope that, abandoned by nearly every one, his father included, amiable old Squire Pennypacker might in some mysterious manner win the day for him,

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just as heroic Joe Barton had held off the howling mob.

When hope dies the heart dies, so let us not grudge Dick Brewster his meagre hope. It was the one thing that enabled him to live during the days that followed; and it was the one thing that sustained his strength as he walked to the court room through the hot July weather, where the sheriff was calling his "Oyez, oyez!" pronouncing it "Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" and where the crowds were gathering, and judge, jury, and court officers had already gathered.

Squire Pennypacker, balancing his chair on its hind legs, sat within the railing when the prisoner was brought in, and moved up to him; and when the charge against Dick was read in the strong, clear voice of the court clerk, and Dick was bidden to plead, it was Pennypacker who answered for him:

"Not guilty!"

Dick's troubled eyes faltered over the sea of faces in the court room. Here and there he saw a familiar countenance. Joe Barton was there — Barton was one of the witnesses summoned for the defence; Chris Miller was there, puffy and pale; Gustav Borg was there, his face strangely stern, like that of a Norse sea king transported hitherward from the days of eld; Hank Wilson, who had driven the knife into the breast of Jed Anderson, was there too, his hawk-like profile quiet and calm as sculptured Innocence.

Back in the rear of the room, in one of the seats assigned to the women, Dick's faltering gaze found Christine Borg; then his face flushed hot

as fire. She had been in his thoughts all the time, and his eyes travelling from face to face seemed unable to rest until they beheld her. She was paler than he had ever seen her — a sort of white pallor that gave to his heart a dull ache.

The torturing trial was drawn out through two days. Squire Pennypacker fought for every possible advantage; forced to yield, he took "exceptions" innumerable for purposes of an appeal, all of which were duly entered in the court records. Witnesses for the State and for the defence told all they knew with native frankness. Now and then as the case went on Dick let his eyes wander over the breathless crowd in the court room. Always he looked for something which he never saw — the face of his father.

Through two terrible hours, toward the close of the second day, Dick Brewster whitened and wilted under the merciless summing-up of the prosecuting attorney. That quavering voice and that pointing forefinger, calling for justice in behalf of the man who had been foully murdered, was like the voice and finger of doom. It was Siberian knout, Chinese bastinado, and sailors' cat-o'-nine-tails, knotted into an Arkansas ox-whip, and plied with a stinging force excelling even that of old Borg when, angered, he cut the flesh of the quivering oxen until blood oozed.

The prosecutor in that summing-up speech showed clearly from the evidence that Dick Brewster had not only killed Jed Anderson because of jealousy, but that he had twice been heard to threaten to kill him; and that, to carry out his determination he had gone to the saloon.

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and there publicly quarrelled with the man who became his victim, thus establishing the contention of the State that the crime was planned with premeditation and consummated with malice aforethought.

Pennypacker essayed to make a stand before that pitiless arraignment, and realized that he was as ineffective as a poplar splinter flicking in a gale. Even Dick Brewster, shaken beyond belief, could have wept himself but that he felt the stinging words too keenly. Jedediah Anderson became a martyred hero. Women sobbed and men ground their teeth, cursing in rage.

The jury retired and came back almost instantly; they had agreed on a verdict.

Judge Spencer rose in his chair and looked down at their foreman, who had a slip of paper in his hand. Spencer was almost the only calm figure there. He was a man of fine appearance, slightly gray, energetic, intellectual, above all legal, a fine lawyer and with the reputation of an honorable and just man. Dick looked at the judge, — he feared to look at the jury.

Judge Spencer took the fateful slip, glanced at it, and then over the room, where the spectators craned forward hushed and palpitant.

"Guilty of murder in the first degree, with a recommendation that life imprisonment be substituted for the death penalty."

This was what the judge read in substance. Dick felt something snap in his head; he became giddy and almost blind.

A roar broke out in the court room which the officers could hardly subdue. Squire Penny-

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packer in the midst of it was moving for a new trial, which was refused. A woman screamed as if with breaking heart, and in that scream Dick recognized the voice of Christine.

Dick stood up when called on to do so, steadying himself by the table. Not answering when asked if he knew of any reason why the court should not pass sentence upon him, he heard Judge Spencer pronounce it in accordance with the finding and recommendation of the jury.

Then he was led away by the sheriff, back to the jail, blind and almost reeling. Outside in the street he heard certain of the friends of the dead deputy sheriff cheering like partisans hailing news of a great political victory.

CHAPTER IX

WHERE THE BIRDS SING

DICK BREWSTER had listened for hours, as it seemed, to the faint and interminable gnawing of the mouse, and he was glad when it stopped, for he could not sleep.

"Guilty ; imprisonment for life !"

Those words seemed to be written in blood across his eyeballs, so that, whether staring up at the grated bars above him, at the narrow slit of window where the soft moonlight stole in hesitantly, as if it feared and loathed the crime-stained place, or turning his vision inward with eyes closed tightly to shut out the sight, he still saw that sentence :

"Guilty ; imprisonment for life !"

He hoped he could sleep, now that the mouse had ceased and gone away, and he needed sleep, that he might have strength for the morrow, when, as he had been informed, he was to be taken away to the great prison, where thereafter he was to remain. He did not want to think of that ; the very thought of it, with its hopelessness, its infamy, its torturing years, made his whole being sick. To be shut up in such a place for life—he, the woods wanderer, the nature lover, the out-of-doors enthusiast ! No, he

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could not bear to think of it; he wanted to sleep and forget it, if even for no more than a little while; so he was glad that the mouse had worn its energy or its teeth out at last and had gone away to rest and to let him rest.

As in childhood, whenever he could not sleep because of a frightful tale read or heard, and his mother to quiet him and draw his thoughts from it had told him that if he would count up to one hundred, and then count up to it again, and yet again, he would fall asleep while thus engaged, he began to count. It had been a very good prescription, that from his mother. She was in heaven now, and he was —

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight —”

He was counting away diligently with eyes closed, though that did not shut out the words seared on his eyeballs, when he heard a soft step by his cell door. It seemed so strange that it should fall there apparently without any sound of an approach! This made him think that he had been counting longer than he believed and had actually dropped asleep for a moment or so. Nevertheless it seemed strange; for the sheriff, who was by virtue of his office also the jailer, was not accustomed to pass through the jail corridors in the night. Yet he had no thought that it was other than the sheriff until, opening his eyes and looking toward the cell door, he saw in the moonlight a shabbily clothed man peering at him through the grating. The moonlight fell full on the man's face and revealed an unkempt, reddish beard, a very red nose, and drink-inflamed eyes.

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Dick Brewster remembered the man then. He was a tramp who had been brought into the jail two days before on a charge of attempted burglary. Aside from Dick he was the only prisoner now within the walls of the jail. There had been some others a few days before, but the court trials had cleared them out, setting them at liberty or sending them away.

Dick started up on his elbow when he beheld this man, and stared blankly. In return the man grinned. In one hand he held a file so thin of blade that to Dick it seemed it must have been made from a watch spring. In his other hand he carried his shoes.

"Like ter git out an' go where de birds sing?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Dick's only answer was to raise himself higher on his elbow. His eyes were wide open now, his head hot, and his heart jumping. The question more than the sight of the man dazed him.

"Been sawin' on dat bar ever sense dey loaded me in 'ere," the tramp vouchsafed, with another grin. "Now she's t'rough; an' I'm goin' t'rough, too — see! When dey builds jails t' hold me dey builds 'em tighter 'n dis."

He began to unscrew the heel of one of the tattered shoes he carried. Dick watching him in amazement saw him take from the heel, which was hollow, some queer, thin, jointed keys. One of these he applied to the lock of the cell door, twisted it about a few times, then applied another. The lock clicked — clicked again; Dick heard the bolt slip back, then saw the man draw the door open.

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"Now wese'll slide," said the man, gleefully, as if proud of his work. "Youse jes' foller der percession, an' I'll show you out to where de birds is singin', or will be singin' in de mornin' — see!"

Dick was sitting up on his cot now, trembling violently. He had not spoken a word. His brain seemed to be whirring round like the great circular saw when it attacked the logs at the mill. "Out where the birds sing!" Would he go? Out where the birds sang, where the forests breathed their perfume, where was the liberty which meant life to him! The way was open.

He choked, gasping for breath, his brain still whirring and his whole body shaking as when the lowland malaria had racked it with ague. The burglar putting the keys and the coil of the little saw into the hollow shoe heel began to screw the heel into place.

"Out where de birds sing," he said, and bearing his shoes in his hands turned and began to creep softly along the corridor.

Dick was out of the cot; his eyes seemed glazed, his teeth were clenched, his breath came in quick short sobs, his hammering heart was churning his very blood in his veins. Would he go?

"Yes!" he said, fiercely, though no sound came from his lips.

Then he was out of the cell, stealing softly along after the burglar. The door of the cell which the burglar had occupied stood open, and they turned into it, Dick now pushing feverishly at the fellow's heels. The window in this cell

was lower than the one in Dick's, and one of the bars was cut in two and twisted aside. Here was where the persistent mouse had been gnawing — at that bar!

The prison cot was under it, and on the cot a low stool, the only other article of furniture.

"I'll climb up de golden rafters first," the man whispered, "an' if dere's no bloke squattin' round outside, I'll reach down my fin t' you an' you can come right along smilin' — see!"

Dick "saw," and in another moment he had hold of the burglar's hand and was being drawn into and through the window. It was a tight squeeze, for Dick's shoulders were broad, but he passed through without sticking, then dropped softly to the ground outside.

Everything was quiet. The hour was late and the street deserted. The moonlight did not fall on that side of the jail and the darkness there proved friendly. Off in the marshes beyond the borders of the town some frogs croaked, calling to Dick in friendly and encouraging tones, "Come on! come on!"

The interior of the jail had seemed feverishly hot. Dick knew that this had been due to his mental condition, when the night wind, cool enough at that hour, showed with its cooling touch that his cheeks were like fire. It called to him, too, that caressing wind, speaking of the freedom of the boundless woods — called to him coaxingly, like the frogs in the marshes, "Come on! come on!"

The escaping burglar stood in the shadow a short time fitting his shoes to his feet, then

moved round the corner of the building, glanced from side to side with alert, experienced eyes, and stepped out where the moonlight fell.

"We 'll jes' mosey 'long like de smoothest kind o' coves, unless we're spotted," he whispered, "den we 'll fly fer th' timber."

Then he observed that Dick was trembling.

"Oh, we 'll make it, podner!" he assured, taking this as an indication of fear. "Whenever Soapy Sam starts in ter do a little job like dis he does it ever' time, betcher life!"

Dick shrank from him with loathing, then felt ashamed of the action and the sense of repulsion which occasioned it. What was he to feel loathing for this man? He a murderer—so decided by a jury of his "peers" and sentenced to life imprisonment, and this man so far as he knew was no more than a trampish burglar!

Soapy Sam was out in the moonlight now and walking down the street in the most innocent manner in the world. Dick would have slouched guiltily after him but that the burglar bade him step along at his side and hold his head up like a "swell." Then Dick walked with him down the street, where they saw no one, and on out of the town.

"Where yer goin'?" the burglar demanded now, stopping.

"I don't know," said Dick; "out of here, somewhere."

"Come wid me, den," was the invitation. "I 'm goin' ter hit de king's highway" (by which he meant the railroad) "a few miles below 'ere, an' lay fer dat freight dat comes along about t'ree

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o'clock. It'll be headin' fer Springfield, up in Mizzoury, an' if dey ketches me after I strikes de Ozarks dey're welcome ter do it."

He was about to start on.

"No," said Dick, that sense of repugnance still strong in him.

The burglar caught the feeling conveyed unintentionally by the tone. He stared at Dick in the moonlight.

"Well, if you ain't der worst!" he grunted. "I guess I oughter left yer where I found yer. Wantin' t' rule me outer yer society! So help me if I ever assists a swell ag'in! Dere ain't no sense o' gratitude in 'em."

"You — I mean I am very grateful, very thankful!" Dick stammered. "But I want to go —"

The burglar's manner showed contempt.

"Oh, josh along by yerself; dat's all right! I ain't wantin' ter inhale de triple-extracted perfume of yer comp'ny; not any I ain't. I ain't killed anybody, an' I wuz n't going t' der penitentiary fer it; so I ain't away up in G!

"But dat's all right!" he continued, and marched off down the road by himself.

Dick stared at him as the darkness took the tattered figure to its shielding embrace. He felt that he had been justly and properly rebuked, yet he could not get rid of that feeling of repugnance, and he did not desire the man's company. When the tattered figure had quite vanished he turned into the woods.

He had no plan. The whole thing, thrust upon him so suddenly, had given no time for

thought. Now he began to ask himself what he should do. He had accepted the proffered chance of escape because he could not help it. His very being rebelled at the thought of imprisonment and cried out for the freedom it had always known. As well expect the captive bird to remain in the cage after it finds that the door is open and it can fly away if it will. And now that the bird was out in the free air and under the shining stars, with the moon sailing like a silver boat above the tops of the tall trees where the winds sang, it could no more go back into that frightful cage voluntarily than it could choose to stay in it after the door had been opened.

Moving steadily through the woods, as one familiar with it, Dick Brewster's thoughts began to work at the task of outlining his present course of action and his future. The latter he could not handle — it was too far away and too much shrouded in the mists of chance and uncertainty; but the present being at hand he could perhaps master that. And he mastered it by steering his feet in a straight course for that port he knew so well — home and its environments. He did not stop to reason that this might not be the best thing to do. He wanted to do it, and ever with Dick Brewster that had been sufficient excuse for anything.

The white mists mounting from the lowlands and the swampy woods were wrapping the high hill on which stood the big house and the stables, and day was not far away when Dick, finishing the six miles of his journey, came out of the woods and walked along the white road. He

looked about him curiously ; then instead of toiling on up the hill he turned aside and strode on past the dogwood, stopping at last before the gate at Borg's.

The place was very still. Aside from the "peeping" of some half-fledged chickens, deserted by their mother and spending an unhappy night in consequence, there was not a sound. The windows were dark ; but Dick picked out one in the room where he believed Christine lay sleeping, and entering by the gate walked softly up to the wall beside it.

He stood in uncertainty for a moment, looked appealingly and longingly at the window with its lowered upper sash, and listening intently almost fancied he could hear the girl's peaceful breathing. With heart crying out to her to forgive him for what he had done, he choked back a sob.

A wild impulse to call out to her, to tell her that he was there by her window, to beg her to come out and fly with him far from that place to some land that was still a land of happiness and peace, almost overpowered him. But he strove with it, though weak as shorn Samson, and conquered it, helped to a victory by the feeling that she would perhaps scorn him, and by the stronger feeling that, disgraced himself, he could not ask her to share his disgrace.

Having conquered he threw himself grovelling on the ground, where he lay many minutes with his face in his hands. On rising he looked about the yard in the faint light, longing for paper and pencil. He had neither and knew neither was to be had there. Then he stared at the window

again and muttered something incoherent that sounded like a mumbled and unintelligible prayer. When he passed out by the gate his cheeks were wet and his face set like a death mask.

Day was not far away ; already there were faint streakings of the sky. But he was not yet ready to depart. Leaving the little house behind him, he climbed the hill with many a backward glance. He entered the stables first, and finding his way to the stall of the black that had borne him on so many a galloping ride over the roads and through the woods, he put his arm round the horse's neck. Do not blame him or feel shame for him if he wept, and wept bitterly ! The velvet muzzle, pressed warmly against his wet cheek as if the black understood and sympathized, was like the soft touch of the hand of a friend, and brought him the realization that now he had no friend other than this gallant black horse, unless that friend were Joe Barton, and perhaps Squire Penny-packer, and perhaps — yes, perhaps, — Christine. He could not be sure about Christine, but he hoped she would never forget that he had told her he loved her, and that some day, when time had dimmed the fresh horror of now recent events, she would think of him with gentle kindness and regret. He could hardly hope for more than that.

"Good by, Ebon !" he whispered, after many fondlings. "Good by, old friend ; I shall never see you again I know, but may your days be long ! It's better sometimes to be a horse than a man."

As he went out of the stable, the horse whinnied softly as if calling him back, but Dick

walked away. He knew he could not tarry much longer, though white mists now enveloped everything and delayed the approach of the sky-heralded dawn.

From the stables he ascended to the house, and circling it to the old oak that brushed his window with its branches, he climbed to that window, as he had done many a time, and lifting the sash entered the familiar room. He could see just enough to know that it was exactly as he had left it. It was an abandoned room now—a closed room, like a room from which death has taken the inmate. He understood. He was dead to the house on the hill and to all of its occupants.

The thought put some fibre into his heart, softened as it had been by the visit to Borg's and to the stables, so he groped about, finding here and there a few things that he wished to take with him. He sought most for that picture of Christine which he had left in the drawer of his desk, but discovered with a pang that it had been removed. He understood that, too, when he made the discovery. Christine had been turned out of that house also, though she had occupied it but as a shadow fixed on a bit of cardboard.

In his trunk, from which he took nothing else, for he could not burden himself, he found a few dollars which he crowded into his pocket.

"This belongs to Hank Wilson by rights," was his thought, as he remembered the I O U's, "but I need it now more than he does."

Then he climbed out of the room, after removing as far as possible all indications of his visit,

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and descending to the ground by the way he had come he walked into the woods again, and the shadows received him there. It is wondrously kind, the great woods, to all hunted things, from the tiny gray squirrel and the timid deer of the hills and the swamplands to man, and it received him, convicted felon, fugitive, and out-cast from home though he was, and folded him to its heart with many sweet murmurings as if it would still all his haunting fears.

CHAPTER X

FROM THE LAND THAT ASKS NO QUESTIONS

FIVE years!

They are short; they are, also, very long, contradictory as this may seem.

They had been both short and long to the man who came now toward the winking campfire through the wavering murk of the September dusk — short when life and death rode with him at the saddle bow, and horn clicking against horn in the mad cattle stampede made both life and death things to be forgot; and long in the night watches when the wolf howled, and the herds slept with frequent rustlings, and the diamond white stars took boat with the moon in the deep seas of the sky.

He carried a broken saddle swung over his arm and led by its bridle a painted cayuse that was twisted of ear by the screw worm and speckled of coat by myriad prods of the "Texas fleas." His clothing was of gray corduroy, much worn, the coat shapeless and the trousers baggy at the knees. The trouser legs were tucked into riding boots with high, sharp heels; on the heels were big-rowelled spurs of the cowboy pattern. The man's head, showing a mass of curling brown hair that was plentifully sprinkled with gray in spite of his youth, was covered by a wide, whit-

ish, cowboy hat, somewhat stained now with dust of trail and grease of campfire cooking. Companion to the hair of the head was a soft brown beard, a stranger to the razor; but there was no gray in the beard. The eyes were gray and keen, set under prominent brows. They had looked into the face of fate quailing; then, looking again, had settled into calm.

He had come up out of the land that asks no questions of any man. It is kind, that land, to hunted things—kind with the kindness of the big woods. Many men have sought it and have found it, and having found it have lived on. These men called it the Nation. If you should care to seek for its location on any map, find one which dates back to a time before Oklahoma was born; there you will see it. The map maker has called it the Indian Territory, and perhaps he has painted it green, for it is a good green land to others besides the hunted—a good land to the Indian and the squaw-man and to the herds that graze by its streams and roam its prairies. In its eastern portion it is well watered and timbered; in its western portion the rainless sun is king, and the plains, rich with grama and buffalo grasses, stretch away in undulations toward the distant mountains.

For five years that land had asked this man no questions. He had toiled. He had fought sometimes, for there is often fighting there. But he had kept himself clean. He had saved something from his toil; and that saving, represented by greenbacks, was wadded into a cowhide belt about his waist beneath his clothing. There was

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something else about his waist, but this was outside of his clothing — a heavy revolver, and a belt but half full of cartridges. He had travelled far, and he had half emptied the cartridge belt in bringing down prairie chickens and other small game, that he might live as he fared forth from the friendly land.

He had thought while toiling through those short and long five years; and his thinking had driven him forth at last to face the world, where living men lived and struggled for the things that seemed worth while. He longed for that struggle, even if he could not feel that he was equipped for it; longed for that life as the deer pants for the running river. The land behind him had given its best, but that best was but to conceal him in its grassy hollows. Now, having suffered much and thought much, having sloughed off the past and all it had ever held, with his name dead, and his heart dead except as to its physiological functions, he was going forth to see what lay before.

Just now the thing lying before him was a twinkling campfire beside the thin thread of grassy trail; the campfire casting its ruby glow over a man who looked to be a cowboy, over a woman who was surely an Indian, and over a baby. In addition there was a pony grazing at the end of a picket rope, some pans and similar articles and a roll of blankets on the ground, and a pot simmering over the fire.

The familiar sight drew him. He knew that this was a squaw-man, his wife, and his child, and that all the belongings were theirs; and having

"herded," as he would have put it, with squawmen and their kind for five years, this lonely group by the fire seemed not only to fit perfectly into the picture of the quiet evening, but to possess kinship with himself.

The squaw-man started up when he heard the hoof falls of the painted cayuse, and swung his ready Winchester round in the direction of the sound.

"A friend!" the newcomer announced in deep cheery tones, and walked on, pulling at the bridle.

The squaw-man did not put down the Winchester; instead, he stared hard at the intruder, and with a keen glance that went far beyond out through the gathering dusk, he seemed to question the truth of the statement that the stranger was a friend. The squaw held the baby tightly to her breast as if to protect it — a baby that did not cry at the quick, crushing hug given it, but cooed gayly and clutched with chubby brown fingers at the once brightly colored blanket hooded about its mother's head.

Not until the intruder came quite up within the circle of light did the squaw-man put down his Winchester, and then he dropped it at his side with his hand on the trigger guard.

"Saw your fire; lonesome a bit out in the open, though I ought n't to say it for I'm used to it."

The tones were friendly, sociable.

The squaw-man looked his uninvited guest over with critical eyes. They were a mild blue in color, though the light was not good enough

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to show that. It did show, however, that the face of the squaw-man, somewhat hard now in its expression, was shaven, except as to the mustache, which grew long and drooped about his mouth, and that his hair was of such length that it hung down on his shoulders. It showed also that his clothing, consisting of gray woollen shirt, cowboy hat, coat, trousers, and leathern chaps, was very much the worse for long wear and rough riding. When he stood up, lifting his Winchester by its breech, he was not tall — about five feet eight or nine inches; in age he was probably thirty-five.

Apologizing for his intrusion, the visitor pulled the bridle rein over the head of the trained cayuse, letting it fall to the ground, knowing the cayuse would not move from the spot after that. Then he dropped down, without invitation, by the fire, which the squaw began to feed with cow-chips from a pile that lay close at hand.

The picketed pony came up to the cayuse, dragging its rope; they rubbed noses, whereupon the cayuse squealed and launched out with his heels.

The squaw-man sat down by the fire, the look of suspicion still on his face.

"Whur frum?" he questioned.

"Nation."

"So? B'long there myself."

"I knew you did as soon as I saw you; that's why I stopped."

"What part?"

"Western section. Cow punching there for the Hayden Brothers. Got tired; thought I'd strike out."

There was another steady look from the squaw-man's mild blue eyes.

"Your handle—meanin' no offence, pardner?"

"Jackson Blake."

"Named after old Andy Jackson, mebbey?" the squaw-man ventured facetiously.

The visitor looked away with a smile of grim humor.

"Yes," he said, "a good while after."

"My name's Prethro — Jim Prethro; this is my squaw and baby."

Thus introduced they began to talk. By and by the visitor rose from the fire and picketed his cayuse, using the long lariat he had carried at the horn of the saddle, driving the iron picket pin into the hard soil with his boot heel, — a performance that made the rowelled spur jingle musically.

"My cayuse stuck his foot into a prairie dog hole awhile back and the girths snapped; consequence, a broken saddle which I'll have to mend," he explained, coming back to the fire when he had finished his task. "Any water round here?"

"Dry camp."

"I thought so. Well, it won't matter; I watered him at the creek when I crossed it this afternoon."

"An' there's coffee'nough in that pot to keep the drouth away from the human herd," Prethro commented, lifting the lid of the steaming pot and sniffing the odor. "Stuff's done, I guess, an' we'll lay to."

So they "lay to." There was no table cloth,

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no cutlery except the clasp knives of the men and a straight, keen blade which the squaw brought up from the depths of a bundle. The only other things of all that civilized men consider necessary were two battered tin cups for the coffee and two battered tin plates for the meat. But the stranger produced from one of his saddle pouches a third battered tin plate and a collapsible drinking-cup, and the board was spread; and on it was placed the evening meal, — roasted rabbit and roasted quail, liberally sprinkled with salt, some bits of bacon fried in its own fat in a black skillet, and a plentiful supply of hard crackers, these last being the contribution of Jackson Blake. It was good, all of it, they agreed, and especially the coffee, of which each drank two cups, black, thick, creamless, and much sweetened.

As soon as the supper was ended Jim Prethro began to extinguish the fire, trampling it out with great deliberation.

Jackson Blake watched him without a question, though he wondered at the care shown. There was little danger that the fire would spread to the grass, for about the fire the earth had been scraped bare as a protection. Then the thought came that this was in line with the suspicion the squaw-man had exhibited; and he reached the tentative conclusion that Jim Prethro had an enemy, or enemies, whom he feared, perhaps from whom he was fleeing, and whom he suspected of being on his trail.

Having thus with much care put out the fire, Prethro produced a short black pipe which he filled and lighted. The fire out, the baby hav-

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ing spent much time in watching its ruddy flicker turned its attention to the stars that were appearing one by one as the darkness deepened.

Jackson Blake took up his broken saddle, produced from one of its pouches needle, thread, and other necessities, and began to repair the damage done by the fall of the cayuse. Now and then he looked at the crowing, kicking baby and smiled. It was such a cheery brown mite, gurgling, "goo-ing," and clutching at the stars, which it seemed to think just out of reach over its head. He wondered amiably what the "goo-ing," half-breed baby thought those marvellous points of light were.

When the humor struck him Prethro began to talk. The squaw took up the baby and withdrew a short distance to where the roll of blankets made a mound in the thickening gloom. The stars were growing brighter. Except for the monotonous sougling of the wind, the only sound aside from the voices of the speakers was the "ruh—ruh-h!" that the ponies made as they tore at the grass.

Prethro smoked. Jackson Blake wrought away at the task of mending his saddle, using his fingers for eyes. The light of the campfire would have been a help to him, but he had not said so when Prethro was stamping at the glowing embers. Both men were from the Nation; still in the Nation, for that matter, and "on the way to God's country," as Prethro said, meaning thereby Kansas. So the conversational ground broadened. Both knew the Nation, particularly its cattle country, from end to end; and they

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had a common store of knowledge concerning its leading personages—squaw-men, cattle men, government agents, Indian chiefs, and leaders.

"Frum th' East, I b'lieve you said, 'riginally?"

The squaw-man put the question.

"Yes."

Michigan and Arkansas are both East if you happen to be living west of them.

"Must be a big country and a curious one, th' East," said Prethro, thoughtfully. "Never been there myself. Allus thought I'd like t' go though, an' kind o' reckoned I would go sometime, but I ain't made th' riffle yit."

The remark was in the nature of an interrogatory.

"Yes, it's a big country."

"Mighty big they tell me, but still not as big 'z th' West!" This with the trans-Mississippian's pride in the vastness of his part of the continent. "West takes in mighty nigh all out of doors, an' I reckon there ain't another similar-sized section anywhere kin beat it, countin' it up one side an' down another."

"Yes, it's big—very big!" Blake agreed.

"I'd kinder like t' take a squint over th' East, though," Prethro continued, reflectively, "'count o' some lies 't was told me 'bout it—'bout th' stacks o' people, an' th' cords o' money in th' banks, an' 'specially th' bustin' big ships; must be nigh an eighth of a mile long, them ships, accordin' t' th' say o' Sam Lindgrin. Mebby you know Sam, he's a Dutchman, punchin' steers f'r th' Double Bar outfit south o' Vinita, an' an

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ol' liar, if there ever was one; but I did n't copper when he told me about th' ships."

He lay for a few moments pulling at his black pipe.

"What made me know that Lindgrin was doin' th' tallest kind o' lyin' then was a lot of other truck he'd peddled out t' me at diff'runt times. He said, f'r inst'nce, that there was once a feller — a Dutchman, I think, wearin' a jaw-twistin' handle somethin' like Munkchowsen — who had no end o' the most wonderful 'xperiences any man ever thought of. One time he said this Munkchowsen — he was a baron, 'r mebb'y a duke, 'r might even been a king, I disremember — was travellin' with his broncho over th' perairies, 'r whatever they have got over there, 'n' when night ketched him there was n't a dugout 'r tepee in sight. So he had to camp down in his blankets on th' snow; an' there was a powerful lot o' snow, been snowin' I guess stiddy f'r more 'n a week countin' in Sundays at both ends; it was jes' snow, snow, ever' which way you looked.

"Well, 'z he could n't do no better Munkchowsen bedded down there f'r th' night after tyin' his broncho to what he thought was th' top of a dead saplin' stickin' up out o' th' snow. In th' night it turned warm — reg'lar Chinook struck th' country while Munkchowsen was asleep. In th' mornin' when he crawled out 'n' shook hisself, he noticed first that th' snow was about all gone, run off into th' rivers. Then he heard his broncho nickerin' up in th' air, an', by jacks, lookin' up if he did n't see that animal o' his'n hangin' by its bridle to th' top of a church

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steeple! Th' blizzard had buried everything that deep ye see, an' that was th' condition o' things when the Chinook struck an' cleared it away. Now, what d' ye think o' that? F'r downright, upright, all-round lyin' that took th' bake-shop with th' cook throwed in, an' I told Lindgrin so when he handed it out t' me."

Jackson Blake laughed, laughed uproariously, and Prethro joined him.

"So ye see after hearin' them kind o' fairy stories out o' Lindgrin, I did n't rise when he baited his hook with them ships."

The sense of comradery now fully established, Prethro dropped into personal reminiscence and talked of his boyhood life in Kansas where he was born, and of interesting incidents in his varied and wandering experience.

"I'm leavin' th' Nation f'r good now," he volunteered, finally. "Takin' my squaw with me; she's been good t' me, you know!" This apologetically. "So I don't shake her jes' because I'm goin' out among white people into a white man's country. I never go back on anybody that treats me right, an' you bet not on a woman who's been 'z good t' me as she has. Why durn it, I'd been under six foot o' sod, with my toes stickin' up toward the roots of th' buffalo-grass more 'n three years ago if it had n't been f'r her; she nussed me through a spell o' fever that would 'a' killed a bull buffalo and pulled me out of it! So I don't go back on her, an' she knows I won't. She's a Creek; ejicated too, at a gover'ment school, better ejicated than I am. Old Powder Face's daughter. Mebby you know him?"

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Blowed hisself up one time while tryin' t' load some shotgun ca'tridges, 'n' sprinkled his face full o' powder — give him his present handle, that did. Nice ol' buck, and his daughter's an A-1 wife. I never want any better, 'n' I ain't ashamed t' have her wearin' my brand."

Perhaps because Jackson Blake was silent over this Prethro felt called upon to go farther in defence of this sin of loyalty and kindness to an Indian wife. The young man understood the feeling; he knew squaw-men. Most of them were neither loyal nor kind to their wives.

"Mebby she ain't what you'd call a looker —"

"A very nice-looking woman!" Blake interjected.

"Not in the white sense," his tones warming a bit with pride because of this interjection, "but she suits me. Handsome is as handsome does! Put it that way 'n' there ain't a handsomer woman on this yere planet. 'N' strikes me that's the correct way t' put it. Now, I've seen purty women; 'n' I've been clos't enough t' some of 'em to git their yaller hair on my coat collar, 'n' find it in my skillet with th' meat nex' day, though t' see me now you might n't think it; so I cal'-late I've some reasons f'r believin' I'm qualified t' jedge."

He puffed slowly and reflectively at his pipe, the tobacco burning hot toward the bottom of the bowl. The thoughts of Jackson Blake had leaped the barrier of five years at that mention of yellow hair, and he came near losing what Prethro said next:

"I recomember one of them women; purty 'z

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a piccher, she was. Never was a heifer, I reckon, come down life's great trail feelin' her grass more 'n she did, 'n lookin' more fat 'n' sassy. She was a short-horn maverick, f'r cert'in, 'n' she knowed it! 'N' all th' range riders of that section was jes' puttin' th' bud to their bronchos 'n' whirlin' their ropes, tryin' t' ketch her. 'N' I was 'mongst 'em, my hat set back, saddle cinched t' beat th' band, spurs gugin'. If I 'd been an Injun I reckon I 'd had on yards of eagle feathers an' paint enough t' cover a house. Anyway, I was doin' my best — goin' th' whole thing!

"Well, this yere blooded heifer would n't look at th' one of us, 'cept t' make monkeys of us! She was that purty I reckon she wanted t' be a dukess, 'r an earless, 'r somethin'. Might 'a' sent f'r Munkchowsen!" He chuckled. "But somehow dukes, 'n' them kind of cattle, were n't growin' plenty on that range. Understandin' her lay at last, I come away. Lemme see! — that was fifteen year ago!"

He thumbed his pipe, and finding it smoked out, knocked the bowl against his boot heel.

"Two year ago, lookin' over a paper that one o' th' boys had at Halford's ranch, down Texas way, I see an advertisement, with ink marked round it. 'T was frum a woman that wanted t' marry so powerful that she 'd put it in th' paper; an' Billy th' Kid — not th' real one, but Halford's Billy th' Kid — had sent a josh on t' her, sayin' 't he was that mattermornally inclined he could n't d'jest his vittles; 'n' she 'd sent 'im her piccher. He showed it t' me. An' —" he dropped his warm pipe into his coat pocket —

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"it was that very same short-horn; still a maverick, 'n' cryin' now f'r some good honest man t' slap his brandin' iron onto her 'n' call her his property. But she'd lost her beauty — piccher showed that; the dukes 'n' th' rich men had n't come; an' — Well, you've heard the story, ever'body has, of th' ol' maid that was prayin' under th' apple tree by th' door, f'r th' Lord t' send her a man; 'n' the owl in th' tree hooted, 'Who — who!' 'Anybody, Lord — anybody!' says she, startin' up like a stampedin' cow. F'r, ye see, she thought the Lord had heard her at last 'n' was goin' t' answer her prayer. An' 't was th' same way with th' heifer I've been tellin' you about. Anything would do f'r her now. She was one o' yer purty women!

"So, I say ag'in, 'handsome is 'z handsome does'; 'n' whether a woman's a looker 'r not a looker don't any longer cut hay with me. What takes my eye is th' woman that'll stand by you, come sunshine 'n' singin' birds, 'r come blindin' Dakoty blizzards with icebergs in their teeth. My squaw's that kind of a woman."

He rose now; he had talked a long time, and the hour was getting late enough for blankets and sleep.

Jackson Blake rose with him, and they went out together and shifted the positions of their horses to enable the animals to get more grass.

Then, returning, they said a final word of rough but kindly good-night, and "turned in," each understanding the other as thoroughly as if the acquaintance had been one of weeks rather than of minutes.

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Wrapped in the blanket that had been carried by his cayuse, with yellow oil slicker over him as an added protection from the coming chill of the early morning hours, saddle for pillow, Jackson Blake stared up at the white stars. So far away they were to him; so near they had been to the half-breed baby! And a picture conjured up by that casual reference to a thread of yellow hair troubled him, as it had done so many times before.

His mind went back along the trail of life covered by the five years. In that time he had been cowboy, farm hand, herder, many things; his beard had grown, his hair had changed—it was no longer a juvenile tow in color—and more than all, as he felt, he had changed. An intoxicated, irresponsible boy had done that bloody deed in Arkansas. The boy had paid for it during those long, toilsome, unlovely years in the land that asks no questions. The boy had died in that land, and a man was going out into the world to taste life, real life, and see if it were sweet or bitter. That boy had a father, a home, a sweetheart, had known the love and kindness of friends.

The boy was Dick Brewster. He was dead, and quite forgotten, no doubt, except by a very few. The man, Jackson Blake, had no father, no home, no sweetheart, and but few friends, these of the rougher sort, and he had turned his back on even these. From the boy he had received a memory; that was all that had survived time's mutation; and holding that memory the man seemed now to himself to be more than anything else that boy reincarnated.

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The man had read in queer books that breathed of pipal trees and the strange Orient of the mystery of reincarnation. Most men of the wise and mocking West had laughed at the thoughts of the Eastern dreamers. Yet here was a new incarnation—the man, Jackson Blake, knew it; a new incarnation in which the soul had not brought much from the other life save memory.

His thoughts becoming dream-mixed by the philtering hand of Sleep, he looked still at the deep black vault where the stars shone, and wondered mistily, asking himself from which of those he had come. It was a long journey, and the stars were so very far away!

Another man watching the stars from another saddle pillow, thinking of the man with the gray eyes and soft brown beard who had dropped into the camp with such disconcerting suddenness, though afterward proving himself a man of kind heart and good intent, cursed himself slowly for the momentary inattention and forgetfulness which had permitted this man to come so close to the campfire without discovery. The only excuse, and it was not sufficient to condone so great an offence, was that the keen ears of the man of the plains had been dulled for a moment or two by the "goo-ing" antics of a chubby brown baby, and by the mother's quaint talk as she held that baby up to stare with its black eyes into the leaping light of the fire.

Still that was no excuse, the man declared to himself, breathing his condemnation to the night wind; for such inattention nothing could be a valid excuse. Men more cruel than wolves,

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bitter as hell and implacable as death, were somewhere behind in that green land that asks no questions, but over whose verdure there often rolls a sea of blood; and those men panted for his life, and perhaps for the lives of the Indian mother and the now sleeping child.

The thought so distressed him that he lay awake a long time, while the stars marched in shining procession across the highways of the sky and the winds crooned to the sleeping mother and the sleeping infant.

Then he too slept at last, with revolvers loosened and hand clutching Winchester. The human wolves were no doubt far away; perhaps they had never found the trail; and perhaps if they had found it their courage and determination were not equal to their desire for revenge.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE WAY TO GOD'S COUNTRY

JACKSON BLAKE slept well, once slumber had come to him, and for that he had youth to thank; for man though he was, he was yet young. When he opened his eyes the stars were gone and day was dawning. Prethro and the Indian woman were already astir, Prethro kindling anew the fire he had stamped out so carefully the evening before.

Looking away from the man and the woman at the fire, Blake observed, as he began to roll from under his slicker and blanket, that the camp was pitched in a little swale that dipped with gentle inclination, its rim making a screen which kept the light of the fire from being seen at any great distance across the plains.

The fact thus observed struck him as having something in common with the squaw-man's suspicious and questioning attitude at first, and made him recall the quick, crushing manner in which the Indian woman had caught up the baby.

"It may be that they have even a better reason than I have for wanting to get out of the Nation," was his thought.

He shook himself out of his blanket, made his toilet by pulling on his high-topped, high-heeled,

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rowelled boots; and calling out a cheery good-morning, rose and walked toward the fire.

"Up early," he said, when Prethro returned the greeting. "Suits me, though; I'm used to it, and I want to get on to-day as fast as I can."

"Same yere," said Prethro, setting the black coffee pot on the fire.

He dropped his rope-burned hands to his hips and looked at the brown-bearded man before him.

"Blake," he said, "if you're in a hurry, might be as well fer you to pull on ahead 'n' leave us, after breakfast. Not but that yer comp'ny's welcome, fer it is; but that broncho is slower 'n a hamstrung steer, and he's only one. So, ye see, we ain't goin' t' make any new time records travellin', though we want t' git ahead fast 'z we kin."

Jackson Blake looked with questioning into the squaw-man's blue eyes—he thought he had never seen such mild blue eyes and such an in-offensive face!—saw that no guile lay there, and at once answered, drawn to this man:

"Oh, I'm not in any such hurry as that!"

"Jes' 'z you say," said Prethro. "Your comp'ny 's mighty welcome, but we're slow in startin', 'n' a good 'eal slower 'n a locomotive after we git t' goin'."

The squaw standing by said nothing; whatever her lord did satisfied her. Prethro had stated that she was educated—educated at a government school. That might mean much or little. Anyway, it has not been written that the alphabet and a few other things forced through

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the skull has ever yet changed the heart or the nature. She may have been "ejicated," as Prethro had proudly boasted; but she was still an Indian woman, silent, pathetic, undemonstrative, uncomplaining.

This question settled not to be referred to again, Prethro finishing his work at the camp-fire went out with Jackson Blake, and they talked while they shifted the ponies to new grass.

There was no dampness of dew on the ground, that dry September morning, but when the animals started up as the men approached, lifting themselves by their forefeet, and then shaking themselves with quick, loose slidings of the skin, their warm sides emitted steam, and the grassy indentations from which they had risen sent up a thin white vapor.

"This yere is the curiourest beast that ever et grass," said Prethro, as he pulled the picket pin and started off to a new spot with his broncho. "Makes me think o' some men. He's 'z good as one o' these yere wanderin' sky pilots, whenever I've got my hands on th' rope, 'n' as mean 'z a train wrecker whenever anybody else is handlin' him. I could n't think of any name fittin' f'r him till I struck onto Hypocrite — Hyp f'r short. See him now, you'd shore think he was plum saintly; an' yit that son of a gun kin waltz stiff 'z a cripple with a wooden leg, kin hump his back jes' fer all th' world like a green measurin' worm, an' with you settin' in the saddle kin kick yer hat off 'thout turnin' a hair. 'N' he won't even be breathin' hard while doin' it. Let me

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come up a minute after an' he's 'z good 'z a printed 'Pilgrim's Progress.'"

"Where'd you get him?" Blake queried, looking the quiet-moving broncho over and noting the tricky white eye.

"Picked him out of a herd myself. F'r the reason that, mean as he is, you c'n no more wear him out than you kin a steam ingine; he'll go all day, live on weeds 'n' thistle heads, carry all you kin cinch onto him, and at night come up smilin' 'z a new bridegroom."

As the men walked back to the campfire, the east, growing rosy red, gave the smoky red disk of the sun a sudden push that sent its edge above the sky line of the plains. Then without much premonition, full-orbed day began to reign, sending its lances of light with warm searchings through the crisp clear air of the morning.

Prethro stopped on the rim of the hollow that held the fire, having observed that the smoke was rising straight upward, and swept the grasslands even to the sunrise with those mild blue eyes. The glance appeared to satisfy him, for he turned and walked on.

There was not as much coffee that morning as the night before. Even with aid from Blake's water bottle but one cup apiece of the bitter beverage could be provided. But it satisfied, — these people were not grumblers.

Again the fire was stamped out. The bundles were rolled together and strapped. Jackson Blake bridled his cayuse, cinched the saddle, stowed away picket rope, blanket, slicker, and other things. He had observed that Prethro

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and his wife preferred to attend to their belongings without assistance. Then he mounted, swinging up lightly and with tinkling spurs.

To his surprise he saw that Prethro, holding the broncho, was helping the Indian woman into the man's saddle and handing up to her the baby. Never yet had he seen a squawman walk while his squaw rode. Already Hypocrite was as deeply laden as a ship for a foreign voyage, yet he stood with meekness and sweet submission in those whitish eyes, which when seen in horses Jackson Blake had come to recognize as the sure indication of a treacherous disposition.

The Indian woman by a dexterous motion which no white woman could ever learn swung the baby round to her back and caught it there in some mysterious manner in a fold of the blanket, deftly securing the blanket in front with almost the same motion. Then she settled in the deep saddle, tucked her feet into the big wooden stirrups, and took up the reins.

Jackson Blake watching this performance saw the man release the bridle, saw the broncho stand quietly for a moment, saw the woman brace herself and tighten her hold of the reins; then saw the broncho give a sudden stiff jump, like a grasshopper. When he stopped at the end of that jump, he stopped with legs quivering and back arched like the back of a cat. But the squaw was still in the saddle and the baby in the fold of the blanket.

Then came another leap, and another, and the broncho was bucking in the good old way.

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Blake rode forward quickly, thinking the woman would need assistance.

"It's all right," said Prethro, with a grin, as the fight between the squaw and the tricky brute went on. "It happens ever' time Anita gits on. 'Tain't nothin'; she'll have him all right in a minute."

Then the woman's name was Anita! It was a pretty name, Blake thought. And as a broncho subjugator she soon proved that she would not have done discredit to the reputation of a professional. Within a very brief time, during which he had kicked and bucked over roods of ground without unseating the squaw or spilling the baby, Hypocrite had learned the old lesson, that the way of the transgressor is hard. He had to learn it anew every day, being a seasoned sinner. When he came into the trail again, blood was mixed with the froth that issued from his championing jaws, brought there by the lacerating cut of the scissors bit.

There was just a trace of triumph in the woman's black eyes, and the baby, looking out from its nest, smiled chubbily at Blake, who wondered why its little brown head had not been snapped off.

Almost as soon as the subjugation of Hypocrite had been completed, the woman, after a word with Prethro, pulled the broncho out of the faint trail.

"Straighter course," he explained, dropping back to where Blake rode alone. "Trail bends. My squaw will keep her nose p'inted straight north, so that we'll hit the line quicker. I

was over this country five year ago, drivin' a bunch o' steers through t' Abilene, 'n' if I ain't out in my figgerin' we'll strike a dry crick, with water holes, in about two hours. I wanted t' reach it last night, but could n't quite, so made a dry camp, knowin' I could strike the needful to-day."

He swung along at Blake's side, with easy, sinuous stride. About his waist were his revolvers, in his hands or on his shoulder his ever-ready Winchester. Now and then after brief intervals he looked behind casually, as one who looks at the sky or the sun or the landscape.

"Walkin's good fer me," he said; and again Blake noted the tone of apology which he had observed the evening before. "Ridin' 'r walkin' is all th' same t' me; an' the woman has th' baby, ye see! Never was a woman yit, red 'r white, did n't like t' ride; 'n' there's the baby — got t' look out fer that! Ain't never been a fambly man, I reckon?"

"No," Blakc answered; and could not help adding, "Never expect to be."

Prethro laughed.

"Oh, you will, all right! Use t' think I'd never be one myself, after that 'xperience with th' short-horn. It's a queer thing. A feiler thinks he'll never git married, an' about the next evenin' he's standin' up before a parson. I dunno 'z I kin 'xplain it; mebbby nobody kin. But you're tuck with the disease sudden, 'n' there's only one cure — th' woman 'n' a preacher. When th' right one comes waltzin' along, why there ain't any more help fer you."

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"Yes, I suppose that's so; when the right one comes along!"

Jackson Blake did not enjoy talking on this subject, but Prethro was not done with his apology. He had to justify himself before this stranger for walking and letting an Indian woman ride. If she had been a white woman no explanation would have been required. Both understood that full well.

"We was hitched reg'lar," he confessed. "Got a sky pilot frum Vinita—a white man, 'n' the mattermonial cinches was tightened ac-cordin' t' Hoyle. She was too good a woman f'r a man t' think of anything else where she was concerned. And of course there was ol' Powder Face! He had mighty good idees on th' subject. So it was done right an' proper."

Blake signified his approval in a manner that was entirely satisfactory.

"Not that I was wantin' any head rights!" Prethro urged. "A lot o' loafers ties up with Injun women jes' to get head rights in th' tribe, so' they kin set back an' divvy on th' annuity 'n' do more loasin'. She was likely, I thought, 'n' she suited me; an' I married her, not thinkin' of head rights an' not carin' a cuss f'r anybody. I jes' married her."

"And because she is your wife and the mother of your child, you think, being a white man, you should let her ride and you walk. I think so too."

Prethro smiled, pleased to see that this man understood, appreciated, and approved his point and his action.

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"Yes, that's why," he assented. "When we started out on this trip we had two ponies, one f'r her 'n' one f'r me; but one of 'em got bit by a rattler in th' night an' was so bad in th' mornin' that we had t' leave him 'r shoot him. We could n't wait t' see if he 'd git well, so I shot him. Sense then I've been doin' th' walkin' act. 'Grees with me, though! We must 've covered nigh forty miles yisterday, 'n' if ever'thing goes well we 'll be on the banks of th' Arkansas by t'-night. That's good travellin' with only one broncho f'r three—I 'm countin' in th' baby, ye see! Yes, I reckon —" he glanced round, and at the sky line, over which the sun was mounting, "we 'll be well on towards th' borders o' God's country by th' time dark ketches us."

They were making good time, all things considered. Hypocrite was moving his nimble legs almost at a jog trot, and Blake's cayuse was doing the same. Yet the man on the ground swung on with wide, easy stride. The exertion did not flush his face nor make him breathless. Blake was not surprised. He was a good walker himself, though few cowboys are, and he had seen men, particularly Indians, who dropping into a swinging lope could keep it up for hours, or all day, as if they were of kin with the untiring, deep-lunged cow ponies.

After crossing the creek with its half-dry water holes, which Prethro had mentioned, they pressed on toward the blue, heat-like haze which retreated steadily before them.

It was there through the hours of the afternoon until evening drew on — a blue sea, where

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bands of antelopes appeared and disappeared, as if they were schools of fishes appearing and sinking again into turquoise deeps.

Out of this blue floated a band of mustangs, and faded away like the antelopes. A little later a single animal, evidently a member of the band but separated from it in some way, came into view over a rise. He headed at first toward the little cavalcade, but perceived his mistake, quickened his speed as if startled, and swinging in a wide half-circle round the slow-moving travellers, disappeared finally in a dead run. He was mottled beautifully — a "paint," in the vernacular of the plains. On a ground of rich reddish yellow patches of milky white were spread.

"Be worth sompin' t' sell to a circus," Prethro commented; then launched into the story of the famous "white pacer of the plains," which all good plainsmen believe to have been the most wonderful steed that ever trampled grass.

His feet were as swift as those of Mercury, and when his milk-white form, beautiful as a dream or a poet's fancy, flashed across the grassy seas it was like the rush of a gull's wing. Many cowboys, cattlemen, frontiersmen, soldiers, had coveted the wonderful "white pacer," but coveted in vain. He had been chased, he had been hunted; noted rifle shots had tried to "crease" him — bring him down with a rifle ball in the neck, that should stun but not kill; snares had been laid for him innumerable. He was the leader of a handsome herd. Members of the herd fell into the hands of the covetous hunters, but never the beautiful, milk-white stallion. Like

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a dream he haunted his native plains, as alluring as the mirage, and like a dream he passed away.

"Some men holds that th' critter never died!" said Prethro, with grim humor.

The miragy blue, into which the antelope bands and the wild mustangs had vanished, disappeared finally. It did not go down nor go up, for it had nothing of the characteristics of a mist or a fog; it simply became tenuous, revealing at first clumps of sage and nodding thistle-heads, then it was gone; and before the eyes of the riders and the striding, deep-lunged man appeared a range of tousled sand-hills; dips and depressions, long undulations and tiny summits, were revealed, as when the up-rolled curtain discloses a theatre landscape.

Prethro stopped, lifted his nose like a hound scenting for game, and swept the circle of the horizon with his mild blue eyes. There was the band of mustangs, and here and there antelopes could be seen grazing. Some straggling bunches of cattle were visible, but no sign of human life. The sand-hills seemed near, so clearly did they stand out against the now wondrously azure background of the northern sky; yet Jackson Blake, viewing them with the eye of experience, knew they were miles distant. Over them the sunlight flooded like white fire.

The squaw was pushing Hypocrite straight on and did not look back. Blake drew in his painted cayuse, which stood flicking its twisted ear in irritation at the flies.

"Fine country!" he said.

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"Nothin' like it — 'ceptin' all th' rest that's jest like it. When the Lord was makin' land He laid out t' do a right smart job out this yere way. I inj'y it — this kind of a country; plenty breathin' room, plenty growin' room, plenty sleepin' room. Says I t' myself many a time, 'Jim Prethro, what if 't 'd been your awful lot t' have your picket pin stuck down in a city?' 'N' when I think that I'm never thankful enough that I'm Western-born."

A small, slim creature flashed from some hiding place and ran with sliding motion toward a hole in the ground. One of Prethro's revolvers leaped out, a sharp report bit into the still air, and the slim creature fell, its lithe body perforated.

The cayuse leaped at the unexpected explosion.

"Too bad t' shoot anything in sich a country!" said Prethro, as if he felt he ought to beg somebody's pardon. "'Phoby cat!"

He stepped forward and kicked it energetically. Blake looked at the slain animal — a species of weasel — then lifted his gray eyes curiously to the saw-man. He was not surprised at the antipathy shown; it is orthodoxy for the plainsman of the Southwest to hate the "hydrophobia cat" as if it were a rattlesnake or the devil. He believes that its bite, even its scratch will bring rabies, and that the victim will die lingeringly and horribly.

"Do you often do shooting like that?" Blake asked.

"Do I what?"

Prethro gave a last vicious stamp at the body

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of the animal, much as if he were crushing the head of some deadly serpent, and looked up.

"Often do shooting like that?"

The mild blue eyes smiled.

"Only when it's needed."

They passed on, Prthro slipping a cartridge into the empty chamber of the cylinder of his revolver.

"Too durn bad that a country like this yere" — he waved his hand comprehensively as he dropped the reloaded revolver into its place — "country 'z handsome 'z a piccher 'r a purty woman should have t' have th' smell o' blood on it, even if 'tain't no more'n th' blood of a cussed 'phoby cat. Don't it strike you that way, now? See this land layin' out yere like the Garden o' Eden 'fore man 'n' th' snakes come into it; smilin' at the sky jes' like my baby does — laughin', ye may say, — with th' weeds 'n' thistles springin' in th' wind, 'n' that wind like nothin' else you kin think of; birds a-singin' — jes' another Eden! 'N' you can't go a yard 'thout steppin' on a cactus that's layin' f'r ye with its stingin' spikes; ye can't go a hunderd yards 'thout routin' out a pizen rattler, 'r more 'n a mile 'r so 'thout kickin' out a 'phoby cat, 'r somepin' like it.

"Of course you've got t' kill 'em — 'phoby cats 'n' rattlers 'n' sich, 'r they'll kill you 'r your animals. But ain't it queer? I dunno 'bout that story of th' snake in the garden — some says 't ain't so, Lindgrin, f'r inst'nce, though he don't count, fer he's a liar! but seems t' me that God A'mighty," he said it reverently,

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"could 'a' left out th' mean things, which if they was left out there would n't been any bloodshed 'n' would n't been any trouble. Th' bloodshed 'n' th' trouble makes me think th' garden story is true, 'n' 't th' snake was there. Anyway, th' snake's been mighty busy sense 'mongst th' human fambly!"

He pushed his hat back from his eyes.

"I'm a-believin' in God," he continued softly. "Things air more curiouser 'n you kin think in this world, 'n' mighty hard t' 'xplain; still I'm believin' in Him. I ain't any professor, 'r what you'd call ejicated ner anything; but it jes' seems t' me that it's easier t' believe in Him than not to, an' more comfortin'."

Jackson Blake understood as before. It was so easy for him to understand this man; for had he not himself, lying under the stars or riding lonely across the vast expanses, pondered on these self-same riddles? Little wonder that they puzzled Jim Prethro; they have puzzled much wiser men.

An hour later, after long and diverting talks on various matters, Prethro broke in, almost like an interruption, showing that the subject had been in his mind all the while:

"If there's anything in this Injun belief that, when a man pulls up his picket pin 'n' leaves th' range yere f'r good an' all, he comes back, if he ever comes back, as an animal, 'r mebbly a serpent, 'r mebbly a bird, there are cert'in men shore spotted f'r th' snake and the 'phoby cat existence, 'cause they would n't be fitted f'r anything else. Snakes an' 'phoby cats air shore th' totems, 'r ought t' be, of them kind of men!"

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As the hills were drawn nearer by the steady advance, Prethro became less sombre and philosophic. He began to laugh and joke, brightening as if a weight were being taken off his heart. Near those sand-hills was the Arkansas River, and there, northward, was — "God's country."

He began to talk of some cattle seen grazing a mile or so away.

"Out o' God's country, I reckon, er frum over th' river," he said, hilariously. "No trouble f'r 'em t' cross that ol' river at this season. Funny river, that is! 'J ever see it further down?"

"Yes, at Little Rock. It was a big river there, floating steamboats. That was a good while ago, but I remember how fine I thought the river looked that day."

"Then you've been in Arkansaw?"

"At Little Rock — and some other places."

"Up in these parts that river is playin' gopher 'bout half th' year, 'r mebbly more. One time you come along 'n' you see it, 'n' th' next time you come along it's dug a hole in th' ground and hid itself. Off there 'n' further up there air seasons when I don't reckon it'd give draught to a plank board loaded with a straw; 'n' ag'in there air spells when it's a reg'lar sea, big enough to float Noah's ark, 'r that powerful big steamship that Lindgrin says he sailed in when he come over frum Germany."

There was a time of silence while the little party pressed on toward the hills looming now not far away. The sun was descending the western sky, a bright white disk of glowing heat.

A wide pass in the hills appeared, toward which

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the squaw turned. The soil was becoming sandy. Here and there, caught up by counter-currents of heated air, dancing sand spirals waltzed out over the plains, tornadoes in miniature. Prethro began to talk again with jovial hilarity.

Suddenly the squaw stopped, looking at the pass. There just before them a group of horse-men had appeared as if out of the ground. Over Prethro's face passed a curious expression which flitted away and was gone instantly. The mild blue eyes contracted and glittered.

"Th' 'phoby cat!" he said, speaking without apparent emotion. "'N' it's comin' t' bite!"

CHAPTER XII

THE 'PHOBY CAT BITES

THE mild blue eyes, a trifle wide-open now, searched the advancing party with hawk-like vision. The squaw had pulled Hypocrite round and was riding back at a walk toward her husband. Jackson Blake, much perplexed, dropped a hand to his heavy revolver and moved to swing out of his saddle.

"Blake," said Prethro, still calmly, with a sidelong glance at him, "I reckon 't you ain't got any call t' mix into this thing. I allow I know who them fellers air, 'n' they ain't meanin' no hurt to you; it's me they're after. So if you'll jes' cut on you'll be safe enough I cal'late."

Jackson Blake swung to the ground.

"Your wife!" he said.

"My wife'll haf to take her chances along with me. I'd feel better, though," he added slowly, "if she 'n' th' baby was some'eres else jes' about now. But you ain't any p'tic'lar call t' run resks that you don't haf to."

"I'll stay with you," said Blake with stern firmness, though even yet he did not know why this man should be afraid of those horsemen who, coming on like the wind, were beginning now to open their ranks.

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The squaw gave Blake a look out of her black eyes that was as nearly a look of gratitude as he had ever seen in the usually stolid face of an Indian woman. He had only time to notice this look and the fear which her face but half displayed when Prethro spoke again, his words a bit quicker but otherwise calm.

"Blake, if you insist on mixin' up in this yere stampede, which you ain't no call to, I'll haf to play fair with you. Them devils air meanin' t' kill me, 'n' I reckon Anita likewise."

"What do you take me for?" Blake asked, in a tone he had not before used. "You're my friend, aren't you? And if those men mean mischief that's just the reason why I ought to stand by you."

Prethro looked keenly at the approaching horsemen who were now near enough to be seen plainly.

"One o' them men is th' devil that the Injuns call Stone Face — his sho.c enough name is Kit Kennedy. Two of his men come t' my cabin three weeks ago, while I was n't t' home, an' insulted 'n' abused my wife in a way that I can't tell you, jes' because she's Injun. If 't 'd been your wife what 'd you 'a' done? Jes' what I done, when I got back an' found her layin' on th' floor half dead, with th' baby pitched into a corner, half dead too. 'Z soon as I had her an' th' baby comfortable I hitched my revolvers round my waist, took my rifle, an' went after th' devils that had done the thing. There was two of 'em, 'z I said. Well, there ain't neither of th' two able t' ride a horse now; one went t' King-

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dom Come, with my bullet through his heart, 'n' th' other was so near dead that I thought he was dead when I left him, though he crawled away afterwards, alive enough to tell th' band what I'd done.

"I knowed there was n't any safety fer me 'r th' woman there after that, 'n' when I heard th' devil had got away an' told, I pulled my freight frum there mighty sudden, takin' my wife an' the baby. I thought if Stone Face 'r any of his men was chasin' me I had give 'em th' slip, but I see I did n't. So there 'tis; there'll be lead flyin' in about a minute, an' if you 're thinkin' of your health any it's time fer you to emigrate. It's my call t' stand by th' woman an' th' baby, an' I'll stand by 'em 'z long as there's a ca'tridge left an' I kin pull trigger."

"And I'll stand by you!" said Blake, his blood beginning to bound.

"Pardner," said Prethro, his voice trembling slightly, "you 're the clean, white article!"

He could not have said more; it was the limit of a plainsman's praise.

He was helping Anita to the ground and did not look at Blake. The horsemen spreading out formed now a big crescent.

Whang — wr-rr-r-r-r!

A bullet from a Winchester sang and whirred over the short grass and threw up a shower of sand beneath the belly of Hypocrite. The horseman on the extreme right had opened the ball by shooting at the squaw-man's horse. The range was too great, and the deadly missile though well aimed had dropped low in its long flight.

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The line of horsemen swung toward the right, separating widely to form a moving cordon of death.

The squaw crouched to the ground without a word, clasping her baby to her bosom. Prethro passed her one of the revolvers and threw her a box of cartridges from the saddle pouch. He was pulling Hypocrite down.

Then Blake began to kick at the legs of his cayuse, commanding it to lie down, while the horsemen swung on, completing the deadly circle.

Both horses were soon on the ground, lying close together. Between them the squaw-man, his wife and baby, and Jackson Blake crouched. With one hand Blake held the bridle of his cayuse and with the other cocked his revolver. His cartridge belt was pulled round so that he could get at its contents without shifting his position.

"Take that, you hounds of hell!" said Prethro, as he poked the blue-nosed, octagonal barrel of his Winchester over the back of Hypocrite and pulled the trigger.

The rifle, with an explosion that sounded dull and flat out there under the wide sky, spouted its smoke and lead. There were few such shots in the West as Jim Prethro. Though the distance was great and the horses moving like the wind, one of the horsemen reeled, but caught his horse's mane and so held his saddle.

The squaw fired at the same instant, and Blake's revolver popped as if it were the echo. Neither did any execution. The horsemen riding swiftly round the trapped party, in the Indian fashion, were still too far away to be touched by

anything which had not the reaching force of a long-range rifle.

Bang — whr-r-r — bang — bang — bang — pop, pop, pop! their weapons sounded.

It was the music of death, — rifles and revolvers opening up all round that horrid circle, their contents whirring and threshing through the grass like jumping locusts. Hypocrite gave a trembling start, and blood spewed from a bullet wound high up in his shoulder.

"Steady!" said Prethro, and again his rifle cracked flat and deadly.

A horse fell as if struck by lightning. The cowboy figure on its back seemed to dive forward into the grass. A little later his rifle barked from behind the dead horse. His horse had fallen, but its body would serve as a rampart from which to hurl projectiles.

Blake and the Indian woman were firing without effect. Reaching for more cartridges, Blake looked at Prethro. The squaw-man's blue eyes seemed to blaze; they were opened a trifle more than usual, but the pupils had contracted to pin-points. His wide hat was pushed back from his forehead; yet except for that blazing fire of the eyes and the set look of his face he did not appear to be excited.

The horsemen were contracting their circle. Strung out many yards apart, they had thrown their bodies to the opposite sides of their horses to escape that deadly fire, and were now for the most part quite invisible, only a foot, a head, or an arm sticking up here and there. One might have been justified in thinking those horses were rider-

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less wild mustangs circling in that way but for the fact that from under their necks and bellies and from over their backs flame and smoke spouted and bullets leaped like storm-driven hailstones.

The fight was on, and Jackson Blake felt the blood pumping hot in the distended veins of his neck. His heavy brows had contracted, his brown-whiskered face was working, the pupils of his gray eyes were narrowing wrathfully. A great and savage rage was seizing him. He did not feel fear, in fact was not thinking of himself. But this was so hellish and dastardly, this attack on the lonely squaw-man and his Indian wife. It had come like a bolt out of the azure; one minute Prethro was laughing and telling stories, philosophizing and speculating on the mysteries of this strange and mysterious world; the next he was fighting for his life and the lives of his wife and baby, fighting against men more heartless than red savages, more malignant than fiends. One minute the blue sky was over these new friends of Jackson Blake—a blue sky in which meadow larks sang and through which the sweet wind whispered, and the next that matchless azure was stained with powder smoke and the music of the zephyr was drowned in this storm of battle.

A great and sublime hatred of these men swelled in the soul of Jackson Blake, and working his revolver again and again he aimed it at the flying figures as the marksman shoots at the flying objects in the target gallery. Twice he hit a horse, though the horse did not fall, and a hoarse cry of gratification gurgled in his throat. The

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next bullet sent a man sprawling, badly wounded, as he could tell.

His smoking rage began to cool at the sight. A horrid memory came to terrify him. A boy had killed a man back in Arkansas in the old days. He had bathed in many waters since then, but in none that could wash away that bloody stain. In all his searchings he had found no river of Lethe that could make him forget. No, he said to himself fiercely, he did not want to kill another man, though if ever men deserved to be killed surely these were the most deserving.

Jim Prethro, swearing furiously, was firing with deadly accuracy. Four horses of the dozen out there were down, all of them dropped by the squaw-man. Two men lay dead in the grass, and the squaw-man had done that. The woman was shooting with the revolver, but without execution so far as could be told. Hypocrite and the cayuse had been struck, though neither seriously. Thus far none of the human targets at whom the ruffians were firing had been touched.

But now the squaw-man, cursing slowly, held up a shattered arm from which the blood dripped. He looked at it fiercely, then dropping it at his side as quite useless went on firing.

Crack-crack — crack — crack — pop, pop, pop, pop! and the bullets came whirring through the air and churning in the grass.

The firing of the horsemen increased to a rattling fusillade, and still they screened themselves as well as they could, though the contracting circle brought them nearer to the rifle of the squaw-man and the revolvers of his companions.

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Hypocrite was hit again, then again, and trying to leap up his bridle was caught by the squaw, who held him down.

At almost the same instant the cayuse was struck. It was so stinging a shot through the fleshy part of the hip that he leaped to his feet in spite of Blake's efforts to keep him down. He was wildly frantic, and the next moment, the strong bridle rein broken short off in the struggle, he tore loose and galloped away.

Blake uttered a groan. He felt like a criminal, for the escape of the cayuse broke the living rampart. The next moment the rifles out on the plains cracking and sputtering again, the bullets threshed into the midst of the crouching and kneeling party beating the grass like a gust of wind-swept rain.

The squaw uttered a cry. She had been hit. Blake saw her half leap to her feet, then drop down, the baby sliding out of her arms. Its wail rose with piercing fervor. Prethro stared at his squaw and at the screaming baby with whitening face, then his eyes blazing still more fiercely bright, he lifted the blue rifle barrel above the back of his trembling broncho and fired again, his lips moving in a curse.

The next moment a rifle ball tore through his shoulder. The terrible impact lifted and hurled him backward; he cursed deeply, and crawling to the horse he fired again and again, as one who is desperately afraid that life will ebb before he can strike the fatal blow to lay low his foe.

The fall of the squaw and the wailing cry of the baby made Jackson Blake forget the man

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slain by the boy in the Arkansas woods ; made him forget all of the past and centre his thoughts on the vital present. It re-aroused the smoking rage in his heart, and he fired, too, like Prethro, with aim as merciless and deadly as he could make it. Horses and men fell, but he did not know whether they were stricken down by his bullets or by the bullets of that marvellous rifleman, Jim Prethro.

The broncho was dead. Bullets had struck against it with horrible thumpings, like drumsticks pounding against leather ; and now, head sunk forward and nose in the grass, it was no longer flinching or struggling. The squaw lay where she had fallen ; the baby wailed piteously.

Then — Blake had known it would come at last — a red-hot cinder, crushing bone and sinew, bored through his shoulder. At the same moment he discovered that his cartridges were gone. His brain reeled bloodily, he coughed, and felt that he was fainting. In the grass, as if they were hissing serpents, he heard the rustling of the deadly leaden missiles.

He heard Prethro's rifle crack, heard the squawman give a curse of hate, mingling it with a triumphant yell, and looking up he saw a man pitch over from the farther side of his horse and fall stiffly to the ground.

"To hell wi' you ! There you go, damn you, t' th' lowest pit ! An' may all th' devils poke you for ever an' ever !"

It was like a prayer, that imprecation.

Faintness was seizing Jackson Blake ; he felt that his end was near. He felt, too, that he

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was in a manner responsible for the terrible things that had happened because he let the cayuse escape.

He summoned all his strength and rolling over caught the crying baby in his arms, hugging it to his breast; then rolled back toward the squaw-man, thus putting his broad back as a shelter between the baby and those awful hissing bullets.

"The end has come, little one," he whispered painfully, as he hugged the brown baby to his bosom and so sought to still its cries. "The end has come—for me; but I'll protect you all I can. Life is still ahead of you, or ought to be; and life is worth something to you, even if you are painted with the Red Blood."

The baby stopped its wailing, drawn thus into his warm bosom. To hold it thus gave him a sweet peace. He looked at the sky. It appeared to be tinged with blood. The sun was sinking and gave the few clouds overhead that crimson glow. It seemed impossible that time had fled so fast; why, the fight began but a moment ago! Yet already the sun was going down with red anger in its face as it looked on that bloody scene.

Again he heard a wild triumphant yell from the cracking lips of Jim Prethro and knew that another murderous desperado had fallen stiff from his saddle. It gave him savage joy to hear that wild yell.

He saw the glow fading out of the sky. He thought it might be Death coming instead of darkness. Prethro yelled once more in a differ-

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ent key, and with painful vision Blake saw that the desperadoes who were left were flying across the plains apparently pursued by other wild riders.

When he aroused again the baby was gone from his arms. He had the feeling that he had awakened from a dream on a bed of grass that was drenched in dew. Looking up he saw the squaw wavering before him in the faint light. Prethro lay on the ground by the broncho, with arms outstretched, motionless. The baby was surely dead in the squaw's arms; and having scooped a shallow grave for it she was preparing to lay it there beneath the sand, while strange, savage, crooning words, such as he had heard at Indian funerals, fell from her lips.

Once more Blake opened his eyes and looked, and a tiny mound showed, and on the mound the squaw was lying, face downward, as if she had fallen there.

Nowhere now was there hoof beat or sound of human voice. He listened for something, he scarcely knew what; he looked for something, straight up into the sky. Then hearing and vision failed finally.

The 'phoby cat had delivered its deadly bite; bullets no longer whirled and slatted, rifles no longer flamed or sang. The stillness of death had come instead.

CHAPTER XIII

IN PROOF OF AN OLD ADAGE

WHEN Jackson Blake came again to a certain and unconfused knowledge that he was still in the world of living men, he was swathed like a mummy and lying on a white cot in a hospital ward.

As he tried to lift himself and look about, he became aware that another cot was in that ward containing another man, and that the man was Jim Prethro. The squaw-man was sitting up, propped with pillows, one arm in a sling. His face, a strange pallor showing under its tan, was turned inquiringly toward Blake. A flush of pleasure came into it when he saw that Blake was awake and could move and was looking at him.

"Hello, ol' man!" he said, in a tone which he meant to be comforting and cheery. "You're comin' round!"

"Yes, thanks."

Blake was very weary and he wanted to sleep. He shook off the feeling. The place had the odor of a drug store. He noticed that, for one thing.

"Why don't they open a window?" he asked, pettishly.

"One open right over there," said Prethro, trying to smile, a thing which seemed to pain him. His head was bound round with a clean

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white cloth. "You'll do," he added, with another attempt at a smile. "Whenever a man gits t' kickin' about things he's giner'ly O. K., I've noticed."

"Where are we?" Blake asked, still feeling pettish, like a sick child.

"Hospital — Wichita, State o' Kansas."

An unhealed wound in Prethro's head hurt when he moved his jaws, and he was consequently sparing of words.

"How'd we get here?"

"Train from Arkansas City — after th' fight! You reck'lect th' fight?"

Blake remembered the fight; he had remembered that even in his delirium.

Still looking at Prethro, he saw a tear glistening against the pallid tan of the cheek.

"Killed Anita," said Prethro, "an' th' baby." His face grew stern, with a sort of savage joy. "But I put Stone Face out o' bizness, you bet! Shot 'im out of his saddle. He's fryin' in hell now, likely. If he ain't he'd ought t' be. An' a good many of his band went with him."

"It was a terrible fight!" said Blake, sickening at thought of it.

Several days later when Jackson Blake was much better, Prethro pulled a newspaper from under his pillow and tossed it over to him. It was a copy of the *Wichita Clarion*. There in staring headlines were the names of James Prethro and Jackson Blake, who were heralded to the world as the heroes of one of the most terrible battles against desperadoes that had ever taken place on the soil of the Indian Territory.

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Though so weak that his fingers shook as he held it up, Blake read with avidity, finding himself and Prethro praised in every other sentence. The whole of the fight was pictured there; for what the industrious reporter had not been able to glean from those who knew he had invented with lively imagination. It was a very good account, too. Blake read it as if he were not portrayed as one of the participants — read every word.

Prethro began to talk about what the paper said, as Blake finished and let it fall on his breast.

"The gang had wrecked an' robbed a Fort Scott and Wichita 'xpress," he commented, "an' was cuttin' f'r th' Nation, with a sheriff's posse hot after 'em. One thing th' paper don't tell — did n't know, I reckon, though it's come t' me how th' thing was. Ol' Stone Face was up yere with his main crowd on that bizness, while some o' the gang that was behind was follerin' me. They met, them two parties, 'n' then Stone Face thought he 'd wipe me out 'fore he went on south. He made out who I was with a field-glass frum th' sand-hills; I know that, 'cause they found th' glass on his saddle. Th' rattlesnake was countin' out more eggs than he could hatch when he made th' tackle; he shore cinched on more 'n he could carry. He stopped there in th' pass f'r that little wipin'-out bizness, thinkin' it would be an easy job, I reckon; an' so give time f'r th' sheriff's men t' come onto him. What we did n't send t' Kingdom Come th' posse did."

A fierce jubilation gleamed in his face, and again Blake noticed a blazing of the blue eyes.

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"We was found there by th' posse, after th' fight an' th' chase was over, 'n' was brought on yere, — all but Anita an' th' baby."

His voice choked and he stopped.

"There was a reward, I see," he continued, a little later. "Five thousan' dollars f'r Stone Face, dead 'r alive. They got him — dead!"

He looked at Blake with steady gaze.

"'N' that reward is your'n an' mine, th' paper says, an' others have sense told me. If we'd been in any condition f'r Fourth o' July fireworks there'd been a brass band 'n' other things paradin' round up yere f'r us, they say, 'count of th' killin' of Stone Face!"

Jackson Blake made no comment. He had seen the statements of the paper concerning the reward offered for the notorious bandit; but he did not intend to accept a cent of it. It was the price of blood. If he had shed blood in that fight it was because he could do nothing else. He would have no pay for it. He had no love for bloodshed — he hated it, and hated the thought that it should command the joyous acclaim of men and be thought worthy of a money recompense. If it were a million dollars, instead of five thousand, and the whole were offered to him, he would have none of it.

Prethro had been out and about town a week and reported that he had secured a boarding place where he was "hanging up" by the time Jackson Blake was able to leave the hospital. One day he came into the convalescents' ward, where Blake lay wondering if he could not get out of the place now himself, and tossed a great roll

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of money into the reclining chair which Blake occupied.

"Two thousan' five hunderd dollars," he said, rolling out the figures slowly, as though the taste of the words was so sweet that he wanted to retain them in his mouth as long as he could. "Your share of that head money. Th' fellers who had th' payin' of it seemed t' figger out that I was the glass-eyed galoot that knocked th' spots out o' Stone Face with my little shooter, 'n' so they paid it over t' me; but half of it's your'n jes' th' same."

Blake flushed as he pushed the money away from him.

"I don't want it," he said, imperiously.

Prethro stared at him, with dropping jaw.

"Don't want it!" he yelled. "Well, your head is shore hurtin' you yit, hain't it?"

"My head is all right, — good as ever, but I don't want it."

"Well, if that don't — " he dropped into a chair. "If that don't flabbergast my everlastin' lights 'n' livers nothin' ever did! What's the reason you don't want it?"

Jackson Blake had no desire to hurt this man, as he saw he was likely to do; at the same time he was resolved that he would not accept this blood money.

"Prethro," he said; in an argumentative tone, "I don't want any of that, it's yours. You killed Stone Face!" He was glad he could say that and believe it. "So the money is yours, every cent, and I refuse to take any of it."

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Prethro drew the money toward him with a sweep of one hand, — the other still hung bandaged in a sling, — while his face flushed deeply.

"Blake, you're a fool!" he exclaimed; then wadded the bills together and tucked them loosely into his coat pocket.

Blake laughed. He would not quarrel with Prethro. He thought too highly of him and his friendship for that.

"That's all right," he agreed; "call me anything you like. What are you going to do with that money?"

"Spend it. What else is money for?"

He studied his friend's face.

"Say," he urged, "this yere don't seem right! Won't you take half this money, jes' t' please me, — 'r take some of it?"

Blake wanted to please him; he knew, too, that a big bill for hospital and medical services awaited payment at his hands.

"Tell you what I will do," he said, having regard for the continuity of the hard-earned money wadded in his cowhide belt, "if you want to pay the hospital and medical bills out of that you may; but that's as far as I'll go."

Prethro grinned.

"Done!" he said. "I'll pay them things right off. But Blake," and the grin widened, "you're funny, — powerful funny! You won't eat th' devil but you'll drink his broth."

Blake did not answer. The shot had gone home. Still, he could not readily recall his offer to let Prethro pay the hospital and medical fees.

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"Prethro," he said, passing this matter by without comment, "money is n't to spend until you're in need of something; then it's all right to spend it. Take my advice now and go to some good bank and place that on deposit."

"Shore," Prethro agreed; "I'll do it after payin' them bills."

The next day he came to Blake.

"I'm wantin' a hunderd dollars of that money," he urged. "How 'm I goin' t' git it?"

"What do you want it for?"

"I jes' want it — you ain't my gardeen!"

Blake was now ready to leave the hospital.

"I'll go down to that bank with you."

So he went down, seeing that nothing else would do, and at the bank he showed Prethro how to make out and sign a check for the sum he required. Prethro stuffed the money into his pocket, and Blake went on with him to the hotel which he had chosen as a temporary abiding place.

When Prethro came in that night he was intoxicated.

"Havin' a time wi' th' boys," he apologized with a hiccough. "Thinkin' too much about Anita an' the baby, 'n' I plum had to!"

When he came in the next night he was even more intoxicated. Blake showed irritation.

"'S all right, ol' man!" Prethro expostulated. "'S all right! I'm jes' spendin' your money fer you — you would n't! See?"

He lurched heavily, tipped his chair sideways, and thrusting his good hand into his trousers pulled out a wad of crumpled bills and flung it

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on the table. Blake saw that it represented at least five hundred dollars.

"That check bizness is great," Prethro hic-coughed, his hand straying into another pocket.

Out came another crumpled wad. His pockets were bulging with money, wadded, twisted, rolled, torn; Blake could not tell how many hundreds of dollars Prethro heaped up in a dishevelled and tattered pile on the little table. The table overflowed and bills dropped like crushed green leaves on the floor.

"How much did you draw out?" Blake demanded sharply.

"Dunno. Went there—t' that bank, six times; tol' th' man I wanted mum-money; writ checks, 'n' he give it t' me. Fines' man I ever see—jes' shovelled money at me through that little winder ever' time I asked."

"Go ahead," said Blake, in despair; "spend it and spend it quick, before you do something worse."

Prethro stared at him with half-vacant eyes.

"Goin' t' put it in th' bank ag'in t'-morrow," he pleaded in extenuation, "so's I can draw it out ag'in. Lots o' fun, drawin' it out—havin' that gen'l'man shoveliin' it to you, a-smilin' 'z if he was yer bootblack. Goin' to put it all in th' bank t'-morrow (hic) 'n' draw it out ag'in. Goin' t' do that ever' day."

Then he reeled off to bed, dropping greenbacks as he went.

Blake did not see him in the morning, for Prethro was out early; but shortly after dinner, as he returned from a little walk through the

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streets, he found half a dozen men staggering up to his room bearing bags and bundles.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Bird cage," said one of the men, depositing it, wrapped in paper, on a chair. "Canary in it."

Another opened a box and revealed a cat striped like a zebra. The room was already filled with things and the tramp of men on the stairs told that more were coming. On the bed lay an accordion and a highly ornamented saddle with wonderful figures of wild riders stamped in the leather. An open cardboard box showed a dozen cowboy hats. In a corner was a high-priced Winchester, a shot-gun, a horse-hair rope, and a heap of silver-mounted spurs. Another corner held a stack of collapsible drinking-cups — Prethro had admired the one Blake owned — together with a checker-board richly inlaid with costly woods, a highly colored photograph of an Indian woman and child that bore a faint resemblance to Anita and the baby, and a writing-desk of ebony, which bore a card sprawled in Prethro's handwriting, testifying that this was a present for "Jaxon Blake, the whitest man on this planit."

Blake would have torn off more wrappings and looked further, but he heard a well-known voice calling to him from the street below the window. Opening the window to look out he saw, first, a shiny rosewood piano which some workmen were roping to hoist to the window; then in the middle of the street, standing up and waving his big hat, the figure of Prethro reeling drunkenly in a bright new farm wagon to which a handsome

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pair of mules was attached. The wagon had the latest style of brake, sideboards on, and a high spring seat, behind which, in the body of the wagon, Prethro was standing. As for the mules they fairly glittered in spangled and silver-mounted harness, with dyed horse-tail ornaments dangling like crazy whisk brooms in front of their forelegs. The whole was a sight to drive Blake to despair.

"Come down, you son of a Siwash," Prethro was bellowing, "an' lemme give you a ride!"

Blake closed the window with a bang of disgust.

"Of all the fools!" he exclaimed.

He turned to the delivery men who were filling the room with their queer assortment.

"Take these things back!" he commanded. "Take them all back. The fellow who bought them is an irresponsible, drunken idiot. If you'll look, you'll see him out in the street now, conducting himself like a lunatic."

The men looked with sickly grins. They had previous knowledge of Prethro's condition. But he had bought the goods, had paid for them with undeniably good money, and as the money was his to do with as he pleased, they had no notion of conveying the things back to the stores. They said as much, adding that this was a matter for the owners of the stores, of which they were only employes.

Blake went out into the street to remonstrate with Prethro, but when he arrived at the point where he had seen the mules and wagon they were gone.

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It was late that night when Prethro came in, and he was very drunk. His pockets were depleted, and he was in a battered and used-up condition. Blake had tried, in some cases effectively, to have the purchases returned; and he had waited for Prethro, intending to remonstrate with him. Now he saw that, in the man's condition, whatever he might say would be words thrown away. At the same time, he could not keep from unloading on Prethro's head a few of the many things that had been boiling in him all the afternoon.

Prethro sat in the big chair he loved, and wept drunkenly, as Blake upbraided him.

"It's all ri', Bla-Blake!" he stuttered thickly. "All ri'! I was doin' that fer you! Doin' it fer you! See?"

He had placed the picture of the Indian woman and child on the mantel. Now he looked at it, and his drunken grief flowed more copiously.

"I was goin' t' quit th' cow-punchin' bizness in-tirely. Anita wanted me to, 'n' I was goin' to. Been plannin' it all, — all out Blake, han'some. I reckoned t' you 'n' me 'd try farmin', f'r a change; I was goin' t' buy a farm 'n' a house, 'n' put these things into it. Be homelike, ye know, with Anita 'n' the baby settin' on th' chimbley-piece, 'n' a pianner tinklin', 'n' a 'cordion goin', 'n' a canary singin', 'n' — But," he swayed drunkenly, wiping away the tears with his soiled handkerchief, "if you don't (hic) 'preciate it, w'y —"

"I appreciate your kindly intentions," said

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Blake, "but I can't say that I admire your sense. How much money have you left?"

Prethro felt with clumsy fingers in his pockets. After a long search he drew out some crumpled bills.

"There she is!"

He threw them on the table — a five, a two, and a one.

"Rest 's in th' bank."

"So you did leave some in the bank?"

"Yes."

"Better go and blow that in to-morrow!" Blake commented dryly.

"N-no! Not now! Was goin' t' buy th' house 'n' farm with that, t'-morrow — fer you — but —"

There was still twelve hundred dollars in the bank, as Blake found out the next day; and that Prethro might not squander the whole amount, he induced the cowboy to let him have a thousand dollars to keep for him. The two hundred remaining Prethro spent quickly enough. Out of the wreck Blake saved two hundred more, by returning the piano and some other things at heavy discounts from the purchase price, and added that to the deposit which he made. The mule team and wagon Prethro wanted to keep.

After the two hundred dollars was gone, Prethro straightened up and ceased to cry drunkenly about Anita and the baby.

CHAPTER XIV

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

WICHITA was overflowing with Oklahoma boomers.

That was one of the first things Blake discovered after he came back to the world of living men. Apparently the boomers had come from everywhere, even the ends of the earth. They had money, and they had what Prethro called "a great gift of gab." They had an organization, too, ramifying to all the cities, towns, and villages of the United States; these ramifications being arteries through which flowed a constant stream of gold and greenbacks. A great fund was being raised, to be used by officers duly elected, for the purpose of lobbying Congress to pass a bill opening Oklahoma and the Cherokee Strip to settlement as public lands.

These officers, having chosen Wichita as the place for their lever, were sure they could move the world. One of these officers, Blake learned, was Captain Payne, the "Sun Scout." Another appeared to be Kicking Bird, who, though he bore an Indian name, was a white man, and a shrewd and persevering one.

Wherever Jackson Blake went, with Prethro or without him, he encountered the ubiquitous and loud-voiced boomers. They filled the streets,

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overflowed the hotels and boarding houses, and crowded the saloons. Kansas was a prohibition State, but news of that fact had not yet made its way to Wichita.

The Sun Scout was holding nightly meetings in a great hall down town, and to that hall Jackson Blake went many evenings, accompanied by Prethro, after the latter became a man once more. There they listened to fiery speeches, in which the greatness of Oklahoma and the Cherokee Strip was told to men who gaped hungrily. These men cheered with hand-clappings and thuddings of the floor, while the "starry flag" waved in wordy grandiloquence and oratorical fireworks spouted and flamed in sparkling and epigrammatic outbursts. But no matter what was said, whether spoken well or otherwise, if it concerned the future territory of Oklahoma, or denounced Congressmen who would not hasten the passage of the bill giving the land away to settlers, it was received with screaming acclaim.

"Blake," said Prethro, as they walked back to the hotel from one of these meetings, "them fellers kin pull th' tail feathers out o' the ol' American eagle han'some, an' I like to hear 'em, but I ain't believin' that land is goin' t' be opened t' settlement very soon, fer all their yawp."

It must not be supposed that, during the long time of his convalescence and in the days that followed, Jackson Blake did not consider most seriously his present situation and give thought to the future. He could do nothing for awhile, of course, but nurse back his wasted strength.

But ever with him was the dream which he had brought from the hospitable land — a dream of a new life, in the midst of living men, where properly directed energy would course the blood with the bounding vigor of the mounting sap in the great Arkansas trees.

He was thinking of that while he listened to the boisterous oratory of the boomers; thinking of it as he read the confident editorial utterances of the *Clarion*; thinking of it as he talked of other things with Jim Prethro, or guided Prethro with friendly hand as he floundered drunkenly in the mazes of grief into which he had been thrust by the death of Anita and the baby.

He was thinking of it even more seriously and deeply than usual as he walked, one bright spring morning, through the clean streets of the little city, almost unconscious for the time of the throngs that jostled him — throngs in which farmers, cattlemen, cowboys, merchants, boomers, real estate agents, gamblers, and loafers were strangely commingled.

As he thus pushed along, shouldering his way, forgetful of the crowd, a voice startled him. It was such a familiar voice, and he seemed to have heard those very words before:

"Out where de birds sing, podner; dat suits me!"

Blake looked up quickly.

A tattered figure was issuing from the door of a police court; a figure with a shuffling, shabby swing of the body, a bleared, bearded face, a watery eye, and a reckless lightness of manner. It was Soapy Sam, the tramp burglar, who, under

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arrest for vagrancy and suspicion of general unworthiness, had flourished a soiled ten-dollar bill, when the judge fined him, and was now departing with gay steps and apparently a cheery heart.

Blake flushed as the tattered figure swung by him. His day dream came tumbling to the ground like a swallow with a broken wing. He turned aside to conceal his face, and breathed a sigh of relief when the man did not recognize him. Then he stood staring stupidly until Soapy Sam was out of sight, and turned back toward his hotel with beating heart.

Jackson Blake had made the discovery that the world is not so large, after all. He realized the ever-present possibility that at the most unexpected turn of the road it might thrust before him some familiar figure of the past. Without warning, the shining planet where he had lived in the old incarnation had neared the earth and the present life with the flash of a dropping meteor.

He was trembling with a sense of weakness and heart-sickness as he approached his hotel, and he was thinking wild things — of a flight to Australia, or the South Seas, or the jungles of Africa, anywhere to enlarge the boundaries of his world.

As he turned into the hotel and walked toward his room, a man came flying down the stairway as if shot out of a cannon. This man was dressed in solemn black, and wore a stovepipe hat of the latest pattern. The hat tumbled off and rolled and bounced ahead of him into the hall. He stooped to snatch it up, and in doing so nearly

ran against Blake, who had paused for a moment in wonder.

"Beg your pardon, sir!" said the man, with a haste which showed that to him time and words were precious.

Then he replaced the battered and dusty stovepipe on his head and fled out into the street.

Mounting the stairway, Blake caught the sound of sulphurous words issuing from the room which he occupied with Prethro.

"Hello!" he said, opening the door. "What's up?"

Prethro was standing in the middle of the room, as if he had been executing some figure in a wild war-dance. On the bed lay his revolver; his hat was on the floor.

Seeing the door fly open and Blake's head appear, he dropped rather shamefacedly into a chair. Blake pushed on into the room.

"What's up?" he asked again.

"Oh, nothin'," said Prethro, picking up his big hat, and depositing it beside the revolver on the bed.

"Was that man in here — the man I saw coming downstairs in such a hurry?"

"We'd been havin' a leetle conversation," Prethro admitted; "talkin' sort o' sourcastic."

"So I imagined. What did he want?"

"Well, you'd never guess."

"I suppose not; I sha'n't try."

"Well, you know th' fellers have been trailin' round after us out in th' streets, 'n' starin' at us in them meetin's, 'n' nudgin' each other when

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they seen us together, whisperin', 'There's the gents that socked it to ol' Stone Face!'"

Blake remembered, angrily. This sort of attention had been particularly distasteful to him.

"He was one of that kind, eh?"

"No, not edzackly! He said he was some sort of a showman — one of these hall show fellers; 'n' he come up yere t' see if he could n't git me t' go into th' show biz with him. Said I was that famous that I'd shore draw full houses. He wanted me t' do a shootin' act, at 'maginary road agents; 'n' he thought if I could induce you t' go 'long, as a sort of added attraction — seein' 't you 'n' me was in that fight together — we could play some kind of a game that he called Willyum Tell 'n' His Little Son. There was t' be a big Ben Davis apple in this piece, 'n' I was t' shoot it off'n your head, 'n' then you was t' fall into my arms, hollerin', 'Saved! saved!' 'r somepin' like that. Said he'd gimme fifty dollars a week, 'n' you fifty, 'n' he cal'lated that'd be whole slews o' money f'r th' work we'd have t' do."

He stopped, pondering.

Blake would have laughed but for that memory of Soapy Sam.

"And you kicked him out!"

"N-no!"

Prethro nursed his leg thoughtfully. He seemed not to want to discuss the affair.

"Jes' give him an evasive answer; talked sort of sourcastic."

"What was the answer?" Blake questioned, pertinaciously.

Prethro sat up, his face flushing suddenly.

"What did I reely say t' him?" he demanded. "What should I say to him? What would you 'a' said to him? I simply told 'im to go to hell, 'n' to go quick; 'n' then I whipped out my gun. 'N' he went!"

Blake was laughing now. Prethro, in a revulsion of feeling, began to laugh also.

"'Fore I come to that I let him chin awhile, jes' t' see what the fool 'd say. Finally I says t' him, 'Stranger,' I says, 'you make me feel like one o' them ol' Scripture prophets—I fergit his name!' 'Which one?' he says, smilin' like. 'Well,' I says, 'I'm feelin' like th' one that was talked to by a jackass!' That was 'fore I got mad."

"He came near running over me when he made his dive for the infernal regions, I can tell you! His eyes were actually rolling—he was wild!"

"Thought I was goin' t' do th' Willyum Tell act on him, right yere, 'n' without the apple, I reckon. He did n't go any too quick t' suit me; I was hot!"

He looked thoughtfully out of the window.

"Say, Blake," he blurted suddenly, "I'm sick of this yere bizness—plum sick of it! I ain't no daggoned two-horned rhinosceros ner silver-tipped grizzly with a chain round his neck—not yit, I ain't. 'N' this bizness of bein' stared at 'z if I was an Eyetalian's monkey settin' up on a music box is gittin' shore wearisome. I'm ready t' vamose this ranch, I am; cut out, go some'eres else, 'n' be a man ag'in, 'n' not a show-bill f'r tenderfeet t' look at."

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"I'm with you!" Blake answered, with such promptness that Prethro fairly stared.

"Done!" he cried, as if he could not believe the good news. "By jacks, we'll pull up our picket pins 'n' stray off to some other range together right away. We'll play maverick. Towns 'z big 'z this don't suit me, nohow. We'll go — le's see, where will we go? West — that's where! Out where th' air ain't so danged tainted up with coal smoke and little stinkin' cigarettes. Out where th' grass rustles under yer feet, 'n' you kin take a good long breath, 'n' kin stretch out yer arms 'thout knockin' somebody over."

He stopped, in hesitation.

"Would n't want t' go back t' th' Nation, I reckon?"

"No!" almost fiercely.

"'N' there ain't nothin' in th' yellin' of these boomers! It's a sort o' whangdoodle that don't reap any harvest o' steers 'r land, fur 'z I kin see. Congress ain't a-goin' t' open that land till it gits good 'n' ready, if ever, f'r all their howlin'. 'N' I reckon we ain't lookin' f'r land down there, anyway."

"I'm not."

"Same yere; 't would make me think all th' time of Anita 'n' th' baby. I want t' find a new range."

"Think it out," said Blake. "Where shall we go?"

They thought it out before morning, and the next day the mule team and the bright new farm

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wagon bore them over the bridge across the Arkansas River.

"Out there some'eres," said Prethro, waving his whip to indicate the direction; and he turned the team into a road that led toward the west.

CHAPTER XV

AT OLD SHAKE'S

LOST CHARLIE ROSS, seated at ease in the Santa Fé station, was playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me," when, many days after leaving Wichita, Jackson Blake and Jim Prethro drove across the railroad into Golden City as the sun went down behind the upland "flats." Lost Charlie's real name was Baker, and he was Old Shake's best cowboy; moreover, he could caper a fiddle like Ole Bull himself, so the cowboys thought.

He stopped in the middle of a bar of music as he heard the rattle of the wagon wheels, and with bow uplifted and fiddle tail tucked under his chin, asked:

"Some more of them crazy grangers comin'?"

The question was addressed to the station agent, who, standing at the window, was looking out into the street.

"No; cowboys, I guess, from the looks of their clothing. Funny thing, too. You don't often see cowboys riding in a granger wagon and whacking away at a pair of granger mules. You'd better take a look at this; it's worth it!"

Lost Charlie rose to his feet and walked to the window. The mule team and wagon with the cowboy figures in the high spring seat were

already vanishing up the flat, sandy street where lights were beginning to shine in the few stores.

"Grangers playin' cowboys!" he grunted, as he scanned the broad cowboy backs. "No real cowboys would be fools enough to be caught dead in a rig like that. Some of these here grangers thinks they're the whole thing if they can put on a cowboy hat and holler round a little."

Having thus summarily disposed of Jackson Blake and Jim Prethro, Lost Charlie went back to his fiddle and the girl he had left behind him.

Ten minutes later, while the station agent was still at the window, looking this time down the twin lines of glinting steel rails into the dimming east, where he expected soon to behold the headlight of the locomotive drawing the California express, the rattle of the wagon wheels was heard again.

"Cowboy grangers coming back!" he announced. "Stopping here, too; want to go on west, maybe."

Lost Charlie had abandoned interest in the subject; he did not care for grangers, even cowboy grangers.

The station agent moved away from the window, and entering the room set apart as telegraph and ticket office began to look at the tickets in the little pigeon holes, meanwhile guessing idly which one of these men would want a ticket, and whether he was going to Las Animas, Pueblo, or Denver.

"Denver, I reckon!" he said to himself, and drew out a Denver ticket; when the door of the

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waiting-room opened and he heard a man ask if any one there could give him "p'int's" as to how he could reach Old Shake's ranch, the "X Y."

The inquirer was Jim Prethro. Blake was outside in the wagon, holding the reins of the mule team.

Lost Charlie came to his feet, the fiddle in his hand, as Prethro pressed on into the room.

"Sure," he said, still thinking these men were grangers; "but he ain't keeping any boarding house!"

Prethro looked at Lost Charlie with mild, critical blue eyes.

"Ain't wantin' t' hang out there," he explained, as if he considered it none of this young man's business, though his tones softened when he noticed the cowboy hat and the cowboy clothing. "Mebby you 're one of his men — th' one I 'm lookin fur?"

"Yep; mebbly I am!" Lost Charlie assented.

"We 're cowboys," said Prethro; "'n' hearin', south of the river, that there was a ranch up yere called the X Y, run by a feller with the handle of Ol' Shake, we jes' thought, bein' cow punchers, we 'd drop in on him a bit, 'n' have a sort of friendly chat with him 'n' his boys."

"Sure!" assented Lost Charlie, with a surprising change of manner, though he was still puzzled by the presence of the wagon and the mule team. "I'll take you under my angelic wing, if you 're agreeable, and show you over; that's where I hang out, and I was just thinkin' of goin' home. Leslie lets me herd round his snubbin' post here, but he won't put out any

grub; so I'm dead sore on him. He's in the corral there," jerking his thumb toward the ticket office; then added, "ticket seller!"

"Glad t'meet up with you," said Prethro, extending his hand warmly. "My pard, Jackson Blake, is out in the wagon, holdin' th' rabbits!"

He looked at the violin, which, with its bow, Lost Charlie clutched in his unoccupied hand.

"My wild canary," Lost Charlie explained, blandly. "Tickle it with hair out of a horse's tail and it will squeal like a pig under a gate."

He was a tall youth, with comely mustache and dancing dark eyes that betokened a fund of unrestrained hilarity and general recklessness.

He now added gravely that he was Lost Charlie Ross, and receiving in return the "handle" of his new acquaintance, they went together out to the wagon, where as Lost Charlie Ross young Baker was introduced by Prethro to Jackson Blake.

"A devil of a joker, that cow puncher is," the ticket agent mused, restoring the ticket to its pigeon hole and glancing at the clock, for the California express was now overdue.

Then he heard the wagon rattling away down the sandy street.

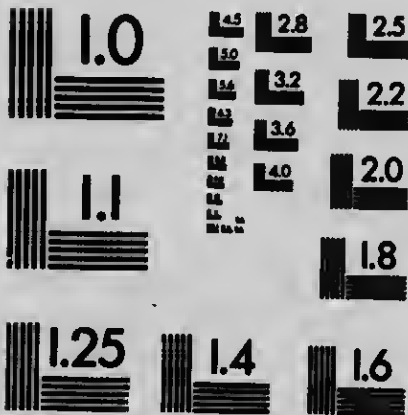
The patriarchal owner of the X Y ranch was sitting under his vine and fig-tree in the starlight, smoking his evening pipe, as the mule team and wagon drew up in front of the ranch house, two or three miles beyond the limits of the little town.

The said vine and fig-tree was a wide, cool, wind-swept piazza; and the ranch house was a



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large, square building, constructed of sod with roof of shingles. One who has never seen and been within such a house will find it hard to conceive of Old Shake's home as it really was. The sod walls, four or five feet thick, were shaggy and dark brown outside, of the color of the earth of which they were composed. Inside the walls were rough-coated with plaster and hung with pictures and other things, while curtains were at the windows. The sod had been ploughed from the prairie in thick, ribbony strips, which cut into short sections had been laid and cemented with mud into walls, as if they were stones or gigantic bricks. The result was that the walls were almost impervious to cold or heat, of sufficient strength to support the heavy roof and to stand up like masonry against the fiercest blizzard.

Old Shake had the wide-reaching hospitality of the true ranchman. He rose from his comfortable rocker as he saw the men descend with Lost Charlie from the wagon and walk up to the house, after hitching the mules to the corral fence.

"Right welcome, strangers," he said, holding his smoking pipe in his left hand as he cordially extended his right.

Then he shook hands gravely as Lost Charlie introduced the guests, and sweeping the sky with his aging eyes pointed out its beauty and the glory of the stars, while his white beard stirred in the evening breeze.

"I like to look at the sky at night," he said, "and the man that don't like to look at it and ponder on the things it su'gests is 'fit for

treasons, stratagems, and spoils.' It's simply glorious, 'this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire!'"

On the way out to the ranch Blake and Prethro had learned that the old man was forever "spout-in' Shakespeare's poetry," which fact had given him his appellation. They learned, too, that his true name was Caxton. "First name William," he said, proudly, seeming to think that this linked him in some mysterious way with the Immortal Bard whom he loved.

Blake and Prethro discovered also, as they passed with him into the house, while Lost Charlie departed to attend to the wants of the mules, that he had a family—a wife named Jerusha, and two daughters, Nevada and Virginia. Ordinarily it was "Rooshy," "Vady," and "Jinny"; but on state occasions, and this was a state occasion, the first names were mouthed roundly and with much unction, though the *a* in the second syllable of Nevada was noticeably flattened.

Later still they found that Mrs. Shake was as much of a student in her way as her husband was in his. He studied and quoted Shakespeare; she with ambition not so soaring, but as she believed more practical, strained her aged eyes over manifold editions of patent-medicine almanacs and divers advertisements of much-heralded remedies. Her well-thumbed "library" was all there, hung up carefully back of the stove-place, in the big family sitting-room. Above it, on the wide mantel, was the old man's much-read volume of the great dramatist, and a copy of Wilder's

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famous book of Kansas great names, which the cowboys irreverently called "The Herd Book of the Kansas Short-Horns."

In a big goods box, whose top covered with a green cloth stuffed and softened with horse-hair and chicken feathers made for her a comfortable chimney-seat whenever she cared to use it, were many boxes and bottles of "family medicines," whose merits she had tried and believed in, and which she sometimes insisted on testing on sick or homesick cowboys, much to their disgust and discomfort. But withal she was a kindly soul, with an alert bright eye, a thin form, and time-seamed face. The "medicines" had not killed her, at any rate, and showed no signs of doing so; and perhaps, who knows? belief in their virtues, if nothing else, had been to her a benefit.

Old Shake did not scoff at his wife's folly, if he considered it such.

"'T is a physic,'" he would say, quoting the Bard, "'that's bitter to sweet end!' Let her have her way; she lets me have mine!"

Thus they travelled life's checkered ways together, with sweet serenity and charity most kind. Happiness in this world consists in that.

Lost Charlie Ross came in from attending to the needs of the mules; and supper was served to him and the strangers in the big dining-room, old Shake sitting by for sociability's sake. Later, in the room they had entered first, Lost Charlie, taking up his fiddle, began to twang the strings in the anticipatory way of violinists, and Miss Nevada sat down to the piano and began to play some chords.

Jim Prethro's mild blue eyes were bright with pleasure. This was "homey," as he would have termed it; something like the farmhouse of which he had dreamed drunkenly in Wichita, with a "pianner tinklin', a 'cordion goin', an' Anita 'n' the baby settin' on th' chimbly-piece." Anita and the baby and the accordion were not there, but here was society of women and a piano, and the violin filled fully the place of the missing accordion. So Prethro beamed and listened, while Lost Charlie, forgetting that he was "lost," tucked the tail of his fiddle under his chin and capered out waltzes and lively airs to the tinkling beat of Vady's flying fingers.

Even Jackson Blake warmed in this genial atmosphere; while outside the bright stars shone and the wind soughed its lullaby round the corners of the great sod house and round the corral and the cowboys' bunk-rooms. All about stretched the buffalo-grass seas of the valley of the Upper Arkansas and of the wide, high upland levels known as "the flats."

Neither Vady, who was the younger, nor her sister Jinny could be called handsome by an impartial observer; but they were bright, wholesome young women, daughters of a rough life and wide horizons, frolicsome, good humored, mettlesome if you will, yet unspoiled. Old Shake was their father, and the woman sitting with placid hands folded, listening in her chair near the box of medicines, was their mother. Neither were descendants of Pilgrims nor of bewigged gentlemen of the Jamestown settlement, but they represented a sturdy family tree, nevertheless,

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and their daughters could not be otherwise than like them.

Nevada had blue-gray eyes like those of her father, and her hair was a silky brown, as his had been; Virginia was darker, slightly taller, and even more vivacious just now, but whether that was because Nevada was engaged at the piano or because of the presence of these strangers, Blake could not tell.

About nine o'clock Pony Brown came in, having ridden that day from Dodge City; and his entrance was an occasion for more introductions and further handshakings. Pony was short and round, with jovial face. After you had heard the name you would perceive the resemblance of that chubby form to the fleshy girth of one of those little ponies which children hitch to carts and behind which they go bowling and shouting through city streets.

He was one of the cowboys of Old Shake's ranch. It was not an extensive ranch, and but two cowboys were kept throughout the whole of the year, others being picked up at the seasons of the round-ups, usually in the great cowboy town of Dodge City. Pony's errand to the house now, aside from a desire to hear the music and see the strangers, who must be peculiar men for cowboys, he imagined, as he had observed closely their granger outfit, was to inform Old Shake that the cowboys for the spring round-up, which was to take place immediately, would be on from Dodge City the next day.

Having delivered this message and smiled all round on those who happened to be looking at

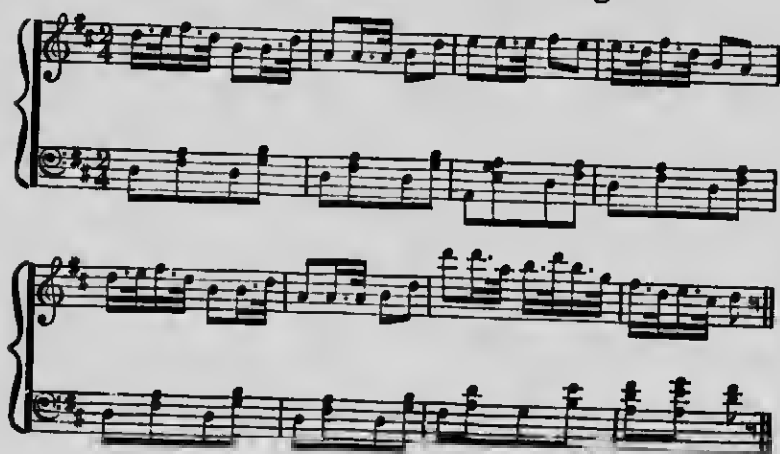
him, Pony deposited his big hat on the floor, then took it up and hung it on his knee, repeating this nervous operation, until Virginia, noticing him, came forward and hung it for him on a hook on the wall near the sitting-room door.

Thereupon Pony grinned amiably, and expressed an irreverent desire to hear more of that "Ol' Arkansaw Traveller Jig," which had been interrupted by his entrance.

So Lost Charlie, always willing to oblige when it came to "tearing out music," repeated the strains of the "Arkansas Traveller," during which performance and in the proper places, he put in the words of the dialogue between the Arkansas Traveller and the Old Settler who sat in his dripping cabin fiddling, while the rain fell on him through the broken roof:

"'Old Man,' says the Traveller to the Fiddler who was setting in his cabin while 't was rainin' in on him, 'how long you been livin' here?'"

"'D' ye see that mount'in there?' says the Old Man; 'when I come here that was a hole in the ground!'"



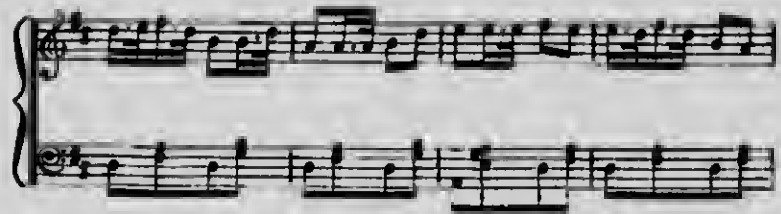
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“‘Old Man,’ says the Traveller, ‘why don’t you shingle your house?’”

“‘Can’t; it’s rainin’.’”

“‘Why in time don’t you shingle it when it ain’t rainin’?’”

“‘Don’t need to; it don’t leak then.’”



“‘Old Man,’ says the Traveller, ‘why don’t you play the second part of that piece?’”

“‘Don’t know it,’ says the Old Man; ‘play it yer-self, if you want to hear it!’”

Here Lost Charlie made a motion in imitation of the Old Settler as he passed the fiddle to the Traveller; then gave the second part of the tune, to Vady’s accompaniment, with much spirit:





This performance, it appeared, so delighted the Old Man that he shouted :

“ ‘Welcome, Traveller; kick that dog off the chair an’ take a seat, an’ we’ll have supper. Sal, git the grubbin’ hoe an’ dig some sass’fras fer tea, quick. Bub, set out the tin plates an’ th’ hawg an’ hominy. We ain’t got no knives, ner forks, ner spoons, Traveller, but —’

“ ‘Then, how do you do?’ says the Traveller.

“ ‘Tol’able, thankee,’ says the Old Man, ‘how do you do? Set up, set up to the table; you kin have the best we’ve got — a man what can play like that is always welcome in this here hospitable home!’ ”

Pony Brown had heard that dialogue a hundred times from the lips of Lost Charlie in the pauses of the fiddling, but it was good and new each time, and each time it made him roar with pure and childish delight.

“Ten o’clock,” Old Shake announced at last.

“Don’t seem but a minute,” Pony protested.

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"Your old turnip is out o' kelter; better send it off to a blacksmith to-morrer."

"Ten o'clock," repeated Old Shake, decidedly. "Would n't mind, but the cowboys air comin' to-morrow, and then we've all got to work. You'll be howling for sleep 'fore the week's out —

'Innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care!'"

"He's mighty robustious when it comes to sleepin'," said Lost Charlie, winking; "but he'll be all right when the time comes."

"Yes, that's so," admitted the old man, rising.

Then, with a kindly "good-night," he took himself out of the room followed by his wife and daughters.

"Mighty handsome girls, them," observed Prethro later.

Blake did not seem to be interested.

"Yes," he admitted, "handsome enough; but I've seen handsomer."

"Well, dog my cats, I dunno 'z I ever did!" was Prethro's emphatic comment.

And he lay awake a good while thinking about it after Jackson Blake was sleeping soundly.

The expected cowboys arrived the next afternoon, having ridden the long distance from Dodge City since sun-up. They were wild figures as they came racing at full speed up to the corral gate where Lost Charlie was standing with Jackson Blake. Yet they were not unpleasant for the eye to linger on. "Chaps" were noticeably absent from their withey legs. Those monstrosities of tanned, haired skins, sometimes bulging

like half barrels, were not needed in this kindly open country, for here there were no tall cacti, nor thorny mesquite, nor tearing shrubs to rip the trousers and the legs of the man on horseback. "Guns" were plentiful, however, some slung in holsters on the saddles, others swinging from leather pistol cases cinched to the waists of the riders. These "guns" of forty-four and forty-five calibre were to "shoot rattlesnakes," the cowboys would have told you. Sometimes they shot other things — men, for instance, but this was not often.

Lost Charlie called over the names of the wild riders and their "pedigrees," as they came careering toward the corral, for the benefit of Blake, who was a stranger to them all.

"That's Cash Colburn on the splay-footed calico. Great boy, Cash is — used to run a ranch of his own, but he swallowed it."

"Drank it up?"

"More like drank it down. Too much of a longin' fer old red-eye and the flowin' bowi."

"It will get the best of any man," said Blake, with an emphasis that surprised Lost Charlie.

"Yep, I reckon it will, if he follers it long enough; and Cash he certainly follered it good and hard. Ain't no bar in five hundred miles that don't know him, I reckon; but he's all right, straight as a T rail when he's outside of the towns and on the range."

"The one on the spotted broncho?" Blake questioned.

"The feller with the long hair swingin' a quirt? That's Tom Orton. He's all right, mighty

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good man but nasty in a fight. Keep me away from him, please, when he's thinkin' cross-eyed!

"And that other feller on the sorrel — that's Cave Dunham. Cave on account of his big mouth; say, you want to see that man shovel grub into that hole in his face. You'd think he was a coal-heaver throwin' coal into a cellar.

"And that other chap on the claybank — take a look at him, he's Mexican. And wicked! When he gits started he's as wicked as a rattlesnake. I asked you to look at him for that reason. Being Mexican, though, he's a roper. My, that feller can sling a rope to make your eyes bug out! If ever he goes for a steer, Mr. Steer is his meat. Best man in the bunch for cutting-out work, and I s'pose that's why Shake sends for him. His name is Vasquez."

"There's a likely boy," Blake suggested, indicating another.

"Him? Yep, that's Bill Conner, real white article, Bill is. He's a Texican, and a reckless chap when it comes to a cattle stampede. He'd ride into the river or through fire to save a steer. Ain't afraid of anything that wears hoofs and horns; if the Old Boy stood in his way while a stampede was on he'd ride right over him. He'd beg his pardon afterwards, of course, for Bill's a gentleman."

Thus Lost Charlie discoursed, and when the cowboys had flung themselves out of their deep saddles — saddles in many instances worth more than the animals that carried them — he introduced Blake to these men, and went through the formula again when Prethro appeared.

Old Shake came out with Prethro.

"Three men short," he said, as he looked at the cowboy band. "Pony!" He wheeled round, — "Where's Pony?"

Pony Brown came running from the horse stables.

"Where's them other men, Pony, that you said you'd got?"

Bill Conner interposed.

"You mean Con Lynch and his crowd? Couldn't drag 'em out of town this mornin'. They was havin' some fun at a jamboree last night, and the likes of that makes men sassy. Be on to-morrow, mebby."

"And mebby they won't find any job waiting for them. Gentlemen," — Old Shake turned to Blake and Prethro, — "you're cowboys. Round-up begins to-morrow. I'm short of good men; got to have two parties, one to go south of the river and one to go north. If you'll hire for the round-up the job's yours; and I'd like to have you. With two good men more'n I've got I can make out; and when them drunken rascals come they can find their way straight back again. What say?"

Jim Prethro speaking for both said they would go and be glad to.

CHAPTER XVI

OUT OF THE FLOOD

WHEN Jim Prethro, returned from the round-up, announced a sudden desire to purchase a quarter section of land close to Golden City — land which had a small irrigation ditch, a small dugout house, and trees growing on it, making it "homey," — Blake smiled in a quiet way, and not only consented but assured him that he thought it would be a good thing and an excellent investment.

Several things had made Blake know this was coming. Chief of them was the fact that the picture of the Indian woman and the child which stood for a representation of Anita and the baby had not been seen by him for some time.

Jackson Blake acquiesced in Prethro's plans because he was able to forecast the future. The overflow of the boomer gatherings at Wichita was being poured out over the plains and settlers were coming from everywhere. The days of the open range were ending in Western Kansas. Blake saw it, if Old Shake and his cowboys did not. It was writ large in the swarming fleets of prairie schooners and the eager inquiries of long-haired "grangers" looking for land. Old Shake and his cowboys regarded these men merely as wild-eyed idiots, to be anathematized for rainbow-

chasing fools, not as serious factors in a new order of things. With clear-eyed foresight Jackson Blake beheld the gray plains transforming and transformed; he had known this type of man before — the all-conquering husbandman, who, now that he had set out to defy and combat the "Great American Desert," was not to be turned back by words and turf-throwing. A new era was coming to the Great Plains. And Jackson Blake was glad. He did not wish to flee further. He had been cowboy, wild rider, and fugitive for more than five years; it was quite long enough.

So Jim Prethro bought the quarter section lying close by the little houses of Golden City, installed his mules in the sod stable and himself and Jackson Blake in the low-walled dugout, and began to "farm it," making a strange sight as he followed the plow along the clean furrows, through the windy spring weather, behind those mules in their shining, silver-mounted harness. To make the purchase took seven hundred dollars of the twelve hundred in the Wichita bank.

Shortly after making the purchase he was given reason to rejoice because of it. The bank failed, entailing the loss of the rest of his money. This loss impressed itself queerly on Prethro's untamed imagination.

"Say, Blake," he said, laying down the newspaper in which the account of the disaster appeared, "now ain't that enough to gall a feller? Five hunderd good hard dollars gone f'r nothin'! Jes' think of the whole howlin' lot o' fun I might 'a' had spendin' that five hunderd, while I was

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cuttin' that big swath back there! 'N' now I ain't got even a memory t' show f'r it! Ain't that enough t' make a man want t' stand up in a corner like a daggone broncho 'n' jes' everlastin'ly kick hisself? But I ain't blamin' you," he added, charitably; "you acted accordin' to your lights!"

Lost Charlie laughed, with dancing dark eyes, when Blake told him of this; and felt called on to laugh again when Blake announced that he had purchased for himself a "rig," consisting of a pair of smart bronchos and a roomy, two-seated carriage, with which he purposed to begin the work of a locator.

"You see, I must be doing something if I settle down here," Blake urged in extenuation. "There are n't enough people in Golden City to buy half the stuff Prethro can grow himself from that black soil with irrigation, so I can't afford to put my time and labor in there with him. These grangers are hot-footed after this land; they want to be located, and located right, and not have to stumble round and pick out the surveyed lines themselves. I've looked over the country a bit"—he displayed some land office plats—"and I can locate them. There's money in it."

Old Shake shook his head. He did not more than half approve. He still thought the grangers a lot of fools with fleece in their heads instead of brains; but if they would make idiots of themselves!

"The only thing to cure this land fever, and they've got it bad," he said, "is a good, old-fashioned plains drought; that'll knock it. And

it'll come all right, give it time enough. I've told dozens of 'em that, but they won't believe me; think I just want to keep 'em out so's I can have the range fer my cattle. Mebby this showin' 'em where to settle is all right; at any rate it's a big opportunity — fer you!"

Blake found the work of a locator fully as pleasant and profitable as he had dreamed. With plats from the land office showing the government surveys and the section numbers, he rode over the country very carefully now, seeking the corner mounds of the surveyors, and marking them here and there with high piles of sod. For ten miles on each side of the railroad the Santa Fé had a land grant of every alternate section. All the rest of the valley land and rolling plain, further than eye could see, was government land, open to settlement, with the exception of two sections of school land in each congressional township.

Blake gave his time to the region north of the river; for on the south side there was a ten-miles stretch of uninviting sand-hills, grass covered now, but in the early days of plains travel mere heaps of drifting and shining desolation. The fact that these sand-hills had been grassed over by coarse blue-stem and broom sedge was one of the arguments which the grangers used to show that the region of safe rainfall was extending steadily westward, and now included this area heretofore deemed fit only for cattle.

Having fixed his corner marks and so familiarized himself with the lay of the valley land and the upland flats that he knew just where to drive

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to find almost any section or quarter section, Jackson Blake placed himself with his new rig in front of the Santa Fé station a short time before the arrival of each passenger train from the East, and began to solicit business from the land seekers. He also interviewed the men who were swarming westward in the white prairie schooners. From the start he was given so much to do that he found the days hardly long enough. The man who satisfies any human hunger succeeds; and these men from the East and the Middle West were fiercely hungry — hungry for land.

Always a lover of the open air, always a lover of nature, those long drives over the short-grass plains behind the swiftly trotting bronchos were to Blake a never-ending joy. He worked early and late. He saw the sun flare red over the rim of the eastern horizon and saw it sink in a sea of gold in the west. He heard the meadow lark sing from thistle stem and stalk of wild sunflower, heard the piping of the upland plover and the angry chatter of the prairie dog owls, watched the long lope of the coyote and the scurrying of the jack rabbit, and seemed to live again, as he had not lived for nearly six years. The spring air, sometimes very gusty it is true, was to him like the tonic of wine. Thus he toiled and thus he drove, with groups of eager land seekers, seeing them settle down here and there like alighting swallows and begin to throw up soddy nests which they called homes.

Returning one afternoon alone from a trip up the valley, he beheld a white-covered wagon and

a team of horses close by the river side. The driver had dismounted and was lowering the reins from the hames, that the horses might drink from the stream, which at that point was approachable.

Blake looked at the man and the team without much interest, wondering vaguely if the man might not want to locate near Golden City, instead of trying farther up the valley, when he became aware of a deep, sougning roar somewhere behind him. He had never heard anything like it. The singularity of the sound caused him to stop his bronchos and listen. Then he heard it more plainly — a dull, booming roar.

"Can't be a cyclone," was his thought, looking at the sky.

It was a brilliant azure, with a golden sun blazing out of it. There had been no rain for some time, and Blake had begun to think that perhaps the drought of which Old Shake had prophesied was already on the land. The appearance of the sky, without a speck of cloud from rim to rim to mar its matchless color, assured him that the dull roar could not be the trumpet-heralding of a tornado.

It was growing noticeably louder. Once he believed he felt the earth quiver. He was not familiar with the moods of nature in the valley of the Upper Arkansas, so thought of earthquakes and other things; then turned his bronchos toward a low eminence that promised to give him a good backward view of the river bottom.

He was no more than half way to the top of the little hill when he beheld a sight that at first

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puzzled him, then quickened his heart beats. A great wall of water was thundering down the almost dry channel of the Arkansas, its front a smoking mass that stood upright like that wall of waves when Moses smote the sea. Like a flash a knowledge of what this thing was came to him.

His eyes were looking on the thundering advance of a June flood, which the sudden melting of the snows of the distant mountains under the burning summer heat had shot through the compressed gateway of the far-off Grand Cañon like a stone flung out from an ancient catapult. Cramped and contracted by a sudden pinching-in of the river bed, it had gathered force there, just beyond the point where he saw it, and was now rushing down the half-dry channel of the stream, roaring in wrath and shaking the ground like a giant walking.

Jackson Blake pulled his bronchos round and raced them across the slope of the hill. He did not head for the upland and safety, but straight toward the white-covered wagon and the man who, all unconscious of peril, was calmly watering his horses at the river, thinking, if he heard the sound at all, that it was made by the ceaseless winds tearing at some pass of the sand-hills.

As Blake drove thus wildly down the valley toward the river, he swung his hat and shouted to the man, trying to give him warning. He saw the man look up as if in surprise. Then he yelled again, pointing up the river, while he lashed the galloping bronchos on.

"Get your team out!" he screamed. "Get your team out! A flood! a flood!"

The man drew up the reins of his horses, looking at Blake as if he thought a madman was racing toward him. Again Blake waved his hat, pointed up the river, and screamed his warning. He wondered at the man's stupidity, for even above the clatter of his carriage wheels and the patter of the bronchos' hoofs he could hear the increasing roar.

All at once the man understood. He saw the wild flood itself as it leaped round a bend of the river and jumped toward him like an angry beast, its torn front yellow and tossing in rage. Then he climbed hastily into the wagon and began to pull the team away from the river.

"Cut your horses loose!" Blake yelled.

Probably the man did not understand him; at any rate he did not heed, but continued to pull his team round. That wagon held his earthly all, and he did not want to lose it. But he was not ten yards from the river, trying to lash his slow horses into a run by beating them with the ends of the lines, when he saw that he could not escape if he clung to the wagon. Thereupon he jumped down and began to unhook the trace chains and the breast yoke; having done which he began to load something from the wagon upon one of the horses.

"That man is a fool!" thought Blake, and again he screamed at him.

More effective than Blake's shouts was the warning given by the flood itself, as it came nearer down the sandy river bed and began to spread out beyond the fringy margin of willows into the wide valley. The combing crest fell somewhat

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with this expansion, yet the turbid wall tore wildly on. The driver could see it quite plainly now, that yellow terror, with front like a writhing mat of dirty wool, in which sticks and willow tops churned and threshed with a strange commingling of snapping noises and a hoarse watery undertone growled in angry base.

Seeing it rushing thus upon him he drew his knife and slashed the lines apart, then tried to climb upon one of the horses. But he had delayed too long in his efforts to save the wagon and its contents. Jackson Blake, still some distance away on much higher ground, saw the yellow wall dash upon the foolhardy stranger. It was like the impact of a landslide. Man and team were overborne; the wagon rose like a chip, then whirling over went out of sight. The next instant the man and the horses rolling together in a tangle of struggling forms and waving legs and heads also went down.

Jackson Blake was out of his carriage, having left it with a flying leap over the spinning wheels that permitted the bronchos to race on unhindered; then he ran toward the spot where the man and horses had disappeared, with the spreading waters rushing out to meet him.

He saw one of the horses rise with frantic lunges, and fall over again; beheld the other come up and begin to swim; then caught a glimpse of the man, as he was tossed on, a mere wisp flung forward by the turbid front of the flood.

Still Blake ran on. Both horses came up once more, and finding an insecure footing began

to struggle toward the higher ground. The front of the flood had passed and was leaving them in the subsidence. Blake saw the waters falling, and still running at top speed he strained his eyes for another glimpse of the unfortunate driver.

He thought he saw him again, close by the wagon, which had been hurled upside down in a twisted willow clump. Disregarding the waters that were spreading widely out through the low bottom land, he plunged in, wading to his knees, rising now on a hillocked mound, then tumbling to his hips into a hole. He could see the wagon clearly enough, its white sheet spattered with leaves and twigs, torn and flood stained to a dirty yellow.

In another minute Blake was floundering almost to his arm-pits. Once, as he sought for footing, he found none, and plunged his whole body under; yet, when he came up, he was resolute and fierce with a courageous determination.

Fortunately the water was falling fast. As he still floundered on, it sank to his waist, though he was reaching lower ground; then sank to his hips, and yet lower, as he waded toward the willow clump.

With the water line dropping still more, he saw he was not mistaken in thinking the dark object by the overturned wagon was the form of the driver, caught in the willow branches, that sagged downward under his weight and the weight of the river drift. There he lay, matted with mud and willow boughs, like a swallow drowned by the rain in its own woven nest.

The man did not seem quite dead as Blake, the water no higher now than his knees, waded up to the roots of the trees, for he lay in a limp and doubled heap with one hand thrown up over his head as if to protect it from the pounding blows of the unheeding flood.

Blake lifted him, a soggy burden, in his dripping wet arms, and began to carry him across the flooded ground to the higher land beyond, which the horses had gained, and where the bronchos, no hand now to guide or restrain them, had cramped the carriage round and had begun to crop the rich herbage of buffalo and grama grasses.

Not until he had reached this higher and still dry ground and laid his burden down did Jackson Blake look into the face of the man, whom he had sought to rescue, yet who might even then be as lifeless as the clay that stained and plastered his coarse clothing. As he looked into that face turned upward toward the deep sapphire of the wonderful summer sky he started back with an exclamation. The man dead or alive was Hank Wilson!

For a moment Blake stood there reeling as if attacked by a sudden sickness. His heart seemed to leap into his throat and then stop still. His face blanched under its coat of tan. Back to him with all the vividness of yesterday, came a horrid memory, in which he saw the saloon of Chris Miller, the beery bar, the card tables, heard the coarse ribaldry and the drunken levity, scented the heavy odors of alcohol and stale tobacco; beheld Hank Wilson himself with the fan of pictured cards in his hand; saw the fierce, intoxicated

look in the face of Jed Anderson; felt the knife in his own hand, the swing of the blows, the reeling crash from the doorway, and the awful awakening to the fact that he was a murderer! That picture graven in his brain by a point tipped with hellish fire had never been erased, yet had never stood out in all its awful colors more vividly.

Hank Wilson lay as if dead, smeared with river mud and sand, eyes closed, legs spread out, one arm at his side and the other dropped limply across his mud-soaked breast.

Only for a moment did Blake stand there in reeling horror and hesitation; then he was down on his wet knees, rubbing, chafing, kneading, rolling the form about in strenuous endeavor to revive the flicker of life, if it had not been blown out entirely. He shivered as he worked, though not because he was drenched to the skin; his face was set like a death mask; through his parted lips his white teeth gleamed as if in a horrid smile; his heart pounded furiously and fast, and his swelling throat and bosom seemed to be choking him. Yet he did not relax his efforts until there were unmistakable signs of returning animation in the limp body.

He stopped as he saw Wilson gasp for a draught of the sweet air; stopped and studied the familiar lines of those now pallid features where a faint flush told of restored circulation; then he resumed his work.

Jackson Blake was some distance away bringing up the bronchos and the carriage when Hank Wilson came to full consciousness and stared

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about, dazed by what had happened. He did not know how he had arrived at that spot of dry ground. He remembered the sudden wild dash of the flood and how it had picked him up as if he were but a straw, and he saw that his clothes were wet and that the grass where he lay was wet from them. Hence he knew that the man whom he now beheld approaching had drawn him out of those awful waters and brought him back to life. A feeling of deep gratitude to this man surged in his heart.

Then his pulses leaped when, the bronchos and carriage coming still nearer, he saw, spite of the changes of years, that he had known this man in that other land as a youth.

"Dick Brewster!" was the name that rose to his lips, yet it stopped there unuttered.

CHAPTER XVII

SHADOWS OF COMING EVENTS

IT was a strange game that Jackson Blake and Hank Wilson were playing.

"Should 'a' thought you'd 'a' runned away frum thet air flood," the Arkansan drawled, hiding h' face behind the smoke of his pipe, as he sat with Blake in Prethro's dugout talking it over, as he had already done a dozen times. "Thet is, seein' 't I was a tee-total stranger to you! I dessay I would ef it'd been me."

"Stranger or no stranger," said Blake, looking at the little window set in the sod wall—the wall rose but two or three feet above the level of the plain-like valley—"it would have been just the same to me; you needed help. I should n't have been much of a man if I had n't given it."

"Saved my life, too!" reflectively, with a covert glance at the side of the face turned toward him. "Not thet it's wu'th much. Seems lack it's a frazzle, hardly wu'th keepin', sometimes. But I ain't got ary other!" He tried to laugh. "Hain't got ary other; so I hev ter do the best I kin with this 'un. Thet's what I su'gested to messe'f when I started out this erway. 'Hank Wilson,' I says to messe'f, 'you wu'thless cuss, you hain't er-doin' no good settin' roun' hyar chawin' and smokin' terbacker, an' you hain't

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never goin' to be doin' any good, nuther; better traipse out West, whar thar's sech a-talkin' 'bout lan' t' be hed, an' see ef ye cyan't git yesse'f some. Be er man 'stid of an ol' no-'count coon dawg!' But I reckon ef 't had n't been fer you!"

He studied the side of the face turned toward him, noting with keen eye the brown beard, the brown hair which had been once like whitish lint, the square jaw, and the prominent brows. It was a handsome head—good to look on; and something of its power made itself felt to the mind of the Arkansan.

"Thet r'arin' ol' water played Jesse wi' my waggin, o' course, an' all the truck in it; but the waggin kin be fixed an' the harniss; so I ain't 'z bad off 'z I mout be. An' this lan' roun' hyar suits me. Knowin' now what ter expect, no omstreperous, crazy floods don't ketch me ergin, an' I 'low I'd like ter jes' squat on thet air bit o' lan' thet kem so nigh ter bein' my graveyard. You said thet it war still open ter settle-ment, I b'lieve?"

Blake nodded, still looking out of the window where the sky was fading into night.

"Good lan', too?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Good 'z thar is roun' hyar, likely?"

"I think so."

"I'll take it ef you'll make out the papers fer it fer me. Be yer neighbor, then!" He tried to laugh again. "Kind er miss the trees lack they have back in Arkansaw, but I kin grow trees, mebby—little 'uns, anyhow; so I'll jes'

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squat on the air quarter. Gits dryer funder west, they tell me."

This was the day after the rescue from the river. Two days later, with the flood a sticky memento drying on the grass blades, Hank Wilson squatted on the land where he had so nearly found a grave; and having made the improvements required by law, which in practice consisted of laying the foundation of a house and spading out the beginnings of a well, he completed his entry by a visit to the land office, where he made his formal application for the quarter section which the land law permitted him to take.

Blake breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Wilson depart on that trip to the land office, even though he knew Wilson would be back in a day or two. He drove alone out over the plains, not visiting the railroad station for the purpose of picking up any would-be settlers, and took hours to think over the situation in which he now found himself.

"I will stay," he decided, when he had thought it all out. "And why should I not stay? Hank Wilson does not recognize me. I ought to have felt sure from the first that he could not recognize me, with all the changes which time and hard work have made in my appearance. The civilized world is so small a place that, if I do not leave it entirely, I must expect now and then to meet some one who knew me in the old days. But they will fail to recognize me now, just as he did."

There was one other thing which helped to determine him on this course. He longed for

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some scraps of information concerning the people and the old place—some knowledge of Christine and his father, and others whom he had known and who had been so much to him there. In all those long-short years he had not heard one word. Now he realized how hungry he was for this. A whisper, a breath from that old air; he felt that he would give worlds for it! Already Hank Wilson in rambling on about his own affairs had mentioned a few familiar names. He would be sure to mention others. By adroit questioning he might be made to talk more and more of the things which Blake wished to know, and thus little by little the details of what had occurred there could be added to Blake's store of knowledge.

"Yes, I will stay!" Jackson Blake decided, speaking to himself in full round tones. "I will stay!"

Then he drove back over the grassy levels, smiling strangely as he watched the swinging trot of the swiftly moving bronchos. He was living the sweetest parts of the old life over again in memory.

Hank Wilson did some thinking also, as he drove away on his journey to the land office.

"Soon's I taken er squint at 'im I knowed him, though he has changed a mighty consid'able; but I hain't er-goin' ter say nothin' ter nobody; would n't say nothin' ter nobody, even ef he had n't drug me out'n thet air water. Kase why? he did n't do thet killin'; 't war me driv thet knife inter Jed Anderson! It's a tur'ble secrit ter kerry, but I'll kerry it messe'f; don't

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need any one ter help me in thet. Kerried it er good while, I hev, by messe'f; an' I kin kerry it a consid'able funder, I reckon."

He snapped his whip thoughtfully at his horses; they were hitched to a buggy he had hired in the town.

"Thet air is what made me leave Arkansaw — kerryin' thet secrit! Could n't stan' it ter swaller ther Ransom: air ary minute longer; reckened mebby I'd sleep better some place else. Lawz, ef I'd er knowed how thet air murder war goin' ter ha'nt me! Ef I'd er knowed how Jed Anderson war er-goin' ter rise up by my bed o' nights, wi' the blood streamin' frum him, and p'int his fingers at me, an' say, jes' lack thet — 'You done it! you done it!' Lawd Gawd, ef I'd er knowed thet! But I'd been er-swallerin' whiskey, too, thet night; an' Jed did act scan'lous an' pesky mean ter me, fer a fac', — scan'lous an' pesky mean. An' aifter I stobbed 'im, co'se I couldn't do nothin' but keep still; though I kem mighty near ter shoutin' when I got word thet Dick hed skun out frum thet air jail. An' I hain't er-goin ter say ther word that'll take 'im back ter it. Thet war fer cert'in a mighty peart trick he done, gittin' out er thet; an' he'll stay out fer all er me, he will, even ef thar is three er fo' thousan' dollars o' reward fer ther man that'll put 'im back thar ag'in. I'm needin' money bad ernough — hain't many needs it wusser, I reckon; but I don't need it bad ernough yit fer thet."

When Jackson Blake drove down the trail leading from Golden City to Prethro's dugout,

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darkness had fallen, and he heard Prethro singing ahead of him in the path. The words of the song concerned the doings of that famous cowboy, Sam Bass, but the tones and the manner of utterance were the things that attracted Blake's attention. Prethro was in a merry mood.

"Hello!" he called, stopping and waiting for Blake to come up, then climbed into the seat beside him without ceremony.

"You're musical to-night!" Blake ventured.

"Say," said Prethro, slapping him on the knee, "I was jes' thinkin' while I warbled along, what a daggone fool Sam Bass was, t' go t' Texas 'n' turn cowboy! No more cow punchin' f'r me. What d' ye think?"

"A good many things," Blake answered.

"By jacks, that land, ye know — give seven hunderd f'r it, you recomember! Feller come 'long this afternoon 'n' bantered me to let him have it fer — what d' ye think?"

"Eight hundred, perhaps."

"A thousan' dollars; a cool thousan'! Says I, 'Young feller,' — he was young, 'n' that may account f'r it! — says I, 'Young feller, I ain't hankerin' to sell, f'r I've jes' bought it, but if I was I'd go ye! Do you reely think it's worth what you're offerin' fer it,' I says to him, 'er air you jes' tryin' t' make me feel good, so's I'll sleep hearty t'-night?' An' what d' ye think? Says he t' me, 'That land lays clost up ag'in th' town, d' ye notice?' 'I've been noticin' it!' I says. 'Well, as you won't sell,' he says, 'I don't mind sayin' t' you that she'll be worth two

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thousan' 'fore th' summer's done.' Was he joshin' me, 'r preachin'? I could 'a' got th' thousan', I reckon!"

"I think that he may not be far off in his guess; land here is bound to rise, it's going up now like a rocket. He did n't offer you any more than your land is worth to-day, in my opinion. Town lots are rising; everything is rising."

"Even th' price of grub, if you've noticed; them 'ievin' store keepers in Golden have pried up th' cost of everything, an' air weighin' their hands in t' boot every time they make a sale. I reckon I'll hold onto that land a spell, anyhow."

"That's right, hold it."

"Might speckilate a little yerself," Prethro suggested. "You ain't dippin' into nothin'. Jes' showin' these grangers round an' seein' 'em settle down on th' range — which is a shame! — an' not tryin' t' git holt of anything yerself. Buy some land, 'r take a claim, 'r git holt of some-thin' some way; then sell out, soon's some fool gits crazy 'nough to make it pay ye."

Blake did not answer this. He had reasons of his own for not wishing to buy or sell real estate. How could he make a deed or written transfer? He could not use the name of Dick Brewster. Could he sign any legal document with the name of Jackson Blake, though in so doing every dollar invested might be made to breed like a mackerel? His scanty legal knowledge made him believe that the thing would not be criminal in the eyes of the law; but in his own eyes it would be a crime. So he was not

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taking land, he was not investing, he was not speculating, though he saw a thousand opportunities round him whereby he could make money.

The subject was not pleasant, and he turned the talk again to the immortal Sam Bass, and soon had Prethro engaged busily in spinning cowboy yarns.

Hank Wilson came back ; and, settling down in a hastily constructed dugout, began to put in crops, though the season was already late. This was not pleasing to Prethro, who did not desire any rivalry in his self-appointed position of vegetable purveyor to the rapidly growing town of Golden City.

Blake assisted Wilson as much as he could, though he would have found it hard to account even to Hank Wilson himself, to say nothing of Prethro and other friends, if he had been compelled to answer why he took such interest in this stranger from Arkansas. He found odd minutes and even hours in which to aid in constructing the dugout. He helped Wilson to sink a well, to build a sod stable, to stretch the barbed wires for a small corral.

It was really pathetic if one could have understood ; for in all this, Blake, wholly innocent of any knowledge that Wilson was the man who had plunged the knife into the heart of Jed Anderson, was performing a labor of compensating love and devotion. By some strange mental process it seemed to him that the things he was doing for Wilson he was doing for Christine and for his father. He was laying up those sod walls for them, digging that well for them,

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splicing and pulling at that barbed wire for them. And, remarkable though it may seem, he found something of peace and rest in it.

When Wilson spoke sometimes of people back in Ransoms, Blake, pretending to be but slightly interested, listened with aching heart. The little that was said was like a drop of water to Tantalus; so much remained unsaid! He learned that Christine lived and that his father lived. Wilson, perceiving no doubt that Blake was hungry for such information, doled out a little now and then, pretending to be talking meanwhile of things which had happened to himself in connection with people unknown to this man.

In his work as a locator Blake soon began to find rivalry. He had been earning big wages, and the man who does that always encounters competition. The one livery stable in Golden City put out some locating teams; and, as the business paid and the hungry land hunters increased like swarming locusts, other men entered into the work of showing them about over the plains and pointing out to them the corner marks of sections and quarter sections, and advising them where to locate.

Throughout it all Old Shake kept on in the even tenor of his way; every night reading a little from his favorite volume, every morning riding about, into the town, or out upon the plains where his immemorial pastures were being taken by men who claimed them now as their own and talked sharply with threatenings of damage suits if he did not keep his cattle away from their crops. Fortunately the greater part of his herd, let loose

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to roam at will after the round-up and the branding, was far away, where even the restless settlers had not yet reached.

Old Shake had ominously and sonorously prophesied drought, casting eye at sky and horizon as if he were the Ancient Mariner. He had believed the drought was coming; but the rains were falling, as they had done at that season the year before and the year before that. It did seem as if the theories of the land hunters were true, and that the character of the climate was changing and pushing the region of safe rainfall farther and ever farther west. Old Shake did not believe it; but the signs and the elements were all against him, and his prophesying of evil to those who trusted to the flood gates of the skies instead of the flood gates of an irrigating ditch was thought to have a deep basis of selfishness, as any man would naturally want to keep that magnificent pasturage for his cattle.

So the settlers came and continued to come, the warm verduring rains causing them to crowd upon each other in their eagerness to get land before the best of it should be gone. They pushed farther and farther out from Golden City; and the city itself grew with such miraculous development of life and energy that it seemed Aladdin himself had awakened long enough to give a few rubs to his old brass lamp and engage in the business of town booming.

CHAPTER XVIII

HYMEN'S CARNIVAL

BLAKE," said Prethro, with strange sheepishness, puffing out a cloud of screening tobacco smoke to hide his face, "been a thing I thought o' mentionin' t' you f'r a goodish bit. Nice an' cool in yere, ain't it?"

The day had been one of intense heat, the sky a burning cobalt; but within the dugout the heat was quite bearable.

"Yes," said Blake, replying generally and looking absently at some dry rosin-weed kindling he had been breaking up for the purpose of starting the evening fire in the cook stove.

Prethro fidgeted and began to grow more embarrassed.

"Did n't know — ahem! — did n't you, ye know, but you might 'a' noticed it!"

Blake, smiling in his brown beard, evaded a reply by rattling at one of the stove lids and looking into the stove to see if the ashes needed to be removed.

Prethro hesitated so long this time that at length Blake spoke.

"Noticed what — the heat? I noticed that, all right, when I was out."

"'Pies like yer mother uster make!'" said Prethro, breaking out in an unexpected spot. It

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was not what he wanted to say, though, and Blake knew it.

"Pies?" Blake questioned, looking up.

"'Like yer mother uster make.' Be good t' put on a sign fer an eatin'-house, don't ye think? Seen a sign like that down in Wichita, you recomember—you spoke of it at th' time, 'n' laughed, but struck me as good. 'Pies like yer mother uster make.' Put that on a sign over an eatin'-house f'r these yere grangers t' snag their optics on, an' it's my 'pinion they'll come into that hash house ever' time. Got some good punkins 'n' squashes, pie-plant, 'n' other truck growin' on my land—you seen it t' other day. Can't git no price fer it in th' stores, so I been thinkin' it'd pay big t' turn that stuff into pies 'n' sell it myself. 'N other words set up a rest'rant."

"Not a bad idea," said Blake. "What made you think of it?"

"Well, Ol' Shake's cattle bizness is goin' t' be deader 'n dead chinch bugs in a little while; no more range 'count of th' grangers bein' crazy f'r land, 'n' you locaters showin' it to 'em. Was talkin' to 'im 'bout it t'-day—'bout that an' some other things—'n' he says, says Ol' Shake, 'Th' cattle bizness is shore goin', but don't make so much diff'runce t' me, f'r I'm goin' soon, too, me 'n' th' ol' woman; though it does make a heap sight diff'runce f'r th' girls. They've got t' live on, even if th' range peters.' That's what he said, 'r words to that effeck, with some poitry throwed in f'r good measure."

"I guess he has diagnosed the disease correctly," Blake remarked, looking into the coal-box.

"So, th' subjec' comin' round handy like, I hands the ol' man a few words that I'd been honin' to deliver f'r some time."

He glanced at Blake but received no return look of encouragement. Blake was very much interested in that coal-box; it was nearly empty, and possibly he was thinking that an empty coal-box needs to be refilled.

"Not that I'm fergittin' some things that mebby I ought to recomember, you know, but I hands 'im a few to the effeck that me 'n' — ahem! — me 'n' Jinny —"

He coughed and stopped; this was worse than "handing" those few words to Old Shake, for Old Shake had been kindly receptive, at least.

"Well, durn it," he blurted suddenly, "you know what I mean! Me 'n' Jinny air goin' t' be hitched Thursday night of next week, 'n' then we're goin' into th' rest'rانت bizness in Golden. Goin' t' have a reg'lar lay-out of a weddin', with all th' fringes — flubdubs 'n' flummery 'n' gim-cracks f'r her, an' me prancin' round in a black coat like a spavined cow pony. We ain't goin' t' count th' cost. There'll be a reg'lar parson; an' after th' parson goes there'll be a high ol' dance, with Lost Charlie doin' th' fiddlin' act, an' Pony Brown 'r some one callin' th' figgers. This ain't any ingraved invitation on shiny card-board that you're gittin' to that weddin', Blake, but it's straight out — rough, mebby, like throwin' a rope at a steer — but it's th' kind that if I had a friend what was goin' t' git married, I'd want that friend t' hand t' me."

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Blake turned from the stove and the coal-box now; he could no longer make a pretence of failing to understand, even if he had wished to and he did not wish to. There was sincerity in his face and in his tones when he spoke.

"I'll be there," he said, "and I thank you; such an invitation is good enough for a king. And now that the subject is up, Prethro, let me tell you that I think you have n't made any mistake in your choice of a wife."

He extended his hand heartily in congratulation. Prethro beamed like a Kansas sunset.

"You was n't guessin' 'bout that little joker I had up my sleeve!" he said, with innocent delight. "It's been a su'prise all round. Lost Charlie nigh about took a fit when I invited him, and Pony opened his mouth tell I thought t' goodness th' kid'd swaller hisself. Fine ol' su'prise all round."

"You always were good at surprises," Blake admitted, smiling down upon his friend. Then he told one of the biggest and most pardonable lies of his life. "It was a great surprise; I don't see how you managed to keep it from all of us so well!"

Prethro slapped his knee joyously.

"Say," he said, spreading his mouth in a wide grin, "I been layin' awake nights, wantin' t' tell you 'bout that, but dassent, f'r the reason that Jinny told me t' keep my head shet. But it's so nigh now that she ain't 'bjectin' any longer. Didn't know but you might 'a' guessed it, though."

Blake did not burden himself with a further

falsehood; he only smiled and repeated his congratulations.

"We 've been pards a good long time now — nigh about a year," said Prethro. "Don't seem like it's so long, but 'tis — nigh about a year."

He looked at Blake earnestly.

"Did n't know but you might be keepin' some sort o' secrits frum me, same's I was frum you?"

"In what way?" Blake asked, going back to the stove.

"'T would be nice, now," Prethro urged, "if we two could tighten them pard cinches a bit tighter, 'n' be brother-in-laws as well 'z pards. Thought mebby you might be thinkin' of it; nice girl, Vady is. Ain't no likelier heifer round these ranges, 'z fur 'z I 've noticed, 'ceptin' mebby Jinny, who 's older 'n' more suited t' me on account of her age. 'T would n't be bad, that brother-in-law bizness, strikes me."

Jackson Blake flushed slightly.

"What about Lost Charlie?" he inquired.

"Well, he has been herdin' round there some, that's a fac'. But I dunno 'z that gives him any ownership. She's a maverick, till somebody slaps his brand onto her."

"I think that Miss Vady is the sole and only reason that has caused Lost Charlie to stay so long with Old Shake. That's my guess, anyway."

"Well, mebby; but he ain't corralled her yit. So long 'z she's out on th' free range, without rope on her 'r brand, she's any man's that ketches her."

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Blake laughed. He was accustomed to the cowboy idiom, but familiarity could not stale some of Prethro's eccentricities of language.

"She is good enough for any man. I'm not denying that, Prethro. But I don't happen to be in the marrying humor just at present. But we're pards always, if not brothers-in-law."

"Shore!" said Prethro, with animation. "'N' I ain't never wantin' any better. But when I come t' brother-in-laws, I'd prefer ropin' up with you more 'n with any other man. Not that Lost Charlie ain't all right, fer he is. Jes' a matter o' preference, you know; 'n' — 'n' friendship."

There were many invitations issued to that wedding and dance. Those invitations reached as far as Dodge City on the east and Las Animas on the west, and took in likewise many of the people of Golden City, including some of the newer arrivals. And almost every invitation was accepted. Perhaps some of those who came realized that cowboy dances, to say nothing of cowboy weddings, were to be things of history very soon, and for that reason were the more anxious to be present.

Old Shake's mansion of sod would do for the wedding ceremony, but when it came to the dance a more roomy interior was needed. So the partitions were removed from the wide bunk-rooms, which in the times when Old Shake was younger and more of a cattle king had sheltered many cowboys, and thus a large space was provided, with a raised platform at one end for the accommodation of Lost Charlie and the caller of the dance figures.

"We could import one o' these yove string bands that they call an orchestra, frum Dodge," Jim Prethro explained, speaking of these preparations to Blake, "but 't would n't be like th' good ol' times. Gimme one fiddle, 'r mebbly two, in the fingers of fellers that knows how t' jig 'em, 'n' you kin cut out all the orchestrys f'r me. 'N' f'r good springy dance music, th' kind that lifts you by yer boot straps, if Lost Charlie can't tear it out of that thing he calls his wild canary there hain't no man on this footstool what kin."

So the Thursday evening of the wedding came. The July and August rains were over and fall was drawing on. The day had been one of melting heat, but the air was cool and sweet now, for the coolness of night comes quickly to those high plains when the sun hides his burning face away behind the rimming horizon of the flats. The stars hung out their clear lamps, like flashing candelabra in the great high dome of the night sky. Nocturnal insects scraped their fiddles as if calling on Lost Charlie to begin his music.

Across the darkened expanses cowboys came riding on galloping bronchos that kicked up white streaks of dust; settlers' wives, sons, and daughters arrived in big wagons filled with prairie hay, which made for the laughing young people more comfortable seats than any upholstered cushions ever contrived by the cunning hand of man; while out from the town of Golden City rode and walked those who had been so blest as to receive invitations, and some others who had not, but who thought it worth their while merely to stand round outside like cranes in the darkness,

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if they could but listen and look on at that distance.

Within the great sod house itself, in addition to the arriving guests, was Jim Prethro, awkwardly self-conscious in his unaccustomed black clothes, which Blake had with much trouble helped him into. Lost Charlie was there, too; he was to stand at Prethro's side ("t' take th' cuss off!" said Prethro), when the new Golden City preacher pronounced those words of solemn import. Pony Brown was there also, tremulously interested and important, guying Prethro at times by assuming that Prethro had snatched the prize of a bride from him just when he was making up his mind to propose and be accepted. Not the least of those who busied themselves were Old Shake and Mrs. Shake. They were like those flowering white century plants whose rich, ripe bloom sometimes lends beauty and dignity to such an occasion. Blake said their presence anywhere was a benediction, and it was more than a benediction here.

Blake had not thought Virginia Caxton dowered with beauty, but she was beautiful that night as she stood before the minister with Jim Prethro and took upon herself those marriage vows. It is said that every woman who marries with love has the privilege of being beautiful at least once, and that is when she seals her plighted love for good or ill with the man of her choice.

This night Virginia looked tall and comely, almost queenly, arrayed in white, with bride roses in her dark hair. The customary sallowness of her cheeks was driven away by the flush that now

so well became them, and the light in her eyes made them starlike. Prethro, clothed in solemn black, lost in appearance standing there beside her.

A bride is seldom tremulous or nervous; a bridegroom is so nearly always, and Prethro, never, as he would have told you, "a society man," and awkward even on ordinary occasions where fighting or shooting or cow-punching work was not concerned, was doubly so now, due to his desire to "do this yere thing up proper." He came near getting his answers to the clergyman's questions in ahead of schedule time, but he got them in, and that was, after all, the main thing. Then he could not find the ring. He had given it to Pony Brown when he should have given it to Lost Charlie, and Pony having thought it necessary to inspect some beer in another room at this particular juncture, the ring part of the ceremony came near being cut out altogether. But Pony bounded into the room with the desired article while Prethro was still hunting for it through those unfamiliar pockets of the black suit, and so saved the day most heroically.

Lost Charlie was twanging his violin strings before the wheels of the parson's buggy were lost to hearing down the trail that led to Golden City, and the sound of that twanging drew the guests into the reconstructed bunk-rooms.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Lost Charlie, standing on his platform, violin and bow in his hands, when the bunk-rooms were pretty well filled, "there 's goin' to be some first-class singin'

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by and by, handed out from the warblin' heart of my old pard, Pony Brown. He made this promise to me under the gentle persuasions of a revolver; so, knowing that he'll keep a promise given like that, we're goin' to excuse him awhile from callin', and call on Petie Langton, of Las Animas. Prance this way, Petie, if you please, you're wanted."

Pony Brown, very red in the face, was on his short legs protesting that he had promised nothing of the kind, but he was howled down; and young Langton, a comely youth in cowboy garb, came forward out of the crowd, threw his wide hat on top of the piano at which Nevada had already established herself, and requested all those who wished to dance to get their partners for a quadrille.

Instantly those young men who had not already secured partners began to hurry here and there, stopping before self-conscious and blushing young women and asking them for the honor. In a very few minutes the dance was in full swing; a romping, joyous dance, the fiddle sending forth a lively air and Petie Langton yelling the figures. It was necessary for him to yell, otherwise the noise of those thudding boots and dancing feet would have made his words indistinguishable. Petie Langton's calling ran something like this:

"Bow to your pardners. All hands round and circle to the left. First couple balance and swing. Now next couple take a fling. (Everybody dance as lively as you can — all the handsome girls and every ugly man!) Whoop 'er up! — swing the yaller-headed girl; swing the beauty with a curl.

Now promenade to beat the band, move like a buckin' horse kickin' up sand. Bal — ance all! Make — no — fall! This is the call of a high old ball! Gents chassa and pound the floor; go it ag'in — a little bit more! First gent swing your opposite pardner; now your own girl. Ag'in your opposite pardner; and now, whirl — your girl — with the teeth of pearl! Ladies now! — see the ladies dance to win; three hands round and go it ag'in. *Everybody* — grand right and left (dance, my hearties, with all your heft!) Whoop 'er up; that's right — you're — all — right; go it, everybody! Now, *all* promenade — for I am through, and so are you; and this is the end of our howdy-do."

Lost Charlie could swing a bow and caper his fingers without tiring as long as any other man, but even he paused after a while, knowing that he must hold himself somewhat in reserve, for this dance, like all of its kind, was likely to last until daybreak. Stopping thus to conserve his strength, he called loudly for that "sweet singer," Pony Brown, to "waltz forward and warble a few" for the entertainment of the dancers, while they rested and fanned themselves.

There was no escape for Pony, except by an ignominious flight out upon the open plains, and Pony was too much of a coward for that; so he came forth, pushed forward by those who stood with him at one end of the room.

"Gentlemen," he began, flushing painfully; then stopped and coughed. "I mean, ladies and gentlemen, — 'scuse me fer forgittin' my comp'ny manners; but I want to say this here is a hold-

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up. Now, why don't you call on Lost Charlie hisself? Sing! Why that feller can sing to make a steer cry! He done it on the Pawnee, last round-up, and I 'm knowin' to the fact, fer I was there. No, this ain't no josh, — I kin prove it! The cattle was stampede crazy that night, an' we all thought they 'd shore go."

"Say, you chuckle-headed prairie dog, what kind of a rig is this you're givin' us?" Lost Charlie demanded. "Do your singing, — that's what you was invited out on the floor for!"

Pony Brown grinned, though still flushing scarlet; he had planned this to get even with Lost Charlie for forcing him into that uncomfortable position.

"Oh, don't go to buckin'!" he called. "This here is all a true story, an' you know it."

"That's right! Go ahead, Pony! Tell us all about it!" came from all round.

Pony smiled and swaggered triumphantly.

"The cattle was that restless that night they shook the ground with their breathin'. Then up comes Lost Charlie. 'Gents,' he says, 'I can quiet them fellers!' We told 'im to try, for, by jacks, we could n't, an' this is how he went at it."

Here Pony spread his legs apart as if he were mounted on a cow pony, lifted his arms as if he were playing a violin; then told his story, with such natural pantomimic gestures, and they were very effective, as came to him at the moment of the telling.

"Here was Lost Charlie on his broncho, and here was his fiddle, and here was them dad-gasted



crazy cattle ready to bolt any minute like a load out of a pistol. But Lost Charlie was shore ekal to the occasion. He begun to play his fiddle and to ride round that there herd, and to sing while he was playin'; and this here is what he sung to 'em and the how of his way of singin' it :

" ' Darlings, I am growing o-o-old,
Silver threads among th' gold,
Shines a-pon my brow to-day-ay,
Life is fading fast away !

" ' But, my darlings, you will be, you will be,
Ever young un' fair t' me !
Yes, my darlings, you will be-e-e-ec,
Ever young un' fair to me ! "

" An' you may shoot me if them fool steers did n't believe the liar, an' took pity on him an' laid right down an' went to sleep jes' like little lambs in a daisy paster."

If Pony Brown thought he would be let off with this effort he was mistaken ; and not being equal to the manufacture of another lie on short notice, he was forced to fall back on the old cowboy favorites. So with a nod to Nevada at the piano, who always knew what was coming when he nodded in just that way, he opened with that classic of the plains, " Sam Bass."

Sam Bass was born in Indianny, it was his native home ;
'T was at the age of seventeen he first began to roam ;
He come to Texas in his youth, a cowboy for to be,
And a better-hearted feller you 'd hardly ever see.

He rode the wildest bronchos, he roped the biggest steers,
He swung a gun so handsome 't would fill your eyes with
tears,

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His chaps were seamed with fringes, his coat so bright with
quills,
An' the way the girls flocked round him give other fellers chills.

He got a herd together in the merry month of May,
Then started out fer Abilene, the devil for to pay ;
He sold 'em there fer a pot o' cash, an' went on a howling spree,
And a tougher lot of cowboys you 'd never want to see.

Pony Brown led his hero through ten verses of this, and then stopped, not because there were no more, or that the applause he received was not entirely satisfactory, but simply for the reason that he was out of breath.

When Pony confessed that he was "done up," and sat down, cries of "Peaches" brought out a merry-eyed boy with curly brown hair, a red handkerchief round his neck, and a faint mustache on his upper lip ; and "Peaches," in a beautiful tenor voice, gave a rendering of one of those woful songs which cowboys delight in, this particular song being the dying words of a poor range rider who "went up against a gun" in the hands of a too-quick enemy. Each verse, and there were many, was followed by what the cowboys called a "chorus," which ran thus :—

Then toll the bells slowly,
And beat the drums lowly,
And play the Dead March as they carry me on ;
And drop a tear for me,
When they lay the sod o'er me,
For I 'm a poor cowboy, and far from my home.

This was so sad that Lost Charlie called for "Handsome Harry," which "Peaches" sang in a manner that was considered perfection :

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"I'm a red hot, roaring cowboy, and my name is Handsome Harry ;

I have chased the festive steer on many a plain ;
Spite of stunted sage and cactus I love the rolling prairie,
As the tarry sailor loves the raging main.
With the spangled sky for coverlet, a saddle for my pillow,
I've camped where blizzards freeze and sand-hills blaze ;
And by treacherous lake and river brink, where nods the leafy willow,

I have fought and drunk the alkali that slays.

"Raging reds, arrayed for battle,
Frightened, charging Texas cattle,
On the grassy slopes of memory arise ;
But I downed them all, with neatness,
Took life's bitter with its sweetness ;
And I strive to rope good fortune as it flies."

There was much more of this, not so good, perhaps, but good enough to drive away doleful thoughts of the unfortunate range rider.

Lost Charlie was scraping his fiddle before the applause ended ; and again, after a hustling search for partners, the couples formed in sets on the floor, and once more the popular square dance was being romped through in wild abandon.

Hank Wilson had been invited, because he was supposed to be Blake's friend ; and he proved himself a nimble caperer, after the rough Arkansas fashion with which he was familiar. Blake encountered him just after he had led a settler's wife smiling to her seat in a chair by the wall.

"Having a good time?" Blake asked.

"Right peart," said Hank, his hawk-like face flushed by the violent exercise ; "I ain't had a better sense Heck was a pup!"

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It was the acme of praise.

The night stars were paling before the heralding flush of day, when the dance ended.

The following Monday Mr. and Mrs. Prethro opened their restaurant in Golden City, and began to offer to a hungry public "pies like yer mother uster make."

CHAPTER XIX

WHILE CUPID HELD THE REINS

IT was October — glorious, golden October — when Judge Spencer and his daughter Elinor arrived in Golden City, from Brownsville, Arkansas. As they alighted from the train Jackson Blake was sitting in his bright repainted carriage behind his roan bronchos, in the sandy street before the station. Blake recognized the judge at a glance; and flushing uncomfortably, began to pull his bronchos away, as if satisfied that the train from the east had brought him no business.

With the carriage turned half round in the middle of the street, he stopped, his desire to depart from the station arrested by words. Hank Wilson, also at the station that morning, had seen and recognized the judge, and was now speaking to him. Blake obeyed a sudden impulse, and listened, with beating heart, to the conversation that followed, not daring to glance in the direction of the speakers.

"Well, Hank, how are you coming on?" was the first that he heard Spencer say. He knew that the men were shaking hands.

"Right peart," Hank Wilson answered, after his customary fashion.

"I knew you were here," the judge observed. "Some one told me about it in Ransoms, the

last time I was over there. There will be some other men out from Arkansas soon, I think. Nice country here, they tell me. I thought I'd run out and take a look at it. If I like it, I may conclude to stay."

As the judge passed up the street on his way to a hotel he looked squarely at the young man in the bright carriage. Blake's heart thudded; then he felt a sense of relief. Judge Spencer did not know him.

With this feeling of relief Blake began to assure himself that while he could not fail to recognize this man, who as a judge had tried him and sentenced him to prison, it was almost certain the judge would not be able to recognize him. In the first place, Blake had changed greatly, and Judge Spencer very little. In the next place, many men, charged with almost every form of crime, came for trial each year before this man. Their features would necessarily fade quickly from his memory even if no change took place in them. On Blake's part that trial was the event of his life which had stamped itself most clearly on his memory. He could never forget it, nor any man who had a part in it. He could recall now, as clearly as if the scenes were being re-enacted, every detail of the court room, and the very appearance of the judge as he sat deciding the many questions of law raised by the attorneys.

Forget the face of Judge Spencer, of Brownsville! He could never forget a line of those fine, clear-cut features. He even seemed to recall each single hair of that graying, closely trimmed beard; and as the judge walked now up the sidewalk,

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with his daughter, Blake seemed to see him walking up the aisle of that distant court room.

As for the judge's daughter, Jackson Blake was certain he had never seen her before.

He was about to drive slowly up the street after the judge and his daughter, for the sight of the judge fascinated him somehow, when he was aroused by the voice of Hank Wilson, and looking down discovered that Wilson had advanced to the carriage wheel.

"One o' my ol' neighbors, Jedge Spencer, o' our county-seat, back in Arkansaw. Cyan't rec'lect ef I ever spoken ter you 'bout him er not. Got his darter wi' him; shore nice-lookin' gal. Chaince fer you there, Blake, an' I won't charge ye nawthin' fer the hint!"

He laughed queerly. His bird-like face was upturned to that of the man in the carriage, his eyes searching those of the young locator. Blake controlled his nerves by an effort.

"Fine-looking man," he said, staring at the judge's receding form. "I scarcely noticed the girl."

"As nice lookin' as her pap; he interduced me. Name's Elly-somethin' — nore, I think — Ellynore. He's er-goin' ter look round a bit, he says, an' mebby you might git a chaince ter locate 'im on some lan'."

"Thank you," said Blake, anxious to get away. "It may pay me to look into it. I'll see which hotel he goes to."

Then he gave the bronchos a cut and drove away, his face still flushed and his gray eyes shining strangely.

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"I'm too easily scared," he mused. "If Hank Wilson has n't recognized me in all this time it seems certain that no one else will. So what's there to be afraid of? I stampede like a nervous steer at the first rustle, and think everything I see or hear is an enemy coming to do me harm. I'll have to brace up. There will be more people come here from Arkansas, and from Brownsville and Ransoms likely; it would be strange if they should n't, when settlers are pouring in from everywhere. But no matter who comes I'm safe enough. If Hank Wilson, who knew me so well there, did n't recognize me here, no other person can."

Even with this mental reassurance he was undeniably nervous. He did not follow on to see where Judge Spencer and his daughter went — had no thought of doing so, but wanted an excuse to take his burning face away from the sharp eyes of Hank Wilson; instead, he drove the bronchos to the livery stable. He was making enough money to enable him to take care of his bronchos and carriage in good style; moreover, he was lodging uptown now himself, and getting his meals at Prethro's restaurant.

When he had turned the bronchos and carriage over to the employés of the stable he sought the quiet of his room, and there thought out again the question of whether he should leave, as he was tempted to do when Hank Wilson came, or should stay on boldly in Golden City. The decision was as before — he determined to stay.

Having reached this conclusion he went down into the street, and proceeded after a time to his

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office. He had now established an office, and had an office boy to look after affairs when he was absent with intending settlers.

"Yes, I'm safe enough," he again assured himself, as he sat in his office chair and stared out into the street. "I've got to stay somewhere and I might as well stay here as any place. Keep my nerve and take the bull by the horns; that's what I must do, and it's what I will do."

To get his mind away from the disagreeable subject he took up some recently published rulings of the land department and began to study them. But he dropped them after a while and sat for a long time staring into space. Billy Gregg, the office boy, thought he was studying the big map of the United States, which hung on the wall, but Blake was quite unaware of the existence of that map, or of the wall itself.

As he came up from Prethro's restaurant, immediately after dinner on the following day, he saw Billy Gregg open the office door and usher in two people, who were none other than Judge Spencer and his daughter, and who, but a moment before, searching the office signs along the street, had descried the one above this door—

JACKSON BLAKE, LAND LOCATOR.

Blake halted in hesitation as he observed these people go into his office. For a moment he seemed about to turn back, then he straightened his broad shoulders and strode on, entering the office himself.

Judge Spencer, who with his daughter had been seated by Billy Gregg to await the return of the

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locator, arose when Blake came in. Something told the judge that this clear-eyed young man with the brown beard and the brown hair streaked prematurely with silver was the young man whose praise as a thoroughly trustworthy locator he had heard sung at the hotel and at other places where his investigations had already led him.

"Mr. Jackson Blake?" he inquired.

"The same," Blake answered, waving him back to the chair.

"My daughter," said Spencer.

Blake bowed, looking for an instant into the eyes of the slender young woman. In that instant he saw that she was a very beautiful girl, with eyes that were a dark violet, or a very dark gray-blue, he could not determine which. He noticed, though, that they were shaded by very long, dark lashes; that her hair was a dark brown, with something like a shine of gold where the sunlight rested on it; and that her features, somewhat dark, too, were regular and oval, with a warm color showing in the cheeks.

For the next moment Jackson Blake hardly knew what Judge Spencer was saying, but he caught the statement that, the locator having been recommended highly, he had called for the purpose of being driven out over the country with his daughter, that they might view some of those leagues of buffalo-grass at close range.

Jackson Blake might have sought for an excuse to keep from driving out with them, but something in the eyes and face of the girl stayed his words of declination.

"Yes, I think I can do so," he said, when

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questioned directly, and even said it with alacrity. The judge and Elinor were seated again, the judge doing most of the talking now.

"Where do you wish to go, — any particular place?" Blake queried.

He had taken a seat also, giving his attention now wholly to the man who, in that far-off time in that far-off other planet, had sentenced him to that awful imprisonment, the thought of which had been so terrible that he had fled, and to which he felt that he could never go back of his own free will.

"Just out over the prairies," the judge answered. "I don't care to take land — that is, no homestead or pre-emption, or anything of that kind, though I may want to buy something later if the country pleases me. We — my daughter and I — simply want to see the country, and have some one with us who knows it well and whose statements concern it can be relied on in every particular. I have been told, Mr. Blake, that you are that kind of man — just the man I am looking for."

Blake colored slightly.

"My friends flatter me," he said. "But I can show you the country, and can give you my opinion of the things we chance to see. You will want to go this afternoon, I suppose?"

"And if there is any prairie-dog town, we want to see that!" the girl interjected.

"Elinor has been crazy to see a prairie dog. I tell her they're only a big sort of rat or chubby squirrel, but she still expects to behold Newfoundlanders digging holes in the ground out here."

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A quarter of an hour later Jackson Blake drove the shining carriage and the roan bronchos up in front of his office, and dismounting assisted the judge and his daughter into the vehicle. Blake swung up over the front wheel into the seat of the driver, and set the bronchos in motion by a word and a snap of the whiplash. Sitting thus he could without much effort look back at the two in the seat just behind him and so talk easily with them, as he talked almost every day with those whom he drove about the country.

Judge Spencer and his daughter had already inspected Golden City, so it was not necessary for Blake to point out to them its chief points of interest—the new hotel which the man from Kansas City was erecting, and which when finished would cost many thousands of dollars, and have on its second floor the largest and finest “opera house” between Kansas City and Denver; the new bank building that was to be occupied by the Golden City First National at the beginning of the next month; and all the other marks of the advancing strides of commercialism. He pointed them out, nevertheless, and in so doing found opportunity to steal glances at the bright-faced young woman.

The judge praised these things, viewing them from a business standpoint; but Elinor did not hesitate to say that she found the town itself rather uninteresting, and even ugly, and that she wanted to get out into the open plains.

The town of Golden City, with its squares of new frame houses set down like so many building blocks on the flat surface of the wide, wind-

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swept valley, was certainly uninteresting to the æsthetic eye. There was much dust in the sandy streets, which crossed each other with the regularity of outline of a checker-board. On the main street, which constituted all there was of the older town, a few cottonwoods grew and made something of a shade, but the rest of the town was hot and sun beleagured.

Golden City, with its new, shining houses and its dusty streets, its rampant commercialism and lack of beauty, was soon left behind by the quick-stepping bronchos, and the broad valley of the Upper Arkansas, cut here and there by new irrigating ditches, opened out before.

"Don't forget the prairie dogs," Elinor reminded, as the carriage swung out upon the beaten trail.

"I thought of going there first," said Blake, smiling back at her; and he drove away toward the nearest dog town.

It was not large and seemed even smaller than it was, in that wide, flat expanse, but the tiny "dogs" were there in sufficient numbers to be interesting, sitting at the entrances to their underground retreats, or running here and there as if on brisk business bent, or nibbling at grass and grass roots.

Blake stopped the bronchos, and the party sat in the carriage looking out over the town. The dogs, accustomed to such things, were not much disconcerted so long as the carriage remained at a distance, but a near approach sent them into their holes in a wild stampede, from which after a time they would poke out their

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noses, and then after a further silence emerge, to sit or stand barking at the entrances, emphasizing each squirrel-like bark with a sharp snap of a stubby tail. In addition to the dogs, there were a few tiny burrowing owls staring in the sunshine. They were like toy owls, and had a queer way of twisting their heads so far round to look at the visitors that an observer might have been pardoned for thinking the heads were in danger of being twisted off.

When Elinor's curiosity concerning prairie dogs had been somewhat appeased, and Blake had been called on for all the prairie dog lore of which he was master, the carriage went on again, climbing by and by out of the valley to the higher levels called "the flats."

Here another stop was made and a bird's-eye view taken of the valley. Golden City had dwindled to insignificant dimensions. Now and then the windings of the river could be seen, looking with the sand on each side of it like a curving silver rope incrustated with dull gold. At a few points willow trees, mere shrubs viewed at that distance, marked it, but the willows had for the most part been cut down by thriftless settlers, who saw more beauty in them when rendered into stove wood than when they flourished green and umbrageous at the river's brink.

Beyond the valley and the river rose the irregular range of sand-hills, a broken gray-green wall cutting the sky line like a curiously notched saw. Over all was the wondrous October sky. The locators and men interested in the speedy settlement of the country likened that sky to

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the sky of Italy. It was like it, yet unlike it. It was as blue and in this month as serene; yet it seemed farther away, a great deep vault, and the blue was steelier and harder. Out of that marvellous blue—a speckless, fathomless, blue—the sun blazed, hot even on this October day, a disk of burning silver.

Up on the rim of the flats the wind blew even more strenuously than down in the valley, but there was no dust taint in it, and it held the stimulating odor of countless leagues of drying buffalo-grass and myriads of dead flowers. A few hardy flowers still bloomed, starring the short, dry grass, which, when the beaten trail was left behind, crisped and crunched under the feet of the bronchos with a sound of dry petals crushed in the hands. That grass, sometimes spread unevenly in tiny bunches, cushioned the jolt of the carriage, so that the wheels seemed to be passing over a rich gray carpet in which the few flowers were set as mottled needlework.

Down in the wide valley and out over the level upland houses of settlers were scattered at infrequent intervals. At the side of each house or near it was an oblong or square of plowing, looking often like a mat spread out in front of the dooryard. These small plowings were some of the "improvements" required by the land office. Here and there irrigating ditches laced the lowlands like fretwork of brown and silver.

Blake pointed out all these things, as if they could not be seen otherwise, and talked of them, facing round to speak to the judge. His eyes lighted with pleasure whenever Elinor asked a

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question, for then, in replying, he could look at her directly. Already he had almost forgotten that Judge Spencer was the man who had conducted that terrible and agonizing trial. Perhaps this forgetfulness came the more readily because he did not want to think of it.

Blake talked of the beauties of the plains, too. On this subject he was naturally an enthusiast. All nature was more than beautiful to him, it was something almost to be worshipped. And the plains were very beautiful that day.

The transcontinental traveller, flying across the country in a space-devouring Pullman, sees the tawny sand-hills of the Upper Arkansas valley; the rugged ravines and ridges with their stunted sage-brush and reddish waving sedge; the sandy river-bed, the shores barren of trees throughout much of its course; the uninteresting towns that fly by, many of them as like each to the other as the white painted mile posts; the hideous shacks, sod houses, and dugouts in which numbers of the people dwell, and turns to his newspaper or his book with a yawn that expresses either weariness or disgust. This traveller beholds only the fringe of things, and so does not know the beauties lying behind that which he condemns.

There are other people who, having been on the plains for a brief time, will assure you that it is the most wearisome portion of the continent. Even they, though they think themselves wise in their scanty knowledge, do not know, simply because their view of the plains was too transient.

He who has seen the great plains in all their

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moods and changes can never declare that they are uninteresting. Jackson Blake had so seen them, and as he proceeded now to point out their beauties, his face shone and his words became eloquent. Elinor listened with enthusiasm. Spencer on the other hand, though he admitted that these miragy, wind-swept expanses of crisp grass were not unattractive, questioned mentally concerning this thing and that, and wondered if this young land locator were not, after all, like others, given to spinning pleasant stories and recounting descriptions which had little foundation outside of an exuberant imagination.

Elinor, however, seeing with the eye of appreciation, and hearing with the ear of a nature worshipper, beheld and listened with pleasure. Nothing escaped her attention. Her fine eyes observed the tawny body gleam and the glistening white patches of the antelopes that swam into and out of the purple ground haze; her ears heard the "prut-t-t-t — prut-t-t-t!" of the high-flying sand-hill cranes, themselves but specks in the infinite azure above her, and the lilting sweetness of the song of the meadow lark, as he sat on the dead thistle-head displaying his bright yellow vest and black-brown collar, and swayed with head in the wind.

White-tailed and black-tailed jack rabbits, great gray fellows, leaped from coverts now and then and scampered away across the springy grass, or lifted themselves, after a few hops, high on their long hind legs, to stare with questioning gaze at the intruders. Startled gophers, grayer cousins of the chipmunks of the Arkansas woods, whistled

shrilly as they ran to their hidden holes. Occasionally a lank coyote skulked from ridge to ridge like a shadow of evil. Once a prairie rattlesnake buzzed his note of warning in the grass, and Blake, stopping the bronchos, would have descended to kill the reptile with his whiplash. Elinor restrained him.

"Why, the thing ought to be killed!" her father protested.

"We don't want anything killed on this trip!" she said, firmly. "It would spoil it for me."

So they sat still in the carriage, looking down at the dull dusty coils, until the snake, finding it was not to be attacked, ceased to ring out its vibrant warning, and dropping down, slipped away into a hole.

Blake thought of Jim Prethro's philosophy, which asserted that wherever there is an Eden there is likewise a snake.

A flock of wild geese bound for the river honked loudly as they drew their sharp harrow across the fields of the upper air; and on one of the numerous alkali lakes myriads of wild ducks quacked, or flew about in high circles with whistling beat of wings.

Elinor queried concerning the buffalo wallows and the "fairy rings" seen frequently; and Blake informed her that the wallows were made by the buffaloes gouging with their matted heads and sprawling their huge bodies in small depressions in the rainy season, whereby they tried to rid themselves of stinging flies and mosquitoes. As for the "fairy rings," he had been informed that

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each told the story of some terrible storm or blizzard, when the buffaloes "milled" to keep from freezing to death — that is, gathered in a compact mass and circled round and round for hours in a big "mill," the motion and the heat of their bodies enabling them to withstand the terrible fall of the temperature.

Then he explained wherein cattle differed from buffaloes when thus caught; cattle drifting before the storm with heads down, continuing to go until overcome or the storm abated, while buffaloes marched with their heads turned into the furious blast, or milled.

The bluish ground haze that had resembled a smoky heat shimmer cleared away after awhile. Then what wonderful vistas opened to the surprised vision! The tops of the sand-hills, all that could be seen of them now, and some low hills to the eastward, appeared to be but a mile away. Herds of cattle came into view as surprisingly as if they had risen out of the ground. Distant shacks and sod houses looked to be astonishingly near. Neither Elinor nor her father were willing to believe they were so distant, until Blake, turning toward one of them, asked Spencer to time the drive. The house seemed no more than a mile off, though it was three miles away at the least.

Mirages began to appear, with the lifting of the shrouding ground haze. Little lakes of blue became visible here and there. As Blake drove toward them they changed in shape and general characteristics; shrinking sometimes, vanishing with startling suddenness sometimes, at other

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times spreading out and ramifying until the amazed spectator beheld a sea with water courses unnaturally blue and smoky, and bays and sounds that were often shoreless. Where shores were visible trees appeared to be growing on them, but Blake assured Elinor and her father that those seeming trees were only weeds and thistle-stalks exaggerated out of all proportion by the mirage. Both had heard and read of mirages, but these were like nothing ever described to them in speech or print.

Through the mirage cattle moved as if they were forests marching, and unimposing sod houses grew into tall towers. Looked down upon from a slight elevation the landscape had the appearance of a raised map. The shacks and sod houses, the strips of plowing, the depressions where the slough grass grew and the wild oats nodded, the alkali lakes shining in the sunlight like indentations of mica, the few men and animals moving here and there as if they were the inhabitants of some region in which chimeras took the place of reality, all were strangely vivid and unlike anything the visitors had ever beheld or imagined.

As they turned homeward, night hawks, the "bull-bats" of the plains, were filling the evening sky with beat and dip of white-starred wings. To Elinor it seemed impossible that night was approaching. She did not want to go homeward. She felt as if she had wandered far out into one of God's great temples, whose carpet was gray-green sprinkled scantily, but daintily, with splendid color, and whose vast dome was golden azure

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filled with high and brilliant lights; a temple hung with beautiful pictures, where Nature herself strewed flowers on the altar, where bird choirs chanted, and the wind swung odorous ceusers. She did not want to go back to that ugly toy town, and to a room which would close in on her, after this, with prison-like walls.

She said as much to her father, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Very pretty," he admitted; "but when it comes to practical things, I prefer a dining-table and a good bedroom even to this."

She was silent after that; and Blake was silent, too. The hoof beats of the bronchos clattered on and the carriage wheels buzzed and br-r-rd. The sun descended quickly, sliding down the west as if, having lingered long, it hastened to be gone that it might return the more speedily.

With the descent of the sun the sky took fire, burning with russet reds that shaded off into red golds and pink silvers. In the east the lights were grayer and more sober, mingled with a mellow haze as of a shower of golden dust; in the west they were flame and ruby, garnet and carnelian, streaked and banded where a few wisps of cloud, drawn earthward by the approach of night, hung like gorgeous draperies along the path of the sun's blazing chariot wheels. But the very glory of this departure of day seemed to shorten it. The colors dimmed to less fiery tones, and these soon lost tint and became pearl, opalescent, and dappled wool. But for a long time after the bright lights had failed, the sky overhead and high in the west held a shimmer

half light that fought back the darkness until the stars came out.

With the stars appearing one by one, swimming into view with the failing light as if swinging swiftly earthward and bursting suddenly upon the sight, a streak of fire shot across the eastern sky line and began to climb the low hills. It flung itself up these as if it were a burning serpent, flashing and sparkling with explosive, rocket-like effects.

"Some settler has tried to burn a fireguard to protect his grass land from possible prairie fire, and in doing it has let his fire get away from him," said Blake, as he looked at it.

"It's a fire, then?" said Elinor, as if relieved.

"Yes; climbing up those hills we saw this afternoon. It will destroy a lot of pasture."

The red streak broadened into a red lane, from which goutts of flame leaped; then mounting higher, where the winds blowing across the crests of the hills could strike it fairly, it rolled away, a sea of fire, toward the south.

"Will it reach the town?" Spencer inquired anxiously.

"No; there are some big draws down that way, with waste alkali land where there is no grass, and it will have to stop there for lack of fuel to feed it."

"It's a beautiful sight," said Spencer, who did not often become enthusiastic. "Worth coming all the way from Arkansas to see!"

It was a beautiful sight, if anything which destroys can be called beautiful. When they drew nearer to it they could hear its crackling roar and

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could feel the suck of the breeze created by the upward swing of the heated air currents. In the midst of the roar and a part of it was a snapping sputter like musketry. When this sounded loudest they could see what appeared to be flaming arrows shooting in all directions from the forefront of that river of fire. These were burning rosin-weeds, whose exploding gum hurled the stems and joints of the weeds out in every direction as if they were propelled by thousands of taut bowstrings.

Now and then a ball of fire was caught up by the wind and hurled onward with great bounds; a phenomenon which Blake explained by saying that these balls of fire were tumbleweeds, which, growing big and round, dry up in the fall and break off close to the ground, to become thereafter the sport of the winds, blown north one day many miles, and rolling back under a reverse wind the next day as many miles or more, which is Nature's clever plan for seeding the plains with tumbleweeds. When caught by a night fire, as in this instance, with the wind propelling them, they race and tumble on in their usual way, transformed into globes of fire, beautiful and spectacular, but terrible in their possibilities as fire spreaders.

The plains fire, started by a careless settler, was still rioting on the high ridges when Blake and the Spencers entered the town. But the houses were not large enough nor set thickly enough together to shut it entirely from view, and could do nothing at all toward blotting its light from the sky.

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Elinor, in her room at the hotel, sat late, with the curtains drawn aside, watching it and enjoying it, thinking of all the things she had seen and heard that day. Naturally an honest-faced, brown-bearded young man, with brown hair strangely silvered, was the centre of the mental pictures she drew. How could this be otherwise, when he had been the driver of the roan bronchos, and had given so freely, in answer to what must have been wearying questions, of that marvellous store of plains information which he possessed?

As for Blake, he did not sleep well that night. He thought very little of the things seen that day; to him they had become almost commonplace, though he still loved them. What he thought of, and what he saw, was the face of Elinor Spencer, with its matchless eyes, its soft, clear complexion, its intelligence, its eagerness, and its wholly new and pleasing delight in everything. She had even appeared to be pleased with him — with him, Jackson Blake! She had smiled — smiles which showed the white, even teeth between the red lips, and which seemed to indicate that she approved of him and of what he said.

Strange to say, he did not think of Judge Spencer at all, except to regret that he had been forced to accept payment from him for that delightful drive, and to wonder if the judge would like the country well enough to make it his home (as he had said he might do if it pleased him), and to feel nervously rebellious at the con-

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clusion that of course the judge would not wish to do anything of the kind.

So Jackson Blake did not sleep well ; and when he did sleep these waking thoughts and feelings followed him into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER XX

SATAN CAME ALSO

A FEW days after the arrival of Judge Spencer and his daughter in Golden City, a man stepped from the Eastern train at the station and asked to be directed to Hank Wilson's.

He was a young man, and well dressed. His lean face expressed intelligence; his dark eyes were bright and shrewd. Over the lower part of his face hovered a perpetual smile, which lifted the thin mustached upper lip and revealed firm, even teeth, white as a wolf's fangs. A reader of Dickens, who was also a good reader of character, would have been reminded of the immortal Carker on beholding this man and his white teeth showing in that eternal smile, which communicated in no way to the upper portions of his features, except possibly to the bright eyes, which wrinkled at the corners as if they, too, would smile, but failed somehow in the effort. Another thing which might have recalled Mr. Carker was the name, which sounded much like it, for it was Parker.

Among the objects that the shining eyes of Martin Parker took in, as he descended from the train, was Jackson Blake, seated behind his bronchos, awaiting business. Blake saw Parker and turned from him instead of toward him.

"He knows me all right," was Parker's thought.

Then he passed into the station and asked the ticket agent to tell him, if he could, how he could find Hank Wilson's claim.

The ticket agent could not, but another man was there who was able to, and thus directed Martin Parker set out along the railway track. He looked at the houses of the town, at the soil, at the sand-hills and the wide valley as he walked, but his thoughts were chiefly of the young man he had beheld in the carriage.

The sun had set before he arrived at Hank Wilson's dugout. Wilson, who had been doing some fall plowing, had just come in from his work and was putting his team into the sod stable.

"Howdy!" said Parker, with effusive greeting, emphasizing his smile. "Thought I'd hunt you up before I went anywhere else and see how the land lays. You look to be prospering. Any other Arkansas men round here?"

"I'll be dawggone ef't ain't Mart Parker!" Wilson exclaimed, reaching out his hand. "Seed you comin', but did n't 'low I knowed who 't war. How're ye? 'N' how's ever'thing an' ever'body back ter Ransoms? Been a 'coon's age sense I hed word frum thar."

Parker walked about with him as he finished his evening work, and sat in the dugout still talking as Wilson started a fire in the cook stove, for Wilson was his own housekeeper.

"Co'se you're er-goin' ter stay all night wi' me," the Arkansan urged. "I ain't no great

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shakes at cookin', but I kin keep ye frum starvin', I reckon, an' ef you kin put up with thet bed over thar you're mighty welcome. Makes a feller feel good ter see somebody frum the ol' place. Been tellin' messe'f thet I did n't keer a chaw er terbacker fer Ransoms ner ary thing in it, but I war a fool when I opined thet, I cal'late, fer the sight o' you makes me purt' near home-sick. When you goin' back, er air you er-goin' ter stop out hyar?"

"Can't answer that yet. I'm just going to look around a bit. Been hearing big stories about this land; and Sam Ford showed me a letter you sent him some time ago bragging on this country. So I thought I'd come out and see you, and see what's in it."

"Ford showed ye my letter, did he? I cal'late thet he hain't got spunk ernough hisse'f ter pull up stakes an' come. He did n't allow now thet he wuz er-comin'?"

"No, he is n't coming."

"I knowed in reason *he* would n't."

"But you are n't alone out here," Parker observed, with a pronounced smile. "When I got out of the train I saw Dick Brewster!"

Hank Wilson turned on him suddenly.

"Say," he cried, his voice trembling, "he hain't er-goin' by thet name out hyar, he hain't!"

"No?"

"'Jackson Blake' is what he calls hisse'f; an' I 'low ef a man wants ter he's got a right ter pick out any name 'z suits 'im so long 'z his doin' of it ain't hurtin' anybody."

The smile that curled Martin Parker's lips deepened and spread, though even yet it could not quite extend up to and include the eyes in its amiable expansion.

"Well, I suppose if anybody's got a good reason for wanting to change his name he's the man. Let's see! How long is it since he broke out of that jail, and a reward was offered for his capture?"

Hank Wilson put down the frying pan he had been using and sat on a stool by the stove, from which point he eyed the smiling young man before him.

"See hyar!" he cried, and his voice croaked harshly. "You hain't er-thinkin' none of tryin' ter git holt of thet reward?"

Parker laughed uneasily.

"Well, I don't know! I had n't thought about it, for I did n't know the fellow was here until I saw him there at the station. He's changed a good deal, and has let his beard grow, and that might fool some men, but it didn't fool me. And I suppose it did n't fool you?"

"No, I war n't fooled ary single minute; but I kep' my head shet, jes' ther same."

"I should suppose you'd have thought of that reward — would have tried to get it. Three thousand dollars does n't grow on every bush, even up here. It was three thousand the State and county offered, was n't it?"

"Looky hyar!" said Wilson, the croak in his voice more pronounced than before. "You're thinkin', air ye, of tryin' ter git thet reward?"

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"I had n't thought anything about it, I told you, until just now."

"Then don't think erbout it!"

"No! why not?"

"'T ain't healthy."

"What do you mean?"

"Jes' thet, — 't won't be healthy."

"You mean that he is a dangerous man, desperate even, and that he would be likely to commit another murder before being taken back?"

"Looky hyar! Ef you're er-thinkin' o' thet three thousan', stop thinkin' of it. Ef I war his frien', I'd make thet reekwest; not bein' his frien', I make it anyhow — sorter, ye see, in the intrust o' jestis. He's started out new, an' he's doin' well hyar, under another name. He'll do better, ef he's let alone. He had orter be let alone."

Parker smiled in the thickening gloom.

Perhaps because there was something queer in that smile which made him wish to see Parker's face more clearly, Hank Wilson rose and lighted a coal-oil lamp. He sat down on the stool again, when the light of the lamp illuminated Parker's face.

"You war on th' jury thet foun' him guilty," he continued, in a slow and distinct way; "an' bein' on thet jury you done your whole 'n' bounden duty at thet time. You listened ter th' ev'dence, an' you foun' him guilty; an' right thar is whar your duty ter the law eended — right then en' thar. You warn't the jedge, ner th' shurruff, ner yit the jailer. You war on'y jes' a

juryman, an' you foun' 'im guilty; an' no more war n't ast o' you, an' no more hain't bein' ast of you now. I knowed him hyar in this place 'z soon 'z I sot my eyes on him; but I hain't cheeped, an' I hain't er-goin' ter."

Parker still smiled — he always smiled — but he did not answer.

"He broke away — clawed outer thet jail; an' now he's hyar. Secin' thet you done your duty et th' time of th' trile, an' thet you're not ary off'cer ner shurruff which the law hez ordered ter run 'im down, thar hain't any call fer you ter do any more. Thet's the way I look at it, an' thet's the way I set it out. You hain't any call to do anything more — even ef you would lack ter hev thet money. It's a heap er money — three thousan' dollars; I've never seed thet much in all my born days; an' I hain't never goin' ter see it, not in thet way!"

"You put the thing strong!" said Parker, feeling called on to make some comment.

"No stronger'n I'm 'bleeged ter. An' you would put it strong, ef you war in my place. I come hyar, not knowin' ary thing 'bout the tricks o' the country, an' the June flood ketched me, an' would er drowned me, ef 't hed n't been fer him. He drug me outer the river, an' resked his life er-doin' it. When an' ef a man favors me, then I favors him."

"So that's your reason?"

Parker laughed with an attempt at amiability, though he was not feeling amiable.

"Thet's one er' th' reasons; I could mention others, but thet's ernough."

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"He did that to get on the good side of you," Parker suggested.

Hank Wilson's dark eyes glinted angrily.

"He did n't know thet it war me, when he done it!"

"But suppose I, who am under no obligations to him, should choose to run whatever risk there may be, in order to deliver him up and get that reward?"

Wilson leaned toward him.

"Darst ter do it!" he said. "Darst ter even dream thet you're ter do it, an' 'z cert'in 'z thar's a hell I'll send ye to it double quick. I've never let on anything, an' you ain't er-goin' ter. Ef you do, ef you ez much 'z bat cross-eyed at him, er ever hint o' anything thet you know, er make trouble fer him in any way, then by the Eternal God I'll shoot yer head so full er holes thet it'll do fer a pepper box. You hear me!"

Martin Parker heard him. He knew, moreover, that Hank Wilson was not speaking idly. In Arkansas Wilson had been a man to be feared; he was said there to be quarrelsome and to hold human life lightly. Many whose relations with him were strained had felt relieved when he packed his few belongings and set out for the new lands of Kansas. All this Martin Parker knew. Caution became the moment; and that suited him, for he was always cautious. So he merely laughed again, and proceeded to dismiss the subject, as if it were of no consequence, and as if no threat had been made.

Later, when he met Jackson Blake, Parker

greeted him as a total stranger. Whereupon Blake who had been much alarmed when he beheld this member of the jury that had tried and condemned him in Arkansas, took fresh courage and had a renewal of his faith in the disguising changes made by the hand of time

CHAPTER XXI

JACKSON BLAKE'S PARTNER

JUDGE HENRY SPENCER not only decided to settle down in the New West, but, much stranger than that, he took as full partner into the business he hoped and expected to build up, Jackson Blake, the young land locator.

The judge had made his journey to Golden City in a disgruntled state of mind, due to the fact that at the last Arkansas election he had been "turned down" by his old constituents in favor of a younger man. It was the fly in the ointment, and it made all other things there unattractive. Hence, in visiting Golden City, he had cherished the strong thought of locating there and starting in anew, if he found the conditions favorable. The conditions, as he viewed them, after mature reflection, were very favorable.

After the return from that long drive over the plains he had asked Jackson Blake some pointed questions.

"Mr. Blake," he said, "you are a man of extensive experience in the cattle country, and I can see that you are also reliable and truthful. I have serious thoughts of stopping here, but I must know my ground first. All this is new to me; it is old to you. You have studied

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the country, and you have heard the grangers and the cattlemen talk. Now, as an honest man, what do you think of the outlook? I can see that there is a boom coming here. Will it be a winner?"

And Jackson Blake, looking the judge honestly in the eyes, had answered:

"I should n't want any man to bank on my judgment in anything so important as this. But I'll answer you to the best of my ability, and after that you will have to use your own discretion and common-sense. When I first came here, and heard Old Shake and his cowboys talk, I thought as they did, that these land hunters were more or less fools, to put it mildly. This is, or was, a great cattle country; no better grass for cattle anywhere. I saw that and I heard Shake and Lost Charlie and Pony Brown and others talk, and I said to myself, this craze won't last.

"But it's lasting and it's growing. Late as it now is the land hunters are still coming to look over the ground, with the intention of sticking down their stakes permanently here in the spring. The season we have had was rainy enough for most crops; the season before that was rainy; and so was the one before that, as even Old Shake and Lost Charlie confess.

"The grangers say and believe that the rain-belt is moving steadily westward; that in Eastern and Central Kansas, where it was impossible to grow crops twenty or even ten years ago, fine crops of everything are now raised and the country is full of valuable farms. They say that the same thing is sure to occur here. 'Rainfall fol-

lows the plow!' They will tell you that, and back it up with proof; and when you've heard the proof, and recall how the eastern and central parts of the State were a few years ago, you've got to believe them. Even Jim Prethro says that in the part of Eastern Kansas where he was born it was too dry to raise crops with any certainty when he was a boy, but that now the rainfall is ample.

"So I'm coming round to believe that the grangers are right, and that the cattlemen and cowboys are mistaken. This buffalo-grass sod runs off the rain as if it were the roof of a house. Cut that sod to pieces with plows, and what rain falls will sink into the ground, and become the beginning of a store of moisture which will increase as the years go by, until this land will grow as good crops as any other part of the State.

"The soil is fine; you've seen it. It will make great wheat land and alfalfa land and sorghum land; too high, perhaps, and nights too cool for corn; but corn is n't the only crop that can be grown profitably. Candidly, I think the thing is coming round. I have never bragged and blustered about the wonders of the country agriculturally, as some locators do; I state what I've seen and what others think, and let the men I show about use their own judgment, just as I've used mine, and as I'm asking you to use yours.

"But one thing — if this country does develop enough rainfall to make farming pay one year with another, it will become a granary that will make the Nile Valley ashamed of itself!"

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Judge Spencer took time to think the thing over in all its bearings; and he remained, and Jackson Blake became his partner, in a neat office on the main street of Golden City, where a sign swung bearing this legend:

SPENCER & BLAKE,

LAND ATTORNEYS, REAL ESTATE AGENTS,
GOVERNMENT LAND LOCATORS.

All business before the United States Land Offices and the Land Department at Washington attended to promptly.

Before this partnership was formally entered into, it was revealed to Blake by the judge himself, that Spencer had "strings on" certain influential politicians in Washington, and that influences were being brought to bear which would result in the creation of a new land office for that section of the country, and that its location would be Golden City. This was not to be mentioned abroad, lest some cog in the machinery of manipulation might be slipped thereby; but the whole thing, Spencer confessed, had been laid out before he came away from Arkansas; and moreover — this being to him the most important of all — he was to be appointed receiver or register of the new land office.

However other things might go, there was nothing surer than that the location of this United States Land Office at Golden City would give to the gathering boom an impetus which nothing else could. It would make Golden City the centre of a new land district, would draw all eyes to it, and crowd the town with settlers, real

estate men, and town boomers. Every form of property would kite skyward, and whoever was "in on the ground floor" would be in a position to profit immensely.

In view of this the judge began to buy land and town lots right and left. Blake brought out his considerable savings, for he had made money that season, and became the judge's partner in some of these deals, as he was already in a business way. He felt that he could do this without violating his conscience, which up to this time had kept him out of such things and so had relegated him to the humbler position of a mere locator of untaken government lands.

Now, by permitting Judge Spencer to sign deeds and other legal papers, as president of the Investment Company of two which they organized, Blake being wholly secondary and of no account in the public eye in these dealings, he escaped the disagreeable necessity of writing "Jackson Blake" at the bottom of legal documents. The arrangement into which he had thus entered enabled him, also, to shift to Spencer the signing of such legal papers as were filed in the land office and the law courts.

Thus it came about that Jackson Blake, as the junior partner of Judge Henry Spencer, was launched on the full sea of land speculation and land booming in and about Golden City.

Judge Spencer's mind became soon a very spawnery of all sorts of plans and schemes whereby the boom which he saw coming could be stimulated and made to turn into his pockets big returns in money. He not only bought lots and

land in and around Golden City, but began to plan the building of a town some miles away, in what he thought would be the centre of another county as soon as population justified the segregation of that section for county purposes.

He foresaw this other town becoming the county-seat, and in his pride in it he named it Spencerdale, and published seductively worded posters and advertisements, which he began to spread broadcast through the mails and by other means before a load of building material had been deposited on the site.

By Christmas Day some of the buildings were up in Spencerdale, a store was started for the benefit of the few settlers there, and to assist in the booming, and a post office had been asked for. The post office would not come before the beginning of the spring boom; but the post-office department is slow, the judge reasoned, and he had the application sent in early.

All these things were known to Elinor Spencer in their general features as they occurred. As for the details she knew little about them, and cared less. Whatever her father set his hand and brain to was proper, right, and wise. He had been a successful and prominent judge, and she did not doubt that in the new field he had chosen he would be equally successful and prominent. She listened and approved whenever he talked to her of his plans; and she smiled with favor on that worthy young man, Jackson Blake, who had so won her father's good-will and high opinion.

Necessarily she saw Jackson Blake a great deal because of these conditions. She was beginning

to realize that she admired him. He was not like other young men whom she had met. He had brains; he was clean and handsome to look on; he had a rare and sympathetic smile; his gray eyes met one honestly and without reserve; he was capable, as her father fully testified; and he was making money and in a way to make a great deal more, as her father also fully testified. Without realizing altogether just what she was doing, and just what those flushes and strange heart throbs meant when she met him, she knew that she liked Jackson Blake very much.

There were other things to occupy the mind of Elinor Spencer, though these other things sometimes made but brief impression, owing to a mental trick which persisted in throwing Blake's picture on the canvas when she was looking at and thinking of something else. Of the things which particularly interested her, there was the peculiar and lovable home life of those queer old people who were universally known as Old Shake and Mrs. Shake. Their names were Caxton, she knew, but they became to her as to every one else, simply Old Shake and Mrs. Shake. Then there was Lost Charlie, who had taken on himself that ridiculous name, though he had a better; and Pony Brown, staring and awkward whenever she met him; and that altogether odd creature, Jim Prethro, the restaurant keeper.

She found interest, also, in the people at the hotel where she occupied apartments with her father; in the queer conglomerate that made up Golden City's cosmopolitan population, and in the big-hatted, big-hearted grangers who were

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always prowling round the hotel and through the streets.

The flickering remnants of plains life interested her even more — particularly the mustang hunters who came in one day from some point north, with a lot of captured wild horses, which she pitied when she saw on their legs the marks of the cruel breaking chains. She went often out upon the plains to drive or ride, and always joyfully. She saw the bone haulers gathering buffalo bones and cattle bones, which they were selling in the "city" for transportation to Eastern manufacturers of fertilizers and bone ash. She had her father and Jackson Blake bring to her some of the handsomest of the buffalo horns they found in their journeyings over "the short-grass country," and on a few occasions she was made happy by finding such specimens herself.

She now called this new land "the short-grass country"; everybody did; and she really felt, having loosed the ties that held her to the old life and the old home, that she had become a permanent dweller of the short-grass land, and held something like pride in the fact that she was a pioneer

CHAPTER XXII

CAUGHT IN THE STORM

ELINOR had never seen the much talked of site of Spencerdale, where there were now a few houses and a store, and where there was soon to be a real government post office. Therefore, when toward the end of the first week of the new year her father spoke of driving over to the "town" with Jackson Blake, she asked and was given permission to accompany them. The distance could be driven readily in less than a day, and the return journey could be made as readily on the day following.

So Judge Spencer, his daughter, and Jackson Blake drove across the country to Spencerdale, where they found shelter in the new home of the man who was to act as the local agent in the sale of the town lots. It was altogether a pleasant drive, for though the season of the year was usually so unpropitious, there had been but few storms and snow flurries, and the traces of even these had disappeared.

At Spencerdale the judge found certain business conditions which demanded that he should stay much longer than he had planned. Hence it came about that on the day following their arrival Jackson Blake set out with Elinor alone to drive back to Golden City. Blake was rather

pleased with this arrangement ; and Elinor, reading her own heart, though somewhat blindly, knew that she was pleased, too. With each this knowledge was a pleasant secret, to be kept religiously from the other.

They set out somewhat late, for a long talk between the judge and Blake seemed to be necessary before starting, this talk being of matters in Golden City which Elinor did not seek to understand, and cared nothing at all about. She was anxious for those roan bronchos to be moving and the carriage wheels to be spinning. Her face brightened when her father and Blake emerged at last from the as yet unpainted doorway of the new, unpainted store.

Though they had started so late Blake did not seem inclined to hurry. He permitted the bronchos to take their customary easy pace, while he and Elinor talked of the things they saw, of the earth and the sky, of Spencerdale, of some affairs in Golden City, and certain acquaintances.

Blake was conscious of pleasure in looking at the slender form in the seat beside him, at the finely chiselled face, the straight, aquiline nose, the delicate brows, and the lights that played hide and seek in the coils of the beautiful hair where sunshine gleamed perpetually.

In spite of the fact that January days were upon them, there was scarcely a hint of icy winter in that cool, bracing atmosphere. Overhead the sky was that same matchless blue which the plains can always show when there is no fleck of cloud nor storm brewing in the upper air. They saw coatless settlers following plows along brown

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furrows, beheld cattle grazing, and the cold of winter was apparently impossible and far away.

So pleasant was that long drive that the afternoon was nearly past before either Blake or Elinor was aware of it.

Suddenly, as the sun began to sink and the shadows to gather, while Golden City was still a speck in the lower valley, a chill of cold air smote them. Jackson Blake, with a sting of self-accusation, turned in the carriage seat to look back over the way they had come. As he looked his eyes filled with a strange light and his face became set.

What he saw was a blue-black line rising in the northwestern sky, where the sun had gone down without any display of red clouds and fine color effects, — a blue-black line that extended far across the horizon. Elinor also looking back saw that line, but did not know what it meant. Jackson Blake knew and accused himself of thoughtlessness.

"That wind is getting cold," he said; "we must drive faster. It is always cold here in winter as night comes on; I really did not know it was so late!"

"Yes, drive on!". Elinor urged, feeling the wind chill her even when she turned her back upon it. "How cold it's growing! Last night at this time it was fairly pleasant. Is that a storm coming, do you think?"

"Perhaps," said Blake, "but we can reach town before it gets to us."

He did not want to frighten her or give her needless alarm, although he knew that the blue-black line was the threatening front of a snow

storm, perhaps of a blizzard. It could be nothing else at that time of year ; and as it had increased while he looked at it, he knew that it was advancing with frightful rapidity. In summer a line like that would have portended a heavy rain or a furious fall of hail.

Starting somewhere under the auroral shine of the Arctic Circle, the great blizzard, — long since a matter of Western history, — swept down over the flat plains, which stretch almost unbroken from the Arctics into Mexico ; swept with the touch of death in its stinging needles of snow.

A more terrible storm than even Jackson Blake feared was upon them. The drop in the temperature with which it heralded its rapid advance was something to startle the most experienced. As the warning line crept out over the horizon and began to envelop the northern sky, the wind which, lulling at first, had shifted into the north with that first intimation, became a singing, whining blast, that soon numbed the limbs and chilled the body.

Blake, who had buttoned his overcoat to his chin, felt his fingers begin to tingle in his heavy gloves. He lashed the bronchos until they tore along at almost frightful speed, dragging the bouncing and swaying carriage. He would have raised the carriage top but that he feared when the blizzard struck fairly the carriage would be lifted and overturned.

As the sudden fall of the temperature was thus making itself felt, the sky darkened almost into night and snow began to fly with the wind, — a pellety, shot-like snow at first, that changed



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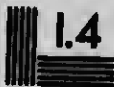
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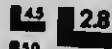
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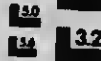
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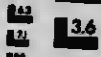
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quickly to the character of powdered, frozen glass. The trail blurred under this driving ice dust and the increasing gloom.

Soon the coming night and the storm made the air so thick that Blake could hardly see; but he gave the bronchos head, lashed them on, and let the lines hang loosely in his hands, lest the slightest pull on them should turn the bronchos out of the trail. To become bewildered and lost now he knew would mean almost certain death.

By this time Elinor Spencer began to understand that their plight, brought about by the slow driving, was likely to become serious. But the town was not so very far away, as plains distances are reckoned, and she had faith in Blake and in those bronchos. So she was not very much alarmed, though the keen tingle of the cold and that terrible wind which penetrated even her thick wrap were things not to be laughed at nor regarded lightly.

As Jackson Blake thus lashed his bronchos on, with the darkness deepening and the white choke of the flying ice dust filling the air so that neither he nor the bronchos could see anything, there was a sudden rending crash. He felt himself hurled forward against the nearest broncho and was pitched to the ground where a carriage wheel struck him and knocked him senseless.

The next he knew Elinor was trying to lift him from the snow-covered ground. Her hands were under his arms, and she was sobbing hysterically. He held up his hands and felt hers clasp them firmly. Thus he gained his feet; and they stood together, swaying unsteadily in

the gale. The bronchos and the carriage were gone, and all about was that awful smother of stinging snow driven by a wind like ice. Blake was dazed and bewildered.

"We must have struck something," he said, groping about with his feet.

"Yes," she answered. "I thought I was thrown out against a wall; and then—I found you on the ground, and—"

He could hardly hear her because of the surf-like beat of the blizzard.

"A wall!" he said. "Then there may be a house here, or some kind of shelter."

He put his arm about her to steady her against the gale, which threatened to tear them from their feet.

"In which direction?" he asked, for he could see nothing, not even the girl by his side.

"Oh, I don't know; I was so frightened!"

"Are you hurt?"

"N-no, I think not; just scared and nervous. The wall must be over that way. A step or two ought to take us to it."

Blake was not sure of that, having had some experience in Western blizzards, which are no more like the things called blizzards in the East than brown is like midnight black. Of one thing he was very sure, though, and that was that if he and Elinor stood there long they would either freeze or smother. Once, after a blizzard in the Nation, which could not have been as severe as this, he had found cattle dead with cups of ice over their breathless nostrils, and old cattlemen had told him that these cups

formed of snow and of the moisture of the breath had frozen there and smothered the cattle. Already his hands and feet were so numb they had nearly lost sensation, and the floury snow and the raking wind were choking him and chilling him to the bone. Instinctively he drew Elinor more closely to him, hoping to protect her, though he knew the protection could be but little at the best.

He was surveying the situation with clearing mind, well aware that a step in the wrong direction might be fatal. If in searching for the wall they moved away from it, they might not be able to find it at all, even when they reversed their course.

He recalled the fate of a lonely line rider who, venturing from his dugout in such a storm for the purpose of feeding his horse in a near-by shed, lost his course in trying to return, and was found in the snow dead, three miles away. So while debating Blake took note of the wind, and moved cautiously with Elinor in the direction she had indicated, feeling the way in advance with one outstretched hand and with his feet.

Blake's hand soon touched the wall. Then they moved along it. The snow was drifting. Ploughing through the drifts they turned the corner of the wall. This brought them into the lee of a low house constructed of sods and boards, and they found there a spot which by contrast was sheltered, though the gale piled the snow over the roof and from behind the walls in wild gusts.

Blake's numbed fingers touched a door, against which he began to hammer with gloved fist, calling loudly at the same time. Getting no response he tried the slippery knob; then set his heavy shoulder against the boards and by a great effort forced the door open, tearing loose the catch of the lock. Dragging Elinor by the hand he pushed his way in, out of the screaming, pounding blizzard.

The little house was dark and deserted. Blake stumbled against a stool as he closed the door, and this stool he used as a prop to keep the door closed. The room seemed very warm. This was only because the blizzard had been shut out, for the little house was really very cold. He began a search through his pockets for matches. He found some and struck a light. The blazing match, held up as a torch, revealed the interior of the dugout—a small, nearly square room, with a closed door at the other end.

With a feeling that was almost joy he noted the rusty cook stove, one of those combination wood and coal stoves so common in certain parts of the West. Against one wall was a narrow cot, almost denuded of its covering. A tattered blanket and the remnant of a quilt were piled on it in a small roll. The walls were hidden by muslin, once white, and now covered in a patchy way with pictures cut from illustrated papers. This muslin, tacked on loosely, swayed and belied before the wind that came through the crevices between the boards forming the upper portions of the walls. The thing that gave Blake the most pleasure was the rusty cook

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stove; if fuel could be had it promised fire, and fire was needed to fight away the cold.

"We're all right!" he said cheerfully, though his lips moved stiffly, being so nearly frozen. "We'll have a fire going soon. I think I know this place; it's Sill Emery's. I located him myself. He has gone back home for the winter, I suppose."

Then the match having flickered out he stumbled across to the stove. His eyes had fallen on a pine board, remnant of a goods box. This he attacked with his pocket knife. Meanwhile he talked to Elinor, telling her they were all right now; and guided by his voice she walked slowly across to where he crouched. He did not strike a match to guide her steps; the few matches in his pockets might mean much to them by and by.

As he struck his second match and its light flared up he looked at her. Her face was fiery red from the sting of the storm, and he could see that she was very much frightened. As he thrust the pine whittlings and splinters into the small stove, and they blazed out a promise of warmth, she crouched by his side, shivering, and began to pull off her gloves.

"I'm blue with the cold!" she said, and seemed about to sob; then, being a woman, she tried to flick away some of the snow which the wind had driven like finest flour into the meshes of her clothing.

Blake did not observe these motions; he was down on his knees before the stove, feeding and husbanding the fire he had started. When it was

burning well, he broke up the remnant of the pine board by stamping it with his heel, and thrust the pieces into the stove. Instead of closing the stove door, he left it somewhat open, that the light might illuminate the gloomy interior of the dugout.

"If we don't find any coal in here we can tear away a few of the boards, I think; it's lucky we found this place!"

He had risen and was looking about anxiously. Elinor crept still nearer to the stove, and having removed her gloves thrust her fingers into the opening through which shone the light of the blaze.

"I wonder what became of the bronchos?" she queried. "Oh, hear that!" as a furious dash of the gale made the walls shake. "There isn't any danger that the house will be blown away, I suppose?"

"None at all," he assured, looking into the corners where the shadows lay heavily. "It's a dugout, and the roof looks strong." He lifted his eyes to it. "Sod roof, supported by timbers and cross boards; it's safe enough. And besides, the house will be pretty well anchored and buried in a little while if the storm keeps up; then a cyclone could n't dig it out."

In the increasing light from the stove he moved to the near-by door, and pushed it open, finding it unlocked.

"I thought I remembered that there was another room here; and it must be even warmer than this, for it's a kind of cave which Emery dug in the side of the hill. I advised him not

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to build here under the hill, for I knew his house would be snowed under in the first storm; but it's lucky for us that he did n't take my advice. And another lucky thing — this dugout is n't so very far from town. The bronchos fairly flew after that wind struck them; but," he added thoughtfully, as if the thing puzzled him, "they got pretty well out of the trail, or they would n't have hit this place! It's two hundred yards from the trail if it's a foot."

He was searching for fuel while speaking, moving about in the corners, and beating his hands together to warm them. He discovered only a few pine boards. Returning to the stove with these, he resolved to make a further search.

He was beginning to realize how stunned and dazed he had been, and to know that he had very nearly met his death when he was thrown out over the dashboard of the carriage and was struck by the wheel as he fell to the ground. On one side of his head was a swollen bruise that throbbed painfully.

"You're sure you were n't hurt?" he questioned, as he came back to the stove. "It seems a miracle that you were n't killed!"

She was not hurt, she assured him; only jarred by the fall, and frightened.

"If we could only get on into town," she urged; "but I suppose we can't for a while! How far did you say it is?"

"Not a great distance, — scarcely a mile, I think."

"It might as well be as far off as the moon. Listen to that wind and the beat of the snow!

"I never heard of such a storm as this, I know; and how suddenly it came! I hope the bronchos reached home all right."

She was beginning to brighten, feeling more comfortable and less nervous. Blake had thrown the boards down by the stove, and she glanced up at him, remembering how she had felt when she discovered him in the snow and thought he must be dead or injured terribly because he did not answer or move when she spoke to him. The terror of that moment when, hardly knowing what she was doing, she tried to drag him to his feet had not wholly left her. Yet here he was, lusty and broad shouldered, his head almost touching the low dugout roof, and talking to her as if he felt that she was unduly alarmed and wished to reassure her. She gained strength from his presence, he was so big and so strong!

With that accession of strength came a renewal of courage, which slowly drove away her fears. They had met with a stunning accident in the blinding storm, but had escaped death or serious hurt; and though she wished they could have reached the town and the hotel, this situation was not wholly unpleasant, now that she was more comfortable. This strong man was familiar with storms, he was resourceful, and she felt that she could trust herself to his protecting care in this emergency.

And Jackson Blake, though he realized the peril of their situation more than he cared to confess, found a joy he would not own in the sympathetic and trusting manner with which she addressed him. He could have been quite con-

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tented and even quite happy but for the fact that a further search showed there was almost no fuel in the dugout. He could use the door connecting with the other room, and meant to do so by and by, and he might with safety remove a board or two from the roof, but not many, lest the roof should give way and let the driving blizzard bury them in that awful white winding-sheet which it was weaving for the exposed plains.

Seeing that the fire would soon go out, and feeling the chill of the cold, he began to feed it miserly, doling out the precious sticks of soft pine as a miser doles out his gold. And to draw Elinor's attention to other things than the storm and their condition, he rose after a while and went round the room looking at the newspaper pictures pinned to the muslin which served as plastering and wall paper.

Elinor joined him when he began to speak of the pictures, and stopping together before some letters scrawled on the muslin in charcoal, letters as dimly to be seen in the poor light as the pictures, he struck one of his few matches, and holding it up they read:

"Homestead claim of S. R. Emery. Gone back to Newton. Will return soon."

"Which means next spring," Blake interpreted. "A good many of the homesteaders have returned to their old homes for the winter. They can do that safely enough, as a contest will not run against a homestead claim until after an abandonment of six months. We'll thank him for leaving the stove; he cleaned out about everything else before he went."

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The muslin, blown by the snow-laden wind that forced its way through even the tiniest crevice, moved up and down, with little ripples running along it in a reeling way, producing an odd effect, for it seemed that the walls were shaking and quivering.

Near Emery's notice was a rude charcoal drawing, which they studied in the bad light, and over which they tried to be merry as they returned to the feeble, flaring blaze in the little stove.

There Elinor questioned again about the bronchos.

"They have made their way into the town before this time, I don't doubt," he told her; then added as if it were a thing to joke about, "And no doubt they've made kindling wood of the carriage!"

"If we had some of it here to burn, it would n't be so bad!"

She tried to laugh cheerily as she took the stool he placed for her.

There was not much fire in the stove, but the flaring light of the pine splinters gave the appearance of heat and impressed the imagination with a sense of comfort.

The snow was drifting in through the crevice of the doorway; and when he had propped the door as well as he could, he tore away some of the muslin wall covering and battened the crevice with it. He likewise stopped other crevices with strips and wads of the muslin, and pushed some threads of it into the keyhole, through which snow was blowing. It was strange, but wherever the wind could penetrate, that flour-like

snow came through, and already there were streaks and hillocks of it spread over the earthen floor.

"We might be worse off than this," he declared, as he came back to the stove. "Very little wind can get in now, and in these storms if you can shut the wind out you can usually be comfortable."

He stooped and thrust into the stove a few more of the precious bits of pine. Having done this he seated himself on the floor and looked across at her as she sat there, the firelight half revealing, half concealing her face. He found pleasure in thus looking at her and in listening to her words.

They talked of the storm, whose wild lashing and roaring shook the dugout. The snow still drove through the tiny interstices in the roof and sifted down like silver dust over their clothing. The warm top of the stove resented its intrusion with steamy hissings.

"That wood will not last a great while," said Elinor, as Blake fed the fire.

"We'll hope the storm will blow itself out before the wood is gone."

"And if it should n't?"

"It will be daylight, probably."

She looked at him earnestly. From the first she had not been unaware of his anxiety, though she had said nothing.

"You do not believe that this blizzard will end by morning?"

"I'm hoping that it will."

"But you do not expect it?"

"It may hang on longer."

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"How much longer?"

"Two or three days."

"And we have only this wood, and nothing to eat. Could we get to town through the blizzard, after daylight comes?"

He hesitated.

"We might."

"But you do not think we could."

"It will depend on how bad the storm is; it might not be safe to try it. That's what I mean. I hope you are not worried!"

"N-no, only anxious. This is n't pleasant, you know."

She drew her wrap more closely.

Noticing this he fed the fire again. After a little he arose, and with a lighted splinter for a torch made another examination of the dugout.

"The room back there, being excavated out of the hill, is warmer than this," he said, as he returned. "I can draw the cot into it for you, and pull down this muslin from the walls for extra covering. I really think it would be better for you, if you would let me do that, and if you would try to get some sleep. We're cooped up here until morning, anyway."

The cot was not inviting in appearance, he knew; but he was impressed by the fact that the situation for her in the outer room of the dugout, where the cold was becoming constantly more intense, was unpleasant and would by and by become perilous.

"I really think it would be wiser if you would let me do that, and if you would try to get some sleep and forget for a time that we are

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caught here in the storm." He did not like to say blizzard — which has a sinister meaning, to those well acquainted with it. "I will put this wood in the stove, and while you are getting thoroughly warm I will move that cot in there; or if you prefer it can be placed here by the stove, though I believe the other room will be much more comfortable."

"And you?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Well, I'm used to cold and to storms; it does n't matter so much to me. My overcoat is thick, and I'll make it through, right here, without trouble or discomfort. I could easily spare the overcoat for your use."

She tried to read his eyes, but the light was bad and she failed.

"I will go into the other room if you think it is best."

"I really do, and I only wish the stove was there to make it warmer."

He crowded the rest of the box into the stove; and while she hovered over the heat it made, he moved the cot into the other room, and tore from the walls the muslin curtains, which he heaped upon it for coverings. After that he tried to get her to accept the overcoat, but this she would not do.

"Oh, it's quite pleasant in here!" she called out to him, when she had retreated to the other room, lighting the way with a flaming bit of pine which he had placed in her hands.

"I am glad you find it so," he said, and smiled grimly.

The temperature in that room was already

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nearly zero and he knew it; but it was warmer than the outer room would be in a few minutes, and he knew that, too.

Then he stared into the flaring fire through the open door of the stove, and listened to the booming roar of the storm as it lashed over the crest of the hill. And down upon him, and on the indignant, sputtering stove drifted that silver dust which the raving wind forced through every tiny opening.

CHAPTER XXIII

FIGHTING THE WHITE DEATH

JACKSON BLAKE did not at once sacrifice more of the precious if poor fuel to feed the flickering flame, and when the fire had fallen so low that even its light failed to cast any glimmer on the walls, dark now that they were denuded of their muslin covering, he began to walk back and forth in the narrow room, to restore circulation, for the increasing cold seemed to be clogging the blood in his veins. And still the storm raved, and the ice-dust snow came like flour through the interstices, thrust in by the pounding fingers of the clamorous wind.

For hours Blake walked up and down the narrow confines of that cold, dark room, stamping his feet, beating his hands, swinging his arms, and indulging in a variety of gymnastic exercises that would have brought a smile to the lips of Elinor if she could have beheld them. And all the while he was thinking of many things, but principally of the girl in the other room, where the darkness lay as heavily and the cold was almost as great as in the room he occupied. He wondered if she were suffering, if she were able to sleep; wondered what she thought of this horrible situation, and if she condemned him.

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Not another stick of the pine would he touch, until the low temperature made itself felt so unpleasantly that fear for its effect on her rather than upon himself caused him to strike another match and rekindle the dead fire. Nor would he permit himself to fall asleep. Few nights within his recollection had seemed so long, though nights had descended on him whose length had been interminable and whose darkness had been like death. Yet he wore it out at last.

The blizzard still smote the low hill and the dugout, as the gray day dawned — a laggard day that, hours late, crept with palsied delay and deathly pallor through the white winding-sheet that the wild night had woven. The dugout was buried beneath snow which the winds had scooped from the levels of the flats and poured in torrents and cascades upon it over the brow of the low hill.

This had deadened the roar of the storm, and the blizzard seemed to have lost something of its terrible rage; yet Blake knew just how the wind was beating and booming over the frozen expanses like a northerly gale over the wastes of an Arctic sea, and how the snow, some of it from the skies and some of it caught up from the earth, was swirling, whirling, and driving as if all the wild white horses of the frigid North were charging with icy hoofs across the crushed and beaten land.

Innumerable times Blake had stopped by the door leading into that other room, listening for some sound of life, yet fearing to awake the sleeper to the monotony and cold of the new

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day, if indeed she were sleeping or had slept. His heart filled with relief and gladness when he heard her stirring. He hastened to the stove and fed it almost lavishly with the few sticks he had husbanded, that the room might be brighter and warmer when she came out into it.

When she appeared she was shivering, and clutched her wrap closely. His first question concerned her and the night. Had she slept well?

"Not very well," she said, with an attempt at brightness. "And you haven't slept at all. I heard you moving about all night."

"Then you did n't sleep, either!"

"Yes, some; but the cold drove me out just now. I thought I should freeze in there. So I came out to see if it was n't warmer in here. That room is like an ice-cave."

She drew the stool up by the stove, shivering as she stretched her hands over the insufficient blaze.

"I'm afraid you are too extravagant," she urged, smiling at him, as he broke up the last bit of board and crowded it into the stove where it roared a feeble challenge to the blizzard.

"Yes, I was too extravagant in the night. I should have used none of it then; but I thought a little fire would make the place more comfortable."

He did not say "more comfortable for you," but he meant that; and she understood that he meant it, though it was not his intention that she should.

"I can break up that door, I think. But not just yet."

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"The storm is as bad as ever," she said, without questioning.

In the quiet of that other room she had heard its raving, even through the blanket of snow heaped over the dugout. The fact that the noise of its gusty rage was muffled had not deceived her.

"I am afraid so."

"And what shall we do?"

Blake had been asking himself that question; had asked it all through the night.

"I shall freeze in there in that cot; and this is n't much better, if any."

"The first thing is to warm yourself as well as you can by the fire here."

He looked across the stove at her—it gave him secret pleasure to do that! He smiled cheerfully.

"Are you good at gymnastics? I've been practising about everything I ever knew or heard of in that line, throughout the night. It's an excellent way to keep warm. This little room is n't a boulevard nor a king's highway, but one can turn round in it without hitting the walls more than a couple of times in each turn. We shall have to do some walking, I'm afraid."

She glanced about the room, his eyes following hers. The floor was criss-crossed with ridges of snow, and heaps and mounds of snow lay here and there against the walls.

"We can open the door into the other room,—in fact it will be open all the time after I break up the door for stove wood,—and that will enlarge the walking space," he suggested.

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She laughed almost merrily as she finished her survey.

"We'll save the wood and do the walking," she said, rising. "Shall we be able to leave here to-day, do you think? I suppose there is no chance to get out and see how the prospect is?"

She looked at the tiny window. It was banked full of snow, which extended above the panes and almost shut out the light.

"No use to try for a look from the outside until we're ready to leave," he said. "The effort would only let the storm in. If the wind falls, and I hope it will, perhaps we can get away from here this afternoon."

Then they began to walk to and fro in the room; and pushing open the connecting door, they penetrated also to the darkness of the other room. But even with that addition of space, the walk was like the tramp of prisoners in a cell. When this exercise was found insufficient, they ran, stamped their feet, and swung their arms, to keep the blood from congealing. They lost breath in these efforts, and succeeded in tiring themselves, but still felt the cold with stinging keenness. However, they made merry over their situation, and stirred each other to cheerfulness in a way that had in it something of the heroic and also something of the pathetic.

When Blake's watch told him that the noon hour had come and gone, and his sense of hearing; and the tingle of the cold assured him that the blizzard was not abating, he felt that the thing he had dreaded to name must now be spoken.

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"I shall have to go to town," he said, as they stopped in front of the again fireless stove. "There isn't a thing more to be burned but that door, and I have purposely saved that for this emergency. The storm will last through another night, and no one can say how much longer. I know that you're starving as well as freezing. If we stay here this way it will certainly make you ill."

She stared at him.

"But you can't get through any more than I can! And if you should, how would you return?"

"I can go and I can return!" he declared. "And in the town I can get help. The worst will be that you will have to stay here alone while I am gone. But I will break up that door and you can burn it, and in that way keep warm. I shall have to start soon, to get back before night with the things we need — some fuel and some food."

"You will carry them? You could n't do anything of the kind! The wind will be right in your face as you come back, if it has n't changed its direction since last night."

It was evident that she was anxious.

"Would you — could you stay while I am gone?" he asked.

Perhaps she fancied she had shown anxiety for his safety in undue measure. Her face flushed suddenly.

"I could stay, of course, for it would be impossible for me to do anything else; and I ought to be brave enough not to be afraid, for nothing can

get near this house now, except the cold. And, as you say, that door broken up will make a fire to keep that away. But do you think you ought to try it? What if you could n't get back? I mean what would become of me, then?"

"I'll get back!" he said, with fierce determination. "I'll find some men to come with me. And we'll get through before dark, too. You need n't be afraid on that account."

Then he began to set forth the reasons which made this action now necessary. Though it was plain that she hesitated, she opposed no longer. She saw that he was right. The time had come when something must be done.

How helpless we are! The temperature rises and we broil; it drops to frigidity, and if our resources of heat are gone or our situation exposed we chill and perish. So as to food. We may be poets with our heads in the clouds; we may be lovers "sighing like furnace," yet we must eat or die. The human image of God may have head of gold and arms of silver, but its feet are clay and its necessities tyrants.

Jackson Blake took the connecting door from its hinges, and with some difficulty reduced it to fragments. When he had apparently made every preparation, he cut a mask from the muslin that had covered the walls, making slits in it for eyes and nostrils, and attaching strings by which it could be held in position over his face. Elinor helped him with it, when he explained its need, and laughed when he put the hideous thing on.

He knew that his appearance was anything but presentable, as with this mask over his face to

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protect it from the stinging snow and wind, his handkerchief tied over his ears, his big coat buttoned lumpily over his chest and about his throat, over a fold of the muslin with which he protected the upper part of his body, he turned at last to go.

Elinor was not laughing now. She was not even equal to an attempt at girlish gayety. Her face looked almost blank and pitifully helpless as he began to open the door.

"Close it tightly after me and keep the fire going!" he cried in a choked voice through the mask. "And keep up your courage. I'll get back all right and as soon as I can."

Through the swirl of the storm she beheld the strong form burrow into the great snowbank that had packed in front of the dugout and disappear. The wind tore at the door as if it would wrench it from its hinges and blew clouds of fine snow into the room.

"Oh, come back!" she wailed to herself, stretching out one hand toward the vanishing figure. "I shall die here; I know I shall! Oh, this is terrible — this —"

The wind rocked the door and threatened to overthrow her and she was compelled to close it, which she did with difficulty, finding it not easy to shut out the snow entirely even when she stuffed strips of cloth into the crevice.

She was sobbing when she went back to the stove, where the bits of boards which Blake had thrust in were leaping merrily, as if they would charm back her courage and her cheerfulness.

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Outside, Jackson Blake was fighting the blizzard. It fairly overwhelmed him when he crept out of the snowbank. The wind driving furiously across level leagues pounded the ice-dust snow into the meshes of his clothing, and its sting searched through his heavy coat and took the warmth from his body.

Nevertheless, he floundered on, putting his back to the blast, and began to search for the wire fence which he knew came at that point almost to the corner of the dugout. This fence ran straight south to the railroad, and there another led at right angles nearly to the railroad station. But for these wires even Jackson Blake, courageous as he was, would not have dared to venture forth in that storm. Without their guidance he could scarcely have hoped to find his way, where sight was well-nigh useless and landmarks lost.

He found the jagged top wire of the fence — the others were buried in the drift — and clinging to it with one hand he stumbled blindly on. In spite of the care he used the barbs of the wire tore his glove and cut his fingers. He feared that sections of the fence would be found buried, or broken by floundering herds of drifting range cattle. In either case he would have nothing to rely on except the wind, which might be veery and treacherous, and that instinct of the plainsman as to direction which seems sometimes to be a sort of sixth sense.

Fortunately his fears were not realized. In places there were no drifts at all, but only the bare ground, swept as clean of snow as if a broom had

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been passed over it. At other points the drifts were high and compacted like ice hillocks, but the top wire was clear even there.

When he reached the fence that paralleled the railroad and made his way along it slowly in the direction of the town he bumped against or stumbled and fell at intervals over hapless cattle that, arriving at the fence and unable to go further because of its obstruction, had sunk down there to die, too much exhausted to make any further effort.

Before he reached the end of the railroad fence near the station he was so benumbed that he stumbled even when cattle did not lie in his way to trip him up. But he kept on with brave determination, and finding the station platform and beholding the station itself, which loomed white in the storm, he put his hands at last on the boards of the fence that ran here along the sidewalk toward Prethro's restaurant.

Lost Charlie Ross was sitting on the counter in Prethro's, sawing his fiddle, in the intervals of this exercise talking with Prethro, who was smoking and taking his ease before the fire, for there was no custom on such a day, when the door was pushed open and a snow-beaten and wholly unrecognizable figure stumbled over the threshold.

"By the great Sam Bass," exclaimed Lost Charlie, "here's a pilgrim that loves his stomick! Come out in a blizzard like this to git a bite of pie!"

But when he knew that this snow-smothered and half-frozen figure was Jackson Blake, who

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was supposed to be in Spencerdale, his levity ended.

Blake told his story as soon as he could get the snow out of his nostrils and beard and regain his breath.

"I must go right back," he declared. "The girl will freeze to death there if help does n't reach her; she'll never go through the night in that fireless dugout and live. I must have coal and something to eat, and must start back with them at once. What time is it?"

"Three o'clock," said Prethro, who was as much aroused by Blake's entrance and by this revelation as was Lost Charlie. "You can't make it — not t'-night."

"Why, man, I've got to!"

Lost Charlie's dark eyes were not dancing now; they were thoughtful and serious.

"We'll have to help you, then," he said. "How much coal you got, Prethro? Of course you've got plenty of grub."

"Grub, yes; but not much coal. We kin take what's yere, though. Set down by the stove there, Blake; you're plum froze! Charlie 'n' me 'll do th' plannin'. Medford next door has got coal, plenty; we kin git some o' his. Gittin' warmish, Blake? Pile in some coal, Charlie! And Jinny — say, Jinny! Rustle somepin' warm, quick, fer Blake t' eat!"

He vanished in search of his wife; while Lost Charlie, after stirring up the fire, and warning Blake not to sit too close to it, as the effect of the frost would make his hands and feet ache, began to get into his heavy coat and yellow slicker.

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"Thirteen below, and still droppin'," he announced, after a look at the thermometer, which Prethro had nailed up outside the restaurant door. "The mercury will kick the bottom out of that old thing 'fore mornin'. This is givin' the cattle hell."

"A lot of them are slung up against the railroad fence," said Blake, to whom these remarks were addressed. "I fell over some of them; couldn't tell them from the snow banks."

It was nearly an hour before Blake was able to start back, so much time was consumed in necessary preparations. He borrowed a pair of shoes of Prethro, his own being snow filled and almost frozen to his feet, and tried to make himself comfortable and get his strength back before undertaking the return trip. Prethro and Lost Charlie procured a large hand sled, upon which they lashed food, a bag of coal, a bundle of kindling wood, and other things thought to be necessary. Prethro slipped a flask of whiskey into his hip pocket—it had been passed to him by his wife, with the food.

"You may need it," she said, "if she's chilled or weak or in a bad way."

"K'rect!" Prethro assented. "Red likker is the ba'm o' life when it's properly 'dministered, 'n' th' fire o' hell when it's abused. We'll need it, mebby."

Then he and Lost Charlie prepared masks similar to the one Blake had worn, and wrapping themselves in their warmest clothing, with yellow slickers over all, they were ready to go; and Blake being also ready, the three men set out,

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urged on by Jinny, who was as heroic. They drew the hand sled by a long rope, to which all three set their strength. The gale was still flailing the streets and obscuring everything but the nearest houses. They observed, though, that the sky was brighter directly overhead, an indication that the snowfall was less. A straight ahead look made it seem as thick as ever, but this was because the wind was grinding at the drifts and picking up the snow from the ground.

"Them bronc 's landed ag'inst the fence some'eres, prob'ly," said Prethro, giving voice to this thought as the three men took shelter for a moment in the lee of the station. "Both of 'em 'll be stiffer 'n stakes 'fore mornin', if they ain't dead a'ready."

"Oh, ye can't tell!" Lost Charlie shouted, as the wind screamed over them. "Hard to kill the likes of them. They've run into some kind o' luck, likely. Only bronc' I ever knowed to be snuffed out by a blizzard was a locoed one, and he ought to died."

Then with breath renewed they plunged again into the struggle with the wind and flying snow, Lost Charlie in the lead feeling his way along by hanging to the barbed wire fence.

It was tiresome work, yet the exertion was not enough to keep them warm. The wind smote even through the heavy slickers, striking a chill to the bone. It sucked the breath away from the nostrils and left them gasping and pinched. It ingulfed the staggering forms in cascades of snow, then beat and buffeted them until at times they were nearly overthrown.

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Sturdy men were these, men of high courage and undaunted hearts. They fought the lashing gale with iron determination. Though they were halted at times these halts were but momentary, as when a strong fighter stops to gain breath. So they pushed on, falling over drifted-in cattle, floundering into and out of new snowbanks, tugging at the laden sled, scarcely speaking, yet putting the town behind them, first in a westerly direction then in a northerly, along the lines of the fences, until they approached the dugout.

Already the short day had closed in a blur of snow and darkness. Overhead the sky was clearer than at any time since the storm set in, and this was a good omen; but except overhead, in which direction none of them were going just then if it could be helped, Lost Charlie said, there was nothing clear. The wind raved as if its energies and its rage were incapable of exhaustion, and the snow flew as when the blizzard began. Little or none of it was coming from the skies now, but the hungry wind was gnawing it from every snowbank and whirling it on as if it were the spindrift of a stormy sea.

Lost Charlie still led, followed by Jim Prethro, Blake bringing up the rear. He felt very weak and numb, but his thoughts were of Elinor Spencer rather than of himself. He hoped she had not suffered. It was a long time since he had left her there in the dugout, and it must have seemed a much longer time to her. Yet he had done all he could. Whatever delay there had been was necessary and unavoidable.

Thus the dugout was reached, and the three

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men stumbled up to the door, where, kicking away the snow with his heavy boots, Prethro hammered on the timbers and shouted in the darkness.

"Hello!" he called. "Hello, in there! Yere we air, with good chuck 'n' coal enough to burn the shanty up, hopin' you're doin' handsome!"

All listened, in the howling of the storm.

When there was no response, Prethro pounded again with his stiff, mittened hands.

"She's in the back room," said Blake. "You'll have to call louder."

So Prethro thumped as if he would knock the door down, and shouted with all his strength:

"Hello! Hello! Wake up! Yere's Mr. Blake; an' we're with him, with grub 'n' coal 'n' fixin's various 'n' otherwise. Pies like yer mother uster make, an' they'll be stiffer 'n icicles if we don't git in with 'em mighty quick."

"That raised her," Lost Charlie observed, as they heard a stir within. "Prethro's pies air deservin' of their repitation. Last week Mrs. Shake took one with her when she called on a dyin' man, and it revived him; fact, and I can prove it! So, ain't it, Jim? 'Twas Mark Adams, you remember; and now he 's hoppin' round spry as a Kansas grasshopper, or would be, I reckon, if this blizzard didn't keep him in the house."

It was some time before the door was drawn open, and they could tell that it was drawn open with difficulty, though they pushed on it by way of assistance. Then they were, as it seemed, blown into the little house by the snow-laden

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wind, dragging after them the sled and its burden.

The place was dark as a cave, until Lost Charlie scratched a match and gave illumination. Elinor had just emerged from the back room. Prethro reached for his hip pocket as soon as his eyes fell on her.

"Some o' th' Wine o' Life!" he said, producing the flask. "Temp'rance principles don't go, in a case like this. You're froze, 'n' I kin see it. Your feet air froze, too — got yer shoes off! Charlie, rustle a fire; Bla'e, you fasten that door!"

Lost Charlie had a fire started by the time the door was closed and properly chocked. Prethro, as a man of years and family, gave his attention to the girl, who was indeed almost frozen. He asked her why she took off her shoes, and she said her feet became so cold that she thought she could warm them better if her shoes were off. She had lain on the cot when her small supply of fuel gave out, and had been there since, the temperature falling so swiftly that she began to fear help could not reach her and she would surely perish during the night.

The experienced plainsman would not let her go near the fire, even when its roaring sounded so pleasant, but kept her "herded" over by the door, where he made her rub her half-frozen feet with snow, and her half-frozen and aching fingers also.

"Got t' thaw out by degrees 'n' gradjully, in a case like this yere," he explained. "Whiskey's good to warm the inner man, but the out'ard

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woman has got to be tempered up t' th' right condition slow an' cautious-like—slow 'n' cautious-like, same 'z coaxin' a skittish steer into a new corral. Queer thing, nature is. You'd think, now, that when you're cold th' proper thing 'd be to turn on th' heat; but if you do—that is t' say turn it on too quick, then nature kicks, an' turns yer toes black, an' puts crimps into yer fingers, 'n' aches into yer j'int's, an' makes a reg'lar hellyballoo all round. But you're all right, Miss Spencer,—all right 'n' O. K., an' you'll be settin' up to that fire and layin' th' table cloth f'r us 'most before you know it."

Both Jackson Blake and Elinor Spencer were glad to have bluff Jim Prethro do the things that needed to be done and take control and guidance at this time. Later, when the girl was permitted to come to the stove, where Lost Charlie now had a great fire going, Blake explained the delay and the difficulty in getting help to her.

Later still, all ate a hearty supper, with laps and knees for table, and hot coffee poured from a tin pail into some tin drinking-cups. And though the blizzard still roared, and the dugout was cramped and unprepossessing, the storm seemed now far away and impotent.

A strip of muslin was hung in the opening between the rooms for a door, and the rear room was taken for the night by the three men. For Elinor the cot was brought out by the stove. The coal fire had rendered the whole dugout habitable now, and even comfortable.

By morning the blizzard was over, and the prisoners of the dugout walked into Golden City

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on the snow. The sun shone brightly, — so brightly that its rays of fire were reflected from the snow-fields in a blinding glitter.

The bronchos, and what was left of the carriage, had found shelter in a farmer's barn near town. The plains were covered with dead cattle. They were winrowed by the wire fences that guarded the railroad. Half of Old Shake's herd was gone. Men with laden horses were starting forth from the town to succor lonely claim holders in need; others were humanely cutting the wire fences to let the living cattle through into the sand-hills.

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE ADVANCE AGENT OF WESTERN PROGRESS"

WHEN Martin Parker, like the spies of old, had looked over the land and found it promising, he bought a ticket and travelled to Kansas City, where he delayed awhile, and journeyed thence into the East, stopping here and there in the principal money centres.

He was possessed of some capital; and, being a man of shrewdness in matters of business, he had made his money breed like Shylock's ducats. He saw now, or thought he saw, opportunities in this line such as he had never dreamed of. Therefore he was content to dismiss for a time the subject of Jackson Blake and the reward, though only because he fancied he saw larger prey, and because he was really afraid of Hank Wilson.

The New West was filling up with men rich in courage and faith, but poor in purse. Their need of money would be great, and their faith being great they would be willing to pay well for it. That was the foundation stone on which Martin Parker laid the fabric of his plans and his arguments. And, as he had a winning way withal, it was not long before he began to make other men see, as it were through his eyes, all

the rosy glow and lavish promise of quick and safe gains.

The wealthy East had money, idle money, in abundance. Three per cent, four per cent, rarely six per cent, was as much as money could earn there. Much of the time it could earn little or nothing. The growing West had land that it would mortgage for money, with which to build houses, stores, and schools, with which to speculate, and it would willingly pay a rate of interest that would seem usurious anywhere else.

Therefore Martin Parker made himself “the advance agent of Western progress.” As such he visited moneyed men in the East; he conferred with the heads of charitable and religious institutions that had funds for investment; he interviewed trust and deposit companies that held the inheritances of widows and orphans; and he sought out other companies and banks where the savings and scrapings of toiling thousands were kept at low rates. By his suavity, his apparent candor, his smoothness and glibness of speech, but more than all by a showing of large profits to be earned, and the financial backing he had been able to secure in Kansas City, he interested these people; and not only interested them, but induced many of them to intrust their money to a corporation formed for the purpose of placing money in the New West. In addition, he contrived to secure for himself the position of local agent of various mortgage and trust companies and money-lending organizations.

When Parker returned to the plains of Western Kansas in the spring, after a considerable

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stay at Ransoms, and opened the office of the Golden City Mortgage and Investment Company, of which he seemed to be the presiding and executive genius, the wild boom was again sweeping the land, and the blizzard and its terrors were long since forgotten.

And such a wild boom as it was! Old Shake rubbed his eyes as he beheld the transformation of his cattle ranges, and pulled at his white beard like another Rip Van Winkle awakening from sleep. He seemed to be witnessing the impossible. As usual, he found refuge in a quotation from the Bard:

“‘If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.’”

CHAPTER XXV

A FORECAST OF THE HARVEST

EVEN Old Shake's cowboys had turned boomers.

"Hoop-la! 'This is a mad world, my masters!'" said Lost Charlie, as he "rustled" the trains for business, displaying to a land-seeking public a gorgeous business card bearing this characteristic inscription:

De June bug hab de golden wing,
De lightning bug de flame;
Lost CHARLIE hab no wings at all;
But HE GITS DAR, jes' de same!

What the great blizzard had left of Old Shake's herd he had sold at round prices, for the influx of new people created a heavy demand for beef, and the new settlers were clamoring for cows with which to form the nuclei of small herds of their own.

Martin Parker found that the firm of Spencer & Blake was not only doing a rushing business in locating land seekers, but that it had bought land near the town and had laid out an "addition" to Golden City. Jim Prethro had followed suit, by laying out his entire quarter section as another "addition"; and he was selling town lots from it, too, at good prices, having closed up his restau-

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rant that he might pursue this more promising path to wealth.

Parker had expected large things of Golden City, but what he now beheld surpassed his expectations. Everywhere were sights and sounds of stirring activity—foundations being laid, buildings going up, stores and banks being opened, new land firms being organized; and strong rumors were current that the new land office, talked of for months in the Kansas newspapers, was to be located there.

He was delighted with these things. He could not have planned and developed them more to his liking if he had tried. He threw himself with avidity into the business he had taken up, and in a little while became known as one of the leading land men of the place, who had abundance of money for loans and investments. His office swarmed with men who wanted money, and who, seeing immense profits in almost anything they cared to undertake, were willing to give interest rates that would have made an Eastern capitalist stare with incredulity.

Twenty-four per cent was what Parker charged and received. In each case, this twenty-four per cent was taken, for the first year, out of the sum of the loan itself. The State laws permitted the payment of no more than twelve per cent. But that was a thing of no consequence. In truth, this legal prohibition pleased and suited Parker. He charged but twelve per cent *interest* and so complied with the law; but he added to it twelve per cent *commission*, for obtaining the money for the borrower; and this "commission," collected, like

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the interest, in advance, out of the loan, he put into his own pockets, in addition to the regular commission received from the Eastern investors whose money he was handling. Surely, Martin Parker had nothing to complain of in the business and booming methods of Golden City; and so rich was the harvest he began at once to reap that the three thousand dollars reward offered for the capture of the Arkansas convict, Dick Brewster, seemed to him but a bagatelle, unworthy of consideration just then, whatever he might conclude to think of it later.

The land office came to Golden City, adding new impetus to the already wild boom. Pleased by this, Judge Henry Spencer yet suffered defeat. He was appointed neither receiver nor register of the new office, these positions going to men who up to that time had not been identified with Golden City in any way.

"It's all right," said Blake, cheerfully and consolingly. "You're better off without it. One of those places would have been an honor, no doubt; but just now more money can be made outside of such a position than in it. And everything is coming our way! I had an offer this morning of five hundred dollars for that lot at the corner of Main and Maple. I wouldn't take it, for it will be worth a thousand dollars inside of two months."

Hank Wilson, instigated by certain land men, sold half of his land up the river, then went into a company with them; and where his claim was another town was started, for the proclaimed purpose of making it the county-seat. It was nearer

the centre of the county, it was urged, and it had other advantages which within a year would enable it to "knock the hind sights off of Golden City."

Sometimes Spencer and sometimes Blake made brief business trips to Topeka and Kansas City. Martin Parker also made flying trips to Kansas City and other points, including Arkansas and Ransoms. He had agents, or "drummers," in these places, and in many others, who sent business to him in the shape of men who wished to invest, men who desired land or town lots, men who wanted to "get in on the ground floor," and who were made to believe that Martin Parker himself owned the "ground floor" at Golden City and all that the term implied.

Parker's perpetual smile irradiated his business methods. He was the embodiment of genial optimism; he was warm and glowing cheerfulness personified. He became an attorney before the new land office, and employed a man whose sole duty was to rise at two in the morning and stand, filing-papers in hand, in the line that gathered before the land office door each day at that early hour. Each land firm was forced to employ such a man, for when the office opened for business at nine, the crush to reach the windows where the filing-clerks worked was so great that life and limb were imperilled. Those who arrived before the land office doors first took stations there, those coming later being compelled to fall into line behind. When the opening hour came it was found, often, that this line of men extended down the office steps and out into the street for half a block or more.

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Parker became not only an attorney before the land office, but was welcomed to a seat on the Golden City Board of Trade, an organization that printed roseate circulars of Golden City, its future, and the future of the country surrounding it, which it sowed everywhere like the leaves of Vallambrosa. This Board of Trade also sent agents into Eastern cities and country places, whose business was to advertise to the people there the greatness and riches of the new land. It published letters, too, in the newspapers of the East and the Middle West, from "correspondents" whose laudations exhausted the language of commendatory epithet.

Ever Martin Parker was in the forefront; ever his radiant smile pointed to new worlds to conquer; and his white teeth were as the plume of Navarre, leading the way to victory.

CHAPTER XXVI

YIELDING TO THE TIDE

THETIS, mother of Achilles, grasping him by the heel dipped him in the river Styx to make him invulnerable. Fate taking Jackson Blake by the heart strings had thrust him out into the Stream of the Forgotten. The results were much the same. The heel of Achilles, held by his mother's hand, remained the one vulnerable spot in his body, and received the fatal arrow from the bow of Paris; and Jackson Blake's heart strings possessed still the power to quiver and to feel the sweet thrill of pleasurable pain which men call love.

When he first met Elinor Spencer he was drawn toward her irresistibly. Her personal beauty, her intelligence, her mental attractiveness, were charms of which he could not be insensible. Her voice was music, to which he could not listen enough; her glance sunshine, that broke like morning light through the clouds which had shrouded him.

He had not forgotten Christine; and remembering her he had thought other love far from him, and that he would never marry nor even dream of it. Yet here before he knew it fully he was dreaming of Elinor as he had never dreamed of Christine, was seeing in her character beauties never discerned in Christine's.

He found himself watching for her appearance in the street; waiting for the sound of her quick footsteps and the rustle of her gown as she came into the office; thinking by the hour of how she looked in certain poses, how a certain smile had so become her, how the glint of gold in her brown hair had been brightened by the light that fell upon her through the office window.

As soon as he became aware of their true character he sought to put these thoughts from him. He was almost frightened by them. He did not dare to love her! He knew it. Yet he could not help loving her. Fight away his thoughts and fancies as he would, they always came back.

Then he threw himself into the business affairs of the new firm of Spencer & Blake with feverish energy, hoping that would aid him to forget. It did not. He found that when he most desired to keep away from her he was inventing excuses which would take him to the hotel where she resided with her father. If Judge Spencer did not appear at the office with his accustomed promptness, it seemed to become needful or at least desirable that a flying visit should be made to the hotel, to lay before him some matter of business which could have been delayed as well as not. Sometimes Blake saw Elinor when he did this, and sometimes he failed to see her. In either case he succeeded in impressing Spencer with his alertness and value as a partner and business man, though this was not within his thought.

Then came the long and delightful drive across the plains with Elinor on that return trip from Spencerdale. It had ended disastrously in more ways than one. Those hours of imprisonment together were as links binding him to her; and when he had fought his way to the town and back to the dugout to bring her succor, the very torture he endured both mentally and physically gave strength to his passion.

Yet he was afraid to love her. He accused himself of blindness, of madness, of treachery even, in permitting his heart to become so engaged, when he could no more help it than water released can prevent its fall to the ground. He trembled at the bare thought of the possible consequences to them both. For himself, if discovery of his identity came, even if he were dragged back to that jail from which he had fled, he could by hardening his heart endure it, as he had endured other bitter ills. But Elinor!

He hoped that she did not love him; then in the same breath accused himself of vanity and egotism for fancying that she could for a moment think of loving him. Why should she love him? Why should she give him even a thought? She was kind to him, but she was kind to every one; and if she appeared at intervals to give him rather more of her time and attention than he deserved, that was accounted for easily by the fact that he was now her father's business partner, interested in the same things and occupying the same office. She would have given of her attention and sympathy to a mere office boy in the same way! So he queried and tortured his heart.

Struggling thus ineffectively with his love, his emotions, his mingled hopes and fears, it is small wonder that Blake's manner toward Elinor became occasionally strange and distraught; that he flushed when she entered the office, and found speedily that business called him somewhere; and that when he beheld her coming down the street he took occasion to pass to the other side to speak to some one, even if that one were no more than a stranger.

At other times, and this was not infrequently, he was not strong enough to keep up the unequal battle. Then yielding to the tide he could not stem, he sought her company, became unnaturally gay, exerted himself to win a smile from her, took her to one of the innumerable church festivals with which the struggling congregations of the new town sought to win money for their work, accompanied her on the opening night when the new theatre was to be "dedicated" by a famous singer from the East, and invited her out for a drive whenever he could find it convenient.

In all this he was like the victim of the opium habit who, knowing his practice is wrong, is yet too weak to withstand its seduction. And while he condemned himself, even cursed himself now and then in wild fury, he saw every barricade he could erect go down.

Thus it came about that before Martin Parker had been two months back in Golden City, Jackson Blake had almost ceased to combat where it was impossible for him to conquer, and ceasing to combat was swept resistlessly on.

CHAPTER XXVII

CHASING THE RAINBOW

GOLDEN CITY was not the only place touched by the wild boom ; it was only one of a multitude of places so touched, so created, or re-created. Whether the magician who wielded that wand of enchantment were a fakir or possessed real power, whether his fabrics were based on airy nothingness or had a secure foundation, no man, or few men, could at that time know. Those who came to question or to scoff became believers in the reality of what they beheld, and remained to garner where they had not sown and to reap where they had not planted.

That boom swept the whole West from the Missouri River even to the Pacific, and its influence was as far reaching for good or evil as the ramifications of the money arteries of the Nation. No man liveth unto himself, and the acts of a Parker, a Spencer, or a Jackson Blake on the plains of Kansas might yet set in motion a train of circumstances that would have power to shake financial capitals. By them political parties might be lifted up or cast down and legislation shaped or influenced.

The figures mixed in the mad turmoil saw this but dimly or not at all. They were eager for gain, and they struggled for it as men struggle in

the stock exchange. The grangers, as the farmers were everywhere called, wanted land, which the government was giving "for nothing." A fierce scramble always results when that which is thought valuable is being given away.

The fever of the grangers communicated itself to other classes — to all classes. The clerks in the stores, in the banks, men of every employment, made out filing-papers and took land, usually under the pre-emption law, which required a residence of but six months and a small money payment per acre — one dollar and a quarter outside of the twenty-mile limit of the railroad land grant, and but twice that sum per acre for the alternate sections of government land within that limit.

If it is asked how these classes of people could live on the land selected for even the short period of six months, the answer is that they did not live on it, nor try to live on it. They erected some sort of house, usually of the flimsiest and cheapest character. One day or one night a week was considered a sufficient residence to satisfy the law. Usually that one day or night of each week was Sunday, so that the time thus consumed did not take from that required by their usual occupations. These flimsy houses they called their "homes," and they but came from their "homes" to do their work of whatever character in the towns, just as the city merchant or clerk may reside in his suburb and do business or follow his vocation in the city's crowded marts. This was not a new theory of residence.

In addition to the erection of a house, it was

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necessary to have some plowing done, and a well dug where that was possible, and crops put in. Five acres or less seeded to sorghum or millet fulfilled the latter requirement; and the real grangers, who had teams and plows and were in need of ready money, found their working capacity taxed to the utmost to do this "farming" for the pretended farmers of the towns. Whether the crop grew or yielded a harvest was of little consequence; the effort to grow something had been made, and this enabled proof to be furnished of the "improvements" demanded by the rulings of the land office. As soon as the land passed into the possession of these claimants they could sell it or mortgage it and reimburse themselves with large profit for the time and money expended.

Entries under the tree-culture act were also favored by the land hungry. Many, perhaps the majority, of the genuine farmers, who really desired land for farming purposes and not for speculation, made their entries under the homestead law, which required a residence of five years, but no money payment beyond the small amount of the filing fees.

The influx of the hordes of land seekers genuine and false created a demand for stores and business facilities of all kinds. Thus the towns grew, this growth being stimulated unnaturally by every method which the ingenuity of gain-seeking men could devise.

The stimulation of this growth in Golden City, and the work of adding to the land excitement which was pouring the farming popu-

lation of the Middle West and even of the farther East out upon the Western plains and into the Western mountains, was the especial task to which the Golden City Board of Trade set its hand.

Golden City grew; so did Spencerdale and the new town begun on Hank Wilson's quarter section. So did dozens and scores of other places which were springing up everywhere like mushrooms in a moist woodland.

The town lots laid out by Jim Prethro were purchased with more eagerness than the "pies like yer mother uster make." Prethro, Hank Wilson, Spencer & Blake, and all others who had secured land in or near Golden City in the beginning, seemed to be on the high road to speedy fortunes. Prethro was drunk with success; and, as always when he was intoxicated, he spent his money lavishly. He had "money to burn," he said, and he seemed determined to burn it. He bought fine horses, carriages, rich dresses for his wife and for Nevada, tailor-made clothing for himself, a diamond like a hazel nut for his white shirt front and another for his finger, and had begun the erection of a twenty-thousand dollar residence on the site once occupied by his dugout.

As the season advanced, the craze for speculation seized upon many of the farmers. They abandoned their plows, and swarming into the towns they began to speculate, borrowing money for the purpose by mortgaging their land where they had acquired title, and where they had not by mortgaging their teams and farming imple-

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ments. And this influx of the farmers into the realm of speculation gave another impetus to prices of town lots by increasing the demand.

Old Shake rubbed his eyes when he beheld these wonders. He could not believe in the durability of the boom, but he had ceased to prophesy. It might be, he admitted; he was getting old, and he was perhaps behind the times, and so failed to realize what men can do with improved methods and the hot blood of desire.

Nevertheless the old man, just because he could not quite agree with all that was being published about this "wonderful region" which he had known through so many years of foul and fair weather, let slip opportunities whereby he might have put money in his purse. He would not lie—some of the claims made by the real estate men, and even by his son-in-law, Prethro, looked like lying to him—and he would not steal, he assured himself. But then he was old; he had, too, lived so long in a little eddy beyond the touch of the great commercial stream that he was not quite sure that he was qualified to judge, and besides his mental tendencies were always of the charitable kind. This "stealing," as he thought it, was perhaps after all but an exaggerated sort of business shrewdness; and he knew, from his reading more than in any other way, that the modern world prides itself on its business shrewdness.

Then, almost imperceptibly, he began to neglect his beloved Bard, and was often found with Bunyan's classic in his trembling hands. It gave

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him great comfort. One day when Blake was calling on him and something was said about the boom, the old man took up his Pilgrim's Progress.

"I am an uneducated man, as you see," he said, humbly, "but I count no man ignorant who is acquainted with the Bible, Shakespeare, and Pilgrim's Progress. I have read all three rather thoroughly in my time, especially the Bible and Shakespeare, and I'm now tryin' to get at the bottom meanin' of the things that Bunyan wrote. He was a humble man and a tinker, but he had got at the foundation things, it seems to me. He was not an old man as I am, I take it, but he put into words the things I feel."

Then he read from the book before him, and Blake knew he was applying the language to himself. As he read, his white beard swept the printed page:

"I am a man of no strength at all of body, nor yet of mind; . . . but this I have resolved on, to-wit, to run when I can, to go when I cannot run, and to creep when I cannot go. As to the main, I thank Him that loves me, I am fixed; my way is before me, my mind is beyond the river that has no bridge, though I am as you see."

He lifted his eyes and looked at his hearer.

"We air all 'going on pilgrimage,' Blake, a thing I see now so much clearer than I used to; and considerin' that, what is all that out there to me?" He waved his hand toward the town. "Nothin'. I have enough to eat and to wear, and a shelter for me and my good wife and my

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daughter who is at home, and the other daughter is provided for. 'Fulness a burden is to him who goes on pilgrimage!' I ain't preachin', nor tryin' to; I'm too much of a miser'ble failure to think of preachin' to anybody, let alone you who air so much younger and smarter in every way than I am; but it seems to me, as we're all 'going on pilgrimage,' and can't any of us stay here very long, even when we stay the longest, that it's hardly worth the wear and tear of energy, let alone conscience, to do the things that men air doin' over there. Still, I am an old man, and old men do not look at things with the eyes of the young."

Jackson Blake profited by this, no doubt; no man could be with Old Shake and hear him talk without profit. Yet Blake did not withdraw from the scramble at Golden City, nor cease to push land and town lot sales and the booming of that "paragon city of the plains, Spencerdale," which, to quote again from a pamphlet written and published by Judge Spencer himself, "was flourishing like a green bay tree and spreading like a banyan."

Nevertheless the hands of Judge Spencer and Jackson Blake were clean of the grosser faults, which might be denominated sins, that affected much of the business life of Golden City. They did not deceive wilfully as to land values, and in their most extravagant statements they said no more than they believed to be true. Spencerdale was making a marvellous growth; so was Golden City; and so was Plains City, the town situated on Hank Wilson's land.

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Both Blake and Spencer had come to credit the golden promise of this land of their adoption. It had been passed by, misunderstood, reviled through ignorance; now its day had arrived. With the adaptation of crops to the peculiarities of soil and climate, the use of sense as well as plowshares in the tillage, this land, which had supported unknown millions of buffaloes, and other millions of beef cattle, would support likewise a teeming agricultural life. There was a promise that the desert should be made to blossom as the rose, and here was one place in which, as they now believed, this promise was to be fulfilled literally. Hence it was doing no man wrong to urge these things upon him, even if the doing so brought profit to the one who did the urging; the man urged would gain also, a gain large and satisfying.

It may be said with entire truthfulness that this was the view held by nearly all of the substantial and reliable business men and land dealers of Golden City, and they formed no inconsiderable majority of the whole. The things they preached with such persistence they believed, and they were showing their belief by the investments they made, by the substantial houses, many of them residences for their own families, and the solid business blocks they were erecting. They were possessing the new land like the Israelites of old, and their Canaan looked to them as fair as that other beyond the ancient Jordan looked to the worn tribes that struggled into it out of the tears and strife of the desert.

Yet there was a class of men of whose doings

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truth forces a record and a notice, who cared nothing for the land itself, nor the town, nor for anything except their own enrichment, and foremost in this class was the Arkansan, Martin Parker. They, like the others, read the promise of gold at the end of the rainbow and struggled for it after their fashion, yet because they were dishonest at heart their methods were dishonest and in many cases criminal.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FALL OF LUCIFER

THERE was a development of Jackson Blake's character at this time that was surprising to his friends and particularly so to Jim Prethro. This was the fierce hatred he began to show toward the saloon element which had invaded Golden City.

The agitation against the saloons, that were openly defying the prohibitory law of the State, was started by David Melchor, the preacher who had officiated at the wedding of Jim Prethro and Virginia Caxton months before. Blake became acquainted with Melchor at that time, admired him, and when Melchor started his crusade joined hands with him, though he felt then and afterward his own unworthiness.

The iron that had seared forever into his brain the memory of that night at Chris Miller's had also burned there a deep and lasting hatred of alcohol. It was alcohol that had made him a murderer and a fugitive on the face of the earth, he assured himself, and he promised his own soul with a solemn oath that he would strike the evil whenever and wherever he could, no matter what the personal consequences might be. There were other young men, innocent as he had been, who were to be dragged down by it, made murderers

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by it perhaps, as he had been, and for their sake and for what it had done to him he would not spare it.

So when the meetings called by Melchor were held in the churches and in the new theatre, Jackson Blake expressed his opinion, though he concealed the mainspring which moved him, and such was the burning character of his earnestness and such his natural powers of oratory that Melchor himself was quite snuffed out by comparison.

This crusade naturally aroused the saloon element against the firm of Spencer & Blake, the immediate effect being to call forth a protest from Spencer himself.

"Don't you see that you're hurting our business!" he urged.

Blake looked at him with a fierce expression.

"I can go out of the firm," he answered, "but I will not stay my hand in this matter. I would send every devil of them to jail if I could do it."

The knowledge of the stand taken by Blake set a sardonic gleam in the eyes of Martin Parker.

"You're making a brave show of yourself, my fine fellow," was his reflection. "Lord, when you do fall what a crash there will be! You have been making flings, I hear, too, at my business methods! Yes, you're pinnacling yourself pretty high on the mount of morality, and because of it there will be a mighty opening of eyes one of these fine days, — a mighty opening of eyes!"

One morning as Jackson Blake approached his office a newsboy thrust the morning paper into his hand.

"Fine mornin', Mr. Blake!" he said, touching his cap respectfully as he moved away.

Blake was reputed to be wealthy, and he was becoming prominent, very prominent, in the affairs of the town, which had so grown that it now supported two dailies, — a morning paper with the Associated Press despatches and an evening paper filled chiefly with the local news and personals.

When he opened the paper Blake beheld on the first page an account of the big temperance meeting of the previous evening in the theatre, when he had so spoken his soul that his words had shaken the audience like a prairie gale. His name was there, in big type, in the headings of the report, thus:

HON. JACKSON BLAKE.

It was a gathering of the "best people of the town," the paper said, of the "foremost citizens," of the "better elements," of the "worthy men of the community"; and the report left no doubt in the mind of the reader that Jackson Blake was the legitimate and strenuous leader of all these. He "stood for the enforcement of law," the reporter announced, and "for the placing of criminals of every class behind prison bars, where they belong." To this was added the further statement that Golden City had become "the refuge of escaped convicts and jailbirds," and that they must be driven out.

Blake's tanned and bearded cheeks crimsoned as he read this report, which was intended to be pleasing to him and to all those who had taken

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part in the meeting; and the cheeks crimsoned still more when he read the suggestion that "Jackson Blake is worthy timber for the judgeship of the new circuit." He would give criminals a "short shrift," it was claimed, and clear the land of the men whose presence disgraced it, if he were but put in a position where, with the law to back him, he could do so.

Blake knew well the young men who conducted the *Golden City Mercury*. He knew that they liked him and believed in him. And he could not drive away the reflection that stung him,—What if these men knew all? What would they say if the mask were torn from his face?

"There must be something mentally and morally wrong in my make-up," was his thought, as he folded the paper when he had ceased reading. "Am I anything but a hypocrite? Why should I rage against men whose only crime is that they sell liquor in defiance of a law which many people honestly believe should have no place on our statute books? I, a murderer, a convict, an escaped jailbird! Why, these saloon men and bootleggers are really as much above me as heaven is above hell! I think I'd better draw out of this crusade and keep quiet, even if I can't keep sensible. I'm a first-class fraud, and a fool into the bargain. The Honorable Jackson Biake! I've no more right to that title of 'Honorable' than I have to the name which I took and am using as my own. What would these editors think if they knew that? What would Elinor think? Good God, it's enough to drive a man mad!"

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When he passed on into the office, with the paper in his coat pocket, he found Spencer there ahead of him. The judge was writing, but looked up as Blake came in; then after making some corrections on the paper with his pen he read aloud for the benefit of his partner what he had written.

It was a series of charges he had drawn and intended to prefer against Martin Parker, by which he meant to bring about Parker's disbarment from the land office as an attorney entitled to practice there and before the land department at Washington.

When he had read the paper they discussed its contents.

"Parker's methods are a disgrace to the town," Spencer affirmed with much warmth. "He ought to be disbarred; and he will be pitched out neck and heels if I can have my way about it. Why, see here!" He took up the paper. "I can prove these things, every one of them; when I go hunting for bear I always have my gun loaded."

He proceeded to read again, in substance the following:

"In the cases of these people," — he read the names, — "the said Martin Parker arranged with them the amounts of the loans they were to receive on the mortgages they were to give on their lands before any proofs whatever had been made by them before the land office."

"Other men do the same," said Blake. "I have known a number of cases where men who expected to prove up their claims and get titles

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went from one loan agent to another to see how much they could borrow on the mortgages they intended to give."

"Showing," said Spencer, with some asperity, "that those fellows never for one moment expected to pay a cent of the mortgage money, or even of the interest, after the first payment, which the loan agent kept out. It's collusion, don't you see, between the loan agents and these pretended farmers! The result will be that whole sections and townships out here will be thrown upon the mortgage companies, which they will be unable to handle or realize on; the people back East who have advanced this money will be compelled to take the land, and the whole fabric of success which we are building will be tumbled about us by a land panic."

Judge Spencer's manner showed that he was very much in earnest, and that having taken up this cudgel he did not intend to lay it down until he had battered a few of the heads that he thought needed battering, particularly the head of Martin Parker.

"And there," he said, pointing to another paragraph of his written complaint, "what do you say to that? There's a man, Titus Prendergast, who under the tutelage of Martin Parker came into this land office, and with two witnesses swore to proofs of his claim, — that he had lived on the land for six months, that he had a house on it ten by twelve in size, and that he had a walled-in spring. Note the language he and his witnesses used, and which I hope to show that Martin Parker induced them to use. I will show,

further, that before they swore to those lies, which Parker must have known to be lies, he had agreed to loan this man eight hundred dollars of Eastern money on his claim the moment the government gave him title to it. Prendergast secured the land, got the eight hundred, and where he is now no one knows, but he has left the country.

"Now, mark you," — the judge was becoming heated, — "I can prove that the house which Prendergast and his witnesses swore was ten by twelve in size, and which the land officials naturally took to mean ten by twelve feet, was nothing but a martin-box house, ten by twelve inches in size, and that the walled-in spring was merely a buggy spring with some stones laid round it. Yet here is the land mortgaged for more than it is worth, and the holder of the mortgage will likely have to take it.

"I may not be able to marshal enough proof to show the guilt of Parker in a way to convict him in a court of subornation, which would send him to the penitentiary, — he's probably been too shrewd in his nefarious work for that, — but I can bring proof enough to shut him out of the land office and keep him from going on here in this criminal business; and I intend to do it."

Blake was silent; he was thinking too much of the dark lights of his own history to have any word of comment.

Spencer continued:

"This man Parker is from Arkansas, from the town of Ransoms, in my own county; and as a man who still loves Arkansas, though I have exiled myself from it, my pride has been aroused

and my sense of right outraged. You talk about a few saloon men, a few boot-leggers who slip round into alleys and hand out whiskey to a lot of loafers and fools, — what is that to such work as this?"

He thumped the paper with quivering forefinger.

"Boot-legging and saloon keeping are virtues compared with such work!"

"I think you're right!" Blake admitted.

He was indeed stirred to indignation by the picture drawn by Spencer; but, he reflected, what was he, to condemn any man? And the reflection chilled his enthusiasm and tied his tongue.

That afternoon Judge Spencer laid his charges before the officials of the land office, backing them with written proofs, and the whole was sent on to the land department in Washington.

Martin Parker heard of this action almost as soon as it was taken. He was disturbed. Other things had disturbed him lately, — notably a visit from a representative of certain Eastern loan companies. The loan companies had refused to let him have any more money, after that visit, and were becoming threatening in their letters.

"Dick Brewster is at the bottom of this," he said, when he heard of the step taken by Judge Spencer.

For once the smile left his face.

"All right, Mr. Dick Brewster, *alias* Jackson Blake, you have stacked the cards against me, but you haven't won the game. When I fall, you will go down with me. You ought to have

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thought of that. Stone throwing is a dangerous business for a man who lives in such a glass house as you do!"

The Washington authorities were aroused by the showing made by Spencer, and ordered an investigation. Parker, fearing worse things, departed quietly from the town, leaving the fag ends of his business affairs to be straightened out by another.

He had begun to make himself unpopular before this; and the youthful and somewhat reckless editors of the *Mercury*, who disliked him for personal reasons, signalized his departure by placing over their report of the investigation this startling headline:

THE FALL OF LUCIFER I

Parker read the report in a Kansas City reading room, whither he had gone for the sole purpose of seeing the comment of the Golden City papers.

"That's all right!" he thought grimly, the smile fading again from his face. "But if I've read aright, when Lucifer fell he dragged some other devils down with him!"

Yet his immediate thought was not an open exposure of Jackson Blake, nor an attempt to get that old reward. Fear of the murderous vengeance of Hank Wilson rested still too heavily on him. There were other and better means, he fancied, and he began to cast about to see how he could make use of them with safety to himself. He was essentially a coward, as he was essentially tricky and treacherous.

CHAPTER XXIX

CHRISTINE AGAIN

MUCH as he was doing, and exciting as were the scenes in which he spent most of his waking hours, time was passing somewhat as a painful but sweet dream to Jackson Blake — painful in the knowledge that he ought not to let his love for Elinor grow, and a sweet happiness in the further knowledge that, in spite of all his wisdom and philosophy, it was growing.

When he thought of her loveliness — he seemed to think of it all the time, and not only of her loveliness but of the apparent pleasure with which she daily greeted him, her fine eyes lighting and her fair cheeks flushing, — he was filled with joy. But when he thought of himself and the position he occupied his joy gave place to a burning shock, and his heart leaped with chagrin and confusion.

He would have run away from Golden City if he could have found it in his heart to do anything so cowardly. At the same time he was made miserable by a sense of baseness while he stayed. Every day and almost every evening he met Elinor and talked with her, and her voice was in his ears continually, her picture in his heart. He had come to know what true love is; and how different from that youthful folly

— he thought of it so now — his early love for Christine.

Shortly after Martin Parker's sudden exit from the business life of Golden City Blake received a letter bearing the Kansas City postmark. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and at the bottom of the letter was appended the unfamiliar name of James Mayfield.

MR. JACKSON BLAKE, GOLDEN CITY, KANSAS:

Dear Sir,— Friends who have visited Golden City inform me that you are thoroughly reliable and give careful attention to all who seek your advice as to investments, land settlement, and such matters. For this reason I have taken the liberty of telling a friend of mine, a lady, that you will wait upon her at the station when the train from this city reaches your town tomorrow, and will show her about Golden City in your carriage, as you did the friends I have mentioned. She will appreciate this greatly, and will perhaps conclude to remain in Golden City and make investments there.

Thus the letter ran.

Courteous treatment of all possible customers or clients was a thing in which the land and law firm of Spencer & Blake took pride. Therefore, Jackson Blake had no thought but to bring out the roan bronchos and the carriage, repaired long since and shiny as of old, and drive down to the station to meet the lady whose name, strangely enough, had not been given.

There was but one woman who descended from the train. She stopped as she reached the platform, and looked about in hesitation, as if seeking some one. Though so changed — changed even

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more than himself— Blake knew her at a glance. The woman was Christine Borg, whom, though she had never been long out of his mind, he had not seen for seven years.

He had dismounted from the carriage and stood in readiness to receive the stranger who was to arrive from Kansas City. When he beheld Christine his face became colorless. In a moment, however, he had regained his outward composure, though he felt his heart beating in great leaps and the blood singing in his ears.

With keen insight he saw the character of the trick that had been played on him, and was sure that the one who had played it was Martin Parker. He knew, too, that Parker had been guided in it by a spirit of retaliation, believing that the charges brought to disbar him had not been brought by Spencer alone, but by the firm of Spencer & Blake. He saw also in that same instant, and with that same quick intuition, that Parker had recognized him all along for what he was—the escaped convict, Dick Brewster.

His mind was in a perplexed whirl and his heart in a tumult when he advanced toward the woman, who was standing in hesitating uncertainty without a knowledge of which way to go, for she did not see the person for whom she was looking. Blake might have turned his face away and driven off without acknowledging that he knew who this woman was; but that would not have been Jackson Blake. She was Christine, she had been tricked apparently, she was bewildered; so though his limbs quaked he walked toward her.

As he did so she saw him and grew white to the lips.

"Dick!" she gasped.

"Get into the carriage," he said, motioning toward it; then took her by the arm.

Many men had descended from the train, though only this woman; and the "rustlers" for the land firms were making the air vocal with their invitations. Among them Blake saw Lost Charlie, hands full of his highly colored cards, elbowing his way toward some men, strangers, who having gained the platform stood talking in a group. Lost Charlie had singled these out as "victims," as he called all land seekers who fell into his hands.

"Into the carriage," said Blake, with marked tenderness, urging the trembling woman along; "we'll talk, after we get in."

"I — I did n't expect to see you here, Dick!" she said almost hysterically.

"No, I suppose not," he answered, thanking his lucky stars that the calls and shouts of the "rustlers" kept any one from hearing that name; "and I did n't expect to meet you this morning. But we'll talk about that when we're in the carriage. There's always a crush here."

How thin and pale she was; and how wasted her arm, as he noticed as he helped her into the vehicle! He climbed in after her without a word, and turned the bronchos up the street. At the first cross street he headed them toward the open country. He wanted to get out of the town, where he could talk freely with her without observation; and he knew, if any one took notice

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of his movements at all, that a drive toward the country with one who was apparently a land seeker would seem the most natural thing in the world.

Christine looked at him timidly from time to time as the bronchos raced on. At last she ventured to speak.

"I thought you were dead long ago, Dick! You have changed a great deal — you have let your beard grow, and your hair and face have changed, but I should have known you anywhere in the wide world the moment I set eyes on you."

Then he looked at her. The shock given by her unexpected appearance had been followed by a pitiful tenderness and compassion. Could this be the girl he had thought so beautiful long ago? How changed she was! The satiny skin was now ivory white; the blue eyes that had so reminded him of violets were faded, as if their deep color had been washed away by many tears; the once rounded throat was flat, the neck thin, the neck-cords showing. The hands that lay in her lap — such soft, white, beautiful hands they had been — were roughened and red, the palms calloused.

She was dressed poorly enough, though there had been an attempt to hide the meanness of her attire, for it showed deft feminine touches — a blue ribbon at the throat and knots and bows of ribbon and lace here and there, all applied in the old way, showing a lack of taste so noticeable to Blake now. Evidently Christine's finances were at a low ebb; but the old ability to do much with little remained, and likewise the old love of cheap finery.

Yet she was Christine. He knew now that he had loved her once, tenderly, with a boyish blindness of devotion; and while that old passion had been pushed aside by his love for Elinor its memory lingered like an aroma. He felt his throat choking and his eyes becoming moist as he looked at her. Nor could he fail to note another thing—it was apparent at a glance; she was about to become a mother.

"You are married," he said.

A flush dyed the ivory whiteness of the thin cheeks.

"No," she answered, after an instant of hesitation, "I am still unmarried."

"You—you expected to meet some one here?"

"Yes; Martin Parker."

"He promised to meet you here?"

"Yes."

She began to tremble, and tears filled the faded eyes.

"I ought not to have trusted him when he said he would meet me here; but what was I to do, Dick? He said he would be sure to meet me; but if anything prevented I was to inquire my way to the office of Spencer & Blake, and ask there for Jackson Blake, who was a special friend of his. I ought not to have trusted him! Oh, I can't tell you, Dick, how I have suffered for—for my folly! You loved me once—I know you did; and because you did you will not think too hard of me—you will not despise me?"

She read in his pitying eyes the sympathy he could not at once express in words.

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"I was always a foolish, silly girl, Dick — you know it as well as I do; but I did think a great deal of you, and my heart was broke when that — that trouble came, and you were sent to jail; and when you got out and ran away, I was so glad — I can't tell you how glad I was! And if I could have done so I would have run away, too, and gone to you. I thought maybe you'd write to me and ask me to come to you, and I would have gone, Dick! I couldn't have suffered as much as you did, I suppose; but oh! how I suffered when the days went by and you didn't write; and the weeks and the months went by and still you didn't write! It seemed to me that I could n't stand it. If I could just have had one word from you!

"Then I began to think that you must be dead, or you would have sent me one little letter, anyway; and after a while I became sure that you were dead. I was so sure of it that when I saw you just now I nearly fainted, for it seemed as if you had come back suddenly from the grave. I suppose you were afraid to write to me?"

"Yes," he admitted. That lump in his throat would not let him say more.

"Then Martin Parker began to pay attentions to me," she went on after a time; "and, thinking you were dead, I" — she twisted nervously at her dress — "I let him come, and I suppose I encouraged him. I thought I liked him, and he was said to be so well off, you know, and was making money; and — you won't understand it, I suppose, but I felt that I *must* have some one who could love me, and I thought he loved me;

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and he promised to marry me. I was very foolish and weak ; you can't know how foolish and weak I was, Dick, for you never really knew me, you know, though you thought you did. And then, and then, — it is his child."

She would not look at him now, but fumbled nervously with her dress where her fingers rested on it in her lap. Her voice was trembling and her cheeks were aflame.

"He — he was away a good deal after that. I heard he was at Kansas City and out here and other places ; and by and by, when I began to feel that he didn't mean to marry me, after all, I left home and went to Kansas City. I told my folks I was going up there to get work, and that I was tired of staying in a little hole like Ransoms ; and they didn't know — they don't know even now. They think I am working there.

"I did get work there, and I hunted up Martin's Kansas City office. It was hard to find the office, and harder still to find him, after I knew where it was, for he was there such a little of the time. But I met him at last ; I was determined to see him, and I did, and I asked him what he meant to do, and told him of his promise to marry me."

"The scoundrel !" Blake ejaculated.

"Yes, he was a scoundrel ! He put me off, somehow, — I hardly know how, he has such a way of using soft words — and I still hoped he would marry me ; and he gave me a little money, and I kept on at my work."

She stopped, in hesitation.

"I lost my position, finally ; the people where

I worked would n't keep me any longer, and I was turned upon the street. Then I wanted to die, Dick! Oh, I prayed to die! I would have killed myself, only I was too much afraid. I did n't want to live but I was afraid to die, for I was afraid of the hereafter, Dick, — afraid because of what I had done, and especially if I killed myself and — and — the child.

"I found Martin again, by watching for him on the street in front of his office. And I threatened him, and perhaps that scared him, I don't know; but, anyway, he said he knew he had done wrong by me, and that he would really and truly marry me now. And he bought me a ticket for Golden City, and said that I should take a certain train, and when I got here he would be here to meet me; and then we would be married here.

"Then I saw you; and — and — I knew then that I had been lied to again, and that he had just sent me out here to put me off on you."

"No," thought Blake fiercely, "to spite me — to get even with me, as he would call it!"

As for speech, he could hardly trust himself for that yet. The bronchos were trotting gayly on; and he now observed with a sense of confusion that they were taking the trail that led toward the prairie dog town to which he had driven Elinor on the first day he had ever seen her. The dog town was part of a land claim now and was planted to sorghum; but the dogs, having no proper respect for human claims, had not relinquished possession, but attacked the sorghum, showing that they appreciated its succulent quali-

ties even better than the juiceless buffalo-grass that had been plowed under to make room for it.

Blake drew the bronchos into a walk and turned them into a little-used trail leading to the flats.

"You condemn me very much, of course," she said, so interpreting his silence; "and I can't expect that you would n't; but you can't condemn me more than I condemn myself."

"No," he urged, with manly gentleness, "I do not condemn you in any way. I have come to see that condemnation is often, usually, impossible when one knows all. I do not condemn you, and I could not if I would when I remember the old days. Martin Parker is the one to be condemned. He sent you out here to get rid of you, and sent you to me because of a grudge he has against me. But I'm glad, under all the circumstances, that he did send you here, for you need help and a friend. What you have told me makes me want to kill Parker; and then I should be a double murderer. And" — he drew a deep breath — "the crime of one murder on my soul is enough!"

"And I was the cause of that," she said softly; to which he made no answer.

The bronchos were moving on at a walk. Overhead the sky was as brightly blue as when he had driven Elinor and her father out over this land, new to Christine, as it had been then to Elinor. At the side of the trail some wild sunflowers turned their yellow disks to the sun, and from the top of one of them a meadow lark sent out his full note of joy.

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Having begun to talk Blake went on, telling Christine the story of the seven years since he had seen her. Its recital and the reflections engendered humbled him.

"So you see what I am — what I have become!" he concluded, bitterly. "I dare not even use my own name here, or anywhere. Martin Parker must have recognized me when he first saw me — what he has done shows that he did, yet for some reason he pretended otherwise. But Judge Spencer has not recognized me; neither has Hank Wilson. So I must go on as Jackson Blake; play out this double part and live this lie to the end. Likely Parker will yet expose me, as a further piece of personal spite and revenge. Well, let him! I shall not run; and I would not run now, while I can be of service to you, if all the sheriffs of Arkansas stood before me, ready to arrest me this minute."

She glanced at him from time to time, as he talked. It could be seen that she was still proud of him in a way — proud of his courage, his manly strength, even proud of his fierce energy. Those were the qualities she had loved in the old days, and she still loved them. Those qualities, and the belief that to marry him would lift her above poverty, together with a pride in being loved by such a man, were the things that had drawn her to him then; and the reputation of wealth borne by Martin Parker, his dashing appearance and that perpetual smile, had been the things which had drawn her to Parker.

She was glad to surrender herself into Blake's hands. She had fought so long, and struggled

with such hopelessness, that she was glad to let him take the burden, in a measure, if he would, though she told him again and again that he ought not to think of it, and that if he would provide her with the means she would return to Kansas City by the next train.

"And go back there to die?"

"I may die, anyway; I've felt, sometimes, that I'm going to. And I haven't cared," she declared, wearily.

He turned the bronchos about and guided them into another trail.

"I have some friends here," he said, "good friends; we'll go to them."

CHAPTER XXX

WHOM THE GODS LOVE

WHOM the gods love die young!" said the ancients. That genial soul, Robert Louis Stevenson, interprets this to mean that those beloved of the gods keep green their youth into old age, and so die young even though they have long passed the Scriptural threescore years and ten. Old Shake and Mrs. Shake kept their youth green and their hearts open to sympathy; and this, it seemed, they would continue to do so long as they lived; and the gods and all good men loved them.

It was to Old Shake's that Jackson Blake drove with Christine; and they took her in, remembering the words of One who walked the rough ways of this world, heart-sore often, though He lived as never man yet lived and spake as never man spake. They took her into the comfort and sweet kindness of their home; and while Old Shake became to her in her distress a father, and Mrs. Shake a mother, Nevada gave to her without stint out of a whole-hearted charity and pity.

In thus taking Christine to Old Shake's Jackson Blake knew well to what he exposed himself. He foresaw everything, yet he did not hesitate. He thought of Elinor and what its effect would be upon her. Though resolved to care for Chris-

tine in her time of need, his love for Elinor had never been higher than in the moment he made the decision.

There was a much easier course. He could have sent Christine back to Kansas City. That would have cost him but a few dollars, and no one need to have known anything. This method of escape from the misconceptions and misunderstandings he foresaw would have been temptingly easy to some men. It did not tempt Jackson Blake. The road he chose was a pathway of thorns, lined with ugly, poisonous weeds instead of heart's-ease and delight roses. Yet he chose it without hesitation.

"It is a calumny on men to say that they are roused to heroic action by ease, hope of pleasure, recompense — sugar plums of any kind in this world or the next! Difficulty, abnegation, martyrdom, death are the *allurements* that act on the heart of man. . . . Not by flattering our appetites; no, by awakening the Heroic that slumbers in every heart."

Thus wrote gruff old Thomas Carlyle, and he was right. The heroic had been aroused in the soul of Jackson Blake; and he would have faced the fagots and fires of martyrdom rather than abandon Christine Borg in the hour of her despair and humiliation. He might suffer for it—he expected to suffer for it!—but had he not withstood suffering in the past? He could withstand it and endure it again. He would not run—he would not leave Golden City now, while Christine needed him, to save himself even from that penitentiary from which he had fled;

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and to liberty-loving Jackson Blake to go there would have been a living death.

Scandal came of it, as Blake expected. He had been to Kansas City, as Spencer's partner, a number of times within the past year. How the gossips mouthed this morsel! Even amid the whirl and whirr of the wild boom their chatter resounded. Men and women guessed what they did not know, and the whole subject became public talk and public property. Judge Spencer visited Old Shake's apparently to learn what he could. But Jackson Blake did not swerve a hair's-breadth from the course he had laid out.

The Caxtons sympathized with Blake, and so did Prethro, though they did not know the whole story; they knew only that he was innocent of this thing. He could not tell the whole truth, nor could Christine.

"Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny," said Old Shake, speaking to his good wife about it; then muttered to himself, as he sat, thinking, pipe in hand:

"Slander,
Whose edge is sharper than the sword; whose tongue
Outvenoms all the worms of the Nile; whose breath
Rides on the posting winds, and doth belie
All corners of the world: kings, queens, and states,
Maids, matrons, nay, the secrets of the grave,
This viperous slander enters.'"

He became kinder even than usual to Blake, and through pity kindness itself to Christine.

David Melchor the preacher showed as sweet a heart as Old Shake himself. Seeing Blake

looking depressed as they passed on the street, he stopped him, took him aside, and they had a talk together.

Blake told him what he could of Christine and of himself, which was little enough. But it satisfied and convinced this man who, perhaps because his heart and his life were so open and simple, had a marvellous insight into the lives and hearts of other men.

Melchor at first glance would not have impressed one as a man of fine intuition and sweet spirituality. He was somewhat stout of build, with large head, and wide face heavily bearded. A front view gave his face and head a square look. "A block-head," he once said of himself, laughing; "but, brother, I hope that there's nothing of the block hardness about my heart."

So when Melchor took Blake aside and they began to talk of the matter which had brought so much distress to Blake, Melchor drawing out the story in his simple and sympathetic way, showing at the same time that he had already heard it, Blake had no thought of being offended, but talked with him freely, and was only sorry that he could not tell this man everything, and get more of this sympathy of which he felt so much in need.

"Brother," said Melchor, laying a hand caressingly on Blake's shoulder, "I can see that you are pure in heart."

"I am not!" said Blake, startled by old recollections.

"I can see that you are doing the work that our Elder Brother would do if He were here;

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even He suffered and was misunderstood. Let that thought comfort you. All of us suffer and are misunderstood. Do the right, as God gives you to see the right, and trust the outcome to Him. For thirty years I have been trusting Him, brother, and He has never yet failed me. Remember the oath of the Three Guardsmen: 'Each for all, and all for each!' We must bear one another's burdens, brother; and it is my anxiety and desire to help you bear yours, as you are helping this woman to bear hers."

Does it seem strange? — perhaps it does! Jackson Blake went from that interview calmed and strengthened.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VOICE OF THE BRIDEGROOM

YES, she has been askin' for you." Old Shake having answered stood aside from the doorway sunk in the heavy wall o' sod, and Jackson Blake entered the house.

"She has been askin' for you for some time," the old man added, as he followed Blake toward the room where Christine lay with face as white as her snowy pillow or the gleaming whitewashed walls about her.

It was dark outside though the stars were shining. Blake had driven out from the town under the starlight in answer to a summons sent by Old Shake. Within the house lights burned dimly, except in the room where Christine lay; for Death had walked hand in hand that day with Life. In the little side room, where one window looked out upon the Dawn and the other out upon the Sunset, lay the babe in its burial robes. The mother — every one knew it — was hastening after the child through the gray gates that swing only outward.

Christine was looking expectantly toward the door as Blake entered the room. One thin hand — hard and rough, but no longer red — lay outside the cover. She looked at him intently, but said nothing. He crossed to the bed and bent

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over her. Old Shake and Mrs. Shake were in the room; so was Nevada and David Melchor.

"I was afraid you could n't come," she whispered.

It seemed but the memory of a voice, so faint it was.

He stood in silence by the bed, infinitely touched.

"If—if you would kiss me, Dick, and forgive me,—you did kiss me once, you know!"

If the others in the room heard the name she used, they must have thought her mind wandered and that she fancied him some close friend or acquaintance of the past.

He bent over and kissed her tenderly with his bearded lips. He had been a beardless boy when he gave her that first kiss of the long ago!

As he sat down in the chair by the bed, the hand that lay outside the bed clothing stole toward his, and she smiled faintly with a sort of child-like contentment when he took it.

"I never had a husband," she murmured, speaking alone to him, "and it was a bitter sin; but, Dick, I am going to the Bridegroom who always keeps His word and never casts any one away that wants to come to Him,—and I do want to come to Him! You do not think He will cast me away, Dick, for He was kind even to poor Mary Magdalene, and to the—woman taken in adultery! He will not cast me away, Dick?"

"No!" he answered, and there was a sob in his voice.

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"And you forgive me, too, Dick?"

"Freely — everything."

The contentment in the eyes deepened. She said no more just then, but lay for a time looking into the face of the man now so close to hers. Her hair was a tangle of yellow gold. Her eyes seemed as blue as of old, — a sky-like azure; yet even while they looked into his, Jackson Blake saw that they had a far-away vacancy as if they beheld things beyond him and far beyond the limits of that little room.

The lids closed down like white curtains after a time. She seemed to be sleeping, but when she aroused again it was seen that she had not been sleeping. Though the smile still lay on the white face and her hand still clutched his, her mind wandered now.

She babbled like a sick child. Then memory, that tricky thing, leaped years, and she was a girl again in her father's little house. Dick Brewster and Jed Anderson were suitors for her smile. It was a merry jest to her, and she laughed gleefully, thinking that she was walking home with Dick Brewster from the dance, and that under the shadows of the dogwood he was trying to kiss her. After that she was in Kansas City, begging Martin Parker to keep the solemn promise he had made to marry her. At times she appeared to sleep.

It was midnight when she heard the Bridegroom's voice. She opened her eyes. Blake took her hand, as he had done at intervals, and her fingers held it in a close grasp. Her eyes wavered away from his face, looked upward,

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opened wider, as if in a sort of glad surprise; her lips parted, the fingers relaxed.

No one heard rustle of sail nor thud of oar nor grate of keel, but all knew the boatman was there, and that Christine and her child were with the Bridegroom, who is not only husband to the widow but to the husbandless, as well as father to the fatherless.

Jackson Flake went outside when he knew he should hear Christine's voice no more, and for a long time he walked about in the yard. The moon had risen long before. Its light flooded the level valley. By the magic of its touch the rude corral, the sod stable, the bunk-rooms, the house itself, were garnished with silver. The dusty trail leading toward the town was puddled with silver, as it was sometimes puddled with rain after a shower. High the moon rode, sending down its white light, — and nowhere else is moonlight quite so white and bright as on those wide plains when the summer nights cool the hot fever of day and the sweet winds blow from the uplands as if they had passed over banks of bloom! Crickets chirped at Blake's feet, but he did not hear them. His thoughts were up there where the big moon and the pale stars were shining.

His heart was heavy and it was troubled as he thought of the past; of that past which seemed so wasted and blasted; of his father, of whom Christine had talked since her coming to Golden City; of Elinor and Judge Spencer.

Blake's thoughts dwelt most upon Christine. They were wide, large thoughts, — of life and

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death and the mystery of existence. He could not be sure of much, — men know so very little, yet there was one thing he did know, because his inmost soul cried out its truthfulness as he looked into the deep vault where the stars scintillated and the moon rolled her silver wheel: — The One who had stretched that spangled canopy, lighted it with those fires, illumined it with that white disk of silver; the One who spins planets and suns as if they were but tops, yet provides that they shall never fall nor deviate from their lines of flight; to whom time is nothing, space nothing, and an archangel no greater than the humblest creature; who is infinite in mercy as in wisdom, — that great Being loved Christine, and would be to her and to every poor erring mortal the source and fountain of all that beauty, goodness, and perfection which she and all have missed and miss in this imperfect life.

“‘He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?’ He that created the mind, and is Mind, shall He not understand?”

“Yes,” said Blake, in answer to these his own thoughts. “It is necessary only to understand to forgive all things!”

Yet Blake was not ready to forgive Martin Parker.

CHAPTER XXXII

TANGLED IN HIS TETHER

BLAKE saw that Christine's wishes were carried out. She was buried with her child in the cemetery at Golden City, and the sealed letter she had left to be forwarded to her parents in the event of her death was sent.

When it was all over and Christine was lying at peace under the kindly sod, safe from all stain and heartache forevermore, Jackson Blake tried to turn his mind again to the press of work he had been neglecting. The hurrying in the streets seemed strange to him. And how hot it was! Until then he had not felt the heat.

He was aware that he was irritable and nervous. The heat fretted him. The worries of business annoyed him. Thoughts of Elinor gave him pain. He had avoided her, had kept away from the office as much as he could, and when forced to go there had felt ill at ease as he consulted or conversed with Judge Spencer on matters of business.

As he approached the office on the first morning in which he tried to return to business, he encountered Elinor. She acknowledged his salutation coldly and passed on.

He stopped in the streaming crowd and looked after her in hesitation. He feared that he had

lost her love, — if he had ever possessed it, and to contemplate what her probable opinion of him now was hurt him beyond the power of words to measure.

"But what am I to do?" was his thought. "I can let her know I am not the dog she probably thinks me; I ought to do that, and I will. But can I go any farther than that, even if she would now let me? Have n't I gone too far already — much too far?"

He turned and walked on into the office. Spencer glanced up from his desk with a look that was unpleasant.

"I suppose we might as well have an understanding," he said, as Blake took a seat. He frowned at the stacks of papers and legal documents before him which stood as mute evidence of Blake's neglected duties. "You've hardly been in the office for a week, and I've been hearing some things that are rather peculiar, to put it mildly."

He searched with keen glance the face of his junior partner.

Blake fumbled with his soft hat, which he had not yet hung up, and felt a deep sense of irritation.

"Whatever you have to say, say it!"

The judge's face reddened angrily.

"I did n't know but there were some explanations you would feel like making."

"None that I know of. I suppose you refer to the death and burial of the young woman who came here not long ago, and who died at Old Shake's and was buried yesterday. There

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is nothing to explain there on my part. I understood you called there one day to make some inquiries about her—and," he added, "about me! It seems you had heard something through Prethro!"

"Yes," Spencer responded quite calmly, "when I heard that she was from Ransoms, in my own county back in Arkansas, I went down to make an inquiry. There was nothing I could do for her, so far as I saw, and I came away. You won't think it an impertinence if I ask you where you knew her?"

"I knew her before I ever came here."

"And met her again during your visits to Kansas City within the past few months?"

"Nothing of the kind; I never saw her in Kansas City."

"Some place else, then?"

"No place else recently."

Blake was becoming even more irritated; for Spencer, lawyer-like, was examining him as if he were a recalcitrant witness.

"See here, Blake," said the judge, with some show of warmth, "up to now we've got along nicely together; I have given you of my confidence, and have trusted you as if you were my son."

"And I've done my part — of the office work, and other work, I mean, — have n't I?"

"You have; but that's not the point. I have n't been so blind as not to see that you have been paying some attention to my daughter. I should have been a mole not to see that! What I hear now — and it is the common talk of the

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street — shows me that in one way, at least, you are not just the young man I thought you. You will be kind enough, therefore, not to speak to Elinor again."

Blake looked at him coldly.

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"I wish it; she wishes it!"

"You are ready to believe the lies you hear, I see!"

"When you are ready to explain fully, I shall be able to see how much of falsehood there is in them. You do not seem ready to explain."

"That's all right," said Blake, testily, as he proceeded to hang up his hat. "You're like some other men I know — you'd rather think evil of a fellow than good. You may think what you like. I have said my say on this subject, and as I have n't any sense of guilt, I haven't any explanation. I simply gave help to one who needed help, to one who had been basely betrayed and as basely abandoned; she was a friend I knew long ago, whom I had not seen for years until she came here, and I did not know that she was coming here!"

Judge Spencer looked at the wrathful young man somewhat critically. He still liked Blake.

"I don't see where you could have met her or known her, if not at Kansas City or during your trips to that place, as I know that she lived in or near Ransoms all her life. I knew her father — that is, I have seen him; he was a log hauler for a quarrelsome old curmudgeon by the name of Brewster, who ran a saw-mill in the woods close to Ransoms."

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Blake turned toward the door.

"We won't talk any more about this," he said. "I have n't any explanations to make. And if I had I would n't make them now!" he added. "I can go out of this office without hurting my feelings any, and out of the town, too, for that matter."

Judge Spencer was angry now, also.

"I think you'd better go," he said, his gray brows contracting until they formed a bridge above his nose. "I spoke to you — asked an explanation of you — on account of my daughter. And I will say to you now, Blake, that if I can help it I do not intend that any man shall approach her in the guise of a suitor, as you have plainly done, who comes to her walking across the ashes of any old amours. I did n't intend to speak so bluntly, but you have forced it from me. If you want to leave the firm, well and good; arrangements to that end can be made as soon as you like."

Blake crushed his hat down on his head and left the office, and did not once look back as he strode down the street.

Before he had gone a block he began to see that he had acted somewhat childishly. Yet he would not return. Instead, he sought out Jim Prethro, proposed an antelope hunt, and passed the rest of the day with Prethro and Lost Charlie in chasing wildly over the distant plains on fleet bronchos. They got no antelopes, but they burned some gunpowder; and the crash of the Winchesters, the clatter of hoofs, the infectious laugh of Lost Charlie, and Jim Prethro's charac-

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teristic talk and comment, helped to cool Blake's blood and clear his brain.

The next day, while he was considering what he should now do, and was beginning to realize that it would be quite impossible for him to leave Golden City, or even to think of it seriously so long as Elinor Spencer was there, he received a call from Judge Spencer. The judge had been thinking, too.

"We might as well patch up that little trouble we had yesterday," he said, in a spirit of conciliation. "Fact is, Blake, I find I can't get on very well without you. You know the country and the run of our business even better than I do myself. There are a dozen land deals now on, in which your advice and help is needed. Our business interests lie together, and —"

The upshot of it was that Jackson Blake went back that day into the office which he had left but the day before, and no one, not even Jim Prethro, knew he had been out of it.

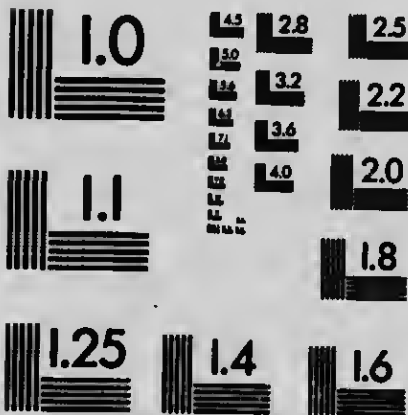
Elinor ceased to visit the office. Though on a dozen occasions Blake was about to bring up the subject again and make a further and more complete statement to Spencer, or seek Elinor out herself and say something to her which would bridge over the chasm now existing between them, he failed to do so.

One thing, however, Jackson Blake did not neglect — the business matters in which Judge Spencer was so vitally interested. He threw himself into the work with greater vigor than ever. The boom was wild now beyond all belief. Fortunes were being made daily on every



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hand, or so it seemed; real estate went higher and ever higher. The most obscure and unattractive lot on what had once been Jim Prethro's farm was worth now as much as the whole farm would have brought two years before.

In the wildness of their excitement these new Croesuses of the West began to erect school-houses and other public buildings. For these improvements the town fathers of course issued the bonds of the town, which the representatives of the mortgage companies were more than willing to take, as the interest rates and commissions were high. This put more money into circulation, and that again helped the boom.

Blake, though he worked early and late, toiling, as he would have said himself, like a horse, had lost his old enthusiasm; and nature now, as if in sympathy with his spirit, began to be unkindly. The rains of the spring and early summer had ceased; the heat increased, and the country began to suffer from drought. It was terrible, that drought, withering the hopes of the genuine farmers even as it wilted their grain fields.

However, nothing, apparently, could stop the rainbow chasing. Reasons in explanation of the drought were, as "plentiful as blackberries," and they were quite as satisfying. Men are convinced most easily when they wish to be convinced. The previous year and the one before that had been favorable years for farming on the plains. That established a rule; and this one year of drought, though most unfortunate just then, could not break the rule. So every one

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said ; and so every one — at least every one in Golden City — believed or affected to believe.

The land speculation, the building operations, the bond voting and the bond selling went on, even though the fields curled and crisped under the hot winds blowing from the Staked Plains of Texas with the breath of a furnace.

Judge Spencer, usually calm, was wrapped up in his speculations and had lost his head. Blake would have lost his head also but for the fact that Elinor's coolness and avoidance of him and the office made it impossible for him to so submerge himself in the wild boom. He was dissatisfied with himself. He knew he loved this woman, and he wanted to tell her that he loved her and beg her to think well of him and believe in him. But the feeling that, while not vile in the way she thought, he was even worse — a murderer, an escaped convict, a man living under an *alias* — rendered him incapable of saying anything. And groaning in spirit he held his words and his desires in check, and went on hating himself but loving her more and more every day.

Though David Melchor continued the task to which he had set his hand, that of clearing the town of its saloons and its disreputable characters, Blake made no more speeches with him and no longer worked at his side. He had reached the conclusion that if he could not be a Bayard without reproach he would not be anything so far as that kind of work was concerned. But people scarcely remarked Blake's absence from the tem-

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perance meetings; they had other things to think of. They were running with the hounds; they saw the gold at the end of the rainbow, and in their eagerness to get it they could have little time or thought for anything else.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN PASSIONS RAGE

OF many chips circling in a whirlpool, first one and then another will rise to the surface. To the man watching the face of the pool the chip in view is the chip of importance; he does not see the others, and so ignores them, forgets them, or lacks interest in them.

There were many chips in the whirlpool at Golden City. Each of them, at different times, drew undivided attention. When the chip marked, "The New Land Office," floated uppermost, nothing else was beheld in the stirring waters. It was the same when a chip appeared bearing the name of a new town, a new land deal, or a new bond issue. Just now the chip that centred all attention was labelled, "The County-Seat." Perhaps it was because this chip was really larger and more vitally important than any of the others which in their time had seemed so important, that the onlookers gazing at it forgot that there were or ever had been any other chips in the pool.

For awhile Golden City investors and speculators had affected to sneer at the pretensions of Plains City, the town that had been started on Hank Wilson's land. The time had arrived when they could no longer pretend to sneer; they

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were alarmed and showed it openly. Plains City was a lusty and loud-voiced candidate for the position of county-seat, and the election was approaching.

Of those who worked and talked for Plains City none was more strenuous and persistent than Hank Wilson himself. The lethargy of the Arkansas lowlands had dropped from him like a worn-out coat. Ordinarily he was inclined to moroseness and unsociability. These qualities disappeared, for he was a good dissembler. He dissembled; he showed lands to land hunters, descanted on the supericrity of the soil and the undeniable fact that Plains City was nearer the geographical centre of the county; he exhibited the advertising matter produced in wonderful profusion by the Plains City promoters, and called attention to the statements, written large, that the railroad was to put in a freight depot and passenger station, coal yards, stock yards, and other needful things; that Plains City was nearer the source of supply of water for purposes of irrigation, and had a hundred advantages where Golden City could show one.

"Lemme go over 'n' shoot th' son-of-a-gun!" said Prethro, when he knew of this. "Why that's blasphemy — goin' back on ol' friends like that! Did n't you drag him out of th' river, Blake, 'n' save his neck, which was n't worth savin', an' did n't I treat 'im 'z kind 'z if he was a preacher, 'stid of the low-down scallywag he's turnin' out t' be; an' did n't ever'body do ever'-thing fer 'im that 'd ort t' been done? An' now see that! Some men ain't got any more graty-

tude 'n a wolf! Feed a wolf, bring 'im up by hand, an' as soon 'z he gits big enough he 'll bite off th' hand that you 're feedin' him with. The on'y cure f'r a scoundrel like Wilson is a gun, 'n' a man that ain't afeared t' use it."

Nevertheless Prethro did not shoot Hank Wilson nor offer to molest him, perhaps for the reason that Blake was able to make him see that Wilson had as much right to exploit the advantages of Plains City as Prethro had to exploit those of Golden City.

Spencer and Blake were forced to take active cognizance of what was going on in and about Plains City; for if Wilson's friends and coadjutors won in the contest now at hand, Golden City would be "a dead duck," and "not in the running," as Lost Charlie phrased it. Therefore they and every one else in Golden City set themselves to work to thwart and balk the plans of the people who were booming Plains City for the position of county-seat.

The campaign took on all the features of a political contest. The county was canvassed, literature was sent out, speeches were made. The chip had so grown that it almost filled the pool.

A big outdoor mass meeting was planned to be held in Golden City on the night preceding the election. Judge Spencer, who was considered something of a "spellbinder," was chosen to make the principal speech, which was to be an effort to hold in line the Golden City forces and counteract the disorganizing effect of Plains City corruption money.

Long before the hour set for the meeting men

came riding in from the surrounding country on horses and bronchos, driving in across the plains in wagons and buggies, walking in over the parched and dusty trails, and soon the streets were filled with them and all the public houses overflowing. They were in cowboy garb, in the clothing of grangers, in the attire of business men and real estate speculators. Towns far and near united to add to the number, for all of these towns had interests in Golden City or Plains City or both.

Jim Prethro, sworn in as a deputy marshal, galloping up the middle of the street on a broncho, and wearing black coat and trousers, a black soft hat, with a blazing diamond in the bosom of his white shirt, another on the little finger of his left hand, while a big forty-four-calibre revolver was belted to his muscular waist, furnished a sight to make a tenderfoot stare. Lost Charlie was armed, mounted, and garbed in a similar manner, lacking the diamonds, for he, too, had been appointed a deputy marshal.

Just before sunset Hank Wilson walked in from Plains City. His sallow, bird-like face was flushed, and his keen, dark eyes were glittering from the effect of liquor. He showed no weapons, but a certain bulging of his coat-tails was significant.

Aware of this gathering of the clans and of what was occurring in the streets, Elinor Spencer became alarmed and tried to dissuade her father from delivering his contemplated speech. Spencer brushed aside her pleadings with a laugh.

"Pooh!" he said, in contempt of her fears. "I've talked to mobs of drunken backwoods-

men in Arkansas when I knew that half of them wanted to shoot me; and shall I back down now, when I am sure that nearly every man in town is friendly to the interests I am to support? The idea is ridiculous."

In spite of her father's assurance, Elinor was so much concerned for his safety that she put aside her pride, sought out Jackson Blake, and asked him to urge upon the judge the advisability of abandoning his determination to deliver a speech.

"I'll do what I can," Blake promised, "though I fancy it will be useless. I'll tell him what you say."

He felt his heart beating unpleasantly as he talked with this woman, to whom he had hardly spoken for many weeks.

"Not what I say," she insisted. "Tell him what you think; he knows what I think, but he will pay no attention to it."

Blake looked at her earnestly.

"I think there is no danger; but I will speak to him and point out the possibility of danger."

"Try to get him to make no speech at all," she urged.

"I'll do that, too; I will do everything I can, though I am sure there is not the danger that you fear."

When she was gone Blake thought the matter over more seriously.

"There is only one way to keep Judge Spencer from making that speech to-night, and that is to kidnap him, and hold him somewhere until the meeting is over. Plainly, that won't do. But

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I can talk with him about it, just as she said; and if I can't get him to drop the speech, perhaps I can get him to modify some of the things I know he intends to say. When the judge gets started, he's as bad as an Arkansas ox-driver — he takes the hide off every time he comes down with his lash."

Blake talked with Spencer, called his attention to the armed men who had come into town, and some threats they were making, and urged him to abandon the thought of speaking, or at least to tame his statements when he spoke.

"Not make that speech," said Spencer, "when I've been billed to make it, and all my friends expect me to make it? What do you take me for, Blake? I'd make it if Plains City had a regiment of men out there, with guns to stop me. And more: I'll say that it's understood that I'm in danger, and then I'll defy the devils! Yes, sir, I'll defy them!"

Blake went from that interview much alarmed. He was beginning to feel, with Elinor, that the judge was about to run himself into peril. The only thing he knew to do now was to speak to Jim Prethro and Lost Charlie and some others who could be relied on, and ask them to keep an eye on the crowd in front of the speakers' stand while the judge was talking.

"Look out for Hank Wilson," he warned; "he's drinking, and I've an idea that when he's drinking he's a dangerous man."

"Oh, I'll watch him," said Prethro, "and if he makes so much 'z a move I'll shoot his fool head off!"

David Melchor came to Blake in the crowd before the speaking began, while the Golden City brass band was parading the streets at the head of a procession composed largely of the business men of the town, with the usual contingent of small boys forming a jigging and whooping column in the rear. The men carried flaming torches, and at intervals stopped to cheer lustily before the residence or business office of some man prominent as a Golden City leader. Their faces were stern and set, as if they felt the importance of what they were doing. Though the gray dust covered their clothing, and oil from the torches trickled down on business suits and smeared itself over glossy silk hats, they appeared to be wholly unaware of it.

"There has been a good deal of liquor sold this afternoon, in spite of all that I and other friends of temperance could do," said Melchor, "and I'm afraid there may be trouble come of it. I cannot understand the wild madness in the brains of the men of Golden City, nor the mad rivalry between the towns. If men would only see things as they are — in their true proportions I mean. What will it matter to them in a hundred years, in fifty years, whether Plains City or Golden City is the county-seat?"

"Nothing then; but it may matter everything next year or next week or even to-morrow. These men are living in their own time, not in that of their descendants."

"Still, what does it matter?" Melchor persisted somewhat sadly. "A man can eat only so much food and wear a certain amount of clothing;

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when he has those things, and a shelter and a fire when he requires it, nothing else is really necessary. These are not new ideas, not my own ideas either; they are the teachings of the Man of Galilee, it seems to me. 'Thou fool,' He said, in parable, 'this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these things be?' See those madmen now screaming like Bedlamites, their very brains on fire, all on account of some little property interests here that they think are imperilled. Brother, it saddens me. But it is the way of the world," he added. "This is the world in epitome, and it saddens me."

The speech of Judge Henry Spencer was characteristic of the man and of the surroundings and circumstances which called it forth. It had the melodic eloquence of the Arkansan and Southern combined with the brisk fire of the Western Kansan, and was moreover spiced with pungent anecdote, and bound together with the solid argument that might be expected to emanate from the mind of such a man. Yet all through it, woven into web and woof, were threads of fiery invective and bitter denunciation.

What he had to say in reference to himself he reserved to the last, bringing it in at the end like the cracker of stinging silk that tipped the terrible ox whip of old Gustav Borg. He told the men of Plains City and their sympathizers that it was hinted his life was in danger if he ventured to speak that night.

"But I have defied you!" he shouted, clenching and swinging his fist. "I defy you now! Cowards — cowards that you are, to come to this

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meeting, here on our principal street with threats and intimidation! It is the courage of poltroons, that — ”

The men in front of the speakers' stand were writhing like a knot of serpents. Voices broke in upon the judge's vituperative sentences; then a revolver cracked. Spencer fell backward with an upward tossing of the hands. The crowd swayed and ground together like the meeting of two cross-currents of a snowslide, while yells and curses arose.

Jackson Blake heard a shriek from the lips of Elinor Spencer. In her anxiety for her father's safety she had insisted on occupying a seat close at his side on the platform, and her arms had caught him as he fell. Blake knew that Hank Wilson had fired the shot that struck Spencer; he had seen the flash and heard the report, and had beheld Jim Prethro leap toward Wilson.

He was not thinking of that but of Elinor as he fought his way to the foot of the platform and then swung upward until he reached the group gathered about Spencer and his daughter. Elinor was supporting her father, who, though not dead, as Blake saw at once, was seriously and perhaps fatally wounded. Blake pushed forward imperiously as he heard some one call wildly for a doctor. The street was in a tumult. A doctor elbowed his way out of the crowd and was helped by Blake to the platform.

“Serious!” was the doctor's declaration, when he located the wound in the breast. “We must get him to his hotel at once.”

Blake shouted for a carriage. When it came

he assisted the doctor in getting Spencer into it, then helped Elinor in and followed himself. He lent his strength in the work of getting Spencer up to his rooms and into bed. The rest of the night, with the exception of brief intervals, he spent in the hotel, to be within instant call, and to render what aid and comfort he could to Spencer and his daughter. But he did not obtrude his presence.

As soon as he had time to inquire he learned to his surprise that some one in the crowd had stabbed Wilson in the back immediately after the firing of the revolver shot, and that Wilson's condition was considered as serious as that of the judge. Who the wielder of that avenging knife was no one appeared to know, though there seemed to be little doubt that he was one of the upholders of the cause of Golden City.

Spencer sent for Blake in the morning. The judge might be mortally wounded, and he looked it; but he was still full of fight.

"Blake," he said, in a weak whisper, "the election is to-day. They tried to kill me, the scoundrels; but I intend to live to spite them. And Blake, they must n't win! See to it that they don't win. Put good men at the polling places, stay by them yourself; and have good men in Plains City to protest every questionable vote that may be offered. I know I can rely on you. And Blake, we've got 'em whipped! This attempt to kill me shows it. Make the most of it, for lying here this way I'm worth a dozen workers at the polls. You know what I want, Blake, — we must beat 'em — beat 'em out of their boots!"

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The judge was exhausted when he finished speaking, but his fierce energy remained.

"We'll beat them, all right," Jackson Blake promised, and went forth to make his words good.

That cowardly shot, though fired at Judge Spencer by a drunken man, brought a revulsion of feeling to many who had more than half decided to give their votes to Plains City. During the day, while the battle raged at the polls, Spencer was several times reported to be dying; and like word came concerning the condition of Hank Wilson. But when night came both of the wounded men were alive, and Golden City had been chosen as the county-seat.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ASHES OF ROSES

ELINOR SPENCER was adult and child. She had the prescience which comes not of education nor even of knowledge, but which seems to be a gift of childhood carried forward into maturer years. It had told her that this young man, the locator who drove her father and herself out over the plains in that golden October, and who then looked at her with a gaze so direct and unabashed, would be glad to become her lover, — aye! that he was even at that moment her lover and one day would be much more.

She had many dreams and girlish fancies after that. Her hours were filled with beautiful visions. Always Jackson Blake had a part in them, and they centred round him. It was delightful to dream and to drift, and she dreamed and drifted — until one day. Then she awoke suddenly, with a crushing pain at her heart, caused by the knowledge that into the world of her dreams and visions another woman had come.

The name of that woman, she learned, was Christine Borg, whose home was, or had been, at Ransoms, near her old home. Busy scandal bound up the name of Christine Borg with that of Jackson Blake, and turning the bundle thus

made up over and over, like a scavenger who pinches his nose and pokes with a stick at some unsavory mass, it commented, and the comments floated straightway to the windows of Elinor Spencer's room, wormed their way in, and lying down by her on the pillow that had been so peaceful, they drove away all the sweet dreams, and so poisoned the very air of that room that no beautiful habitant of any happy vision could dwell there for a single moment.

Elinor was not willing to believe the things she heard. She doubted the credibility and even the honesty of the acquaintances who dilated on them. And how they loved to dilate on them, even when they knew that it gave her pain! But this has ever been and ever will be. At first she discredited what she heard, and held firmly to her good opinion of Jackson Blake. But when the stories passed uncontradicted, and Blake seemed to give color to them by avoiding and evading her, unpleasant doubts arose. And when doubts assail the strong citadel of faith, the walls weaken; they can no more withstand such insidious assaults than walls of masonry can withstand the weakening effects of an army of burrowing rodents.

Up to the time of the arrival of Christine, Jackson Blake had apparently sought opportunities to see Elinor. Now he absented himself from the hotel where she and her father lived, was not often in the office, even, and when she chanced to pass him in the street he appeared to shrink within himself. If forced to speak to her he was plainly embarrassed and cut

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the interview as short as he could without a show of rudeness. It was to be seen that the old delight in meeting her which had been so manifest had departed.

The prescience which had seemed Elinor's natural gift, and had made her feel that this handsome man was to be not only her admirer and lover but perhaps her husband, became diseased now; and like a diseased nerve, its premonitions were distressing and lacked value as right indications.

One morning her father spoke to her of Blake. She flushed and showed a too evident agitation.

"Has he ever said anything to you on the subject of— of love or marriage?"

"Why, father, of course not!" she answered.

"Well, he must n't— not now! You've been hearing things about him, I suppose?"

"I'm sure I—"

"Well, I have, and I know that you have. He's turning out to be not just what I thought him. I don't care to have him coming up here, and you'll be careful not to be seen with him. I don't think it will be well for you to go out driving with him any more."

Judge Spencer and his daughter lacked something of the close mental communion which should be the normal state existing between father and daughter. As a rule he did not question her concerning her movements, nor even advise; he was a busy man, and he regarded her as a sensible girl. But this was a matter in which he thought he ought to interfere.

He did not say more at the time, and but little

more on the subject at any other time ; but he took his way down town and to his office, where he had the interview already recorded with Jackson Blake.

Elinor was faithful in her obedience until the day of the election, when concern for her father's safety induced her to speak to Blake, in the hope that he could get the judge to forego his declared purpose.

That interview with Jackson Blake, brief as it was, brought back with redoubled force the old tide of feeling. That tide had never been powerless, nor in abeyance ; now and then it had risen with such force that it threatened to tear down and wash away forever all the barriers Elinor tried to erect against it in her womanly heart. For she had come slowly, though certainly, to the knowledge that she loved this man and would continue to love him, no matter what he had done. More, she felt that she could but love him, even if he refused or ceased to love her in return.

She had drifted into that love—it had been so easy, so delightful, to drift into it!—during the many evenings spent with Blake, in those pleasurable drives, and through the long hours of the wild blizzard when he had been so manly, so tender, so heroic. She had thought he loved her then, whatever the state of his heart now.

Her feelings she had tried to lock fast from the eyes of spying friends, even from the eyes of her father ; away, too, from the gaze of Jackson Blake, and that was the most important. This she fancied she had done, except sometimes when

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she scanned her reflection in the long mirror in her room; then she doubted. She was always alone when she took that look. With all the gayety gone and joy absent, she surveyed her image thoughtfully. She beheld a beautiful face, but the lovely oval of its contour had lengthened and the sweet eyes under the long lashes and dark arching brows looked troubled.

When Hank Wilson, incensed and thrown into a drunken fury by Judge Spencer's words, fired his murderous shot, and Elinor holding her father in her strong young arms beheld the stalwart form of Jackson Blake leap toward the stand, and then climb up and elbow his way to her side, the old respect and admiration aroused by his energy and courageous determination made her forget all the past.

It strengthened her to have him there at her side, to hear his quick words of command, to feel the warm, strong pressure of his hand as he almost lifted her into the carriage that was to convey the wounded man to his rooms at the hotel.

Blake came the next morning, and called several times during the day with reports of the work he was doing in getting out the full vote for Golden City. He sat in the room where Judge Spencer lay when the Golden City band, followed by a long procession, marched under the hotel windows, and he went out on the hotel balcony and there thanked the voters, in Judge Spencer's name, for the splendid work they had done. Elinor sitting at her father's side heard the speech and the subdued cheers

with which it was greeted, and the old love was strong again in her heart.

Blake came to the hotel every day after that, and many times a day while the judge's condition was considered serious. Sometimes he entered the room where the judge lay; at other times Elinor met him and acquainted him with the judge's condition.

Within a week Spencer was thought to be out of danger. But the excessive heat had weakened him and so retarded his recovery that a month went by before he was able to sit in a chair, and the indications were that another month or more must elapse before he could hope to venture down to the office.

Hank Wilson did not make the same favorable progress toward recovery. Daily there were rumors that he was dying; but he clung to life, and the belief that he would recover gained in strength.

"I ain't fitten ter die!" he declared over and over to Old Shake and Mrs. Shake, who were constant in their ministrations at his bedside. "I'm jes' natcherly afeared ter die; fer I know thet the devil is layin' fer me an' a-waitin' fer me ter come to him."

He said the same to David Melchor.

"It's all right erbout th' Thief," he protested, after Melchor had read to him the story of the malefactor forgiven on the cross. "He war more fitten then me,—a heap more fitten; I dunno sometimes but thet the ol' devil hisse'f would be ershamed ter hev me round in his s'iety."

Mrs. Shake visited Judge Spencer's bedside

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also, with her bottles of medicines, her herbs and roots, her prescriptions and accounts from the almanacs of marvellous cures performed by the cure-alls in which she placed such implicit reliance.

The judge listened with amused incredulity when she urged the much-heralded remedies upon him; but he was pleased to have her come, for her visits were in themselves beneficial, and he was pleased to receive those kindly visits from Old Shake, with their conversations interlarded with quotations from the Bard.

More than once Elinor almost mustered courage to question Mrs. Shake about Christine Borg and Jackson Blake; but as often her courage failed at the crucial moment.

Thus the days passed, while the blazing heat grew more and more oppressive.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE HEGIRA

THAT burning heat, accompaniment of the terrible drought which, coming up from the Texas plains, gnawed the green herbage of the land with teeth of fire, broke the spirit of the wild boom. It palsied speculation and laid its hot hand on the heart of every industry. Resolution sickened under it and died.

Golden City had won in the fierce contest for the county-seat, yet that victory availed nothing. The hopes of the promoters withered with the herbage. This was the first year in which men had tried seriously to farm on the plains without the aid of irrigation. They had heard of the droughts whose desiccating breath sapped the milk from the heading wheat and curled the green blades of the sorghum into ribbons of sickly yellow. They had not been willing to believe until now.

Then, when men awoke from their fevered dreams in that intolerable heat, when fields of waving verdure were burned and seared in a day as if touched by the flames of a furnace, a panic swept the land like that of the Black Fridays which sometimes shake the stock-gambling exchanges of Wall Street and the grain pits of Chicago.

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The speculations at Golden City had been largely in options and margins. So long as the tendency of prices was upward, money was easy to obtain and sales were made readily. Now, no one could borrow and no one could sell when every one wanted to borrow and to sell. The speculators were like frightened mariners caught in a gale. They had not time to take in sail, so they cut away everything, — cordage, sails, standing rigging, even the masts; everything came down on the run or went overboard.

The shock of that storm threw a wave of distress into the room where Judge Spencer lay convalescing. He sent for Jackson Blake.

"What can we do?" he asked, when Blake answered the summons.

"We're caught," Blake was forced to confess. "I don't see any way out unless things take a turn for the better. The town is wild; you can't sell anything. I tried to sell those blocks and the corner lots on Main Street this morning; nobody would touch them, — nobody would listen to me. Every man is crazy to sell, and there are no buyers. I don't believe you could give a lot away to-day if it had so much as a ten-cent mortgage on it; and everything is mortgaged."

"I must get down to the office! Elinor; send word to the doctor; he's got to brace me up for a few days until I can right things."

But when the doctor came he was firm in his declaration that if Judge Spencer went back into the office now he would be taking perilous chances.

"I would n't guarantee your life for a week!" he said.

"Elinor," said the judge when he heard this, "I can't commit suicide; you must go into the office with Mr. Blake and see what you can do — help him all you can; there's so much to see to! And Blake, try to pull through somehow. Save all you can out of the wreck. Perhaps you can get money in Kansas City; try it. Offer a high rate. I know you'll do what you can."

Elinor Spencer went to the office with Jackson Blake. She could not comprehend the calamity that had come so suddenly to Golden City. She knew of the hot winds and the withering drought, but why the quotations of town lots should drop almost to nothing as a consequence was a thing difficult to understand.

Though unfamiliar with business affairs she was quick to learn, and when Blake assigned to her some work she gave her heart to it with a loyalty that was born of love for her father and a desire to render him less unhappy.

She found it pleasant, too, in an incomprehensible way, to be near Jackson Blake, though it was true that he passed more time in the streets than in the office. He told her of the efforts he was making to realize on mortgages and to dispose of lands, buildings, and town lots; of his endeavors to borrow money with which to tide over matters for a time; and it pleased her to know that he was so devoting himself to her father's interests, even though those interests were likewise his own.

Jackson Blake toiled hard enough, — no man could have toiled harder. But he could not

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sweep back the sea. From a town of congested population Golden City dwindled until the streets began to look almost deserted. Men were leaving on every train, — leaving at a more rapid rate than they had come in. Laborers walked the dusty streets without work, for there was no paid employment for any one now.

The situation in the country districts was said to be even worse. Farmers were abandoning their farms in disgust; the trails were lined with white schooners, all headed eastward toward the old homes, or westward toward the mountains, where the rainbow was said by some to still bend its alluring arch and the pot of gold to lie hidden at its end.

Nearly every farm and piece of land was mortgaged, and these mortgages represented in almost every instance amounts much greater than the lands could be sold for now. The worst of it was, or seemed to be, that often these mortgages had been given by men and women whose only apparent desire was to procure quickly all the money they could. This class led in the hegira. They departed from the towns and the farms as soon as the boom bubble broke; they had squeezed the lemon dry and would no more of it.

When the exodus was at its height and the drought continued, Jackson Blake rode forth to look at the farms that were being deserted so rapidly. And as he thus rode forth and surveyed the country he thought of the work of such men as Martin Parker, and of the benevolent associations, the savings banks, the missionary societies, and the widows and orphans of the East, whose

lust for large interest returns had combined with Western cupidity in this mad amalgam.

"Would that this flood of money had been water," was Blake's thought as he rode toward a house which he could see was deserted. "Water would kill these hot winds and stop the drought. It would send prices up again in Golden City, and we could see our way out of the muddle we're now in. Too bad that this awful drought should strike this year, of all years! I'm afraid Old Shake was right; this is n't a safe country for farming without irrigation, and I thought it was!"

Some blistered melon vines sprawled before the door of the cheap house. At one side a field of young alfalfa had been burned to the roots. On the other side a square of sorghum had so withered in the drying wind that the sere blades were whipping into strings and being blown away. A broken chair lay in the yard and near it the remnants of a child's cradle. Something was scrawled in chalk on the rude door. Blake urged his horse up to it and read the words.

Chinch-bugged in Illinoy,
Froze in Dakoty,
Et up by grasshoppers in Newbrasky,
Burnt up in Kansas.
We've lit out for a cooler country,
Which it's name is H—I.

A sense of grim humor had possessed many of the real farmers as they made ready to turn their backs on this land that had been the grave of their hopes.

"Man cannot live by wind alone," said one,

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writing his farewell on his door, "he needs a little water; I'm going where I can get it."

Still another that Blake read stuck in his memory:

Good-bye old Kansas — you're always "burnt up" or "bleedin'." Prohibition in a drouth-cussed country, where you can't get neither water nor whiskey, ain't to say a cinch. Hurrah for Oklahomy — that's our Canaan land!

Jackson Blake had much to think about of a serious and unpleasant nature as he galloped back toward the town. The hot south wind blew full in his tanned face, yet so far as personal comfort was concerned he cared not for it. He cared only for what it meant — those deserted houses, those abandoned and mortgaged lands, those new towns which he had expected to see grow into cities, the town lots, business blocks and houses, which he could not sell, and on which he could now borrow no money.

More than all he thought of Elinor and of himself; he recalled her willing industry as she worked over the books and accounts, at the mortgages and loan notes in the office; of what she had said on such a day and on such another day; of how she had looked, and how at times she had smiled. Then turning bitterly with heart-sickness to himself, he travelled wearily over the past — the irrevocable past.

"I am always making mistakes," was his thought. "Everything I touch turns in a direction contrary to that which I expect. To my own self I have been a Jonah, trying to

run away, but always hemmed in and stopped. And besides, a man cannot run away from himself! Yes, a Jonah always, and," he started at the suggestion, "perhaps I, too, will be caught by and by; and if I am" — something seemed to rise up and choke him as he thought of this possibility in connection with Elinor — "I shall not have even so much as one poor gourd-vine to cover me!"

He struck his horse sharply with his heels, perhaps thinking to escape from these unpleasant reflections; but he did not escape from them. All the way to town he thought of Martin Parker, who knew his secret and harbored a grudge against him, and of what it would mean if Parker should one day lift against him a mailed and angry fist.

"I can't expect anything else," was his conclusion, "and it's a wonder he has n't done it already. I could leave here now while so many are going, and it would be wise to do so."

He knew, though, that he could not go away while Elinor was there struggling with the financial problem that had overwhelmed her father. No matter what came he would stand by her and by Judge Spencer in this time of need. He could not go now; so he felt as does the man who seeing enemies approaching does not run, but resolutely draws his sword, sets his back to a wall, and determines to fight out the combat there, no matter what the result may be. Jackson Blake had his back to the wall; he knew it. The battle meant defeat; he was satisfied of that, too. Yet his sword was drawn and there was no retreat.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LOVE'S MADNESS

MARTIN PARKER had kept in touch with Golden City through the medium of the Golden City newspapers; and when he saw that Hank Wilson, whom he feared as a dangerous man, had been stabbed after shooting Judge Spencer, and was in a condition so serious that if he recovered months must pass before he could be out again, he turned his thoughts once more to the reward which had been offered for the capture of Dick Brewster. Two potent impulses moved him—rage against the man he now hated and covetousness.

Putting himself in communication with the Arkansas authorities, Parker made some guarded and tentative inquiries. Fear of the wrath of Gustav Borg kept him from going to Brownsville and Ransoms personally.

Knowledge of what Martin Parker was doing came to Dayid Melchor in a letter from a brother minister who had gone to Arkansas after the collapse of the boom, and who had been questioned there by an officer concerning his knowledge of a certain real estate man of Golden City, known as Jackson Blake, whose right name, it was hinted, was Dick Brewster, and who was said to be an escaped convict. This minister had known Blake

while in Golden City, so was loth to give credence to the story, and felt impelled to write to Melchor about it.

Melchor came at once to Blake, bringing the letter, and found him alone in the office.

"Brother," he said in his kindly way, "before you read this I want to assure you that I do not credit a word of it."

Blake paled as he read the letter Melchor placed in his hands. When he looked up, after a moment of thought, his bearded face was flushed.

"I might say to you that this is a lie," he said, speaking with evident effort, "but if I did, I should say what is false."

Then he went on hurriedly, as he noted Melchor's distress:

"I am Dick Brewster, and what is here reported is true. I was convicted of killing a man in Arkansas, and I killed him; for which crime I was duly tried, convicted, and sentenced to imprisonment as a just punishment. I escaped without serving a day of that sentence, and —" he drew a long breath — "I have lived in hell ever since. The thing shocks you, and I do not wonder; it shocks me. I have always had a feeling that this would come; and now it has come."

"But, brother —"

"I deceived you, Melchor, — a thing easy enough to do, for you never suspect any one of wrong. I deceived Judge Spencer and his daughter; and all who have become my friends here, and who if they had known the truth would have turned from me in scorn."

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"No, brother," said Melchor in grieved protest, "I should not, and I do not believe that these other friends would have done so."

"When they know all, you will see!" Blake declared, his voice hardening. "I tried to be a man here, — a new man, and to forget all that had gone before. But it was something I could n't do, try as I would; for the memory of what I had done, and the knowledge that I was a walking, living lie, even while I posed as a pattern of virtue —"

"Posed is not the right word, brother; you never posed!"

"The knowledge that I was living a lie confused and confounded me at every turn. You thought it strange, perhaps, when I failed you in your temperance work; you see now the reason. I felt that I was ten times worse than the men I was condemning, and that decency commanded me to keep my mouth closed."

Melchor was apparently at a loss what to say. Blake's confession had astounded him, though at the same time it filled him with compassion.

"I have known for some time that this was coming. I have thought it over, and what I have suffered while thinking it over you can't know; what I have suffered all these years no man can know. I might run away as I did before. I was a boy then and did not understand. Now I shall not run. I will stay and face it out; and when the exposure comes, and it will come quickly enough, I shall ask to be taken back to Arkansas, and to that prison where I ought to have been all these years. It will be

my just desert, and I shall try not to flinch from it."

His voice had grown calm; only that heightened color of the bearded cheeks told of the motion of the inward fire.

"Brother," said Melchor, with much tenderness, "I am but a weak man myself. We are all weak stumblers; but I will stand by you in my weakness, to help you, to comfort you, if I can — if you will let me."

The sincerity of the man's nature and the knowledge that here was one person at least who would not scorn him, nor hate him, though all the world turned away its face, gave Blake some consolation.

"I will say nothing of this," said Melchor.

"No," said Blake, with a sense of gratitude; "it does n't matter, though, for the whole town will know of it in a few hours. Martin Parker will not let any grass grow under his feet when he has started in a matter of this kind. Still, I thank you."

After Melchor's departure Blake sat staring at the letter which had been left lying on the table. He took it up, crushing it nervously; then read it over. He knew that it had been left there intentionally, for him to do with as he pleased.

After reading it over slowly he folded it and put it in his pocket.

"I wish I were as good a man as Melchor!" he thought.

Then he sat a long time without movement, staring at the floor. He felt beaten, bruised, crushed beyond the power of words to express;

his mouth was in the dust of humiliation and defeat. He thought with shame and confusion of Elinor and the effect the exposure would have on her, — thought of his true and long-time friend, Jim Prethro, of Old Shake and his family, and many others. He thought also of his father, whom he knew to be still living, for Christine had told him that, and he had known it before her coming through the talk of Hank Wilson. Then he reflected sadly and bitterly that when he went back to Arkansas a prisoner, it would not be a return of the prodigal to open arms of love; for he was, and for a long time had been, not only a convict but a castaway, who could expect no paternal sympathy.

"I will give myself up before the arrest is made," he said, communing with himself. "It will be easier to do that. Jim Prethro is still a deputy marshal. I will go to him, and tell him about it, and of what is coming, and request him to take me into custody; and then —"

He did not want to think beyond that.

It was nearly an hour later, and he was still cowering in his chair, his face hidden in his hands, when the office door opened and Elinor came in. He sat up, with a start, revealing features so white and ghastly that she was alarmed.

"You are ill, Mr. Blake!" she said, in sympathy.

"No!" he protested.

His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears.

"It must be the effect of the heat," she amended; "what dreadful heat we are having! And you are worrying about this business tangle.

It *is* enough to drive any one wild. We shall never get it straightened out, I'm afraid. I don't care so much, only for father's sake; but it does distress him so. You don't think we shall be able to save very much from the wreck, do you?"

"No," he said, straightening in his chair, and speaking with difficulty. "The country is ruined. If people were n't so panicky in a time like this something might yet be done. Next year may be a good crop year; I feel almost sure that it will be. But, though everybody would have believed that a month ago, no one will believe it now."

"And so the people have ruined themselves, just through folly, and because they can't wait — can't have patience!"

"It's always so in a stampede." He forced himself to look her in the face. "People are just like cattle; when a stampede begins it is impossible to control them. We have had a crazy boom here, followed by a reaction that is as crazy; you see the result."

"Yes," she said, walking to the window and looking out into the almost deserted street. "Father was saying this morning that if the country is to be depopulated and abandoned, he wants to get out of it himself; and I begin to feel that way. We're all getting the stampede fever, I guess. Likely you will be one of the first to go!"

"Yes," he admitted, his voice again hoarse, "it's very likely that I shall go first!"

She had turned toward her desk; but she looked at him again, and what she saw frightened her.

Blake's face was as white as that of a dead man, and he was trembling. The forced suppression of his real feelings, his wild love for this girl, the agony that tore at his very heart strings, the sense of humiliation, unworthiness, and defeat that oppressed him, together with the tremendous exertion of will power which had enabled him to speak with such apparent calmness, had wrought his nerves to the highest tension and whitened his face to the color of chalk.

Alarmed by his appearance, Elinor crossed the room to where he sat. Love and anxiety made her bold.

"Mr. Blake," she said, her voice sweet and tremulous with solicitude, "you are ill — you have n't told me the truth!"

She bent over him, and he felt her breath on his face and the electric touch of her hair.

He started to rise, then sank back into the chair; and she, thinking this due to physical weakness, tried to support him, as on that night of the great blizzard when the stroke of the carriage wheel had rendered him unconscious and helpless.

"You are not well, Mr. Blake," she insisted; "I feel it my duty to call a doctor."

She turned hurriedly toward the door, and her hand was on the knob when he stopped her.

"Don't do that!" he said.

For a moment he hesitated.

"I suppose I may as well tell you myself, as to have some one else do it — you will know it soon enough! I am not sick, not ill at all; I am —"

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He did not know how to go on, and fumbled blindly for the letter.

She was coming back from the door; she could not understand him, but the imperiousness of his request and his positive statement that he was not ill caused her to waver. His face was flushing with what appeared to be healthy color, and that seemed to her a good sign.

Having extracted the letter he offered it to her in its envelope, at the same time rising with difficulty from his chair.

"You will see that it is addressed to Mr. Melchor — he brought it to me; read it and condemn me!"

Her chair was at the other side of the room and he pushed his toward her.

"Read it," he urged, as she hesitated.

She was thinking of Christine — was sure the letter concerned itself with Christine, and was not at all sure that she ought to read it even though urged. But when he pushed the chair to her she dropped into it from sheer weakness.

"I — I do not understand this!" she said, when she had glanced over the letter.

"Simply because I have been playing a double part!" he declared bitterly, looking down into her flushed face.

He drew forward a chair and sat down, — he was too weak to stand longer. He forced himself to look at her. Such infinite compassion as he had for her! — and such infinite love! Tears were in his voice and in his heart. He longed to take her in his arms, and — then he recoiled in a revulsion of feeling, — he was a murderer!

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He compelled himself to speak, and was aware that his voice was strained and harsh.

"You will see the whole black record there. The things that letter tells of me are true; I am guilty of them all."

To the surprise in her face was added pity and tenderness. She looked at the letter again more carefully.

"And that is why —"

"Yes, that is why — I have acted so strangely toward you! Why I have been so little like a man — why I have —"

A wave of scarlet suffused her cheeks.

"And —" she began; then stopped.

He was out of his chair and by her side; he read that look and that tone aright. Though he was a murderer she did not hate him; she could forgive him; more, she could — he gasped; — could she love him?

"Elinor," he was saying, — he had seldom used that name, — "I am ashamed of myself, because I know that I have no right to, ought not to, must not, — yet I can't help it, and I can't help telling you. I love you — I love you — I love you! I'm a murderer, I know, and a fugitive, and have no right to the name I've been using, — and I shall soon be in convict stripes; I know it, I know it, and I'm a poltroon, — but you must n't hate me, you won't despise me, and you will forgive me for — for loving you, when — when —"

She looked up, — her cheeks were wet with tears; with an all-pitying gesture she drew him gently toward her.

"Dick," she said, using the name given in the letter, — "it seems strange to call you that! — I don't care what you've been, I don't care what you've done, if you love me! Oh, I thought you didn't love me! But you do love me, — you've said you do! You love me?"

"I love you; yes, I love you — yet —"

He put away her clinging arms and looked into her streaming face. For one moment the light of heaven was in his eyes.

"Elinor," he said, "I am worse than contemptible. I do love you, and — we cannot go on this way! But I must, I will, kiss you just once, — because you love me!"

"Why can't we go on in this way?" she asked. Then added: "Tell me about it, — about everything; I do not seem to be able to understand."

He tried to tell her, compressing hours and even years into sentences.

"And — Christine?" she said, when he stopped.

"Thank God, I am guiltless there!" he cried, with the proud consciousness of innocence.

As he talked, looking into her face now and then, feeling the touch of her lips, the warm clasp of her arms, seeing the light in her eyes, — above all, knowing that she loved him even as he loved her, there grew up in his heart by quick accessions of strength the wild impulse which had controlled him when Soapy Sam opened the prison door and beckoned him to that outdoor land where the birds sing. He began to ask himself why he should return to prison walls, after all. The world was wide, and there were in it many

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lands that asked no questions. Why should he not seek one with this woman — this woman who loved him — and there abide and be happy? He began to put the thought into words.

"Oh, if we could go away from here together, — somewhere, anywhere —"

It seemed that she shivered, but perhaps she only trembled; he was holding her in his strong arms.

"Where could we go?" she asked, clinging to him.

"We ought not to think of going anywhere, — my duty is before me, and that is to go with Martin Parker and the officers back to Arkansas."

"You must not, — you shall not; that would be too dreadful; I could not live after that!"

"There is nothing else to do."

"There is; I will go with you, go anywhere, go now, before they come!"

"Your father?" he said, gently.

She trembled again.

"He will not blame me when he understands, dear; when he understands, he could not blame me. I will write and tell him everything; and then he will see that we had to, that we could n't do anything else. We can't do anything else; for, dear, don't you see that I would do anything for you — anything. You cannot — must not — go to that — that prison; it would kill me, and it would kill you! And are not our lives worth something — and our happiness? And we could be happy together — so happy together — I know it, anywhere, if only we are together. So we must go somewhere — somewhere!"

"Now that you know everything, you do not condemn me?" he asked, for it seemed unbelievable.

"If it were ten times worse, dear, I could n't condemn you—because, you see, I love you so!"

Her love had overcome all else.

"My God, Elinor, if I were but worthy—if I were anything but what I am! But this is madness!"

A moment later he would have spoken of their contemplated flight together; for to that, without plan or definite agreement, and in spite of all, they were being drawn. Though feeling that it was a cowardly thing to do, he was moving toward that course of action with a speed which was irresistible. The guiding lines had dropped from his hands, as when his prison door had stood open and the forest called with alluring voice. But the words that struggled for utterance remained unspoken. A sharp whistle sounded. Drawn by it, he moved with Elinor to the window which gave a view out upon the dusty, deserted street.

The deep color waved into the face of Jackson Blake as he saw the train from the East draw up at the station and Martin Parker descend, accompanied by a man he believed to be an officer.

"Too late!" he said, his voice trembling.

Then he straightened his broad shoulders, while the flush went slowly out of his face.

"And, thank God, it is too late!" He drew a deep breath. "I was mad, crazy, to think of trying to get away and of taking you with me!"

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He was drawing back from the window as if he feared Parker might see him there.

As for Elinor, she seemed to have lost all power of speech.

"For your sake, dear — for your sake, it is best!" he urged. "It would not do — it was a mad thought; our great love, and the knowledge of what lies before me, frightened us into it. We must be brave; yet, O God, how can I be brave — how can I give you up now, now when I know that you love me?"

She seemed dazed and bewildered as he led her to a chair.

"Is it really too late?" she said.

Hope was gone, and her grief was too great for tears.

CHAPTER XXXVII

REPARATION

WITH an inward quaking but an outward show of bravery Dick Brewster walked up the street; and he walked rapidly lest his resolution should weaken and he should be drawn back to the office, where he had left Elinor. He did not want to be arrested in the office in her presence; and as Martin Parker and the Arkansas officer had passed up the street, no doubt for the purpose of consulting with some local official, he felt that he had no time to lose if he surrendered to Prethro.

He had made this wish clear to Elinor, and had endeavored to show her, also, that what had happened was for the best for both of them and especially best for her. It was too late now, he had argued; and even if it were not too late, their thought of flight was sheer madness. For her own sake, for her good name, and because he loved her, they must not think of it.

As he approached Jim Prethro's residence he saw Prethro on a side street moving away at a rapid gait. Instead of calling to him, Dick followed with quick steps, feeling a sense of relief, not because the revelation he intended to make was delayed, but because he felt that he could make it better in the open air, out under the

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blue sky which seemed to him so often a type of the Infinite love and forgiveness.

Following thus and beginning to overtake Prethro he observed that the latter was directing his steps toward the house into which Hank Wilson had been removed from the hotel to which he had been conveyed at first.

"Just a few words with you, Prethro!" he called now.

Prethro stopped. He was by the gate.

"Glad t' see ye, Blake," he said. "Jes' in time. Th' ol' gent sent f'r me a little while ago. It'll be all right if you go right in with me."

"After we've had a talk," said Dick, laying his hand on Prethro's arm. "It won't take many words, but—it's very important."

Prethro noticed something strange in his voice and manner.

"K'rect," he assented; "where'll we go?"

The door opened; David Melchor appeared in the doorway and beckoned to them.

"Come in," he urged; "he can't last long, and he wants to see you."

He spoke to Dick.

"Hank's at the end o' his picket rope," Prethro explained.

"Yes," assented Melchor, who had come out into the yard, "he has n't long to stay now and he knows it; he's been telling me some things, and I've been writing them down; but he wanted to see you, Mr. Blake, and I hurried a messenger to you only a minute or so ago."

Then the door was opened by Old Shake, and Dick entered the house. He realized that he

was bewildered, and that this was not the thing he had come to do. Parker and the Arkansas officer would be looking for him, and he desired to make his confession to Prethro and place himself in the hands of his friend before he could be arrested in the regular way. Yet the compelling manner of the minister and a confusion of mind caused him to step into the house before he could quite decide not to.

In another moment he was in the room where Hank Wilson lay, emaciated almost beyond recognition, his hatchety face showing a life-like sharpness and his dark eyes feverishly bright.

As Dick Brewster entered the room accompanied by Melchor and Prethro, Wilson tried to raise himself on his elbow. His burning eyes searched Dick's face pathetically. For a moment no word was said as Dick approached the bed.

"Sorry to see that you're not so well," Dick stammered, thoughts of himself changing to thoughts of this man who lay gasping against the pillow.

"I'm dyin'," said Wilson, in a weak, hollow voice. "'N' I felt I couldn't go untel I seen you an' tol' you."

"Yes," said Dick, taking the chair that Melchor placed for him.

He had noticed in the room a table with writing materials on it, and had observed the presence of Mrs. Shake and her daughter Nevada.

"'Bout thet murder," said Wilson.

Dick gave an uneasy start.

"'Bout thet stobbin' er Jed Anderson," Wilson went on. "Folks back thar thinks it war you

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thet done it; but it war me — me thet stobbed Jed Anderson thar at Chris Miller's. I stobbed 'im when he fell over onter you, 'z both o' ye tumbled outer ther door together. An' I let you go ter jail fer it, an' let folks think thet you war th' one thet done it."

"Yes?" said Dick, feeling that he was gasping for breath, while his heart pounded up into his throat. A blurring mist was before his eyes, through which he could not see Hank Wilson's face; but the voice reached him, weak and wavering, as if coming from a distance.

"Seems right thet I'm er-goin' ter die frum a stob, jes' lack Jed Anderson done; seems right 'n' jestis. But I could n't go 'fore I'd tol' you it war me thet killed 'im, stiddy you; as I 'low you've been er-thinkin', 'n' 'z ever'body's been believin'. That's why when I seen you hyar thet I kep' my mouth shet; 'n' why I tol' Mart Parker ef he did n't keep his'n shet, too, thet I'd kill him. An' aifter thet, we both made out ter believe thet we hed n't never seen you before, 'n' made out thet we-all war strangers t' you. But —"

He had spoken rapidly, and now gasped for breath.

"But I hain't hed no peace er mind frum thet air day ter this; no peace er mind at all. Jed kep' er-comin' ter me when I war asleep, 'n' when I walked inter th' woods I'd be expectin' ter see his ha'nt rise up from ahint ever' tree. An' I come out hyar, thinkin' ter git away frum him; but I hain't. He's been by th' bed hyar time 'n' ag'in. I've seen 'im settin' on the bedpost

o' nights, lookin' at me, 'n' whisperin' thet thar is a hell, which I 've been tryin' ter believe thar hain't, 'n' thet he war er-comin' mighty quick ter kerry me to it."

Perspiration was standing out in shiny beads on his pallid forehead. Dick, dazed and astounded, tried to say something. Wilson went on almost fiercely, as if he hurried to tell all.

"An' I 've been feelin' thet I 'm hell-bound, though ther preacher says 't he knows thet I hain't. I do ax parding of God, 'n' Jed Anderson thet I murdered, an' o' you thet hez suffered fer th' murder thet I done with my own han'. But I 'm afeard — O God, I 'm afeard; fer Jed Anderson is thar waitin' fer me, I know; 'n' he won't fergive me, will he, even ef God does? He's thar waitin' fer me, with thet knife stob in 'im, jes' 'z I 've seen it a thousan' times. But ef I —" he choked in his excitement — "ef I kin do anything ter make folks see thet it war me stiddy you thet done it — thet it war me thet killed him, 'n' thet you did n't know nothin' 'bout it at all; ef I —"

"It's known," said Melchor soothingly. "Everything will be made known; I 've written it down, you know, and I will see that your wishes are carried out."

Wilson looked at him.

"Yes," he said, something of the terror going out of his pinched features, "tell ever'body — put it in ther papers — thet it war me thet stobbed Jed Anderson at Chris Miller's, 'n' thet Dick Brewster, which is this hyar man, did n't do it, did n't know erbout it, an' would er been killed

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hisse'f by Anderson ef it hed n't been fer me. An' I want you ter pray fer me, thet — thet — I may n't be afeared — an' thet God won't be too hard on me. You read ter me 'bout th' Thief; but you read onc't somethin' erbout Vengeance b'longs ter God, 'n' thet He never fergits ter pay. I'm desarvin' of His vengeance — I'm desarvin' of hell, but I'm afeard!"

Melchor was already beside the bed, lifting his voice in prayer for the terrified and conscience-stricken man. Such a prayer Dick had never heard. The walls of the room seemed to recede as he listened to those solemn yet tender words, and he, too, stood in the presence of the Great Judge; time and space were no more; the earth had fled out of its place. Rancor, hatred, injustice, fear, together with all the grossness and dross of earth, melted away, and love stood revealed in their place. Over and above all stood the God of Love, infinite in compassion and swift to hear the cry of the least of earth's children.

The lines of fear were no more in Hank Wilson's face, but instead a look of peace and rapt wonder, as if the prayer had brought to him in his last moments the conviction that across the Gates of Paradise there is no bar to shut out the penitent soul.

As Dick Brewster turned away from the bed he felt the warm blood bounding once more and making a new being of him. That horrible past — it had been, after all, but a frightful dream! And as he turned thus away, he found himself face to face with his heart's desire.

"I followed you, Dick," said Elinor, holding

out her arms. "I don't know why, but I could n't stay behind. I have heard everything. I *knew*, I *felt*, my heart told me that those terrible things were not true!"

Then he took her in his arms before them all, his face filled with a wonderful joy.

Martin Parker's sword had been broken in his hand, as he lifted it for that blow of revenge and avarice.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE SUN ABOVE THE WOODLANDS

IT was golden October again, when he who had been Dick Brewster, then Jackson Blake, and was now Dick Brewster once more, drove out with Elinor over the crisp grass of the plains behind the roan bronchos. The sky was a dark, fathomless blue, like her eyes — he knew their color now, as well as any one could know a color that seemed so changeable. There were a few flowers in the short grass yet untouched by frost or too hardy to mind its first approaches; and some of these blossoms were pink, like her cheeks, or showed petals coral as her lips.

"The last drive here!" she whispered, closing her fingers on his arm. "It makes me feel almost sad, Dick; though I could n't be sad if I would, with you by my side as my husband. Isn't it strange and even wonderful, after everything? And I am not Mrs. Jackson Blake, either, as I used to dream I might one day be, but Mrs. Richard Brewster!"

"More wonderful than words can tell," was his answer. Then he repeated it, as if to himself this time, for it seemed unbelievable to him, also — "more wonderful than words can tell!"

That confession of Hank Wilson, which had made Dick Brewster a full-statured man again,

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had been followed by a wedding, without too great delay; and now, Judge Spencer having recovered wholly, they were to return to Arkansas, after saving all they could, which was little enough, from the wreck of the wild boom.

"And we do love these wide wonderful spaces, where we have driven so many times," said Elinor, her hand still on the arm of her husband. "That first drive—I shall never forget it! And to-day is as beautiful—more beautiful."

"Yes, more beautiful!" he assented. "It seems to me I could wish that it might never close; but that we might drive on and on in this way, until we came to the end, out there somewhere."

He motioned almost imperceptibly with his whip; and looking on before she saw down the far purpling slope of the sky a little shine of gold, as if there, at the end of all things, golden gates of delight opened, and beyond those portals they should stray nevermore.

A few wild geese harrowed the air; far up in the seas of azure the sand-hill cranes were calling; larks sang, the striped gophers whistled. Stress of storm and sob of heartache were far away, and if not forgotten were not regarded. It was a perfect day, and sitting close together, behind the rapidly moving bronchos, while the carriage wheels sang, this man and this woman were perfectly happy.

The great spaces of grass-land were again almost destitute of human life—that swarming human life so noticeable but a few months before. Here and there a settler of more sturdy fibre

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remained in his shack or his dugout, prepared to stay in the country and try again another year. The condition was the same in the town; the majority of its citizens had gone or were going, but the others intended to remain and to make the place their home, still holding faith in it and in the possibilities of the country.

"Prethro says that he and Lost Charlie are going into the cattle business with Old Shake," Dick remarked, as the carriage, turned homeward, brought them in sight of the houses, in the midst of which Prethro's new residence towered in its grandeur. "He can't sell his house, so he intends to occupy it, and will pay off the mortgage as rapidly as he can. He says that the house and the diamonds are the only things he pulled out of the wreck, and he is going to perform the miracle of changing those diamonds into cattle."

Elinor smiled contentedly.

"Lost Charlie and Nevada will live with Mr. and Mrs. Shake, I suppose, after they are married?"

"Yes, of course; it will be a very convenient arrangement, and give satisfaction all round."

"And we'll go back to Arkansas, to the dear old county—from which we both came! Does n't it seem strange, Dick? And yet I like it—it's a very pleasant thought to me!"

Judge Spencer stopped in Brownsville.

Dick and Elinor went on to Ransoms, and walked over to the house from the station, instead of taking a conveyance as they might have done,—walked over together along the white

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ribbon of road. The great woods were bright with the colors that the Master Painter had laid on every leaf. As in the days of the Hebrew law-giver, bushes burned and were not consumed. The tall black gums stood like lighted beacons, and the scarlet fire of the dogwood and maple flamed in every leafy aisle and archway.

Colonel Brewster had known of their coming, and was expecting them. He beheld them while they were still afar off down the dusty road, and he came out of the great lonely house — so lonely through all the years in which Dick had been away — and with trembling eagerness hurried forth to meet them. The colonel was bent and old now, and his hair was white; yet his eye was keen — he had seen them! Something warm seemed to rise up in his heart.

"My son, my son — and my daughter!" he whispered. "God, who punished me for my cruelty, has forgiven."

The sun was above the woodlands, shining with clear white disk, the air was sweet with the breath of morning, and all the world was new again.

