EVANS LARRY

WINNER TAKE ALL

Larry Evans

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Evans L.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
IS LUCK A LADY?

By easy stages Blue Jeans had arrived at the water tanks.

That had not pleased him much, though the water which fell in a musical drip from the stack nearest the rails into what impressed one as a sensible, frugal tub, until it, too, filled and overflowed and betrayed its trivial nature, was sweet on his tongue and grateful to his mare.

Arriving anywhere by easy stages had never appealed to him. Swift and sudden, that was the better way. Rather would he have whirled into Reservoir with zest and some commotion. But Girl o' Mine was in no shape for that. She drooped. Events which had jostled him roughly in the last few weeks had dealt with her unkindly as well. There had been many weary miles and not much grain.

And yet his poverty had not been a thing of easy stages. It had seemed both swift and sudden, and he liked it none the better for that. But he would not enter Reservoir with ostentation. He'd ride in without enthusiasm, and thus call no attention to the pass to which he'd come.

Nor was he in a hurry to get there, either. The town, a quarter of a mile across the track, squat and squalid in the dust, held nothing for his mood.

Reservoir was a poor town, anyway.

And Life was a poor thing, too.

He'd tried for hours and hours to think of one fair promise which it still held for him—just one!—tried hard! And couldn't!

Blue Jeans was twenty-two.

And Luck had trifled with him over-long.

One brief month earlier he had been a man of ambition, a man of promise. He'd even found his Dream. An Easterner had helped him to that foolishness; an -ologist from a university who expected to find prehistoric bones and relics entombed under the hills.

Cornered by that Easterner, who liked his face, and not having been handy enough as a liar to get out of it neatly, Blue Jeans had admitted under cross-examination that he was familiar with the country.

Was he doing anything at present?

No-o-o. But he was looking around.

Could he pack?

Yes.

Was he accustomed to horses?

He hoped so.

Could he cook?

Ye-s-s, some. Not good for delicate folks.

Well, then, he was the very man for the position.

And Blue Jeans hadn't been able to think offhand of an objection; not one which he wanted to voice. He couldn't admit outright that the prospect was dismaying to his young pride. That he was afraid of the ridicule which certainly it would bring down upon him.

"I'm a cowpuncher, not a grave-robber," was the way it rose to his mind. But that wouldn't serve. It sounded neither dignified nor convincing.

Then if that was settled, what remuneration would he expect per month?

He had been of astonishing though dense persistence, that professor. Blue Jeans had pounced upon the query with sensations of deliverance.

"Wel-l-l," and he named a figure which struck him as outrageous.

But it hadn't staggered the professor; it hadn't even made him hesitate. The professor's expenses in the field were already guaranteed, back home, by men who could afford it.

"Then it's settled," he had said.

And Blue Jeans, who forgot immediately that he had been dragged, struggling, into this bargain and began to view it as a deal of his own shrewd consummation, had scorned himself for two whole hours for not having made it twice as outrageous at least.

Thus had it started.

By night he had figured out how great the sum he had mentioned would be, multiplied by six. The professor planned to be out that long. By morning he had spent some money, quite a little money, in anticipation of it. But that was not cause for worry; prosperity was shining in his eyes. He was going to be a man of substance. And he would save, for the Dream was bright. And then the professor spoiled it all by mistaking a mule for a horse.

The mule had not kicked him hard. If that had been the case, Blue Jeans might have found it in his heart to be sorry for him. A less frail man would have suffered less. As it was he spent his sympathy on himself. And when directly the professor sent for him and intimated that owing to the unavoidable postponement of the trip he was again out of employment, he had not lingered to listen.

"Of course, if you care to hang about," the professor had suggested, "until I can travel once more—"

He had not even found it in his heart to be polite.

"Hanging about is just what ails me," finished it. "The devil, he finds mischief for my idle hands to do. You can wait till you're able, but I'm going to travel *now*!"

And he made good his word without further loss of time, first paying painfully the sums which he had spent in fond anticipation, and enduring with a grin the ridicule which was double, because he had made no trip at all.

Last of all, before departing he went around to the stable and fed the mule some sugar.

He had found a new job hard to locate. And the Dream had lost definition and grown dim and distant. It was late for looking around. The outfits all were full. If he could have cooked—but he couldn't. Not for a bunch of plain-spoken cowmen. Not without risking bodily harm. He'd told almost the truth about that. And then he landed with the Dee & Zee.

At any other time the Dee & Zee could not have hired him. He had heard things. But he had lost at last his desire to pick and choose. And he began to think, after he had started work there, that folks had been mistaken. He liked the place, and it seemed permanent. He even went back to the Dream and refurbished it a bit. And then he learned that the superintendent didn't like him. The superintendent, it appeared, could never bring himself to care much for any man whose scruples were too flourishing. That's what Blue Jeans had heard and almost begun to disbelieve. Everybody had heard it except the Dee & Zee syndicate owners themselves. But that did him small good. He doubted no longer, however. He quit. He resigned by request.

But when he thought to collect the little pay due him, he experienced difficulty. He made a desperate effort and crowded the issue perilously. When, however, in the face of superior numbers and their eagerness for him to insist, he realized that he would be in no condition to enjoy the money, even if he did succeed in collecting it, he did the thing of indubitable valor. He gave it up gracefully. A coward would have been ashamed to back down, and thus got himself thoroughly killed. He laughed. And moved his right hand further from his holster.

But this time he had waxed stubborn; he had refused to let his Dream grow dim.

And the Box-A people—three weeks later they could have used him. And would have. He knew it. A man had been badly hurt; so badly that he would never know anything any more. They

could have used him, only the superintendent had just passed that way and outstripped him. They were too busy, therefore, with sober work, too harmonious among themselves, to risk a firebrand.

"A firebrand? Him!"

He had tried to laugh again, but he knew that his laughter was hollow. It is hard to be blithe and all but broke. Nor had he pled this latter state to urge himself upon them. Anybody could draw that conclusion now, if he wanted to, just from the look of his clothes.

He'd tried Claiborne—town. Little jobs they had offered him there—menial! And that had made him rebellious.

Thus by well-defined stages, and hugging now his Dream, to the stud-poker game.

All that he possessed he'd sold and put it on this venture; all but his saddle and bridle and gun, and Girl o' Mine. He played stud-poker well; better than most men he knew; and that was no empty conceit, either. He just did. Some men's judgment was quicker, surer than others, that was all.

And he had played well last night. But he could not overcome with nerve what he had lacked in capital. Five cards and many dollars oft will beat a better hand. But his dollars had been few. So had he tested again a time-tried truth, and proved it. A man should not gamble at all; that is, not when he needs to win. For then he was sure to lose. That was why they called luck a lady.

Clink your money in your pocket and not care whether you won or lost, and she'd fair swarm upon you. She wouldn't *let* you be! Nothing was too good for you—you were a king! Two deuces and a lazy smile would bluff a brace of aces.

But just you let her guess that your straits were desperate. Just you let her guess that your last dollar was on the table! You couldn't catch a pair back to back in forty-seven years. She'd quit you flat!

That was why they called luck a lady. Just like a woman!

And he had lost less composedly than they had suspected from his face and comment. He had gone, then, still early, to bed to escape their torment. It was not often that they had found him so completely at their mercy, and they made the most of it.

And he'd risen and ridden out at dawn toward Reservoir. Reservoir would offer nothing; but it was on the road he meant to travel, and water was to be had there. He rode early because he did not choose that any of his pitiless opponents of the night before should surmise that the torn, worn jeans and old cracked boots and shirt with a rent in the elbow was not merely his working garb, worn informally because he had not wanted to waste time in changing and slicking up, but the only garb he owned.

If they had believed his decent outfit to be rolled in the blanket behind his saddle, let them. He'd not disillusion them. Then they'd not come around, embarrassing him and themselves as well, with awkward offers of a loan.

He rode at daybreak, and in the splendor of that desert dawn forgot for a time to be desolate. Girl o' Mine stepped smartly in the early cool. He had paid for her breakfast before he tried at poker. He forgot himself, and presently he raised a light-hearted carol to the shuffle, shuffle, shuffle of her hoofs.

"Daughters of Pleasure, one and all,
Of form and feature delicate,
Of bodies slim and bosoms small,
With feet and fingers white and straight,
Your eyes are bright, your grace is great,
To hold your lover's heart in thrall;
Use your red lips before too late,
Love ere love flies beyond recall."

He didn't know where he had learned that. Nor did he know that it was the lay of another vagabond, a dreamer light-hearted in adversity. But it was good—some folks might question its morality—but it was good—good philosophy. Swift and sudden, that was the better way. And sad, too, a little.

He sang it again and again.

But the sun rose higher and the sand grew hot. And the gorgeous sky was gorgeous no longer, but a glimmer of savage heat.

Little by little Girl o' Mine's head drooped. Dust settled white upon her, and she became streaked with sweat. And little by little the song was stilled.

He remembered then, abruptly. He was disconsolate. He had no call to sing. He had been a dreamer, too—but that was ages and ages ago, and long, long gone for him. He was only the vagabond.

He'd been nearly broke? Well, he was all broke now. And better that way! Half way was no good. It was better to be an out-and-out than a neither-one-nor-the-other. He had had some large plans, until the professor had started the run against him. He'd had a Vision, a vision of prosperity and himself a settled man. And maybe some day—some day, when he'd proved himself—when he'd found Her—

He wouldn't even tell himself how disappointed he was.

Noon came and they tarried a while. There was no hurry; they weren't going anywhere,—not anywhere in particular. Presently they started on again. And through the glare of afternoon they passed along the horizon, a despondent scarecrow upon a dejected horse.

CHAPTER II
RIDE HIM, COWBOY!

So to the tanks; but here at least was a little luck. The tub was full and over-flowing; he would not have to cause the agent to swear by swinging round the nozzle and wasting of his water. And something besides sagebrush and sand to look at, too. For upon the tracks stood a train; a train packed very full with men whose faces showed white at the windows,—indoor men, Eastern men,—and a private car at the end of the string.

All men! Well, that would be the special train, come through from the other coast; the prize-fight special,—and the last section, at that. There was no man up the tracks with a red flag to guard against a pile-up. And they also looked bored; they must have been standing there quite a while. And hot. So, you see, his plight was not so bad! He didn't have to breathe that air and sit in a slippery red-plush seat. Not much!

He went to the drip, serenely careless of the thousand eyes upon him; he drank and clicked to Girl o' Mine, his mare. She pricked up her ears and approached a step or two; she tossed her head and whinnied; she was afraid of the drip and spatter of the overflow.

He drank again.

"See," he said, "it'll not hurt you. Plain water—that's all—awful plain! Sure, you're unstrung—but that's nothing. So am I. We both been under a strain. But I'm not asking you to do anything I'll not do myself. See, I'm drinking it—just plain water! There—what'd I tell you? See!"

The mare had edged nearer, eagerly, while he talked. She was very thirsty, though fearful. And at length his voice reassured her; she thrust her velvet nostrils into the tub.

Then he seated himself upon a foundation timber of the tank and rolled a cigarette. His toilet could wait. He wasn't going to ride into Reservoir and advertise his straits,—not to a lot of half-breeds and Mexicans and worse. He could wait; years and years of time were before him. For, vindictively, he wasn't going to provide a spectacle for those eyes at the windows to watch either; eyes hungry to look upon anything—anything—if only it wasn't empty desert. Not even the spectacle of a scarecrow making himself neat and clean,—not him! Let 'em suffer and be bored. He was bored himself!

He smoked and meditated, and presently a shadow fell athwart his lap. Another horseman was arriving, and he was creating not mild interest but a veritable stir at the windows. For he was different, oh-so-different! He drew the eye with his magnificence. His chaps were new and so was his shirt and his hat had cost thirty dollars. And Blue Jeans could almost hear them exclaiming as they crowded to the panes.

This was the real thing! You bet! No fringy-panted scarecrow upon a horse too good for him—stolen probably at that. Well, I guess not! This was a bit of the real West—the old West. Look at them spurs. Silver—solid! A regular cowboy!

And the newcomer had been quick to sense this too. He was on his way out from Reservoir, traveling north. Of course he would be traveling north—the Dee & Zee lay in that quarter—and this magnificence was the Dee & Zee superintendent. More than that, his horse was fresh up from the stable, and the stable hands were not accustomed to sending a horse out thirsty into the desert, but he did not now pause to consider this. He felt the eye of that whole train upon him, its approval, its admiration, and his importance grew. He couldn't help it; he played up to his audience. Some men invariably will, with the eye of the world upon them. They're made that way.

Just for an instant the sight of that familiar figure, quiet there before him, had given him an unpleasant start. The little matter of unpaid back wages had crowded to mind and simultaneously a realization that in numbers he was no longer superior, and therefore not equal in other essentials. Just for an instant—and then the fact of the train reassured him. Blue Jeans, hardy though he undoubtedly

was and in desperate need of cash, would scarcely venture force so publicly. It would look to be nothing but rankest hold-up and robbery. And when Blue Jeans, having out-thought him and arrived already at the same depressing conclusion, let his regret show in his face, the superintendent swelled some more. It appeared quite safe.

"Back that horse away from that bucket," he directed. It was the voice of authority commanding the urchin on the curb; of seasoned seniority chiding the heedlessness of the stripling of twenty-two.

"Can't you see that my beast wants water?" Blue Jeans was deeply offended. Such opulence in anyone at such a moment would have seemed a needless taunt; that chance had selected the superintendent to flaunt it was surplusage of insult. Yet he could not even resent the superintendent's gesture, wide-flung and arrogant to all beholders. Again the superintendent looked to have the right of it. He clicked to Girl o' Mine and she came to him, out of the way, like an obedient puppy.

And then began the performance for the benefit of the car windows, and which the car windows enjoyed. This picturesque son of the real West, this colorful figure in new chaps and new shirt and thirty dollar hat, tried to ride his horse up to the tub. And the horse would not go. In the first place the horse was not thirsty; in the second place, like Girl o' Mine, he was exceedingly afraid. Yet in the beginning, when the Dee & Zee superintendent scratched him with the solid silver spurs by way of comforting him, he merely rose on his hind legs, but no nearer the tank.

At any other time the superintendent, who was not an unusual fool, would have done the wiser thing; he would have dismounted and led his animal. But now, even though he might have bested his own vanity in spite of the car windows, Blue Jeans would not permit it. Blue Jeans had been quick to see where this might lead and spoke with malicious calculation.

"I thought your horse wanted water?" he drawled, as the superintendent paused to consider his course. "Pshaw! He ain't so plumb crazy for it!"

That settled it. It grew instantly furious and cruel. The superintendent no longer merely scratched with the rowels; he drove them home. And the roan horse plunged and bucked and staggered.

It was hot and the sawing bit raised quickly a white slaver. The roan wasn't a bad horse at heart; he was frightened at something he couldn't understand. He tried to break and run. But at his bad heart the superintendent wasn't even a man, and no damned bronco was going to have his way with him. He rounded him back and sent him full at that tinkling, dreadful drip once more. So the roan fought on, till tumult rose within the cars.

This was real! This was regular! One wiser than the rest—one who thought himself schooled in the vernacular, because he had once witnessed a Frontier Week celebration at Cheyenne—seized upon this opportunity to air his vocabulary.

The sashes had been left closed to exclude sand and cinders. He tugged one open now and sent forth his voice.

"Hi yi yi-i-p," he shouted. "Ride him, cowboy!"

And the superintendent rode him! Rode him till the slaver turned red and the spurs were a torture to the raw torn flanks. Rode him till his eyes rolled white and crazed. For the superintendent had gone mad too, mad with vain rage. He laid his rope across the roan's dripping withers; it did not help; it was inadequate. With staring eyes he cast about for a more efficient weapon. Then he drew his gun from its holster.

"You won't, eh, you—?" he panted, foaming a little himself. "You won't, eh? Try that! Maybe that'll persuade you!" And holding the long blue sixshooter by its barrel, he struck the roan heavily with the butt just behind the eyes. Immediately the roan stood stock-still and slowly closed his eyes. A less strong-hearted horse would have sunk to the ground. But the superintendent was blind now to the pass to which he had brought his mount.

"Maybe that'll persuade you! Maybe that—" He mouthed the words thickly and would have struck again.

But just then Blue Jeans struck him.

Blue Jeans took his gun away from him. How weak is that poor word! Took? It would not have been so simple a recital had not the weapon been reversed in the superintendent's hand for the hazing of the roan. The train would have been treated otherwise to a bit of the real West indeed, for the superintendent was beyond all sane thought or discretion. Blue Jeans took his gun away from him. As the superintendent would have thrust it into his face to fire he struck the out-stretched wrist with the edge of his stiffened hand, and it fell to the ground.

Then Blue Jeans took the superintendent from the saddle.

And now the train rocked and roared. This was not novelty, but it was good. This was what they had come West to see, but better—better! Better fifty times over than the tame affair which the world's championship heavy-weight bout at Denver had turned out to be. This was a fight. You said it—a fight!

The superintendent fought with wasteful fury; Blue Jeans with a cold hatred of his cruelty—a cold and bitter hatred of his opulence. The superintendent struck him once with a wild, wide swing. Once—only once. For he hugged to the superintendent after that and those wild swings went past. And he jabbed! And jabbed! And jabbed!

After a while the foeman would have clinched, but Blue Jeans prevented that. That would not do; the superintendent was heavy and he was slight. So from a position always before his own face his fists battered the other man's features blank. And he tore that new shirt, and trampled on the thirty dollar hat; and the chaps grew old and dingy from constant falling and rising.

Later the superintendent rose less readily; later still he did not rise at all. Then Blue Jeans watered his horse for him and led it where he lay. With a heave he tossed the once pretty puncher into the saddle,—he was pretty no longer. He returned his gun. But he broke that weapon and extracted the shells before he gave it back.

"There it is," he told the beaten man, and instantly a light leaped to the half-closed eyes.

Blue Jeans read it.

"Oh, it ain't loaded. See!" And he flung afar the handful of cartridges.

"It ain't loaded, and don't you load it, either. Don't you try to load it, till you're out of sight. Don't you even think to try to load it. If you do—if you do—"

He went back to his seat on the timber.

And the train rocked no more. It became instead loquacious.

"Didn't I tell you?" it demanded. "Didn't I say so, the minute I spotted that moving-picture scenery! You didn't think real cowboys dolled up like that, did you? You did? My Gawd! But that other bird—look at him! Sure—smoking his cigarette as if nothing had happened. Bet he rolls 'em with one hand! Bet he rolls 'em with one hand, going at a gallop! And dressed for business all the while! Gentlemen, you're looking at a cowboy!"

And the wise one—the one who had been in Cheyenne during Frontier Week—capped it all, nonchalantly. He'd never hoped to have such a happy chance to display his vocabulary.

"One bad hombre," he declared. "One bad hombre!"

Oh, but they were loquacious! They forgot the heat and delay; they would have risen to a man and gone out to him who sat, back toward them, on the timber base of the tank, only they were afraid that the train might pull out without them. So they had to be content with watching him while they continued to tell each other what good offhand judges of human nature they were.

Not so, however, in the private car at the end of the row of coaches. No noise had come from its occupants during even the worst, or the best, of it. First tense attention and then when it was over and the superintendent had ridden away, three pairs of eyes which, turned upon each other, were startled, questioning.

One of the men was tall and fat, and prosperous to the casual eye, as he most surely must have been offensive to the fastidious. One of them was short and fat, with pointed ears that made him look

quite fox-faced. And the other was a reporter. From his appearance one would have said I hope, and truly, that only pursuit of his calling could have brought him in such company.

These three, then, sat for a time and looked eloquently at each other. They were not loquacious about it, not verbally; and finally the tall fat one heaved himself from his seat.

"I've got a hunch," he declared, "and God never forgives a man who doesn't ride one." Certainly he was a strange person to be mentioning God so complacently.

"Pull the bell cord if that fool engineer tries to start without me." And he left the car.

So presently another shadow fell athwart Blue Jeans' lap. He did not bother to raise his head this time, however; he was nursing a bruised hand and craved solitude. The fat man stood and looked down at him until he realized that the other was likely never to look up, unless he did something besides impose his plainly unwelcome presence upon him. Therefore he cleared his throat—"hm-m-m."

"Don't hm-m-m me," snarled Blue Jeans promptly. "And get out of my light."

In his own way the huge man was a genius, for surely nothing else could have accomplished it.

"Warm, isn't it?" he commented; and at that inanity Blue Jeans raised his head.

The huge man had his first fair view of the other's fine hard youth; and while he observed the self-possessed eyes and long nose, acquisitive and courageous, Blue Jeans devoted the interval to a counter-scrutiny. He scanned the newcomer from head to foot, silk hose and hair-line suit and expensive panama. The rings upon those pudgy fingers held longest his wandering eye, the blue-white fortune in the burnt-orange cravat. But all this seemed to kindle no approval.

"Prosperous!" he muttered bitterly. "Prosperous! And yet I don't hate you like I did that superintendent. Just as much maybe, but not just the same.… Go away!"

But the huge man smiled and stood his ground until finally Blue Jeans slanted his head at him, wickedly, and fell to talking again.

"I could pluck that stone from out your tie *that* easy!" And his voice held no assurance that he would not act upon his words. "Just as easy! Yes, and I could beat you over the head with my gun—oh, sure I've got one!—just like he beat that roan horse, and strip your pockets and be clean away before one of those"—he nodded over his shoulder at the train—"could think to call for help. And thinking to call for help would come quicker to them than thinking to help without calling. And Girl o' Mine would carry me clear in five minutes."

He paused remorselessly, as if to let this sink in, but out of the silence, "I don't scare easily," the huge man said.

"Pshaw! I'm not telling you to try to scare you," Blue Jeans scoffed. "I'm telling myself how simple it could be—and wondering why I don't do it!"

"I can tell you that," answered the Easterner. "Because you're honest."

But that was not subtle, and he realized the flattery had been ill-chosen, even before Blue Jeans flared, which was almost instantaneously.

"Don't you tell me I'm honest! Don't you dare even hint I am! It's honesty brought me here."

The huge man laughed gently. He'd made one mistake; few could accuse him of repeating in stupidity. He took accurate stock of the symptoms; set his sights upon what he surmised must be the bull's-eye of Blue Jeans' discontent; waited a nicely balanced moment, and fired.

"How," he inquired in a tone both mild and unsensational, "how would you like to earn two hundred dollars?"

But the shot did not take effect as he had expected it to. Instead of snapping back Blue Jeans' curly head sank a little lower. Though his inward start at the query had been great his outward display of emotion was scarcely visible. For perceiving that this was a deliberate attempt to arouse his interest, he dissembled it and exhibited no interest at all.

"I balk at murder," he replied with careful indifference and no flicker of jocularity. "And it would have to be that, to earn that much money. Two hundred dollars is a fortune; so's one; so's fifty. But I'm kind of particular that way—though the offer is liberal—it is so! I admit that, but I—"

He would have gone on rambling had not the other stopped him.

"Sure, it's a nice bunch of coin." And then, daring to be facetious himself, though adhering still to his admirable and just-formed plan of not disclosing too much at once:

"You'd not have to kill him, you know. Half of what you did to your friend on the roan horse would be plenty and to spare."

"He was no friend of mine," Blue Jeans corrected coldly. "We'd just barely begun to get acquainted."

"Lucky for him!" Indeed, despite his personality, the huge man had a lively wit.

"A life-long friendship would have proved fatal!"

It made Blue Jeans' eyes twinkle though it warmed them not at all. He didn't like the fat man and he wasn't going to try. But when the latter showed no readiness to go back to the important topic which he had himself introduced, he found anxiety overcoming his resolution to remain unconcerned.

"You were speaking intimately of two hundred dollars," he drew it back tentatively.

And then the huge man knew that it was best to be precise.

"For eighteen minutes' work," he explained. "Six rounds with young Condit, at Estabrook, on the tenth."

"Me!" Blue Jeans blurted his surprise, it was so far from the sort of proposition he had been prepared to hear. In spite of his habiliments the Easterner was no new type to him, and he had been ready to dismiss him and his project, whenever it should develop, with a satisfying frankness which could not have been admitted here. But this tripped him,—stripped him momentarily of his self-possession.

"Me!" he deprecated. "Pshaw! I'm no box-fighter! I don't box!"

"Sure you don't," the huge man agreed, eagerly and instantly. "That's what I saw as I watched you from the window, arguing with your fr—your acquaintance. The whole world is full of box-fighters who box. You'll look years and years, however, before you'll find one who will fight."

Blue Jeans had learned to make his decisions quickly, and to abide later by their results without complaint. Swift and sudden, that was the better way. But here was no step to be taken ill-considered. He wasn't sick of cowpunching; he hadn't had half enough of it; he'd never have enough. But he was sick of punching other men's cattle. And he'd been maturing lately, getting full-grown ideas into his head. There wasn't any future for him, or for any man, hellin' around the country. But if a man was to settle down,—that was the Dream!

And he knew the place,—back of Big Thumb Butte. Good pasture; not too big, but enough for any bunch he was ever likely to own. Some fence; some buildings; both in a sad state but reclaimable by a handy man. And water! The finest water in all the country, and it never failed. And cheap! Cheap if one kept one's mind on relative values and off one's own financial troubles; cheap if one didn't pause to recollect that six bits, at the moment, would have been a prohibitive price.

He'd got his eye on that place lately; that's why he had tried so hard with the Dee & Zee; that's why he had been over-anxious at poker. He'd even figured how, by being saving and eating nothing to speak of and drinking nothing at all, he could save up half the price in about twenty years. But he'd be old in twenty years, past forty, and tottering and toothless without doubt. Unless Opportunity —*was* this Opportunity?

He didn't like that game—not much—not at all! But, then, he didn't know much about it; he could judge only by externals, by the clique who made it their profession. And he'd liked none of them any better than he did this huge Easterner standing before him, waiting for an answer.

But if this was Opportunity—he didn't have to mix—he could herd by himself, as he had at the Dee & Zee. And it was the best water in the county, and somebody, pretty soon, was going to see the possibilities in that valley and snap it up. And then where'd he be? He wanted to become a solid citizen; he wanted to amount to something *now*.

He raised a chill, gray-green eye.

"You can say on," he gave leave calmly.

But the huge man drew a slip of cardboard from his pocket instead, and wrote upon it. It seemed to be one of a stock for such emergencies, for it bore no engraving.

"If you'll carry this to Harry Larrabie, he'll understand. He'll give you what you need and send you against Condit Saturday night. Short notice for you, I know, but you look to be in shape." He glanced at the lean length.

"One hundred and twenty-eight?"

"Thirty-two," said Blue Jeans, and somehow resentfully.

"Fine—fine! Well?"

Blue Jeans had learned to make decisions with suddenness. He gave this one, however, a full five seconds' consideration. Then he reached out and possessed himself of the card.

"Scratch Blake and send bearer against Condit Saturday. If he looks as good to you as he has to me, keep him busy. Some day I may have employment for him myself."

It was signed with the single letter D.

"There are no strings to it, after Condit?" Blue Jeans asked finally.

"None—if you want to quit. None."

"Then what is there in it for you?"

Blue Jeans had been schooled to be skeptical concerning any act masking as purely philanthropic. But the huge man wisely disclaimed such motives.

"Maybe you won't want to quit,—not right away." He had taken accurate account of the symptoms. Everybody wanted money, but this man's desire, he discerned, though great, was curbed and disciplined. It was not feverish, as if ambitious merely of a few days of debauch in town. It was controlled, and fixed and steady.

"You'll find other two hundreds waiting," said he.

"That's your gamble?"

"That's my gamble."

Again the card.

"There's no sum mentioned here."

Keenly the huge man's regard played over him. A scarecrow without question,—poverty had had shabby sport with him,—but honest. You couldn't mistake it. The large man's flattery had been ill-chosen, yet well-founded. He drew two one hundred dollar bills from a folder and handed them to Blue Jeans.

"That'll let you buy some clothes, too," he said, and largely. And this largeness was his second bad mistake.

Blue Jeans had risen, and as they stood side by side, one thing was now strangely emphasized. Travel-soiled as he was, and tattered and marked with signs of conflict, Blue Jeans was the cleaner of the two, the more wholesome, and immaculate. For what *he* was stood out upon the huge man in every fold of flesh.

And Blue Jeans was at no pains to hide his distaste. He was no prude—no sissy—but somewhere every man had to draw the line. And every man should draw it before the state of his soul did such things to lips and eyes. Therefore, and because of the other's condescending largeness, his reply was cold.

"I'd better," he said, without thanks. "When a man goes into a doubtful business he'd ought at least to dress respectable. He owes it to himself to look his best."

The level dislike in the other's tone disconcerted the huge man not at all. He was wise enough to drop it there. But it set him thinking as he retraced his way to the private car.

The fox-faced man and the reporter who was monosyllabic were waiting for his return.

"How much?" This from Fox-face, avidly. He had seen money change hands.

"Two hundred. He was stony!"

"He did look hungry." This from the reporter, ruminatingly.

"I sent him on to Larrabie."

"Bet you a hundred that Larrabie never sees him!"

"I'll take that," said the reporter.

But Fox-face, perceiving better ones, changed the terms of his proffered wager.

"Bet you a hundred you never hear from him, even if he does meet Condit." He hurled this at the huge man, disdaining the reporter. "Bet you you've not heard from him in three years—in five!"

"There's too many sure things in this world," opined the huge man, calm under Fox-face's challenge with something like contempt, "to bother with a gamble." He squinted a moment in thought.

"But when we pull into Shell you'd better wire Larrabie to be discreet. If he wants to know who D. is, better advise Larrabie to call me 'Denver'—'Denver' Smith will do. Just a disinterested party."

And at that Fox-face was instantly, visibly consumed with curiosity. The reporter looked almost as though he understood.

"He might not approve of me," he chose to be downright, and enlighten Fox-face at the same time. "He doesn't now, as it is." And then he laughed softly, as if at himself.

"It's funny, too. I suppose he's like all of them, drunk every pay-day while his money holds out, and a familiar face at every brothel. And yet from the way he looked at me—" He shook his head, not in anger but amiable meditation. "It's funny," he repeated, and let it go at that.

So it remained a conundrum to Fox-face. The reporter, however, was now sure that he had understood. He was sorry that he had not gone out to speak to Blue Jeans himself. And now the fat man was speaking again.

"He'll go to Estabrook, and he'll earn his two hundred. No room for doubt. But beyond that—" he shook his head. He could talk frankly to the reporter, for he never talked for publication.

"He looked honest—but it was a bad hunch, I'm afraid. I'm not so certain but what he would prove to be too honest, for any practical purpose, if he ever did come through."

"You've seen the last of him," stated Fox-face omnisciently.

But they hadn't. Blue Jeans was invisible for a while, then he reappeared, and the water from the tank overflow had done much for man and beast. He looked almost neat, and very shining and clean. And the huge man, the reporter observed, must have been mistaken about the brothels. Blue Jeans was no prude—no sissy—but a man had to draw the line somewhere. Wherefore his lips did not puff and sag, his eyeballs were not mottled.

His neckerchief had been newly knotted, with a flourish; his discouraged boots wiped free of dust. And the mare, Girl o' Mine, had also found refreshment. She drooped no longer; she even arched her neck and buck-jumped a little, when he put his weight in the stirrup.

"You, too," he chided her, though gravely, for he was not pleased, not happy in the course to which he had committed himself. "You, too," he chided. "Oh, you brazen huzzy! There's nothing like it—nothing in all the world like ready cash to make a female frivolous!"

He turned her across the tracks.

"We'll not linger long in Reservoir," he spoke again aloud, and the mare threw back one ear to listen. "Just long enough to eat and sleep, and then we'll start overland to Estabrook. That's sensible! That's better than squandering money on a railroad ticket."

Certainly the prospect to which he was bound irked his pride; hurt him definitely in his self-respect. But with this frugal reflection his spirits rose a little. He'd not have to be like them; he'd not mix with that clique; he'd herd alone. And save his money! That was it. There was the Dream again!

His spirits rose. With the whole train watching him he rode from sight without even putting up a hand in farewell to those at the private car windows. And at that, without realizing it, Fox-face —for that—began hating him.

Once across the tracks Blue Jeans clicked to Girl o' Mine. She swung to a canter.

"Trip along, honey," he bade her, his serenity almost restored. "Trip along, and watch your step. Remember you're bearing a capitalist!"

CHAPTER III
LITTLE-TWEED-SUIT

Little-Tweed-Suit was being bothered by a toad—a toad-person with a prominent thick watch chain and a loose smirk. She had been bothered by him ever since dinner—dinner at night at the Cactus House, which was inclined to be Eastern and effete in its apings—but his persecutions there had been confined to lurking, contrived meetings, and long glances which touched her noisomely.

Once she had swept the hotel office with a desperate glance, trying to select a face to which she might appeal. There wasn't one. Estabrook was filling with its usual week-end scum; crafty faces, hard faces, faces shallowly good-natured, and therefore doubly treacherous. Even the pimply clerk at the desk, discerning her unescorted state, had changed subtly in voice and manner.

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"Lonesome?"

She had not answered him. But here on the railway platform, where she had fled to catch the East-bound, nine o'clock express, and where the toad unhurriedly had followed her; here where she had thought to fear him less she found she feared him more.

To know herself that such a thing had looked upon her as he had looked was loathsome; to have others see him accost her and leer over their interpretations of the insult seemed more than she could bear. And the platform and hot, foul waiting-room, common to both men and women, were both as conspicuous as the hotel had been; both peopled with the same side-long glances.

So she had fled again from the lighted portion of the platform this time to the darker, far more dangerous end, which was out of the puddle of illumination. And now he was coming toward her less unhurriedly, his canine teeth showing wolfishly through a grin. This last move of hers he believed he understood; he even valued it. A little coquetry lent zest to the game. And she *had* led him a pretty chase—but now… he was very sure of himself…

How Little-Tweed-Suit—a girl like Tweed-Suit—came there upon the station platform of Estabrook is a long story; and it is not entirely hers or ours. Therefore only the briefest part, for this tale's sake, shall be set down here.

It concerns a white house on a hill, and a man who failed so bleakly that few could remember, even directly after his funeral, how shining his successes had been. For his brilliance could not be saved in ink or perpetuated with paint or brush. To be sure, his friends after his death now and then found themselves recalling something particularly keen, something analytical and searching as a probe, which he had voiced on this occasion or that.

"I remember how Manners used to say," they would begin; and then quote as accurately as it were possible. But directly, when they discovered how happily these epigrams were received by those who had not heard them, they acquired a singular habit; they began to leave out Manners' name and appropriate the applause to themselves. Thus they robbed the dead man safely, nor found the practice ghoulish. One or two thereby even acquired permanent fame as an after-dinner wit.

Even his enemies, implacable, political enemies, who had done the most to destroy him, more than the temperament which he himself believed to be a blight, were a little more honest than that. They had fought him according to their own rules, which debarred nothing, with every foul trick they knew. If there was a weak spot in a man's record, go after it; if he had been a weakling, temporarily a fool, seek it out. There were human bloodhounds always sniffing to come upon such a scent. Hunt it down; find the woman.

As a matter of fact, there had not been a woman, after all. That had been a mistake. A bad mistake, for it had killed his wife. But a lucky mistake for them! For it had delivered into their hands the secret of an actual and even more vulnerable place to attack.

Before his wife's death he had been proud enough to hide it, and fight it out when the struggle was on, within the four walls of his home. But afterward he seemed to cease to care.

Shameless! That was the pass to which they said he had come, in the very worthy, very tight-traditioned and not very large town in which the white house stood. And the day he rose drunk in Assembly, white, haggard drunk, they read his doom aloud. Dead politically the papers said. Fools! Dead in hopes they should have written; dead in his debonair heart; dead sick of fighting a losing fight. And dying.

This last, the sudden death of his body, however, took them by surprise. They had not been observant. Yet on that bright day when quite as many of his political enemies as friends rode behind him, the latter were rather quick and proud to notice this. In suitably hushed voices they remarked that it proved their broad-mindedness as a community.

But whenever anything particularly crooked was being crammed through thereafter at the State Capitol, his name was sure to come up.

"It's a good thing Charlie isn't here," they'd chuckle. "We couldn't fool him this easy; he'd spot it; he'd tear us to pieces with his tongue."

His enemies were more honest; they remembered and appreciated him as an antagonist.

The others, save for the epigrammatic quotations already mentioned, were more immediately concerned with his daughter. She had been proud of her father—proud! She had never belittled him with hidden pity, not even on that night when she surprised him, all in evening black and white, immaculate and wasted, before a mirror which hung over the buffet in the dining-room. He was holding a goblet in an uplifted hand, the skin cruelly taut, though he neither swayed nor stammered.

"Your damnation, my friend," she heard him say. "Your deep damnation."

And he drank it to his reflection.

The friends were immediately concerned with the daughter. And her pride! They didn't say so, not aloud, but they thought to see it break now. And the day that Ostermoor—Young Ostermoor was his title, though his given name was Howard Davenport—broke his never announced and merely tacitly accepted engagement to her they knew great joy. But she robbed them of half their triumph. In public she never dropped her chin. And only Ostermoor and she knew the shame of that private conversation by which they were unplighted.

"You must see my predicament." So spoke Ostermoor. "I'm dependent on the old man. If he cuts me off, and he says he will if—"

Even callow young Ostermoor, hair slick and scented, a thick-limbed, small-town Brummel confident in his best-clothes smartness, had not had quite the courage to tell her to her uplifted, flushed face what his father had shouted:—That he'd have no blood of his crossed with hers; that it was dangerous blood—tainted—wild.

"He says," he finished lamely instead, "it's better to wait."

Yet how easily she read his lameness, and estimated his father's words. Dangerous blood—tainted? Ostermoor had feared her tongue; the women in his household talked shrilly and long upon far less provocation. But she only sat and seemed to smile.

"I see," was all she said.

And while she smiled, her cheeks hot, his eyes had crept over her. Her slenderness was rounded, her slimness soft and full. A girl, it came upon him, for whom a man's arms might still yearn in spite of himself.

"This—this needn't mean any real break between us," he hoped, with what he intended as a worldly careless air. He'd never have dared that a week earlier; he had always been too conscious until that moment of a certain unapproachability, a transcendent daintiness, audacious and the reverse

from fragile, which nevertheless had kept him at arms' length. But with his father's words in his ears —dangerous!—tainted!—he managed it easily.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.