MAX BRAND

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Max Brand

The Garden of Eden

«Public Domain»

Brand M.

The Garden of Eden / M. Brand — «Public Domain»,

© Brand M.
© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER ONE 5
CHAPTER TWO 8
CHAPTER THREE 11
CHAPTER FOUR 16
CHAPTER FIVE 20
CHAPTER SIX 23
CHAPTER SEVEN 27
CHAPTER EIGHT 30
CHAPTER NINE 34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 35

Max Brand
The Garden of Eden

CHAPTER ONE

By careful tailoring the broad shoulders of Ben Connor were made to appear fashionably slender, and he disguised the depth of his chest by a stoop whose model slouched along Broadway somewhere between sunset and dawn. He wore, moreover, the first or second pair of spats that had ever stepped off the train at Lukin Junction, a glowing Scotch tweed, and a Panama hat of the color and weave of fine old linen. There was a skeleton at this Feast of Fashion, however, for only tight gloves could make the stubby fingers and broad palms of Connor presentable. At ninety-five in the shade gloves were out of the question, so he held a pair of yellow chamois in one hand and in the other an amber-headed cane. This was the end of the little spur-line, and while the train backed off down the track, staggering across the switch, Ben Connor looked after it, leaning upon his cane just forcibly enough to feel the flection of the wood. This was one of his attitudes of elegance, and when the train was out of sight, and only the puffs of white vapor rolled around the shoulder of the hill, he turned to look the town over, having already given Lukin Junction ample time to look over Ben Connor.

The little crowd was not through with its survey, but the eye of the imposing stranger abashed it. He had one of those long somber faces which Scotchmen call "dour." The complexion was sallow, heavy pouches of sleeplessness lay beneath his eyes, and there were ridges beside the corners of his mouth which came from an habitual compression of the lips. Looked at in profile he seemed to be smiling broadly so that the gravity of the full face was always surprising. It was this that made the townsfolk look down. After a moment, they glanced back at him hastily. Somewhere about the corners of his lips or his eyes there was a glint of interest, a touch of amusement – they could not tell which, but from that moment they were willing to forget the clothes and look at the man.

While Ben Connor was still enjoying the situation, a rotund fellow bore down on him.

"You're Mr. Connor, ain't you? You wired for a room in the hotel? Come on, then. My rig is over here. These your grips?"

He picked up the suit case and the soft leather traveling bag, and led the way to a buckboard at which stood two downheaded ponies.

"Can't we walk?" suggested Ben Connor, looking up and down the street at the dozen sprawling frame houses; but the fat man stared at him with calm pity. He was so fat and so good-natured that even Ben Connor did not impress him greatly.

"Maybe you think this is Lukin?" he asked.

When the other raised his heavy black eyebrows he explained: "This ain't nothing but Lukin Junction. Lukin is clear round the hill. Climb in, Mr. Connor."

Connor laid one hand on the back of the seat, and with a surge of his strong shoulders leaped easily into his place; the fat man noted this with a roll of his little eyes, and then took his own place, the old wagon careening toward him as he mounted the step. He sat with his right foot dangling over the side of the buckboard, and a plump shoulder turned fairly upon his passenger so that when he spoke he had to throw his head and jerk out the words; but this was apparently his time-honored position in the wagon, and he did not care to vary it for the sake of conversation. A flap of the loose reins set the horses jog-trotting out of Lukin Junction down a gulch which aimed at the side of an enormous mountain, naked, with no sign of a village or even a single shack among its rocks. Other peaks crowded close on the right and left, with a loftier range behind, running up to scattered summits white with snow and blue with distance. The shadows of the late afternoon were thick as fog in the gulch, and all the lower mountains were already dim so that the snow-peaks in the distance

seemed as detached, and high as clouds. Ben Connor sat with his cane between his knees and his hands draped over its amber head and watched those shining places until the fat man heaved his head over his shoulder.

"Most like somebody told you about Townsend's Hotel?"

His passenger moved his attention from the mountain to his companion. He was so leisurely about it that it seemed he had not heard.

"Yes," he said, "I was told of the place."

"Who?" said the other expectantly.

"A friend of mine."

The fat man grunted and worked his head around so far that a great wrinkle rolled up his neck close to his ear. He looked into the eye of the stranger.

"Me being Jack Townsend, I'm sort of interested to know things like that; the ones that like my place and them that don't."

Connor nodded, but since he showed no inclination to name his friend, Jack Townsend swung on a new tack to come to the windward of this uncommunicative guest. Lukin was a fairly inquisitive town, and the hotel proprietor usually contributed his due portion and more to the gossips.

"Some comes for one reason and some for another," went on Townsend, "which generally it's to hunt and fish. That ain't funny come to think of it, because outside of liars nobody ever hooked finer trout than what comes out of the Big Sandy. Some of 'em comes for the mining – they was a strike over to South Point last week – and some for the cows, but mostly it's the fishing and the hunting."

He paused, but having waited in vain he said directly: "I can show you the best holes in the Big Sandy."

There was another of those little waits with which, it seemed, the stranger met every remark; not a thoughtful pause, but rather as though he wondered if it were worth while to make any answer.

"I've come here for the silence," he said.

"Silence," repeated Townsend, nodding in the manner of one who does not understand.

Then he flipped the roan with the butt of his lines and squinted down the gulch, for he felt there might be a double meaning in the last remark. Filled with the gloomy conviction that he was bringing a silent man to his hotel, he gloomily surveyed the mountain sides. There was nothing about them to cheer him. The trees were lost in shadows and all the slopes seemed quite barren of life. He vented a little burst of anger by yanking at the rein of the off horse, a dirty gray.

"Giddap, Kitty, damn your eyes!"

The mare jumped, struck a stone with a fore foot, and stumbled heavily. Townsend straightened her out again with an expert hand and cursed.

"Of all the no-good hosses I ever see," he said, inviting the stranger to share in his just wrath, "this Kitty is the outbeatingest, no good rascal. Git on, fool."

He clapped the reins along her back, and puffed his disgust.

"And yet she has points. Now, I ask you, did you ever see a truer Steeldust? Look at that high croup and that straight rump. Look at them hips, I say, and a chest to match 'em. But they ain't any heart in her. Take a hoss through and through," he went on oracularly, "they're pretty much like men, mostly, and if a man ain't got the heart inside, it don't make no difference how big around the chest he measures."

Ben Connor had leaned forward, studying the mare.

"Your horse would be all right in her place," he said. "Of course, she won't do up here in the mountains."

Like any true Westerner of the mountain-desert, Jack Townsend would far rather have been discovered with his hand in the pocket of another man than be observed registering surprise. He looked carefully ahead until his face was straight again. Then he turned.

"Where d'you make out her place to be?" he asked carelessly.

"Down below," said the other without hesitation, and he waved his arm. "Down in soft, sandy irrigation country she'd be a fine animal."

Jack Townsend blinked. "You know her?" he asked.

The other shook his head.

"Well, damn my soul!" breathed the hotel proprietor. "This beats me. Maybe you read a hoss's mind, partner?"

Connor shrugged his shoulders, but Townsend no longer took offense at the taciturnity of his companion; he spoke now in a lower confiding voice which indicated an admission of equality.

"You're right. They said she was good, and she was good! I seen her run; I saddled her up and rode her thirty miles through sand that would of broke the heart of anything but a Steeldust, and she come through without battin' an eye. But when I got her up here she didn't do no good. But" – he reverted suddenly to his original surprise – "how'd you know her? Recognize the brand, maybe?"

"By her trot," said the other, and he looked across the hills.

They had turned an angle of the gulch, and on a shelf of level ground, dishing out from the side of the mountain, stretched the town.

"Isn't it rather odd," said Connor, "for people to build a town over here when they could have it on the railroad?"

"Maybe it looks queer to some," nodded Townsend.

He closed his lips firmly, determined to imitate the terseness of his guest; but when he observed with a side-glance that Connor would not press the inquiry, talk suddenly overflowed. Indeed, Townsend was a running well of good nature, continually washing all bad temper over the brim.

"I'll show you how it was," he went on. "You see that shoulder of the mountain away off up there? If the light was clearer you'd be able to make out some old shacks up there, half standin' up and half fallin' down. That's where Lukin used to be. Well, the railroad come along and says: 'We're goin' to run a spur into the valley, here. You move down and build your town at the end of the track and we'll give you a hand bringing up new timber for the houses.' That's the way with railroads; they want to dictate; they're too used to handlin' folks back East that'll let capital walk right over their backs."

Here Townsend sent a glance at Connor to see if he stirred under the spur, but there was no sign of irritation.

"Out here we're different; nobody can't step in here and run us unless he's asked. See? We said, you build the railroad halfway and we'll come the other half, but we won't come clear down into the valley."

"Why?" asked Connor. "Isn't Lukin Junction a good place for a village?"

"Fine. None better. But it's the principle of the thing, you see? Them railroad magnates says to us: 'Come all the way.' 'Go to the devil,' says we. And so we come halfway to the new railroad and built our town; it'd be a pile more agreeable to have Lukin over where the railroad ends – look at the way I have to drive back and forth for my trade? But just the same, we showed that railroad that it couldn't talk us down."

He struck his horses savagely with the lines; they sprang from the jog-trot into a canter, and the buckboard went bumping down the main street of Lukin.

CHAPTER TWO

Ben Connor sat in his room overlooking the crossing of the streets. It was by no means the ramshackle huddle of lean-to's that he had expected, for Lukin was built to withstand a siege of January snows and storm-winds which were scooped by the mountains into a funnel that focused straight on the village. Besides, Lukin was no accidental, crossroads town, but the bank, store, and amusement center of a big country. The timber was being swept from the Black Mountain; there were fairly prosperous mines in the vicinity; and cattlemen were ranging their cows over the plateaus more and more during the spring and summer. Therefore, Lukin boasted two parallel main streets, and a cross street, looking forward to the day when it should be incorporated and have a mayor of its own. At present it had a moving-picture house and a dance hall where a hundred and fifty couples could take the floor at once; above all, it had Jack Townsend's hotel. This was a stout, timber building of two stories, the lower portion of which was occupied by the restaurant, the drug store, the former saloon now transformed into an ice-cream parlor, and other public places.

It was dark, but the night winds had not yet commenced, and Lukin sweltered with a heat more unbearable than full noon.

It was nothing to Ben Connor, however, for he was fresh from the choking summer nights of Manhattan, and in Lukin, no matter how hot it became, the eye could always find a cool prospect. It had been unpleasant enough when the light was burning, for the room was done in a hot, orange-colored paper, but when he blew out the lamp and sat down before the window he forgot the room and let his glance go out among the mountains. A young moon drifted across the corner of his window, a sickle of light with a dim, phosphorescent line around the rest of the circle. It was bright enough to throw the peaks into strong relief, and dull enough to let the stars live.

His upward vision had as a rule been limited by the higher stories of some skyscraper, and now his eye wandered with a pleasant sense of freedom over the snow summits where he could imagine a cold wind blowing through reach after reach of the blue-gray sky. It pleased and troubled Ben Connor very much as one is pleased and troubled by the first study of a foreign language, with new prospects opening, strange turns of thought, and great unknown names like stars. But after a time Ben Connor relaxed. The first cool puff moved across his forehead and carried him halfway to a dreamless sleep.

Here a chorus of mirth burst up at him from the street, men's voices pitched high and wild, the almost hysterical laughter of people who are much alone. In Manhattan only drunken men laughed like this. Among the mountains it did not irritate Ben Connor; in tune with the rest, it was full of freedom. He looked down to the street, and seeing half a dozen bearded fellows frolic in the shaft of light from a window, he decided that people kept their youth longer in Lukin.

All things seemed in order to Connor, this night. He rolled his sleeves higher to let all the air that stirred get at his bulky forearms, and then lighted a cigar. It was a dark, oily Havana – it had cost him a great deal in money and nerves to acquire that habit – and he breathed the scent deep while he waited for the steady wind which Jack Townsend had promised. There was just enough noise to give the silence that waiting quality which cannot be described; below him voices murmured, and lifted now and then, rhythmically. Ben Connor thought the sounds strangely musical, and he began to brim with the same good nature which puffed the cheeks of Jack Townsend. There was a substantial basis for that content in the broiled trout which he had had for dinner. It was while his thoughts drifted back to those browned fish that the first wind struck him. Dust with an acrid scent whirled up from the street – then a steady stream of air swept his face and arms.

It was almost as if another personality had stepped into the room. The sounds from the street fell away, and there was the rustling of cloth somewhere, the cool lifting of hair from his forehead, and an odd sense of motion – as if the wind were blowing through him. But something else came with the breeze, and though he noted it at first with only a subconscious discontent, it beat gradually

into his mind, a light ticking, very rapid, and faint, and sounding in an irregular rhythm. He wanted to straighten out that rhythm and make the flutter of tapping regular. Then it began to take on a meaning; it framed words.

"Philip Lord, jailed for embezzlement."

"Hell!" burst out Ben Connor. "The telegraph!"

He started up from his chair, feeling betrayed, for that light, irregular tapping was the voice of the world from which he had fled. A hard, cool mind worked behind the gray eyes of Ben Connor, but as he fingered the cigar his brain was fumbling at a large idea. Forty-Second and Broadway was calling him back.

When he looked out the window, now, the mountains were flat shapes against a flat sky, with no more meaning than a picture.

The sounder was chattering: "Kid Lane wins title in eighth round. Lucky punch dethrones lightweight champion." Ben Connor swallowed hard and found that his throat was dry. He was afraid of himself – afraid that he would go back. He was recalled from his ugly musing by the odor of the cigar, which had burned out and was filling the room with a rank smell; he tossed the crumbled remnants through the window, crushed his hat upon his head, and went down, collarless, coatless, to get on the street in the sound of men's voices. If he had been in Manhattan he would have called up a pal; they would have planned an evening together; but in Lukin —

At the door below he glared up and down the street. There was nothing to see but a light buggy which rolled noiselessly through the dust. A dog detached itself from behind the vehicle and came to bark furiously at his feet. The kicking muscles in Connor's leg began to twitch, but a voice shouted and the mongrel trotted away, growling a challenge over its shoulder. The silence fell once more. He turned and strode back to the desk of the hotel, behind which Jack Townsend sat tilted back in his chair reading a newspaper.

"What's doing in this town of yours to-night?" he asked.

The proprietor moistened a fat thumb to turn the page and looked over his glasses at Connor.

"Appears to me there ain't much stirrin' about," he said. "Except for the movies down the street. You see, everybody's there."

"Movies," muttered Connor under his breath, and looked savagely around him.

What his eyes fell on was a picture of an old, old man on the wall, and the rusted stove which stood in the center of the room with a pipe zigzagging uncertainly toward the ceiling. Everything was out of order, broken down – like himself.

"Looks to me like you're kind of off your feet," said Jack Townsend, and he laid down his paper and looked wistfully at his guest. He made up his mind. "If you're kind of dry for a drink," he said, "I might rustle you a flask of red-eye – "

"Whisky?" echoed Connor, and moistened his lips. Then he shook his head. "Not that."

He went back to the door with steps so long and heavy that Jack Townsend rose from his chair, and spreading his hands on the desk, peered after the muscular figure.

"That gent is a bad hombre," pronounced Jack to himself. He sat down again with a sigh, and added: "Maybe."

At the door Connor was snarling: "Quiet? Sure; like a grave!"

The wind freshened, fell away, and the light, swift ticking sounded again more clearly. It mingled with the alkali scent of the dust – Manhattan and the desert together. He felt a sense of persecuted virtue. But one of his maxims was: "If anything bothers you, go and find out about it."

Ben Connor largely used maxims and epigrams; he met crises by remembering what some one else had said. The ticking of the sounder was making him homesick and dangerously nervous, so he went to find the telegrapher and see the sounder which brought the voice of the world into Lukin.

A few steps carried him to a screen door through which he looked upon a long, narrow office.

In a corner, an electric fan swung back and forth through a hurried arc and fluttered papers here and there. Its whining almost drowned the ticking of the sounder, and Ben Connor wondered with dull irritation how a tapping which was hardly audible at the door of the office could carry to his room in the hotel. He opened the door and entered.

CHAPTER THREE

It was a room not more than eight feet wide, very long, with the floor, walls, and ceiling of the same narrow, unpainted pine boards; the flooring was worn ragged and the ceiling warped into waves. Across the room a wide plank with a trapdoor at one end served as a counter, and now it was littered with yellow telegraph blanks, and others, crumpled up, were scattered about Connor's feet. No sooner had the screen door squeaked behind him and shut him fairly into the place than the staccato rattling of the sounder multiplied, and seemed to chatter from the wall behind him. It left an echoing in the ear of Ben Connor which formed into the words of his resolution, "I've made my stake and I'm going to beat it. I'm going to get away where I can forget the worries. To-day I beat 'em. Tomorrow the worries will beat me."

That was why he was in Lukin – to forget. And here the world had sneaked up on him and whispered in his ear. Was it fair?

It was a woman who "jerked lightning" for Lukin. With that small finger on the key she took the pulse of the world.

"Belmont returns – " chattered the sounder.

Connor instinctively covered his ears. Then, feeling that he was acting like a silly child, he lowered his hands.

Another idea had come to him that this was fate – luck – his luck. Why not take another chance?

He wavered a moment, fighting the temptation and gloomily studying the back of the operator. The cheapness of her white cotton dress fairly shouted at him. Also her hair straggled somewhat about the nape of her neck. All this irritated Connor absurdly.

"Fifth race," said the sounder: "Lady Beck, first; Conqueror, second – "

Certainly this was fate tempting tune.

Connor snatched a telegraph blank and scribbled a message to Harry Slocum, his betting commissioner during this unhappy vacation.

"Send dope on Murray handicaps time – trials of Trickster and Caledonian. Hotel Townsend."

This done, having tapped sharply on the counter to call the operator's attention, he dropped his elbows on the plank and scowled downward in profound reverie. They were pouring out of Belmont Park, now, many a grim face and many a joyous face. Money had come easy and gone easy. Ah, the reckless bonhomie of that crowd, living for to-day only, because "to-morrow the ponies may have it!" A good day for the bookies if that old cripple, Lady Beck, had found her running legs. What a trimming they must have given the wise ones!

At this point another hand came into the circle of his vision and turned the telegram about. A pencil flicked across the words, checking them swiftly. Connor was fascinated by that hand, it was so cool, so slender and deft. He glanced up to her face and saw a resolute chin, a smiling mouth which was truly lovely, and direct eyes as dark as his own. She carried her head buoyantly, in a way that made Connor think, with a tingle, of some clean-blooded filly at the post.

The girl made his change, and shoving it across, she bent her head toward the sounder. The characters came through too swiftly for even Ben Connor's sharp ear, but the girl, listening, smiled slowly.

"Something about soft pine?" queried Connor.

She brightened at this unexpected meeting-point. Her eyes widened as she studied him and listened to the message at the same time, and she accomplished this double purpose with such calm that Connor felt a trifle abashed. Then the shadow of listening vanished, and she concentrated on Connor.

"Soft pine is up," she nodded. "I knew it would climb as soon as old Lucas bought in."

"Speculator in Lukin, is he?"

"No. California. The one whose yacht burned at Honolulu last year. Sold pine like wild fire two months ago; down goes the price. Then he bought a little while ago, and now the pine skyrockets. He can buy a new yacht with what he makes, I suppose!"

The shade of listening darkened her eyes again. "Listen!" She raised a hushing forefinger that seemed tremulous in rhythm with the ticking.

"Wide brims are in again," exclaimed the operator, "and wide hats are awful on me; isn't that the luck?"

She went back to her key with the message in her hand, and Connor, dropping his elbows on the counter, watched her send it with swift almost imperceptible flections of her wrist.

Then she sat again with her hands folded in her lap, listening. Connor turned his head and glanced through the door; by squinting he could look over the roof just across the street and see the shadowy mountains beyond; then he looked back again and watched the girl listening to the voice of the outer world. The shock of the contrast soothed. He began to forget about Ben Connor and think of her.

The girl turned in her chair and directly faced him, and he saw that she moved her whole body just as she moved her hand, swiftly, but without a jerk; she considered him gravely.

"Lonely?" she inquired. "Or worried?"

She spoke with such a commonplace intonation that one might have thought it her business to attend to loneliness and worries.

"As a matter of fact," answered Ben Connor, instinctively dodging the direct query, "I've been wondering how they happened to stick a number-one artist on this wire.

"I'm not kidding," he explained hastily. "You see, I used to jerk lightning myself."

For the first time she really smiled, and he discovered what a rare thing a smile may be. Up to that point he had thought she lacked something, just as the white dress lacked a touch of color.

"Oh," she nodded. "Been off the wire long?"

Ben Connor grinned. It began with his lips; last of all the dull gray eyes lighted.

"Ever since a hot day in July at Aqueduct. The Lorrimer Handicap on the 11th of July, to be exact. I tossed up my job the next day."

"I see," she said, becoming aware of him again. "You played Tip-Top Second."

"The deuce! Were you at Aqueduct that day?"

"I was here – on the wire." He restrained himself with an effort, for a series of questions was Connor's idea of a dull conversation. He merely rubbed his knuckles against his chin and looked at her wistfully.

"He nipped King Charles and Miss Lazy at the wire and squeezed home by a nose – paid a fat price, I remember," went on the girl. "I suppose you had something down on him?"

"Did a friend of yours play that race?"

"Oh, no; but I was new to the wire, then, and I used to cut in and listen to everything that came by."

"I know. It's like having some one whisper secrets in your ear, at first, isn't it? But you remember the Lorrimer, eh? That was a race!"

The sounder stopped chattering, and by an alternation in her eyes he knew that up to that moment she had been giving two-thirds of her attention to the voice of the wire and the other fraction to him; but now she centered upon him, and he wanted to talk. As if, mysteriously, he could share some of the burden of his unrest with the girl. Most of all he wished to talk because this office had lifted him back to the old days of "lightning jerking," when he worked for a weekly pay-check. The same nervous eagerness which had been his in that time was now in this girl, and he responded to it like a call of blood to blood.

"A couple of wise ones took me out to Aqueduct that day: I had all that was coming to me for a month in my pocket, and I kept saying to myself: 'They think I'll fall for this game and drop my wad; here's where I fool 'em!'"

He chuckled as he remembered.

"Go on," said the girl. "You make me feel as if I were about to make a clean-up!"

"Really interested?"

She fixed an eager glance on him, as though she were judging how far she might let herself go. Suddenly she leaned closer to Connor.

"Interested? I've been taking the world off the wire for six years – and you've been where things happen."

"That's the way I felt at Aqueduct when I saw the ponies parade past the grand stand the first time," he nodded. "They came dancing on the bitt, and even I could see that they weren't made for use; legs that never pulled a wagon, and backs that couldn't weight. Just toys; speed machines; all heart and fire and springy muscles. It made my pulse jump to the fever point to watch them light-foot it along the rail with the groom in front on a clod of a horse. I felt that I'd lived the way that horse walked – downheaded, and I decided to change."

He stopped short and locked his stubby fingers together, frowning at her so that the lines beside his mouth deepened.

"I seem to be telling you the story of my life," he said. Then he saw that she was studying him, not with idle curiosity, but rather as one turns the pages of an absorbing book, never knowing what the next moment will reveal or where the characters will be taken.

"You want to talk; I want to hear you," she said gravely. "Go ahead. Besides – I don't chatter afterward. They paraded past the grand stand, then what?"

Ben Connor sighed.

"I watched four races. The wise guys with me were betting ten bucks on every race and losing on red-hot tips; and every time I picked out the horse that looked good to me, that horse ran in the money. Then they came out for the Lorrimer. One of my friends was betting on King Charles and the other on Miss Lazy. Both of them couldn't win, and the chance was that neither of them would. So I looked over the line as it went by the stand. King Charles was a little chestnut, one of those long fellows that stretch like rubber when they commence running; Miss Lazy was a gangling bay. Yes, they were both good horses, but I looked over the rest, and pretty soon I saw a rangy chestnut with a white foreleg and a midget of a boy up in the saddle. 'No. 7 – Tip-Top Second,' said the wise guy on my right when I asked him; 'a lame one.' Come to look at him again, he was doing a catch step with his front feet, but I had an idea that when he got going he'd forget all about that catch and run like the wind. Understand?"

"Just a hunch," said the girl. "Yes!"

She stepped closer to the counter and leaned across it. Her eyes were bright. Connor knew that she was seeing that picture of the hot day, the crowd of straw hats stirring wildly, the murmur and cry that went up as the string of racers jogged past.

"They went to the post," said Connor, "and I got down my bet – a hundred dollars, my whole wad – on Tip-Top Second. The bookie looked just once at me, and I'll never forget how his eyebrows went together. I went back to my seat."

"You were shaking all over, I guess," suggested the girl, and her hands were quivering.

"I was not," said Ben Connor, "I was cold through and through, and never moved my eyes off Tip-Top Second. His jockey had a green jacket with two stripes through it, and the green was easy to watch. I saw the crowd go off, and I saw Tip-Top left flat-footed at the post."

The girl drew a breath. Connor smiled at her. The hot evening had flushed his face, but now a small spot of white appeared in either cheek, and his dull eyes had grown expressionless. She knew what he meant when he said that he was cold when he saw the string go to the post.

"It – it must have made you sick!" said the girl.

"Not a bit. I knew the green jacket was going to finish ahead of the rest as well as I knew that my name was Ben Connor. I said he was left at the post. Well, it wasn't exactly that, but when the bunch came streaking out of the shoot, he was half a dozen lengths behind. It was a mile and an eighth race. They went down the back stretch, eight horses all bunched together, and the green jacket drifting that half dozen lengths to the rear. The wise guys turned and grinned at me; then they forgot all about me and began to yell for King Charles and Miss Lazy.

"The bunch were going around the turn and the two favorites were fighting it out together. But I had an eye for the green jacket, and halfway around the turn I saw him move up."

The girl sighed.

"No," Connor continues, "he hadn't won the race yet. And he never should have won it at all, but King Charles was carrying a hundred and thirty-eight pounds, and Miss Lazy a hundred and thirty-three, while Tip-Top Second came in as a fly-weight eighty-seven pounds! No horse in the world could give that much to him when he was right, but who guessed that then?

"They swung around the turn and hit the stretch. Tip-Top took the curve like a cart horse. Then the bunch straightened out, with King Charles and Miss Lazy fighting each other in front and the rest streaking out behind like the tail of a flag. They did that first mile in 1.38, but they broke their hearts doing it, with that weight up.

"They had an eighth to go – one little measly furlong, with Tip-Top in the ruck, and the crowd screaming for King Charles and Miss Lazy; but just exactly at the mile post the leaders flattened. I didn't know it, but the man in front of me dropped his glasses and his head. 'Blown!' he said, and that was all. It seemed to me that the two in front were running as strongly as ever, but Tip-Top was running better. He came streaking, with the boy flattening out along his neck and the whip going up and down. But I didn't stir. I couldn't; my blood was turned to ice water.

"Tip-Top walked by the ruck and got his nose on the hip of King Charles. Somebody was yelling behind me in a squeaky voice: 'There is something wrong! There's something wrong!' There was, too, and it was the eighty-seven pounds that a fool handicapper had put on Tip-Top. At the sixteenth Miss Lazy threw up her head like a swimmer going down and dropped back, and Tip-Top was on the King's shoulder. Fifty yards to the finish; twenty-five – then the King staggered as if he'd been hit between the ears, and Tip-Top jumped out to win by a neck.

"There was one big breath of silence in the grand stand – then a groan. I turned my head and saw the two wise guys looking at me with sick grins. Afterward I collected two thousand bucks from a sicker looking bookie."

He paused and smiled at the girl.

"That was the 11th of July. First real day of my life."

She gathered her mind out of that scene.

"You stepped out of a telegraph office, with your finger on the key all day, every day, and you jumped into two thousand dollars?"

After she had stopped speaking her thoughts went on, written in her eyes.

"You'd like to try it, eh?" said Ben Connor.

"Haven't you had years of happiness out of it?"

He looked at her with a grimace.

"Happiness?" he echoed. "Happiness?"

She stepped back so that she put his deeply-marked face in a better light.

"You're a queer one for a winner."

"Sure, the turf is crowded with queer ones like me."

"Winners, all of 'em?"

His eye had been gradually brightening while he talked to her. He felt that the girl rang true, as men ring true, yet there was nothing masculine about her.

"You've heard racing called the sport of kings? That's because only kings can afford to follow the ponies. Kings and Wall Street. But a fellow can't squeeze in without capital. I've made a go of it for a while; pretty soon we all go smash. Sooner or later I'll do what everybody else does – put up my cash on a sure thing and see my money go up in smoke."

"Then why don't you pull out with what you have?"

"Why does the earth keep running around the sun? Because there's a pull. Once you've followed the ponies you'll keep on following 'em. No hope for it. Oh, I've seen the boys come up one after another, make their killings, hit a streak of bad luck, plunge, and then watch their sure-thing throw up its tail in the stretch and fade into the ruck."

He was growing excited as he talked; he was beginning to realize that he must make his break from the turf now or never. And he spoke more to himself than to the girl.

"We all hang on. We play the game till it breaks us and still we stay with it. Here I am, two thousand miles away from the tracks – and sending for dope to make a play! Can you beat that? Well, so-long."

He turned away gloomily.

"Good night, Mr. Connor."

He turned sharply.

"Where'd you get that name?" he asked with a trace of suspicion.

"Off the telegram."

He nodded, but said: "I've an idea I've been chattering to much."

"My name is Ruth Manning," answered the girl. "I don't think you've said too much."

He kept his eyes steadily on her while he shook hands.

"I'm glad I know some one in Lukin," said Connor. "Good night, again."

CHAPTER FOUR

When Connor wakened the next morning, after his first impression of blinding light, he closed his eyes and waited for the sense of unhappy doom which usually comes to men of tense nerves and active life after sleep; but, with slow and pleasant wonder, he realized that the old numbness of brain and fever of pulse was gone. Then he looked up and lazily watched the shadow of the vine at his window move across the ceiling, a dim-bordered shadow continually changing as the wind gathered the leaves in solid masses and shook them out again. He pored upon this for a time, and next he watched a spider spinning a web in the corner; she worked in a draft which repeatedly lifted her from her place before she had fastened her thread, and dropped her a foot or more into space. Connor sat up to admire the artisan's skill and courage. Compared to men and insects, the spider really worked over an abyss two hundred feet deep, suspended by a silken thread. Connor slipped out of bed and stood beneath the growing web while the main cross threads were being fastened. He had been there for some time when, turning away to rub the ache out of the back of his neck, he again met the contrast between the man of this morning and the man of other days.

This time it was his image in the mirror, meeting him as he turned. That deep wrinkle in the middle of the forehead was half erased. The lips were neither compressed nor loose and shaking, and the eye was calm – it rested him to meet that glance in the mirror.

A mood of idle content always brings one to the window: Connor looked out on the street. A horseman hopped past like a day shadow, the hoofbeats muffled by thick sand, and the wind, moving at an exactly equal pace, carried a mist of dust just behind the horse's tail. Otherwise there was neither life nor color in the street of weather-beaten, low buildings, and the eye of Connor went beyond the roofs and began to climb the mountains. Here was a bald bright cliff, there a drift of trees, and again a surface of raw clay from which the upper soil had recently slipped; but these were not stopping points – they were rather the steps which led the glance to a sky of pale and transparent blue, and Connor felt a great desire to have that sky over him in place of a ceiling.

He splashed through a hasty bath, dressed, and ran down the stairs, humming. Jack Townsend stood on a box in the corner of the room, probing at a spider web in the corner.

"Too late for breakfast?" asked Connor.

The fat shoulders of the proprietor quivered, but he did not turn.

"Too late," he snapped. "Breakfast over at nine. No favorites up here."

Connor waited for the wave of irritation to rise in him, but to his own surprise he found himself saying:

"All right; you can't throw a good horse off his feed by cutting out one meal."

Jack Townsend faced his guest, rubbing his many-folded chin.

"Don't take long for this mountain air to brace up a gent, does it?" he asked rather pointedly.

"I'll tell you what," said Connor. "It isn't the air so much; it's the people that do a fellow good."

"Well," admitted the proprietor modestly, "they may be something in that. Kind of heartier out here, ain't they? More than in the city, I guess. I'll tell you what," he added. "I'll go out and speak to the missus about a snack for you. It's late, but we like to be obligin'."

He climbed carefully down from the box and started away.

"That girl again," thought Connor, and snapped his fingers. His spirits continued to rise, if that were possible, during the breakfast of ham and eggs, and coffee of a taste so metallic that only a copious use of cream made it drinkable. Jack Townsend, recovering to the full his customary good nature, joined his guest in a huge piece of toast with a layer of ham on it – simply to keep a stranger from eating alone, he said – and while he ate he talked about the race. Connor had noticed that the lobby was almost empty.

"They're over lookin' at the hosses," said Townsend, "and gettin' their bets down."

Connor laid down knife and fork, and resumed them hastily, but thereafter his interest in his food was entirely perfunctory. From the corner of his eye a gleam kept steadily upon the face of Townsend, who continued:

"Speaking personal, Mr. Connor, I'd like to have you look over them hosses yourself."

Connor, on the verge of speech, checked himself with a quick effort.

"Because," continued Townsend, "if I had your advice I might get down a little stake on one of 'em. You see?"

Ben Connor paused with a morsel of ham halfway toward his lips.

"Who told you I know anything about horses?" he asked.

"You told me yourself," grinned the proprietor, "and I'd like to figure how you knew the mare come from the Ballor Valley."

"From which?"

"From the Ballor Valley. You even named the irrigation and sand and all that. But you'd seen her brand before, I s'pose?"

"Hoofs like hers never came out of these mountains," smiled Ben Connor. "See the way she throws them and how flat they are."

"Well, that's true," nodded Jack Townsend. "It seems simple, now you say what it was, but it had me beat up to now. That is the way with most things. Take a fine hand with a rope. He daubs it on a cow so dead easy any fool thinks he can do the same. No, Mr. Connor, I'd still like to have you come out and take a look at them hosses. Besides" – he lowered his voice – "you might pick up a bit of loose change yourself. They's a plenty rolling round to-day."

Connor laughed, but there was excitement behind his mirth.

"The fact is, Townsend," he said, "I'm not interested in racing now. I'm up here for the air."

"Sure – sure," said the hotel man. "I know all that. Well, if you're dead set it ain't hardly Christian to lure you into betting on a hoss race, I suppose."

He munched at his sandwich in savage silence, while Connor looked out the window and began to whistle.

"They race very often up here?" he asked carelessly.

"Once in a while."

"A pleasant sport," sighed Connor.

"Ain't it, now?" argued Townsend. "But these gents around here take it so serious that it don't last long."

"That so?"

"Yep. They bet every last dollar they can rake up, and about the second or third race in the year the money's all pooled in two or three pockets. Then the rest go gunnin' for trouble, and most generally find a plenty. Any six races that's got up around here is good for three shooting scrapes, and each shooting's equal to one corpse and half a dozen put away for repairs." He touched his forehead, marked with a white line. "I used to be considerable," he said.

"H-m," murmured Connor, grown absentminded again.

"Yes, sir," went on the other. "I've seen the boys come in from the mines with enough dust to choke a mule, and slap it all down on the hoss. I've seen twenty thousand cold bucks lost and won on a dinky little pinto that wasn't worth twenty dollars hardly. That's how crazy they get."

Connor wiped his forehead.

"Where do they race?" he asked.

"Right down Washington Avenue. That is the main street, y'see. Gives 'em about half a mile of runnin'."

A cigarette appeared with magic speed between the fingers of Connor, and he began to smoke, with deep inhalations, expelling his breath so strongly that the mist shot almost to the ceiling before

it flattened into a leisurely spreading cloud. Townsend, fascinated, seemed to have forgotten all about the horse race, but there was in Connor a suggestion of new interest, a certain businesslike coldness.

"Suppose we step over and give the ponies a glance?" he queried.

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Townsend. "And I'll take any tip you have!"

This made Connor look at his host narrowly, but, dismissing a suspicion from his mind, he shrugged his shoulders, and they went out together.

The conclave of riders and the betting public had gathered at the farther end of the street, and it included the majority of Lukin. Only the center of the street was left religiously clear, and in this space half a dozen men led horses up and down with ostentatious indifference, stopping often to look after cinches which they had already tested many times. As Connor came up he saw a group of boys place their wagers with a stakeholder – knives, watches, nickels and dimes. That was a fair token of the spirit of the crowd. Wherever Connor looked he saw hands raised, brandishing greenbacks, and for every raised hand there were half a dozen clamorous voices.

"Quite a bit of sporting blood in Lukin, eh?" suggested Townsend.

"Sure," sighed Connor. He looked at the brandished money. "A field of wheat," he murmured, "waiting for the reaper. That's me."

He turned to see his companion pull out a fat wallet.

"Which one?" gasped Townsend. "We ain't got hardly any time."

Connor observed him with a smile that tucked up the corners of his mouth.

"Wait a while, friend. Plenty of time to get stung where the ponies are concerned. We'll look them over."

Townsend began to chatter in his ear: "It's between Charlie Haig's roan and Cliff Jones's Lightning – You see that bay? Man, he can surely get across the ground. But the roan ain't so bad. Oh, no!"

"Sure they are."

The gambler frowned. "I was about to say that there was only one horse in the race, but – " He shook his head despairingly as he looked over the riders. He was hunting automatically for the fleshless face and angular body of a jockey; among them all Charlie Haig came the closest to this light ideal. He was a sun-dried fellow, but even Charlie must have weighed well over a hundred and forty pounds; the others made no pretensions toward small poundage, and Cliff Jones must have scaled two hundred.

"Which was the one hoss in your eyes?" asked the hotel man eagerly.

"The gray. But with that weight up the little fellow will be anchored."

He pointed to a gray gelding which nosed confidently at the back hip pockets of his master.

"Less than fifteen hands," continued Connor, "and a hundred and eighty pounds to break his back. It isn't a race; it's murder to enter a horse handicapped like that."

"The gray?" repeated Jack Townsend, and he glanced from the corner of his eyes at his companion, as though he suspected mockery. "I never seen the gray before," he went on. "Looks sort of underfed, eh?"

Connor apparently did not hear. He had raised his head and his nostrils trembled, so that Townsend did not know whether the queer fellow was about to break into laughter or a trade.

"Yet," muttered Connor, "he might carry it. God, what a horse!"

He still looked at the gelding, and Townsend rubbed his eyes and stared to make sure that he had not overlooked some possibilities in the gelding. But he saw again only a lean-ribbed pony with a long neck and a high croup. The horse wheeled, stepping as clumsily as a gangling yearling. Townsend's amazement changed to suspicion and then to indifference.

"Well," he said, smiling covertly, "are you going to bet on that?"

Connor made no answer. He stepped up to the owner of the gray, a swarthy man of Indian blood. His half sleepy, half sullen expression cleared when Connor shook hands and introduced himself as a lover of fast horse-flesh.

He even congratulated the Indian on owning so fine a specimen, at which apparently subtle mockery Townsend, in the rear, set his teeth to keep from smiling; and the big Indian also frowned, to see if there were any hidden insult. But Connor had stepped back and was looking at the forelegs of the gelding.

"There's bone for you," he said exultantly. "More than eight inches, eh – that Cannon?"

"Huh," grunted the owner, "I dunno."

But his last shred of suspicion disappeared as Connor, working his fingers along the shoulder muscles of the animal, smiled with pleasure and admiration.

"My name's Bert Sims," said the Indian, "and I'm glad to know you. Most of the boys in Lukin think my hoss ain't got a chance in this race."

"I think they're right," answered Connor without hesitation.

The eyes of the Indian flashed.

"I think you're putting fifty pounds too much weight on him," explained Connor.

"Yeh?"

"Can't another man ride your horse?"

"Anybody can ride him."

"Then let that fellow yonder – that youngster – have the mount. I'll back the gray to the bottom of my pocket if you do."

"I wouldn't feel hardly natural seeing another man on him," said the Indian. "If he's rode I'll do the riding. I've done it for fifteen years."

"What?"

"Fifteen years."

"Is that horse fifteen years old?" asked Connor, prepared to smile.

"He is eighteen," answered Bert Sims quietly.

The gambler cast a quick glance at Sims and a longer one at the gray. He parted the lips of the horse, and then cursed softly.

"You're right," said Connor. "He is eighteen."

He was frowning in deadly earnestness now.

"Accident, I suppose?"

The Indian merely stared at him.

"Is the horse a strain of blood or an accident? What's his breed?"

"He's an Eden gray."

"Are there more like him?"

"The valley's full of 'em, they say," answered Bert Sims.

"What valley?" snapped the gambler.

"I ain't been in it. If I was I wouldn't talk."

"Why not?"

In reply Sims rolled the yellow-stained whites of his eyes slowly toward his interlocutor. He did not turn his head, but a smile gradually began on his lips and spread to a sinister hint at mirth. It put a grim end to the conversation, and Connor turned reluctantly to Townsend. The latter was clamoring.

"They're getting ready for the start. Are you betting on that runt of a gray?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Conner shook his head almost sadly. "A horse that stands not a hair more than fourteen-three, eighteen years old, with a hundred and eighty pounds up – No, I'm not a fool."

"Which is it – the roan or the bay?" gasped Townsend. "Which d'you say? I'll tell you about the valley after the race. Which hoss, Mr. Connor?"

Thus appealed to, the gambler straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. He looked coldly at the horses.

"How old is that brown yonder – the one the boy is just mounting?"

"Three. But what's he got to do with the race?"

"He's a shade too young, or he'd win it. That's what he has to do with it. Back Haig's horse, then. The roan is the best bet."

"Have you had a good look at Lightnin'?"

"He won't last in this going with that weight up."

"You're right," panted Townsend. "And I'm going to risk a hundred on him. Hey, Joe, how d'you bet on Charlie Haig?"

"Two to one."

"Take you for a hundred. Joe, meet Mr. Connor."

"A hundred it is, Jack. Can I do anything for you, Mr. Connor?"

"I'll go a hundred on the roan, sir."

"Have I done it right?" asked Townsend fiercely, a little later. "I wonder do you know?"

"Ask that after the race is over," smiled Connor. "After all, you have only one horse to be afraid of."

"Sure; Lightnin' – but he's enough."

"Not Lightning, I tell you. The gray is the only horse to be afraid of though the brown stallion might do if he has enough seasoning."

For a moment panic brightened the eyes of Townsend, and then he shook the fear away.

"I've done it now," he said huskily, "and they's no use talking. Let's get down to the finish."

The crowd was streaming away from the start, and headed toward the finish half a mile down the street beyond the farther end of Lukin. Most of this distance Townsend kept his companion close to a run; then he suddenly appealed for a slower pace.

"It's my heart," he explained. "Nothin' else bothers it, but during a hoss race it sure stands on end. I get to thinkin' of what my wife will say if I lose; and that always plumb upsets me."

He was, in fact, spotted white and purple when they joined the mob which packed both sides of the street at the finish posts; already the choice positions were taken.

"We won't get a look," groaned Townsend.

But Connor chuckled: "You tie on to me and we'll get to the front in a squeeze." And he ejected himself into the mob. How it was done Townsend could never understand. They oozed through the thickest of the crowd, and when roughly pressed men ahead of them turned around, ready to fight, Connor was always looking back, apparently forced along by the pressure from the rear. He seemed, indeed, to be struggling to keep his footing, but in a few minutes Townsend found himself in the front rank. He mopped his brow and smiled up into the cool face of Connor, but there was no time for comments. Eight horses fretted in a ragged line far down the street, and as they frisked here and there the brims of the sombreros of the riders flapped up and down; only the Eden gray stood with downward head, dreaming.

"No heart," said Townsend, "in that gray hoss. Look at him!"

"Plenty of head, though," replied Connor; "here they go!"

His voice was lost in a yell that went up wailing, shook into a roar, and then died off, as though a gust of wind had cut the sounds away. A murmur of voices followed, and then an almost womanish yell, for Lightning, the favorite, was out in front, and his rider leaned in the saddle with arm suspended and a quirt which never fell. The rest were a close group where whips worked ceaselessly, except that in the rear of all the rest the little gray horse ran without urge, smoothly, as if his rider had given up all hope of winning and merely allowed his horse to canter through.

"D'you see?" screamed Townsend. "Is that what you know about hosses, Mr. Connor? Look at Cliff Jones's Lightning! What do you – "

He cut his upbraidings short, for Connor's was a grisly face, white about the mouth and with gathered brows, as though, with intense effort, he strove to throw the influence of his will into that mass of horse-flesh. The hotel-keeper turned in time to see Lightning, already buckling under the strain, throw up his head.

The heavy burdens, the deep, soft going, and the fact that none of the horses were really trained to sprint, made the half-mile course a very real test, and now the big leader perceptibly weakened. Out of the pack shot a slender brown body, and came to the girth – to the neck of the bay.

"The stallion!" shouted Townsend. "By God, you do know hosses! Who'd of thought that skinny fellow had it in him?"

"He'll die," said Connor calmly.

The bay and the brown went back into the pack together, even as Connor spoke, though the riders were flogging hard, and now the roan drew to the front. It was plain to see that he had the foot of the rest, for he came away from the crowd with every leap.

"Look! Look! Look!" moaned Townsend. "Two for one! Look!" He choked with pleasure and gripped Connor's arm in both his hands in token of gratitude.

Now the race bore swiftly down the finish, the horses looming bigger; their eyes could be seen, and their straining nostrils now, and the desperate face of each rider, trying to lift his horse into a great burst.

"He's got it," sobbed Townsend, hysterical. "Nothin' can catch him now."

But his companion, in place of answer, stiffened and pointed. His voice was a tone of horror, almost, as he said: "I knew, by God, I knew all the time and wouldn't believe my eyes."

For far from the left, rounding the pack, came a streak of gray. It caught the brown horse and passed him in two leaps; it shot by the laboring bay; and only the roan of Charlie Haig remained in front. That rider, confident of victory, had slipped his quirt over his wrist and was hand-riding his horse when a brief, deep yell of dismay from the crowd made him jerk a glance over his shoulder. He cut the quirt into the flank of the roan, but it was too late. Five lengths from the finish the little gray shoved his nose in front; and from that point, settling toward the earth, as he stretched into a longer and longer stride, every jump increased his margin. The nose of the roan was hardly on the rump of the gelding at the finish.

A bedlam roar came from the crowd. Townsend was cursing and beating time to his oaths with a fat fist. Townsend found so many companion losers that his feelings were readily salved, and he turned to Connor, smiling wryly.

"We can't win every day," he declared, "but I'll tell you this, partner; of all the men I ever seen, you get the medal for judgin' a hoss. You can pick my string any day."

"Eighteen years old," Connor was saying in the monotonous tone of one hypnotized.

"Hey, there," protested Townsend, perceiving that he was on the verge of being ignored.

"A hundred and eighty pounds," sighed the big man.

Townsend saw for the first time that a stop-watch was in the hand of his companion, and now, as Connor began to pace off the distance, the hotel proprietor tagged behind, curious. Twenty steps from the starting point the larger man stopped abruptly, shook his head, and then went on. When he came to the start he paused again, and Townsend found him staring with dull eyes at the face of the watch.

"What'd they make it in?" asked the little man.

The other did not hear.

"They ran from this line?" he queried in a husky voice.

"Sure. Line between them posts."

"Fifty-nine seconds!" he kept repeating. "Fifty-nine seconds! Fifty-nine!"

"What about the fifty-nine seconds?" asked Townsend, and receiving no answer he murmured to himself: "The heat has got to his head."

Connor asked quietly: "Know anything about these gray horses and where they came from?"

"Sure. As much as anybody. Come from yonder in the mountains. A Negro raises 'em. A deaf mute. Ain't ever been heard to say a word."

"And he raises horses like that?"

"Sure."

"And nobody's been up there to try to buy 'em?"

"Too far to go, you see? Long ride and a hard trail. Besides, they's plenty of good hoss-flesh right around Lukin, here."

"Of course," nodded Connor genially. "Of course there is."

"Besides, them grays is too small. Personally, I don't hanker after a runt of a hoss. I look like a fool on one of em."

The voice of Connor was full of hearty agreement.

"So do I. Yes, they're small, if they're all like that one. Too small. Much too small."

He looked narrowly at Townsend from the corner of his eyes to make sure that the hotel proprietor suspected nothing.

"This deaf-mute sells some, now and then?"

"Yep. He comes down once in a while and sells a hoss to the first gent he meets – and then walks back to the garden. Always geldings that he sells, I understand. Stand up under work pretty well, those little hosses. Harry Macklin has got one. Harry lives at Fort Andrew. There's a funny yarn out about how Harry – "

"What price does the mute ask?"

"Thinking of getting one of 'em?"

"Me? Of course not! What do I want with a runt of a horse like that? But I was wondering what they pay around here for little horses."

"I dunno."

"What's that story you were going to tell me about Harry Macklin?"

"You see, it was this way – "

And he poured forth the stale anecdote while they strolled back to the hotel. Connor smiled and nodded at appropriate places, but his absent eyes were seeing, once more, the low-running form of the little gray gelding coming away from the rest of the pack.

CHAPTER SIX

When he arrived at the hotel Ben Connor found the following telegram awaiting him:

> Lady Fay in with ninety-eight Trickster did mile and furlong in one fifty-four with one hundred twenty Caledonian stale mile in one thirty-nine Billy Jones looks good track fast.
> *Harry Slocum.*

That message blotted all other thoughts from the mind of Connor. From his traveling bag he brought out a portfolio full of wrinkled papers and pamphlets crowded with lists of names and figures; there followed a time of close work. Page after page of calculations scribbled with a soft pencil and in a large, sprawling hand, were torn from a pad, fluttered through the air and lay where they fell. When the hour was ended he pushed away the pamphlets of "dope" and picked up his notes. After that he sat in deep thought and drove puff after puff of cigarette-smoke at the ceiling.

As his brown study progressed, he began crumpling the slips in his moist fingers until only two remained. These he balanced on his finger-tips as though their weight might speak to his finely attuned nerves. At length, one hand closed slowly over the paper it held and crushed it to a ball. He flicked this away with his thumb and rose. On the remaining paper was written "Trickster." Connor had made his choice.

That done, his expression softened as men relax after a day of mental strain and he loitered down the stairs and into the street. Passing through the lobby he heard the voice of Jack Townsend raised obviously to attract his attention.

"There he goes now. And nothing but the weight kept him from bettin' on the gray."

Connor heard sounds, not words, for his mind was already far away in a club house, waiting for the "ponies" to file past. On the way to the telegraph office he saw neither street nor building nor face, until he had written on one of the yellow blanks, "A thousand on Trickster," and addressed it to Harry Slocum. Not until he shoved the telegram across the counter did he see Ruth Manning.

She was half-turned from the key, but her head was canted toward the chattering sounder with a blank, inward look.

"Do you hear?" she cried happily. "Bjornsen is back!"

"Who?" asked Connor.

"Sveynrod Bjornsen. Lost three men out of eight, but he got within a hundred and fifty miles of the pole. Found new land, too."

"Lucky devil, eh?"

But the girl frowned at him.

"Lucky, nothing! Bjornsen is a fighter; he lost his father and his older brother up there three years ago and then he went back to make up for their deaths. Luck?"

Connor, wondering, nodded. "Slipped my mind, that story of Bjornsen. Any other news?"

She made a little gesture, palms up, as though she gathered something from the air.

"News? The old wire has been pouring it at me all morning. Henry Levateur went up thirty-two thousand feet yesterday and the Admiral Barr was launched."

Connor kept fairly abreast of the times, but now he was at sea.

"That's the new liner, isn't it?"

"Thirty thousand tons of liner at that. She took the water like a duck. Well, that's the stuff for Uncle Sam to give them; a few more like the Admiral Barr and we'll have the old colors in every port that calls itself a town. Europe will have to wake up."

She counted the telegram with a sweep of her pencil and flipped the change to Connor out of the coin-box. The rattle of the sounder meant new things to Connor; the edges of the world crowded

close, for when the noise stopped, in the thick silence he watched her features relax and the light go out of her eyes. It enabled him to glance into her life in Lukin, with only the chattering wire for a companion. A moment before she had been radiant – now she was a tired girl with purple shadows beneath her eyes making them look ghostly large.

"Oh, Bobby," she called. A tall youth came out of an inner room. "Take the key, please; I'm going out for lunch."

"Come to the hotel with me," suggested Connor.

"Lunch at Townsend's?" She laughed with a touch of excitement. "That's a treat."

Already she gained color and her eyes brightened. She was like a motor, Connor decided, nothing in itself, but responding to every electric current.

"This lunch is on me, by the way," she added.

"Why is that?"

"Because I like to pay on my winning days. I cashed in on the Indian's horse this morning."

In Connor's own parlance – it brought him up standing.

"*You* bet on it? You know horse-flesh, then. I like the little fellow, but the weight stopped me."

He smiled at her with a new friendliness.

"Don't pin any flowers on me," she answered. "Oh, I know enough about horses to look at their hocks and see how they stand; and I don't suppose I'd buy in on a pony that points the toe of a fore-foot – but I'm no judge. I bet on the gray because I know the blood."

She had stopped at the door of the hotel and she did not see the change in Connor's face as they entered.

"Queer thing about horses," she continued. "They show their strain, though the finest man that ever stepped might have a son that's a quitter. Not that way with horses. Why, any scrubby pinto that has a drop of Eden Gray blood in him will run till his heart breaks. You can bet on that."

Lunch at Townsend's, Connor saw, must be the fashionable thing in Lukin. The "masses" of those who came to town for the day ate at the lunch-counters in the old saloons while the select went to the hotel. Mrs. Townsend, billowing about the room in a dress of blue with white polka-dots, when she was not making hurried trips into the kitchen, cast one glance of approval at Ben Connor and another of surprise at the girl. Other glances followed, for the room was fairly well filled, and a whisper went trailing about them, before and behind.

It was easy to see that Ruth Manning was being accused of "scraping" acquaintance with the stranger, but she bore up beautifully, and Connor gauging her with an accurate eye, admired and wondered where she had learned. Yet when they found a table and he drew out a chair for her, he could tell from the manner in which she lowered herself into it that she was not used to being seated. That observation gave him a feeling of power over her.

"You liked the gray, too?" she was saying, as he took his place.

"I lost a hundred betting against him," said the gambler quietly. "I hope you made a killing."

He saw by the slight widening of her eyes that a hundred dollars was a good deal of money to her; and she flushed as she answered:

"I got down a bet with Jud Alison; it was only five dollars, but I had odds of ten to one. Fifty dollars looks pretty big to me," she added, and he liked her frankness.

"But does everybody know about these grays?"

"Not so many. They only come from one outfit, you see. Dad knew horses, and he told me an Eden Gray was worth any man's money. Poor Dad!"

Connor watched her eyes turn dark and dull, but he tossed sympathy aside and stepped forward in the business.

"I've been interested since I saw that little streak of gray shoot over the finish. Eighteen years old. Did you know that?"

"Really? Well, Dad said an Eden Gray was good to twenty-five."

"What else did he say?"

"He didn't know a great deal about them, after all, but he said that now and then a deaf and dumb Negro comes. He's a regular giant. Whenever he meets a man he gets off the horse and puts a paper into the hand of the other. On the paper it says: Fifty dollars in gold coin! Always that."

It was like a fairy tale to Connor.

"Jude Harper of Collinsville met him once. He had only ten dollars in gold, but he had three hundred in paper. He offered the whole three hundred and ten to the deaf-mute but he only shook his head."

"How often does he come out of the valley?"

"Once a year – once in two years – nobody knows how often. Of course it doesn't take him long to find a man who'll buy a horse like one of the grays for fifty dollars. The minute the horse is sold he turns around and starts walking back. Pete Ricks tried to follow him. He turned back on Pete, jumped on him from behind a rock, and jerked him off his horse. Then he got him by the hair and bent his head back. Pete says he expected to have his neck broken – he was like a child in the arms of that giant. But it seemed that the mute was only telling him in deaf-and-dumb talk that he mustn't follow. After he'd frightened the life out of Pete the big mute went away again, and Pete came home as fast as his horse could carry him."

Connor swallowed. "Where do they get the name Eden Gray?"

"I don't know. Dad said that three things were true about every gray. It's always a gelding; it's always one price, and it always has a flaw. I looked the one over that ran to-day and couldn't see anything wrong, though."

"Cow-hocked," said Connor, breathing hard. "Go on!"

"Dad made up his mind that the reason they didn't sell more horses was because the owner only sold to weed out his stock."

"Wait," said Connor, tapping on the table to make his point. "Do I gather that the only Eden Grays that are sold are the poorest of the lot?"

"That was Dad's idea."

"Go on," said Connor.

"You're excited?"

But he answered quickly: "Well, one of those grays beat me out of a hundred dollars. I can't help being interested."

He detached his watch-charm from its catch and began to finger it carelessly; it was the head of an ape carved in ivory yellowed with age.

The girl watched, fascinated, but she made no mention of it, for the jaw of the gambler was set in a hard line, and she felt, subconsciously, a widening distance between them.

"Does the deaf-mute own the horses?" he was asking.

"I suppose so."

"This sounds like a regular catechism, doesn't it?"

"I don't mind. Come to think of it, everything about the grays is queer. Well, I've never seen this man, but do you know what I think? That he lives off there in the mountains by himself because he's a sort of religious fanatic."

"Religion? Crazy, maybe."

"Maybe."

"What's his religion?"

"I don't know," said the girl coldly. "After you jerk lightning for a while, you aren't interested much in religion."

He nodded, not quite sure of her position, but now her face darkened and she went on, gathering interest in the subject.

"Oh, I've heard 'em rave about the God that made the earth and the stars and all that stuff; the mountains, too. I've heard 'em die asking for mercy and praising God. That's the way Dad went. It was drink that got him. But I'm for facts only. Far as I can see, when people come up against a thing they can't understand they just close their eyes and say, God! And when they're due to die, sometimes they're afraid and they say, God – because they think they're going out like a snuffed lantern and never will be lighted again."

The gambler sat with his chin buried in his palm, and from beneath a heavy frown he studied the girl.

"I don't hold malice more than the next one," said the girl, "but I saw Dad; and I've been sick of religion ever since. Besides, how do you explain the rotten things that happen in the world? Look at yesterday! The King of the Sea goes down with all on board. Were they all crooks? Were they all ready to die? They can tell me about God, but I say, 'Give me the proofs!'"

She looked at Connor defiantly. "There's just one thing I believe in," she said, "that's luck!"

He did not stir, but still studied her, and she flushed under the scrutiny.

"Not that I've had enough luck to make me fond of it. I've been stuck up here on the edge of the world all my life. And how I've wanted to get away! How I've wanted it! I've begged for a chance – to cut out the work. If it doesn't make callouses on a girl's hands it will make them on her heart. I've been waiting all my life for a chance, and the chance has never come." Something flared in her.

"Sometimes I think," she whispered, "that I can't stand it! That I'd do anything! Anything – just to get away."

She stopped, and as her passion ebbed she was afraid she had said too much.

"Shake," he said, stretching his hand across the table, "I'm with you. Luck! That's all there is running things!"

His fingers closed hard over hers and she winced, for he had forgotten to remove the ivory image from his hand, and the ape-head cut into her flesh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That evening Ruth sent a boy over to the hotel with a telegram for Connor. It announced that Trickster, at six to one, came home a winner in the Murray. But Connor had time for only a grunt and a nod; he was too busy composing a letter to Harry Slocum, which read as follows:

> Dear Harry:
>
> I'm about to put my head in the lion's mouth; and in case you don't hear from me again, say within three months, this is to ask you to look for my bones. I'm starting out to nail a thousand-to-one shot. Working a hunch for the biggest clean-up we ever made. I'm going into the mountains to find a deaf mute Negro who raises the finest horses I've ever seen. Do you get that? No white man has gone into that valley; at least, no one has come out talking. But I'm going to bring something with me. If I don't come out it'll be because I've been knocked on the head inside the valley. I'm not telling any one around here where I'm bound, but I've made inquiries, and this is what I gather: No one is interested in the mute's valley simply because it's so far away. The mute doesn't bother them and they won't bother him. That's the main reason for letting him alone. The other reasons are that he's suspected of being a bad actor.
>
> But the distance is the chief thing that fences people away. The straight cut is bad going. The better way around is a slow journey. It leads west out of Lukin and down into the valley of the Girard River; then along the Girard to its headwaters. Then through the mountains again to the only entrance to the valley. I'm telling you all this so that you'll know what you may have ahead of you. If I'm mum for three months come straight for Lukin; go to a telegraph operator named Ruth Manning, and tell her that you've come to get track of me. She'll give you the names of the best dozen men in Lukin, and you start for the valley with the posse.
>
> Around Lukin they have a sort of foggy fear of the valley, bad medicine, they call it.
>
> I have a hard game ahead of me and I'm going to stack the cards. I've got to get into the Garden by a trick and get out again the same way. I start this afternoon.
>
> I've got a horse and a pack mule, and I'm going to try my hand at camping out. If I come back it will be on something that will carry both the pack and me, I think, and it won't take long to make the trip. Our days of being rich for ten days and poor for thirty will be over.
>
> Hold yourself ready; sharp at the end of ninety days, come West if I'm still silent.
>
> As ever,
>
> Ben.

Before the mail took that letter eastward, Ben Connor received his final advice from Jack Townsend. It was under the hotel man's supervision that he selected his outfit of soft felt hat, flannel shirts, heavy socks, and Napatan boots; Townsend, too, went with him to pick out the pack mule and all the elements of the pack, from salt to canned tomatoes.

As for the horse, Townsend merely stood by to admire while Ben Connor went through a dozen possibilities and picked a solidly built chestnut with legs enough for speed in a pinch, and a flexible fetlock – joints that promised an easy gait.

"You won't have no trouble," said Townsend, as Connor sat the saddle, working the stirrups back and forth and frowning at the creaking new leather. "Wherever you go you'll find gents ready to give you a hand on your way."

"Why's that? Don't I look like an old hand at this game?"

"Not with that complexion; it talks city a mile off. If you'd tell me where you're bound for – "

"But I'm not bound anywhere," answered Connor. "I'm out to follow my nose."

"With that gun you ought to get some game."

Connor laid his hand on the butt of the rifle which was slung in a case under his leg. He had little experience with a gun, but he said nothing.

"All trim," continued Townsend, stepping back to look. "Not a flaw in the mule; no sign of ringbone or spavin, and when a mule ain't got them, he's got nothin' wrong. Don't treat him too well. When you feel like pattin' him, cuss him instead. It's mule nature to like a beatin' once in a while; they spoil without it, like kids. He'll hang back for two days, but the third day he'll walk all over your hoss; never was a hoss that could walk with a mule on a long trip. Well, Mr. Connor, I guess you're all fixed, but I'd like to send a boy along to see you get started right."

"Don't worry," smiled Connor. "I've written down all your suggestions."

"Here's what you want to tie on to special," said the fat man. "Don't move your camp on Fridays or the thirteenth; if you come nigh a town and a black cat crosses your trail, you camp right there and don't move on to that town till the next morning. And wait a minute – if you start out and find you've left something in camp, make a cross in the trail before you go back."

He frowned to collect his thoughts.

"Well, if you don't do none of them three things, you can't come out far wrong. S'long, and good luck, Mr. Connor."

Connor waved his hand, touched the chestnut with his heel and the horse broke into a trot, while the rope, coming taut, first stretched the neck of the mule and then tugged him into a dragging amble. In this manner Connor went out of Lukin. He smiled to himself, as he thought confidently of the far different fashion in which he would return.

The first day gave Connor a raw nose, a sunburned neck and wrists, and his supper was charred bacon and tasteless coffee; but the next morning he came out of the choppy mountains and went down a long, easy slope into the valley of the Girard. There was always water here, and fine grass for the horse and mule, with a cool wind off the snows coming down the ravine. By the third day he was broken into the routine of his work and knew the most vulnerable spot on the ribs of the mule, and had a pet name for the chestnut. Thereafter the camping trip was pleasant enough. It took him longer than he had expected, for he would not press the horse as the pitch of the ravine grew steeper; later he saw his wisdom in keeping the chestnut fresh for the final burst, for when he reached the head-spring of the Girard, he faced a confusion of difficult, naked mountains. He was daunted but determined, and the next morning he filled his canteens and struck into the last stage of his journey.

Luck gave him cool weather, with high moving clouds, which curtained the sun during the middle of the day, but even then it was hard work. He had not the vestige of a trail to follow; the mountain sides were bare rock. A scattering of shrubs and dwarfed trees found rooting in crevices, but on the whole Connor was journeying through a sea of stone, and sometimes, when the sun glinted on smooth surface, the reflection blinded him. By noon the chestnut was hobbling, and before nightfall even the mule showed signs of distress. And though Connor traveled now by compass, he was haunted by a continual fear that he might have mistaken his way, or that the directions he had picked up at Lukin might be entirely wrong. Evening was already coming over the mountains when he rounded a slope of black rock and found below him a picture that tallied in every detail with all he had heard of the valley.

The first look was like a glance into a deep well of stone with a flash of water in the bottom; afterward he sat on a boulder and arranged the details of that big vista. Nothing led up to the Garden

from any direction; it was a freak of nature. Some convulsion of the earth, when these mountains were first rising, perhaps, had split the rocks, or as the surface strata rolled up, they parted over the central lift and left this ragged fissure. Through the valley ran a river, but water could never have cut those saw-tooth cliffs; and Connor noted this strange thing: that the valley came to abrupt ends both north and south. By the slant sunlight, and at that distance – for he judged the place to be some ten or fifteen miles in length – it seemed as if the cliff fronts to the north and south were as solid and lofty as a portion of the sides; yet this could not be unless the river actually disappeared under the face of the wall. Still, he could not make out details from the distance, only the main outline of the place, the sheen of growing things, whether trees or grass, and the glitter of the river which swelled toward the center of the valley into a lake. He could discover only one natural entrance; in the nearest cliff wall appeared a deep, narrow cleft, which ran to the very floor of the valley, and the only approach was through a difficult ravine. The sore-footed chestnut had caught the flash of green, and now he pricked his ears and whinnied as if he saw home. Connor started down the rocks toward the entrance, leading the horse, while the mule trailed wearily behind. As he turned, the wind blew to him out of the valley a faint rhythmical chiming. When he paused to listen the sound disappeared.

He dipped out of the brighter level into a premature night below; evening was gathering quickly, and with each step Connor felt the misty darkness closing above his head. He was stumbling over the boulders, downheaded, hardly able to see the ground at his feet, yet when he reached the bottom of the little ravine which ran toward the entrance, he looked up to a red sky, and the higher mountains rolled off in waves of light. Distances were magnified; he seemed to look from the bottom of the world to the top of it; he turned, a little dizzy, and between the edges of the cleft that rose straight as Doric pillars, he saw a fire burning at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. The sunset was above them, but the fire sent a long ray through the night of the lower valley. Connor pointed it out to his horse, and the little cavalcade went slowly forward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With every step that he took into the darkness the feeling of awe deepened upon Connor, until he went frowning toward the fire as though it were an eye that watched his coming. He was quite close when the chestnut threw up its head with a snort and stopped, listening; Connor listened as well, and he heard a music of men's voices singing together, faint with distance; the sound traveled so far that he caught the pulse of the rhythm and the fiber of the voices rather than the tune itself, yet the awe which had been growing in Connor gathered suddenly in his throat. He had to close his hands hard to keep from being afraid.

As though the chestnut felt the strangeness also, he neighed suddenly; the rock walls of the ravine caught up the sound and trumpeted it back. Connor, recovering from the shock, buried his fingers in the nostrils of the horse and choked the sound away; but the echo still went faintly before them and behind. The alarm had been given. The fire winked once and went out. Connor was left without a light to guide him; he looked up and saw that the sunset flush had fallen away to a dead gray.

He looked ahead to where the fire had been. Just then the horse jerked his nose away and gasped in a new breath. Even that slight sound flurried Connor, for it might guide the unknown danger to him. Connor remembered that after all he was not a bandit stealing upon a peaceful town; he composed his mind and his nerves with an effort, and was about to step forward again when he saw in the night just before him a deeper shade among the shadows. Peering, he discovered the dim outlines of a man.

Ben Connor was not a coward, but he was daunted by this apparition. His first impulse was to flee; his second was to leap at the other's throat. It spoke much for his steadiness in a crisis that he did neither, but called instead: "Who's there?"

Metal gritted on metal, and a shaft of light poured into Connor's face so unexpectedly that he shrank. The chestnut reared, and turning to control the horse, Connor saw his eyes and the eyes of the mule shining like phosphorus. When he had quieted the gelding he saw that it was a hooded lantern which had been uncovered. Not a ray fell on the bearer of the light.

"I saw a light down here," said Connor, after he had tried in vain to make out the features of the other. "It looked like a fire, and I started for it; I've lost my bearing in these mountains."

Without answering, the bearer of the lantern kept the shaft staring into Connor's face for another moment; then it was as suddenly hooded and welcome darkness covered the gambler. With a gesture which he barely could make out, the silent man waved him forward down the ravine. It angered Connor, this mummery of speechlessness, but with his anger was an odd feeling of helplessness as though the other had a loaded gun at his head.

The man walked behind him as they went forward, and presently the fire shone out at them from the entrance to the valley; thus Connor saw the blanket which had screened the fire removed, and caught a glimpse of a second form.

Even the zenith was dark now, and it was double night in the ravine. With the chestnut stumbling behind him, Connor entered the circle of the fire and was stopped by the raised hand of the second man.

"Why are you here?" said the guard.

The voice was thin, but the articulation thick and soft, and as the questioner stepped into the full glow of the fire, Connor saw a Negro whose head was covered by white curls. He was very old; it seemed as though time had faded his black pigment, and now his skin, a dark bronze, was puckered at the corners of his mouth, about his eyes, and in the center of his forehead, seeming to have dried in wrinkles like parchment. While he talked his expression never varied from the weary frown; yet years had not bowed him, for he stood straight as a youth, and though his neck was dried away until it was no thicker than a strong man's forearm, he kept his head high and looked at Connor.

The man who had gone out to stop Connor now answered for him, and turning to the voice the gambler saw that this fellow was a Negro likewise; as erect as the one by the fire, but hardly less ancient.

"He is lost in the mountains, and he saw the fire at the gate, Ephraim."

Ephraim considered Connor wistfully.

"This way is closed," he said; "you cannot pass through the gate."

The gambler looked up; a wall of rock on either side rose so high that the firelight failed to carry all the distance, and the darkness arched solidly above him. The calm dignity of the men stripped him of an advantage which he felt should be his, but he determined to appear at ease.

"Your best way," continued Ephraim, "is toward that largest mountain. You see where its top is still lighted in the west, while the rest of the range is black.

"Jacob can take you up from the ravine and show you the beginning of the way. But do not pass beyond the sight of the fire, Jacob."

"Good advice," nodded Connor, forcing himself to smile, "if it weren't that my horse is too sore-footed to carry me. Even the mule can hardly walk – you see."

He waved his hand and the chestnut threw up its head and took one or two halting steps to the side.

"In the meantime, I suppose you've no objection if I sit down here for a moment or two?"

Ephraim, bowing as though he ushered the other into an apartment of state, waved to a smooth-topped boulder comfortably near the fire.

"I wish to serve you," he went on, "in anything I can do without leaving the valley. We have a tank just inside the gate, and Jacob will fill your canteen and water the horse and mule as well."

"Kind of you," said Connor. "Cigarette?"

The proffered smoke brought a wrinkling of amazed delight into the face of Ephraim and his withered hand stretched tentatively forth. Jacob forestalled him with a cry and snatched the cigarette from the open palm of Connor. He held it in both his cupped hands.

"Tobacco – again!" He turned to Ephraim. "I have not forgotten!"

Ephraim had folded his arms with dignity, and now he turned a reproving glance upon his companion.

"Is it permitted?" he asked coldly.

The joy went out of the face of Jacob.

"What harm?"

"Is it permitted?" insisted Ephraim.

"He will not ask," argued Jacob dubiously.

"He knows without asking."

At this, very slowly and unwillingly, Jacob put the cigarette back into the hand of Ben Connor. A dozen curious questions came into the mind of the gambler, but he decided wisely to change the subject.

"The boss gives you orders not to leave, eh?" he went on. "Not a step outside the gate? What's the idea?"

"This thing was true in the time of the old masters. Only Joseph can leave the valley," Ephraim answered.

"And you don't know why no one is allowed inside the valley?"

"I have never asked," said Ephraim.

Connor smoked fiercely, peering into the fire.

"Well," he said at length, "you see my troubles? I can't get into the valley to rest up. I have to turn around and try to cross those mountains."

"Yes," nodded Ephraim.

"But the horse and mule will never make it over the rocks. I'll have to leave them behind or stay and starve with them."

"That is true."

"Rather than do that," said Connor, fencing for an opening, "I'd leave the poor devils here to live in the valley."

"That cannot be. No animals are allowed to enter."

"What? You'd allow this pair to die at the gate of the valley?"

"No; I should lead them first into the mountains."

"This is incredible! But I tell you, this horse is my friend – I can't desert him!"

He fumbled in his coat pocket and then stretched out his hand toward the chestnut; the horse hobbled a few steps nearer and nosed the palm of it expectantly.

"So!" muttered Ephraim, and shaded his eyes with his hand to look. He settled back and said in a different voice: "The horse loves you; it is said."

"I put the matter squarely up to you," said Connor. "You see how I stand. Give me your advice!"

Ephraim protested. "No, no! I cannot advise you. I know nothing of what goes on out yonder. Nevertheless – "

He broke off, for Connor was lighting another cigarette from the butt of the first one, and Ephraim paused to watch, nodding with a sort of vicarious pleasure as he saw Connor inhale deeply and then blow out a thin drift of smoke.

"You were about to say something else when I lighted this."

"Yes, I was about to say that I could not advise you, but I can send to Joseph. He is near us now."

"By all means send to Joseph."

"Jacob," ordered the keeper of the gate, "go to Joseph and tell him what has happened."

The other nodded, and then whistled a long note that drifted up the ravine. Afterward there was no answer, but Jacob remained facing expectantly toward the inside of the valley and presently Connor heard a sound that made his heart leap, the rhythmic hoofbeats of a galloping horse; and even in the darkness the long interval between impacts told him something of the animal's gait. Then into the circle of the firelight broke a gray horse with his tail high, his mane fluttering. He brought his gallop to a mincing trot and came straight toward Jacob, but a yard away he stopped and leaped catlike to one side; with head tossed high he stared at Connor.

Cold sweat stood on the forehead of the gambler, for it was like something he had seen, something he remembered; all his dreams of what a horse should be, come true.

Ephraim was saying sternly:

"In my household the colts are taught better manners, Jacob."

And Jacob answered, greatly perturbed: "There is a wild spirit in all the sons of Harith."

"It is Cassim, is it not?" asked Ephraim.

"Peace, fool!" said Jacob to the stallion, and the horse came and stood behind him, still watching the stranger over the shoulder of his master.

"Years dim your eyes, Ephraim," he continued. "This is not Cassim and he is not the height of Cassim by an inch. No, it is Abra, the son of Hira, who was the daughter of Harith."

He smiled complacently upon Ephraim, nodding his ancient head, and Ephraim frowned.

"It is true that my eyes are not as young as yours, Jacob; but the horses of my household are taught to stand when they are spoken to and not dance like foolish children."

This last reproof was called forth by the continual weaving back and forth of the stallion as he looked at Connor, first from one side of Jacob and then from the other. The old man now turned with a raised hand.

"Stand!" he ordered.

The stallion jerked up his head and became rigid.

"A sharp temper makes a horse without heart," said the oracular Ephraim.

Jacob scowled, and rolling his eyes angrily, searched for a reply; but he found none. Ephraim clasped one knee tightly in both hands, and weaving his head a little from side to side, delighted in his triumph.

"And the hand which is raised," went on the tormentor, "should always fall."

He was apparently quoting from an authority against which there was no appeal; now he concluded:

"Threats are for children, and yearlings; but a grown horse is above them."

"The spirit of Harith has returned in Abra," said Jacob gloomily. "From that month of April when he was foaled he has been a trial and a burden; yes, if even a cloud blows over the moon he comes to my window and calls me. There was never such a horse since Harith. However, he shall make amends. Abra!"

The stallion stepped nearer and halted, alert.

"Go to him, fool. Go to the stranger and give him your head. Quick!"

The gray horse turned, hesitated, and then came straight to Connor, very slowly; there he bowed his head and dropped his muzzle on the knee of the white man, but all the while his eyes flared at the strange face in terror. Jacob turned a proud smile upon Ephraim, and the latter nodded.

"It is a good colt," he admitted. "His heart is right, and in time he may grow to some worth."

Once more Connor fumbled in his pocket.

"Steady," he said, looking squarely into the great, bright eyes. "Steady, boy."

He put his hand under the nose of the stallion.

"It's a new smell, but little different."

Abra snorted softly, but though he shook he dared not move. The gambler, with a side glance, saw the two men watching intently.

"Ah," said Connor, "you have pulled against a headstall here, eh?"

He touched an old scar on the cheek of the horse, and Abra closed his eyes, but opened them again when he discovered that no harm was done to him by the tips of those gentle fingers.

"You may let him have his head again," said Connor. "He will not leave me now until he is ordered."

"So?" exclaimed Jacob. "We shall see! Enough Abra!"

The gray tossed up his head at that word, but after he had taken one step he returned and touched the back of the white man's hand, snuffed at his shoulder and at his hat and then stood with pricking ears. A soft exclamation came in unison from Jacob and Ephraim.

"I have never seen it before," muttered Jacob. "To see it, one would say he was a son of Julanda."

"It is my teaching and not the blood of Julanda that gives my horses manners," corrected Ephraim. "However, if I might look in the hand of the stranger – "

"There is nothing in it," answered Connor, smiling, and he held out both empty palms. "All horses are like this with me."

"Is it true?" they murmured together.

"Yes; I don't know why. But you were going to bring Joseph."

"Ah," said Ephraim, shaking his head. "I had almost forgotten. Hurry, Jacob; but if you will take my advice in the matter you will teach your colts fewer tricks and more sound sense."

The other grunted, and putting his hand on the withers of Abra, he leaped to the back with the lightness of a strong youth. A motion of his hand sent the gray into a gallop that shot them through the gate into darkness.

CHAPTER NINE

That faint and rhythmic chiming which Connor had heard from the mountain when he first saw the valley now came again through the gate, more clearly. There was something familiar about the sound – yet Connor could not place it.

"Did you mark?" said Ephraim, shaking his head. "Did you see the colt shy at the white rock as he ran? In my household that could never happen; and yet Jacob does well enough, for the blood of Harith is as stubborn as old oak and wild as a wolf. But your gift, sir" – and here he turned with much respect toward Connor – "is a great one. I have never seen Harith's sons come to a man as Abra came to you."

He was surprised to see the stranger staring toward the gate as if he watched a ghost.

"He did not gallop," said Connor presently, and his voice faltered. "He flowed. He poured himself through the air."

He swept a hand across his forehead and with great effort calmed the muscles of his face.

"Are there more horses like that in the valley?"

Ephraim hesitated, for there was such a glittering hunger in the eyes of this stranger that it abashed him. Vanity, however, brushed scruple away.

"More like Abra in the valley? So!"

He seemed to hunt for superlatives with which to overwhelm his questioner.

"The worst in my household is Tabari, the daughter of Numan, and she was foaled lame in the left foreleg. But if ten like Abra were placed in one corral and Tabari in the other, a wise man would give the ten and take the one and render thanks that such good fortune had come his way."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Connor in that same, small, choked voice.

"I speak calmly," said Ephraim gravely. He added with some hesitation: "But if I must tell the whole truth, I shall admit that my household is not like the household of the blood of Rustir. Just as she was the queen of horses, so those of her blood are above other horses as the master is above me. Yet, if ten like Tabari were placed in one corral and the stallion Glani were placed in another, I suppose that a wise man would give the ten for the one."

He added with a sigh: "But I should not have such wisdom."

Connor smiled.

"And at that rate it would require a hundred like Abra to buy Glani?" he asked.

"A thousand," said the old man instantly, "and then the full price would not be paid. I have already asked the master to cross him with Hira. He will answer me soon; one touch of Glani's blood will lift the strain in my household. My colts are good mettle – but the fire, the soul of Glani!"

He bowed his head.

"Ah, they are coming, Jacob and Joseph."

His keen ear heard a sound which was not audible to Connor for several moments; then two gray horses swept into the circle of the firelight, and from the mare which led Abra by several yards, a huge Negro dismounted.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.