MAX BRAND

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Содержание

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Chapter One
A Horse in Need

He came into the town as a solid, swiftly moving dust cloud. The wind from behind had kept the dust moving forward at a pace just equal to the gallop of his horse. Not until he had brought his mount to a halt in front of the hotel and swung down to the ground did either he or his horse become distinctly visible. Then it was seen that the animal was in the last stages of exhaustion, with dull eyes and hanging head and forelegs braced widely apart, while the sweat dripped steadily from his flanks into the white dust on the street. Plainly he had been pushed to the last limit of his strength.

The rider was almost as far spent as his mount, for he went up the steps of the hotel with his shoulders sagging with weariness, a wide-shouldered, gaunt-ribbed man. Thick layers of dust had turned his red kerchief and his blue shirt to a common gray. Dust, too, made a mask of his face, and through that mask the eyes peered out, surrounded by pink skin. Even at its best the long, solemn face could never have been called handsome. But, on this

particular day, he seemed a haunted man, or one fleeing from an inescapable danger.

The two loungers at the door of the hotel instinctively stepped aside and made room for him to pass, but apparently he had no desire to enter the building. Suddenly he became doubly imposing, as he stood on the veranda and stared up and down at the idlers. Certainly his throat must be thick and hot with dust, but an overmastering purpose made him oblivious of thirst.

"Gents," he said huskily, while a gust of wind fanned a cloud of dust from his clothes, "is there anybody in this town can gimme a hoss to get to Stillwater, inside three hours' riding?"

He waited a moment, his hungry eyes traveling eagerly from face to face. Naturally the oldest man spoke first, since this was a matter of life and death.

"Any hoss in town can get you there in that time, if you know the short way across the mountain."

"How do you take it? That's the way for me."

But the old fellow shook his head and smiled in pity. "Not if you ain't rode it before. I used to go that way when I was a kid, but nowadays nobody rides that way except Doone. That trail is as tricky as the ways of a coyote; you'd sure get lost without a guide."

The stranger turned and followed the gesture of the speaker. The mountain rose from the very verge of the town, a ragged mass of sand and rock, with miserable sagebrush clinging here and there, as dull and uninteresting as the dust itself. Then he

lowered the hand from beneath which he had peered and faced about with a sigh. "I guess it ain't much good trying that way. But I got to get to Stillwater inside of three hours."

"They's one hoss in town can get you there," said the old man. "But you can't get that hoss today."

The stranger groaned. "Then I'll make another hoss stretch out and do."

"Can't be done. Doone's hoss is a marvel. Nothing else about here can touch him, and he's the only one that can make the trip around the mountain, inside of three hours. You'd kill another hoss trying to do it, what with your weight."

The stranger groaned again and struck his knuckles against his forehead. "But why can't I get the hoss? Is Doone out of town with it?"

"The hoss ain't out of town, but Doone is."

The traveler clenched his fists. This delay and waste of priceless time was maddening him. "Gents," he called desperately, "I got to get to Martindale today. It's more than life or death to me. Where's Doone's hoss?"

"Right across the road," said the old man who had spoken first. "Over yonder in the corral—the bay."

The traveler turned and saw, beyond the road, a beautiful mare, not very tall, but a mare whose every inch of her fifteen three proclaimed strength and speed. At that moment she raised her head and looked across to him, and the heart of the rider jumped into his throat. The very sight of her was an omen of

victory, and he made a long stride in her direction, but two men came before him. The old fellow jumped from the chair and tapped his arm.

"You ain't going to take the bay without getting leave from Doone?"

"Gents, I got to," said the stranger. "Listen! My name's Gregg, Bill Gregg. Up in my country they know I'm straight; down here you ain't heard of me. I ain't going to keep that hoss, and I'll pay a hundred dollars for the use of her for one day. I'll bring or send her back safe and sound, tomorrow. Here's the money. One of you gents, that's a friend of Doone, take it for him."

Not a hand was stretched out; every head shook in negation.

"I'm too fond of the little life that's left to me," said the old fellow. "I won't rent out that hoss for him. Why, he loves that mare like she was his sister. He'd fight like a flash rather than see another man ride her."

But Bill Gregg had his eyes on the bay, and the sight of her was stealing his reason. He knew, as well as he knew that he was a man, that, once in the saddle on her, he would be sure to win. Nothing could stop him. And straight through the restraining circle he broke with a groan of anxiety.

Only the old man who had been the spokesman called after him: "Gregg, don't be a fool. Maybe you don't recognize the name of Doone, but the whole name is Ronicky Doone. Does that mean anything to you?"

Into the back of Gregg's mind came several faint memories,

but they were obscure and uncertain. "Blast your Ronicky Doone!" he replied. "I got to have that hoss, and, if none of you'll take money for her rent, I'll take her free and pay her rent when I come through this way tomorrow, maybe. S'long!"

While he spoke he had been undoing the cinches of his own horse. Now he whipped the saddle and bridle off, shouted to the hotel keeper brief instructions for the care of the weary animal and ran across the road with the saddle on his arm.

In the corral he had no difficulty with the mare. She came straight to him in spite of all the flopping trappings. With prickly ears and eyes lighted with kindly curiosity she looked the dusty fellow over.

He slipped the bridle over her head. When he swung the saddle over her back she merely turned her head and carelessly watched it fall. And when he drew up the cinches hard, she only stamped in mock anger. The moment he was in the saddle she tossed her head eagerly, ready to be off.

He looked across the street to the veranda of the hotel, as he passed through the gate of the corral. The men were standing in a long and awe-stricken line, their eyes wide, their mouths agape. Whoever Ronicky Doone might be, he was certainly a man who had won the respect of this town. The men on the veranda looked at Bill Gregg as though he were already a ghost. He waved his hand defiantly at them and the mare, at a word from him, sprang into a long-striding gallop that whirled them rapidly down the street and out of the village.

The bay mare carried him with amazing speed over the ground. They rounded the base of the big mountain, and, glancing up at the ragged canyons which chopped the face of the peak, he was glad that he had not attempted that short cut. If Ronicky Doone could make that trail he was a skillful horseman.

Bill Gregg swung up over the left shoulder of the mountain and found himself looking down on the wide plain which held Stillwater. The air was crystal-clear and dry; the shoulder of the mountain was high above it; Gregg saw a breathless stretch of the cattle country at one sweep of his eyes.

Stillwater was still a long way off, and far away across the plain he saw a tiny moving dot that grew slowly. It was the train heading for Stillwater, and that train he must beat to the station. For a moment his heart stood still; then he saw that the train was distant indeed, and, by the slightest use of the mare's speed, he would be able to reach the town, two or three minutes ahead of it.

But, just as he was beginning to exult in the victory, after all the hard riding of the past three days, the mare tossed up her head and shortened her stride. The heart of Gregg stopped, and he went cold. It was not only the fear that his journey might be ruined, but the fear that something had happened to this magnificent creature beneath him. He swung to the side in the saddle and watched her gallop. Certain she went laboring, very much as though she were trying to run against a mighty pull on the reins.

He looked at her head. It was thrown high, with pricking ears.

Perhaps she was frightened by some foolish thing near the road. He touched her with the spurs, and she increased her pace to the old length and ease of stride; but, just as he had begun to be reassured, her step shortened and fell to laboring again, and this time she threw her head higher than before. It was amazing to Bill Gregg; and then it seemed to him that he heard a faint, far whistling, floating down from high above his head.

Again that thin, long-drawn sound, and this time, glancing over his right shoulder, he saw a horseman plunging down the slope of the mountain. He knew instantly that it was Ronicky Doone. The man had come to recapture his horse and had taken the short cut across the mountain to come up with her. Just by a fraction of a minute Doone would be too late, for, by the time he came down onto the trail, the bay would be well ahead, and certainly no horse lived in those mountains capable of overtaking her when she felt like running. Gregg touched her again with the spurs, but this time she reared straight up and, whirling to the side, faced steadily toward her onrushing master.

Chapter Two
Friendly Enemies

Again and again Gregg spurred the bay cruelly.

She winced from the pain and snorted, but, apparently having not the slightest knowledge of bucking, she could only shake her head and send a ringing whinny of appeal up the slope of the mountain, toward the approaching rider.

In spite of the approaching danger, in spite of this delay which was ruining his chances of getting to Stillwater before the train, Bill Gregg watched in marvel and delight the horsemanship of the stranger. Ronicky Doone, if this were he, was certainly the prince of all wild riders.

Even as the mare stopped in answer to the signal of her owner, Ronicky Doone sent his mount over the edge of a veritable cliff, flung him back on his haunches and slid down the gravelly slope, careening from side to side. With a rush of pebbles about him and a dust cloud whirling after, Ronicky Doone broke out into the road ahead of the mare, and she whinnied softly again to greet him.

Bill Gregg found himself looking not into the savage face of such a gunfighter as he had been led to expect, but a handsome fellow, several years younger than he, a high-headed, straight-eyed, buoyant type. In his seat in the saddle, in the poise of his

head and the play of his hand on the reins Bill Gregg recognized a boundless nervous force. There was nothing ponderous about Ronicky Doone. Indeed he was not more than middle size, but, as he reined his horse in the middle of the road and looked with flashing eyes at Bill Gregg, he appeared very large indeed.

Gregg was used to fighting or paying his way, or doing both at the same time, as occasion offered. He decided that this was certainly an occasion for much money and few words.

"You're Doone, I guess," he said, "and you know that I've played a pretty bad trick on you, taking your hoss this way. But I wanted to pay for it, Doone, and I'll pay now. I've got to get to Stillwater before that train. Look at her! I haven't hurt her any. Her wind isn't touched. She's pretty wet, but sweat never hurt nothing on four feet, eh?"

"I dunno," returned Ronicky Doone. "I'd as soon run off with a man's wife as his hoss."

"Partner," said Bill Gregg desperately, "I have to get there!"

"Then get there on your own feet, not the feet of another gent's hoss."

Gregg controlled his rising anger. Beyond him the train was looming larger and larger in the plain, and Stillwater seemed more and more distant. He writhed in the saddle.

"I tell you I'll pay—I'll pay the whole value of the hoss, if you want."

He was about to say more when he saw the eyes of Ronicky Doone widen and fix.

"Look," said the other suddenly, "you've been cutting her up with the spurs!"

Gregg glanced down to the flank of the bay to discover that he had used the spurs more recklessly than he thought. A sharp rowel had picked through the skin, and, though it was probably only a slight wound indeed, it had brought a smear of red to the surface.

Ronicky Doone trembled with anger.

"Confound you!" he said furiously. "Any fool would have known that you didn't need a spur on that hoss! What part d'you come from where they teach you to kill a hoss when you ride it? Can you tell me that?"

"I'll tell you after I get to Stillwater."

"I'll see you hung before I see you in Stillwater."

"You've talked too much, Doone," Gregg said huskily.

"I've just begun," said Doone.

"Then take this and shut up," exclaimed Bill Gregg.

Ordinarily he was the straightest and the squarest man in the world in a fight. But a sudden anger had flared up in him. He had an impulse to kill; to get rid of this obstacle between him and everything he wanted most in life. Without more warning than that he snatched out his revolver and fired point blank at Ronicky Doone. Certainly all the approaches to a fight had been made, and Doone might have been expecting the attack. At any rate, as the gun shot out of Gregg's holster, the other swung himself sidewise in his own saddle and, snapping out his revolver, fired

from the hip.

That swerve to the side saved him, doubtless, from the shot of Gregg; his own bullet plowed cleanly through the thigh of the other rider. The whole leg of Gregg went numb, and he found himself slumping helplessly to one side. He dropped his gun, and he had to cling with both hands to lower himself out of the saddle. Now he sat in the dust of the trail and stared stupidly, not at his conqueror, but at the train that was flashing into the little town of Stillwater, just below them.

He hardly heeded Ronicky Doone, as the latter started forward with an oath, knelt beside him and examined the wound. "It's clean," Doone said, as he started ripping up his undershirt to make bandages. "I'll have you fixed so you can be gotten into Stillwater."

He began to work rapidly, twisting the clothes around Gregg's thigh, which he had first laid bare by some dexterous use of a hunting knife.

Then Gregg turned his eyes to those of Doone. The train had pulled out of Stillwater. The sound of the coughing of the engine, as it started up, came faintly to them after a moment.

"Of all the darned fools!" said the two men in one voice.

And then they grinned at each other. Certainly it was not the first fight or the first wound for either of them.

"I'm sorry," they began again, speaking together in chorus.

"Matter of fact," said Ronicky Doone, "that bay means a pile to me. When I seen the red on her side—"

"Can't be more than a chance prick."

"I know," said Ronicky, "but I didn't stop to think."

"And I should of give you fair warning before I went for the gat."

"Look here," said Ronicky, "you talk like a straight sort of a gent to me."

"And you thought I was a cross between a hoss thief and a gunfighter?"

"I dunno what I thought, except that I wanted the mare back. Stranger, I'm no end sorry this has happened. Maybe you'd lemme know why you was in such a hurry to get to Stillwater. If they's any trouble coming down the road behind you, maybe I can help take care of it for you." And he smiled coldly and significantly at Bill Gregg.

The latter eyed with some wonder the man who had just shot him down and was now offering to fight for his safety. "Nothing like that," said Bill. "I was going to Stillwater to meet a girl."

"As much of a rush as all that to see a girl?"

"On that train."

Ronicky Doone whistled softly. "And I messed it up! But why didn't you tell me what you wanted?"

"I didn't have a chance. Besides I could not waste time in talking and explaining to everybody along the road."

"Sure you couldn't, but the girl'll forgive you when she finds out what happened."

"No, she won't, because she'll never find out."

"Eh?"

"I don't know where she is."

"Riding all that way just to see a girl—"

"It's a long story, partner, and this leg is beginning to act up. Tell you the best thing would be for you to jump on your mare and jog into Stillwater for a buckboard and then come back and get me. What d'you say?"

Twenty minutes after Ronicky Doone had swung into the saddle and raced down the road, the buckboard arrived and the wounded man was helped on to a pile of blankets in the body of the wagon.

The shooting, of course, was explained by the inevitable gun accident. Ronicky Doone happened to be passing along that way and saw Bill Gregg looking over his revolver as he rode along. At that moment the gun exploded and—

The two men who had come out in the buckboard listened to the tale with expressionless faces. As a matter of fact they had already heard in Stillwater that no less a person than Ronicky Doone was on his way toward that village in pursuit of a man who had ridden off on the famous bay mare, Lou. But they accepted Ronicky's bland version of the accident with perfect calm and with many expressions of sympathy. They would have other things to say after they had deposited the wounded man in Stillwater.

The trip in was a painful one for Bill Gregg. For one thing the exhaustion of the long three days' trip was now causing a

wave of weariness to sweep over him. The numbness, which had come through the leg immediately after the shooting, was now replaced by a steady and continued aching. And more than all he was unnerved by the sense of utter failure, utter loss. Never in his life had he fought so bitterly and steadily for a thing, and yet he had lost at the very verge of success.

Chapter Three
At Stillwater

The true story was, of course, known almost at once, but, since Ronicky Doone swore that he would tackle the first man who accused him of having shot down Bill Gregg, the talk was confined to whispers. In the meantime Stillwater rejoiced in its possession of Ronicky Doone. Beyond one limited section of the mountain desert he was not as yet known, but he had one of those personalities which are called electric. Whatever he did seemed greater because he, Ronicky Doone, had done it.

Not that he had done a great many things as yet. But there was a peculiar feeling in the air that Ronicky Doone was capable of great and strange performances. Men older than he were willing to accept him as their leader; men younger than he idolized him.

Ronicky Doone, then, the admired of all beholders, is leaning in the doorway of Stillwater's second and best hotel. His bandanna today is a terrific yellow, set off with crimson half-moon and stars strewn liberally on it. His shirt is merely white, but it is given some significance by having nearly half of a red silk handkerchief falling out of the breast pocket. His sombrero is one of those works of art which Mexican families pass from father to son, only his was new and had not yet received that limp effect of age. And, like the gaudiest Mexican head piece, the band of this

sombrero was of purest gold, beaten into the forms of various saints. Ronicky Doone knew nothing at all about saints, but he approved very much of the animation of the martyrdom scenes and felt reasonably sure that his hatband could not be improved upon in the entire length and breadth of Stillwater, and the young men of the town agreed with him, to say nothing of the girls.

They also admired his riding gloves which, a strange affectation in a country of buckskin, were always the softest and the smoothest and the most comfortable kid that could be obtained.

Truth to tell, he did not handle a rope. He could not tell the noose end of a lariat from the straight end, hardly. Neither did Ronicky Doone know the slightest thing about barbed wire, except how to cut it when he wished to ride through. Let us look closely at the hands themselves, as Ronicky stands in the door of the hotel and stares at the people walking by. For he has taken off his gloves and he now rolls a cigarette.

They are very long hands. The fingers are extremely slender and tapering. The wrists are round and almost as innocent of sinews as the wrists of a woman, save when he grips something, and then how they stand out. But, most remarkable of all, the skin of the palms of those hands is amazingly soft. It is truly as soft as the skin of the hand of a girl.

There were some who shook their heads when they saw those hands. There were some who inferred that Ronicky Doone was little better than a scapegrace, and that, in reality, he had never

done a better or more useful thing than handle cards and swing a revolver. In both of which arts it was admitted that he was incredibly dexterous. As a matter of fact, since there was no estate from which he drew an income, and since he had never been known in the entire history of his young life to do a single stroke of productive work of any kind, the bitter truth was that Ronicky Doone was no better and no worse than a common gambler.

Indeed, if to play a game of chance is to commit a sin, Ronicky Doone was a very great sinner. Yet it should be remarked that he lacked the fine art of taking the money of other less clever fellows when they were intoxicated, and he also lacked the fine hardness of mind which enables many gamblers to enjoy taking the last cent from an opponent. Also, though he knew the entire list of tricks in the repertoire of a crooked gambler, he had never been known to employ tricking. He trusted in a calm head, a quick judgment, an ability to read character. And, though he occasionally met with crooked professionals who were wolves in the guise of sheep, no one had ever been known to play more than one crooked trick at cards when playing against Ronicky Doone. So, on the whole, he made a very good living.

What he had he gave or threw away in wild spending or loaned to friends, of whom he had a vast number. All of which goes to explain the soft hands of Ronicky Doone and his nervous, swift-moving fingers, as he stood at the door of the hotel. For he who plays long with cards or dice begins to have a special

sense developed in the tips of his fingers, so that they seem to be independent intelligences.

He crossed his feet. His boots were the finest leather, bench-made by the best of bootmakers, and they fitted the high-arched instep with the elastic smoothness of gloves. The man of the mountain desert dresses the extremities and cares not at all for the mid sections. The moment Doone was off his horse those boots had to be dressed and rubbed and polished to softness and brightness before this luxurious gambler would walk about town. From the heels of the boots extended a long pair of spurs—surely a very great vanity, for never in her life had his beautiful mare, Lou, needed even the touch of a spur.

But Ronicky Doone could not give up this touch of luxury. The spurs were plated heavily with gold, and they swept up and out in a long, exquisite curve, the hub of the rowel set with diamonds.

In a word Ronicky Doone was a dandy, but he had this peculiarity, that he seemed to dress to please himself rather than the rest of the world. His glances never roved about taking account of the admiration of others. As he leaned there in the door of the hotel he was the type of the young, happy, genuine and carefree fellow, whose mind is no heavier with a thousand dollars or a thousand cents in his pocket.

Suddenly he started from his lounging place, caught his hat more firmly over his eyes, threw away his unlighted cigarette and hurried across the veranda of the hotel. Had he seen an

enemy to chastise, or an old friend to greet, or a pretty girl? No, it was only old Jud Harding, the blacksmith, whose hand had lost its strength, but who still worked iron as others mold putty, simply because he had the genius for his craft. He was staggering now under a load of boards which he had shouldered to carry to his shop. In a moment that load was shifted to the shoulder of Ronicky Doone, and they went on down the street, laughing and talking together until the load was dropped on the floor of Harding's shop.

"And how's the sick feller coming?" asked Harding.

"Coming fine," answered Ronicky. "Couple of days and I'll have him out for a little exercise. Lucky thing it was a clean wound and didn't nick the bone. Soon as it's healed over he'll never know he was plugged."

Harding considered his young friend with twinkling eyes. "Queer thing to me," he said, "is how you and this gent Gregg have hit it off so well together. Might almost say it was like you'd shot Gregg and now was trying to make up for it. But, of course, that ain't the truth."

"Of course not," said Ronicky gravely and met the eye of Harding without faltering.

"Another queer thing," went on the cunning old smith. "He was fooling with that gun while he was in the saddle, which just means that the muzzle must of been pretty close to his skin. But there wasn't any sign of a powder burn, the doc says."

"But his trousers was pretty bad burned, I guess," said

Ronicky.

"H-m," said the blacksmith, "that's the first time I've heard about it." He went on more seriously: "I got something to tell you, Ronicky. Ever hear the story about the gent that took pity on the snake that was stiff with cold and brought the snake in to warm him up beside the fire? The minute the snake come to life he sunk his fangs in the gent that had saved him."

"Meaning," said Ronicky, "that, because I've done a good turn for Gregg, I'd better look out for him?"

"Meaning nothing," said Harding, "except that the reason the snake bit the gent was because he'd had a stone heaved at him by the same man one day and hadn't forgot it."

But Ronicky Doone merely laughed and turned back toward the hotel.

Chapter Four
His Victim's Trouble

Yet he could not help pondering on the words of old Harding. Bill Gregg had been a strange patient. He had never repeated his first offer to tell his story. He remained sullen and silent, with his brooding eyes fixed on the blank wall before him, and nothing could permanently cheer him. Some inward gloom seemed to possess the man.

The first day after the shooting he had insisted on scrawling a painfully written letter, while Ronicky propped a writing board in front of him, as he lay flat on his back in the bed, but that was his only act. Thereafter he remained silent and brooding. Perhaps it was hatred for Ronicky that was growing in him, as the sense of disappointment increased, for Ronicky, after all, had kept him from reaching that girl when the train passed through Stillwater. Perhaps, for all Ronicky knew, his bullet had ruined the happiness of two lives. He shrugged that disagreeable thought away, and, reaching the hotel, he went straight up to the room of the sick man.

"Bill," he said gently, "have you been spending all your time hating me? Is that what keeps you thin and glum? Is it because you sit here all day blaming me for all the things that have happened to you?"

The dark flush and the uneasy flicker of Gregg's glance gave a sufficient answer. Ronicky Doone sighed and shook his head, but not in anger.

"You don't have to talk," he said. "I see that I'm right. And I don't blame you, Bill, because, maybe, I've spoiled things pretty generally for you."

At first the silence of Bill Gregg admitted that he felt the same way about the matter, yet he finally said aloud: "I don't blame you. Maybe you thought I was a hoss thief. But the thing is done, Ronicky, and it won't never be undone!"

"Gregg," said Ronicky, "d'you know what you're going to do now?"

"I dunno."

"You're going to sit there and roll a cigarette and tell me the whole yarn. You ain't through with this little chase. Not if I have to drag you along with me. But first just figure that I'm your older brother or something like that and get rid of the whole yarn. Got to have the ore specimens before you can assay 'em. Besides, it'll help you a pile to get the poison out of your system. If you feel like cussing me hearty when the time comes go ahead and cuss, but I got to hear that story."

"Maybe it would help," said Gregg, "but it's a fool story to tell."

"Leave that to me to say whether it's a fool story or not. You start the talking."

Gregg shifted himself to a more comfortable position, as is

the immemorial custom of story tellers, and his glance misted a little with the flood of recollections.

"Started along back about a year ago," he said. "I was up to the Sullivan Mountains working a claim. There wasn't much to it, just enough to keep me going sort of comfortable. I pegged away at it pretty steady, leading a lonely life and hoping every day that I'd cut my way down to a good lead. Well, the fine ore never showed up.

"Meantime I got pretty weary of them same mountains, staring me in the face all the time. I didn't have even a dog with me for conversation, so I got to thinking. Thinking is a bad thing, mostly, don't you agree, Ronicky?"

"It sure is," replied Ronicky Doone instantly. "Not a bit of a doubt about it."

"It starts you doubting things," went on Gregg bitterly, "and pretty soon you're even doubting yourself." Here he cast an envious glance at the smooth brow of his companion. "But I guess that never happened to you, Ronicky?"

"You'd be surprised if I told you," said Ronicky.

"Well," went on Bill Gregg, "I got so darned tired of my own thoughts and of myself that I decided something had ought to be done; something to give me new things to think about. So I sat down and went over the whole deal.

"I had to get new ideas. Then I thought of what a gent had told me once. He'd got pretty interested in mining and figured he wanted to know all about how the fancy things was done.

So he sent off to some correspondence schools. Well, they're a great bunch. They say: 'Write us a lot of letters and ask us your questions. Before you're through you'll know something you want to know.' See?"

"I see."

"I didn't have anything special I wanted to learn except how to use myself for company when I got tired of solitaire. So I sat down and wrote to this here correspondence school and says: 'I want to do something interesting. How d'you figure that I had better begin?' And what d'you think they answered back?"

"I dunno," said Ronicky, his interest steadily increasing.

"Well, sir, the first thing they wrote back was: 'We have your letter and think that in the first place you had better learn how to write.' That was a queer answer, wasn't it?"

"It sure was." Ronicky swallowed a smile.

"Every time I looked at that letter it sure made me plumb mad. And I looked at it a hundred times a day and come near tearing it up every time. But I didn't," continued Bill.

"Why not?"

"Because it was a woman that wrote it. I told by the hand, after a while!"

"A woman? Go on, Bill. This story sure sounds different from most."

"It ain't even started to get different yet," said Bill gloomily. "Well, that letter made me so plumb mad that I sat down and wrote everything I could think of that a gent would say to a girl

to let her know what I thought about her. And what d'you think happened?"

"She wrote you back the prettiest letter you ever seen," suggested Ronicky, "saying as how she'd never meant to make you mad and that if you—"

"Say," broke in Bill Gregg, "did I show that letter to you?"

"Nope; I just was guessing at what a lot of women would do. You see?"

"No, I don't. I could never figure them as close as that. Anyway that's the thing she done, right enough. She writes me a letter that was smooth as oil and suggests that I go on with a composition course to learn how to write."

"Going to have you do books, Bill?"

"I ain't a plumb fool, Ronicky. But I thought it wouldn't do me no harm to unlimber my pen and fire out a few words a day. So I done it. I started writing what they told me to write about, the things that was around me, with a lot of lessons about how you can't use the same word twice on one page, and how terrible bad it is to use too many passive verbs."

"What's a passive verb, Bill?"

"I didn't never figure it out, exactly. However, it seems like they're something that slows you up the way a muddy road slows up a hoss. And then she begun talking about the mountains, and then she begun asking—

"About you!" suggested Ronicky with a grin.

"Confound you," said Bill Gregg. "How come you guessed

that?"

"I dunno. I just sort of scented what was coming."

"Well, anyways, that's what she done. And pretty soon she sent me a snapshot of herself. Well—"

"Lemme see it," said Ronicky Doone calmly.

"I dunno just where it is, maybe," replied Bill Gregg.

"Ill tell you. It's right around your neck, in that nugget locket you wear there."

For a moment Bill Gregg hated the other with his eyes, and then he submitted with a sheepish grin, took off the locket, which was made of one big nugget rudely beaten into shape, and opened it for the benefit of Ronicky Doone. It showed the latter not a beautiful face, but a pretty one with a touch of honesty and pride that made her charming.

"Well, as soon as I got that picture," said Bill Gregg, as he took back the locket, "I sure got excited. Looked to me like that girl was made for me. A lot finer than I could ever be, you see, but simple; no fancy frills, no raving beauty, maybe, but darned easy to look at.

"First thing I done I went in and got a copy of my face made and rushed it right back at her and then—" He stopped dolefully. "What d'you think, Ronicky?"

"I dunno," said Ronicky; "what happened then?"

"Nothing, not a thing. Not a word came back from her to answer that letter I'd sent along."

"Maybe you didn't look rich enough to suit her, Bill."

"I thought that, and I thought it was my ugly face that might of made her change her mind. I thought of pretty near everything else that was bad about me and that she might of read in my face. Sure made me sick for a long time. Somebody else was correcting my lessons, and that made me sicker than ever.

"So I sat down and wrote a letter to the head of the school and told him I'd like to get the address of that first girl. You see, I didn't even know her name. But I didn't get no answer."

Ronicky groaned. "It don't look like the best detective in the world could help you to find a girl when you don't know her name." He added gently: "But maybe she don't want you to find her?"

"I thought that for a long time. Then, a while back, I got a letter from San Francisco, saying that she was coming on a train through these parts and could I be in Stillwater because the train stopped there a couple of minutes. Most like she thought Stillwater was just sort of across the street from me. Matter of fact, I jumped on a hoss, and it took me three days of breaking my neck to get near Stillwater and then—" He stopped and cast a gloomy look on his companion.

"I know," said Ronicky. "Then I come and spoiled the whole party. Sure makes me sick to think about it."

"And now she's plumb gone," muttered Bill Gregg. "I thought maybe the reason I didn't have her correcting my lessons any more was because she'd had to leave the schools and go West. So, right after I got this drilling through the leg, you remember,

I wrote a letter?"

"Sure."

"It was to her at the schools, but I didn't get no answer. I guess she didn't go back there after all. She's plumb gone, Ronicky."

The other was silent for a moment. "How much would you give to find her?" he asked suddenly.

"Half my life," said Bill Gregg solemnly.

"Then," said Ronicky, "we'll make a try at it. I got an idea how we can start on the trail. I'm going to go with you, partner. I've messed up considerable, this little game of yours; now I'm going to do what I can to straighten it out. Sometimes two are better than one. Anyway I'm going to stick with you till you've found her or lost her for good. You see?"

Bill Gregg sighed. "You're pretty straight, Ronicky," he said, "but what good does it do for two gents to look for a needle in a haystack? How could we start to hit the trail?"

"This way. We know the train that she took. Maybe we could find the Pullman conductor that was on it, and he might remember her. They got good memories, some of those gents. We'll start to find him, which had ought to be pretty easy."

"Ronicky, I'd never of thought of that in a million years!"

"It ain't thinking that we want now, it's acting. When can you start with me?"

"I'll be fit tomorrow."

"Then tomorrow we start."

Chapter Five
Macklin's Library

Robert Macklin, Pullman conductor, had risen to that eminent position so early in life that the glamour of it had not yet passed away. He was large enough to have passed for a champion wrestler or a burly pugilist, and he was small enough to glory in the smallest details of his work. Having at the age of thirty, through a great deal of luck and a touch of accident, secured his place, he possessed, at least, sufficient dignity to fill it.

He was one of those rare men who carry their dignity with them past the doors of their homes. Robert Macklin's home, during the short intervals when he was off the trains, was in a tiny apartment. It was really one not overly large room, with a little alcove adjoining; but Robert Macklin had seized the opportunity to hang a curtain across the alcove, and, since it was large enough to contain a chair and a bookshelf, he referred to it always as his "library."

He was this morning seated in his library, with his feet protruding through the curtains and resting on the foot of his bed, when the doorbell rang. He surveyed himself in his mirror before he answered it. Having decided that, in his long dressing gown, he was imposing enough, he advanced to the door and slowly opened it.

He saw before him two sun-darkened men whose soft gray hats proclaimed that they were newly come out of the West. The one was a fellow whose face had been made stern by hard work and few pleasures in life. The other was one who, apparently, had never worked at all. There was something about him that impressed Robert Macklin. He might be a young Western millionaire, for instance. Aside from his hat he was dressed with elaborate care. He wore gray spats, and his clothes were obviously well tailored, and his necktie was done in a bow. On the whole he was a very cool, comfortable looking chap. The handkerchief, which protruded from his breast pocket and showed an edging of red, was a trifle noisy; and the soft gray hat was hardly in keeping, but, on the whole, he was a dashing-looking chap. The bagging trousers and the blunt-toed shoes of his companion were to Robert Macklin a distinct shock. He centered all of his attention instantly on the younger of his two visitors.

"You're Mr. Macklin, I guess," said the handsome man.

"I am," said Macklin, and, stepping back from his door, he invited them in with a sweeping gesture.

There were only two chairs, but the younger of the strangers immediately made himself comfortable on the bed.

"My name's Doone," he said, "and this is Mr. William Gregg. We think that you have some information which we can use. Mind if we fire a few questions?"

"Certainly not," said Robert Macklin. At the same time he

began to arm himself with caution. One could never tell.

"Matter of fact," went on Ronicky smoothly, lighting a tailor-made cigarette, while his companion rolled one of his own making, "we are looking for a lady who was on one of your trains. We think you may possibly remember her. Here's the picture."

And, as he passed the snapshot to the Pullman conductor, he went on with the details of the date and the number of the train.

Robert Macklin in the meantime studied the picture carefully. He had a keen eye for faces, but when it came to pretty faces his memory was a veritable lion. He had talked a few moments with this very girl, and she had smiled at him. The memory made Robert Macklin's lips twitch just a trifle, and Ronicky Doone saw it.

Presently the dignitary returned the picture and raised his head from thought. "It is vaguely behind my mind, something about this lady," he said. "But I'm sorry to say, gentlemen, I really don't know you and—"

"Why, don't you know us!" broke in Bill Gregg. "Ain't my partner here just introduced us?"

"Exactly," said Robert Macklin. And his opinion of the two sank a full hundred points. Such grammar proclaimed a ruffian.

"You don't get his drift," Ronicky was explaining to his companion. "I introduced us, but he doesn't know who I am. We should have brought along a letter of introduction." He turned to Macklin. "I am mighty sorry I didn't get one," he said.

It came to Macklin for the fraction of a second that he was

being mocked, but he instantly dismissed the foolish thought. Even the rough fellows must be able to recognize a man when they saw one.

"The point is," went on Ronicky gently, "that my friend is very eager for important reasons to see this lady, to find her. And he doesn't even know her name." Here his careful grammar gave out with a crash. "You can't beat a deal like that, eh, Macklin? If you can remember anything about her, her name first, then, where she was bound, who was with her, how tall she is, the color of her eyes, we'd be glad to know anything you know. What can you do for us?"

Macklin cleared his throat thoughtfully. "Gentlemen," he said gravely, "if I knew the purpose for which you are seeking the lady I—"

"The purpose ain't to kidnap her, if that's your drift," said Ronicky. "We ain't going to treat her wrong, partner. Out in our part of the land they don't do it. Just shake up your thoughts and see if something about that girl doesn't pop right into your head."

Robert Macklin smiled and carefully shook his head. "It seems to be impossible for me to remember a thing," he asserted.

"Not even the color of her eyes?" asked Ronicky, as he grinned. He went on more gravely: "I'm pretty dead sure that you do remember something about her."

There was just the shade of a threat in the voice of this slender youngster, and Robert Macklin had been an amateur pugilist of much brawn and a good deal of boxing skill. He cast a wary eye

on Ronicky; one punch would settle that fellow. The man Gregg might be a harder nut to crack, but it would not take long to finish them both. Robert Macklin thrust his shoulders forward.

"Friends," he said gruffly, "I don't have much time off. This is my day for rest. I have to say good-by."

Ronicky Doone stood up with a yawn. "I thought so," he said to his companion. "Mind the door, Gregg, and see that nobody steps in and busts up my little party."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to argue with this gent in a way he'll understand a pile better than the chatter we've been making so far." He stepped a long light pace forward. "Macklin, you know what we want to find out. Will you talk?"

A cloud of red gathered before the eyes of Macklin. It was impossible that he must believe his ears, and yet the words still rang there.

"Why, curse your little rat-face!" burst out Robert Macklin, and, stepping in, he leaned forward with a perfect straight left.

Certainly his long vacation from boxing had not ruined his eye or stiffened his muscles. With delight he felt all the big sinews about his shoulders come into play. Straight and true the big fist drove into the face of the smaller man, but Robert Macklin found that he had punched a hole in thin air. It was as if the very wind of the blow had brushed the head of Ronicky Doone to one side, and at the same time he seemed to sway and stagger forward.

A hard lean fist struck Robert Macklin's body. As he gasped

and doubled up, clubbing his right fist to land the blow behind the ear of Ronicky Doone, the latter bent back, stepped in and, rising on the toes of both feet, whipped a perfect uppercut that, in ring parlance, rang the bell.

The result was that Robert Macklin, his mouth agape and his eyes dull, stood wobbling slowly from side to side.

"Here!" called Ronicky to his companion at the door. "Grab him on one side, and I'll take the other. He's out on his feet. Get him to that chair." With Gregg's assistance he dragged the bulk of the man there. Macklin was still stunned.

Presently the dull eyes cleared and filled immediately with horror. Big Robert Macklin sank limply back in the chair.

"I've no money," he said. "I swear I haven't a cent in the place. It's in the bank, but if a check will—"

"We don't want your money this trip," said Ronicky. "We want talk, Macklin. A lot of talk and a lot of true talk. Understand? It's about that girl. I saw you grin when you saw the picture; you remember her well enough. Now start talking, and remember this, if you lie, I'll come back here and find out and use this on you."

The eyes of Robert Macklin started from his head, as his gaze concentrated on the black muzzle of the gun. He moistened his white lips and managed to gasp: "Everything I know, of course. Ill tell you everything, word for word. She—she—her name I mean—"

"You're doing fine," said Ronicky. "Keep it up, and you keep

away, Bill. When you come at him with that hungry look he thinks you're going to eat him up. Fire away, Macklin."

"What first?"

"What's she look like?"

"Soft brown hair, blue eyes, her mouth—"

"Is a little big. That's all right. You don't have to be polite and lie. We want the truth. How big is she?"

"About five feet and five inches, must weigh around a hundred and thirty pounds."

"You sure are an expert on the ladies, Macklin, and I'll bet you didn't miss her name?"

"Her name?"

"Don't tell me you missed out on that!"

"No. It was—Just a minute!"

"Take your time."

"Caroline."

"Take your time now, Macklin, you're doing fine. Don't get confused.

Get the last name right. It's the most important to us."

"I have it, I'm sure. The whole name is Caroline Smith."

There was a groan from Ronicky Doone and another from Bill Gregg.

"That's a fine name to use for trailing a person. Did she say anything more, anything about where she expected to be living in New York?"

"I don't remember any more," said Macklin sullenly, for the

spot where Ronicky's fist landed on his jaw was beginning to ache. "I didn't sit down and have any chats with her. She just spoke to me once in a while when I did something for her. I suppose you fellows have some crooked work on hand for her?"

"We're bringing her good news," said Ronicky calmly. "Now see if you can't remember where she said she lived in New York." And he gave added point to his question by pressing the muzzle of the revolver a little closer to the throat of the Pullman conductor. The latter blinked and swallowed hard.

"The only thing I remember her saying was that she could see the East River from her window, I think."

"And that's all you know?"

"Yes, not a thing more about her to save my life."

"Maybe what you know has saved it," said Ronicky darkly.

His victim eyed him with sullen malevolence. "Maybe there'll be a new trick or two in this game before it's finished. I'll never forget you, Doone, and you, Gregg."

"You haven't a thing in the world on us," replied Ronicky.

"I have the fact that you carry concealed weapons."

"Only this time."

"Always! Fellows like you are as lonesome without a gun as they are without a skin."

Ronicky turned at the door and laughed back at the gloomy face, and then they were gone down the steps and into the street.

Chapter Six
The New York Trail

On the train to New York that night they carefully summed up their prospects and what they had gained.

"We started at pretty near nothing," said Ronicky. He was a professional optimist. "We had a picture of a girl, and we knew she was on a certain train bound East, three or four weeks ago. That's all we knew. Now we know her name is Caroline Smith, and that she lives where she can see the East River out of her back window. I guess that narrows it down pretty close, doesn't it, Bill?"

"Close?" asked Bill. "Close, did you say?" "Well, we know the trail," said Ronicky cheerily. "All we've got to do is to locate the shack that stands beside that trail. For old mountain men like us that ought to be nothing. What sort of a stream is this East River, though?"

Bill Gregg looked at his companion in disgust. He had become so used to regarding Doone as entirely infallible that it amazed and disheartened him to find that there was one topic so large about which Ronicky knew nothing. Perhaps the whole base for the good cheer of Ronicky was his ignorance of everything except the mountain desert.

"A river's a river," went on Ronicky blandly. "And it's got a

town beside it, and in the town there's a house that looks over the water. Why, Bill, she's as good as found!"

"New York runs about a dozen miles along the shore of that river," groaned Bill Gregg.

"A dozen miles!" gasped Ronicky. He turned in his seat and stared at his companion. "Bill, you sure are making a man-sized joke. There ain't that much city in the world. A dozen miles of houses, one right next to the other?"

"Yep, and one on top of the other. And that ain't all. Start about the center of that town and swing a twenty-mile line around it, and the end of the line will be passing through houses most of the way."

Ronicky Doone glared at him in positive alarm. "Well," he said, "that's different."

"It sure is. I guess we've come on a wild-goose chase, Ronicky, hunting for a girl named Smith that lives on the bank of the East River!" He laughed bitterly.

"How come you know so much about New York?" asked Ronicky, eager to turn the subject of conversation until he could think of something to cheer his friend.

"Books," said Bill Gregg.

After that there was a long lull in the conversation. That night neither of them slept long, for every rattle and sway of the train was telling them that they were rocking along toward an impossible task. Even the cheer of Ronicky had broken down the next morning, and, though breakfast in the diner restored some

of his confidence, he was not the man of the day before.

"Bill," he confided, on the way back to their seats from the diner, "there must be something wrong with me. What is it?"

"I dunno," said Bill. "Why?"

"People been looking at me."

"Ain't they got a right to do that?"

"Sure they have, in a way. But, when they don't seem to see you when you see them, and when they begin looking at you out of the corner of their eyes the minute you turn away, why then it seems to me that they're laughing at you, Bill."

"What they got to laugh about? I'd punch a gent in the face that laughed at me!"

But Ronicky fell into a philosophical brooding. "It can't be done, Bill. You can punch a gent for cussing you, or stepping on your foot, or crowding you, or sneering at you, or talking behind your back, or for a thousand things. But back here in a crowd you can't fight a gent for laughing at you. Laughing is outside the law most anywheres, Bill. It's the one thing you can't answer back except with more laughing. Even a dog gets sort of sick inside when you laugh at him, and a man is a pile worse. He wants to kill the gent that's laughing, and he wants to kill himself for being laughed at. Well, Bill, that's a good deal stronger than the way they been laughing at me, but they done enough to make me think a bit. They been looking at three things—these here spats, the red rim of my handkerchief sticking out of my pocket, and that soft gray hat, when I got it on."

"Derned if I see anything wrong with your outfit. Didn't they tell you that that was the style back East, to have spats like that on?"

"Sure," said Ronicky, "but maybe they didn't know, or maybe they go with some, but not with me. Maybe I'm kind of too brown and outdoors looking to fit with spats and handkerchiefs like this."

"Ronicky," said Bill Gregg in admiration, "maybe you ain't read a pile, but you figure things out just like a book."

Their conversation was cut short by the appearance of a drift of houses, and then more and more. From the elevated line on which they ran presently they could look down on block after block of roofs packed close together, or big business structures, as they reached the uptown business sections, and finally Ronicky gasped, as they plunged into utter darkness that roared past the window.

"We go underground to the station," Bill Gregg explained. He was a little startled himself, but his reading had fortified him to a certain extent.

"But is there still some more of New York?" asked Ronicky humbly.

"More? We ain't seen a corner of it!" Bill's superior information made him swell like a frog in the sun. "This is kinder near One Hundredth Street where we dived down. New York keeps right on to First Street, and then it has a lot more streets below that. But that's just the Island of Manhattan. All around

there's a lot more. Manhattan is mostly where they work. They live other places."

It was not very long before the train slowed down to make Grand Central Station. On the long platform Ronicky surrendered his suit case to the first porter. Bill Gregg was much alarmed. "What'd you do that for?" he asked, securing a stronger hold on his own valise and brushing aside two or three red caps.

"He asked me for it," explained Ronicky. "I wasn't none too set on giving it to him to carry, but I hated to hurt his feelings. Besides, they're all done up in uniforms. Maybe this is their job."

"But suppose that feller got away out of sight, what would you do? Your brand-new pair of Colts is lying away in it!"

"He won't get out of sight none," Ronicky assured his friend grimly. "I got another Colt with me, and, no matter how fast he runs, a forty-five slug can run a pile faster. But come on, Bill. The word in this town seems to be to keep right on moving."

They passed under an immense, brightly lighted vault and then wriggled through the crowds in pursuit of the astonishingly agile porter. So they came out of the big station to Forty-second Street, where they found themselves confronted by a taxi driver and the question: "Where?"

"I dunno," said Ronicky to Bill. "Your reading tell you anything about the hotels in this here town?"

"Not a thing," said Bill, "because I never figured that I'd be fool enough to come this far away from my home diggings. But here I am, and we don't know nothing."

"Listen, partner," said Ronicky to the driver. "Where's a fair-to-medium place to stop at?"

The taxi driver swallowed a smile that left a twinkle about his eyes which nothing could remove. "What kind of a place? Anywhere from fifty cents to fifty bucks a night."

"Fifty dollars!" exclaimed Bill Gregg. "Can you lay over that, Ronicky? Our wad won't last a week."

"Say, pal," said the taxi driver, becoming suddenly friendly, "I can fix you up. I know a neat little joint where you'll be as snug as you want. They'll stick you about one-fifty per, but you can't beat that price in this town and keep clean."

"Take us there," said Bill Gregg, and they climbed into the machine.

The taxi turned around, shot down Park Avenue, darted aside into the darker streets to the east of the district and came suddenly to a halt.

"Did you foller that trail?" asked Bill Gregg in a chuckling whisper.

"Sure! Twice to the left, then to the right, and then to the left again. I know the number of blocks, too. Ain't no reason for getting rattled just because a joint is strange to us. New York may be tolerable big, but it's got men in it just like we are, and maybe a lot worse kinds."

As they got out of the little car they saw that the taxi driver had preceded them, carrying their suit cases. They followed up a steep pitch of stairs to the first floor of the hotel, where the

landing had been widened to form a little office.

"Hello, Bert," said their driver. "I picked up these gentlemen at Grand Central. They ain't wise to the town, so I put 'em next to you. Fix 'em up here?"

"Sure," said Bert, lifting a huge bulk of manhood from behind the desk. He placed his fat hands on the top of it and observed his guests with a smile. "Ill make you right to home here, friends. Thank you, Joe!"

Joe grinned, nodded and, receiving his money from Bill Gregg, departed down the stairs, humming. Their host, in the meantime, had picked up their suit cases and led the way down a hall dimly lighted by two flickering gas jets. Finally he reached a door and led them into a room where the gas had to be lighted. It showed them a cheerless apartment in spite of the red of wall paper and carpet.

"Only three bucks," said the proprietor with the air of one bestowing charity out of the fullness of his heart. "Bathroom only two doors down. I guess you can't beat this layout, gents?"

Bill Gregg glanced once about him and nodded.

"You come up from the South, maybe?" asked the proprietor, lingering at the door.

"West," said Bill Gregg curtly.

"You don't say! Then you boys must be used to your toddy at night, eh?"

"It's a tolerable dry country out there," said Ronicky without enthusiasm.

"All the more reason you need some liquor to moisten it up. Wait till I get you a bottle of rye I got handy." And he disappeared in spite of their protests.

"I ain't a drinking man," said Gregg, "and I know you ain't, but it's sure insulting to turn down a drink in these days!"

Ronicky nodded, and presently the host returned with two glasses, rattling against a tall bottle on a tray.

"Say, when," he said, filling the glasses and keeping on, in spite of their protests, until each glass was full.

"I guess it looks pretty good to you to see the stuff again," he said, stepping back and rubbing his hands like one warmed by the consciousness of a good deed. "It ain't very plentiful around here."

"Well," said Gregg, swinging up his glass, "here's in your eye, Ronicky, and here's to you, sir!"

"Wait," replied Ronicky Doone. "Hold on a minute, Bill. Looks to me like you ain't drinking," he said to the proprietor.

The fat man waved the suggestion aside. "Never touch it," he assured them. "Used to indulge a little in light wines and beers when the country was wet, but when it went dry the stuff didn't mean enough to me to make it worth while dodging the law. I just manage to keep a little of it around for old friends and men out of a dry country."

"But we got a funny habit out in our country. We can't no ways drink unless the gent that's setting them out takes something himself. It ain't done that way in our part of the land," said

Ronicky.

"It ain't?"

"Never!"

"Come, come! That's a good joke. But, even if I can't be with you, boys, drink hearty."

Ronicky Doone shook his head. "No joke at all," he said firmly. "Matter of politeness that a lot of gents are terrible hard set on out where we come from."

"Why, Ronicky," protested Bill Gregg, "ain't you making it a little strong? For my part I've drunk twenty times without having the gent that set 'em up touch a thing. I reckon I can do it again. Here's how!"

"Wait!" declared Ronicky Doone. And there was a little jarring ring in his voice that arrested the hand of Bill Gregg in the very act of raising the glass.

Ronicky crossed the room quickly, took a glass from the washstand and, returning to the center table, poured a liberal drink of the whisky into it.

"I dunno about my friend," he went on, almost sternly, to the bewildered hotel keeper. "I dunno about him, but some gents feel so strong about not drinking alone that they'd sooner fight. Well, sir, I'm one of that kind. So I say, there's your liquor. Get rid of it!"

The fat man reached the center table and propped himself against it, gasping. His whole big body seemed to be wilting, as though in a terrific heat. "I dunno!" he murmured. "I dunno

what's got into you fellers. I tell you, I never drink."

"You lie, you fat fool!" retorted Ronicky. "Didn't I smell your breath?"

Bill Gregg dropped his own glass on the table and hurriedly came to confront his host by the side of Ronicky.

"Breath?" asked the fat man hurriedly, still gasping more and more heavily for air. "I—I may have taken a small tonic after dinner. In fact, think I did. That's all. Nothing more, I assure you. I—I have to be a sober man in my work."

"You got to make an exception this evening," said Ronicky, more fiercely than ever. "I ought to make you drink all three drinks for being so slow about drinking one!"

"Three drinks!" exclaimed the fat man, trembling violently. "It—it would kill me!"

"I think it would," said Ronicky. "I swear I think it would. And maybe even one will be a sort of a shock, eh?"

He commanded suddenly: "Drink! Drink that glass and clean out the last drop of it, or we'll tie you and pry your mouth open and pour the whole bottle down your throat. You understand?"

A feeble moan came from the throat of the hotel keeper. He cast one frantic glance toward the door and a still more frantic appeal centered on Ronicky Doone, but the face of the latter was as cold as stone.

"Then take your own glasses, boys," he said, striving to smile, as he picked up his own drink.

"You drink first, and you drink alone," declared Ronicky.

"Now!"

The movement of his hand was as ominous as if he had whipped out a revolver. The fat man tossed off the glass of whisky and then stood with a pudgy hand pressed against his breast and the upward glance of one who awaits a calamity. Under the astonished eyes of Bill Gregg he turned pale, a sickly greenish pallor. His eyes rolled, and his hand on the table shook, and the arm that supported him sagged.

"Open the window," he said. "The air—there ain't no air. I'm choking—and—"

"Get him some water," cried Bill Gregg, "while I open the window."

"Stay where you are, Bill."

"But he looks like he's dying!"

"Then he's killed himself."

"Gents," began the fat man feebly and made a short step toward them. The step was uncompleted. In the middle of it he wavered, put out his arms and slumped upon his side on the floor.

Bill Gregg cried out softly in astonishment and horror, but Ronicky Doone knelt calmly beside the fallen bulk and felt the beating of his heart.

"He ain't dead," he said quietly, "but he'll be tolerably sick for a while. Now come along with me."

"But what's all this mean?" asked Bill Gregg in a whisper, as he picked up his suit case and hurried after Ronicky.

"Doped booze," said Ronicky curtly.

They hurried down the stairs and came out onto the dark street. There Ronicky Doone dropped his suit case and dived into a dark nook beside the entrance. There was a brief struggle. He came out again, pushing a skulking figure before him, with the man's arm twisted behind his back.

"Take off this gent's hat, will you?" asked Ronicky.

Bill Gregg obeyed, too dumb with astonishment to think. "It's the taxi driver!" he exclaimed.

"I thought so!" muttered Ronicky. "The skunk came back here to wait till we were fixed right now. What'll we do with him?"

"I begin to see what's come off" said Bill Gregg, frowning into the white, scowling face of the taxi driver. The man was like a rat, but, in spite of his fear, he did not make a sound.

"Over there!" said Bill Gregg, nodding toward a flight of cellar steps.

They caught the man between them, rushed him to the steps and flung him headlong down. There was a crashing fall, groans and then silence.

"He'll have a broken bone or two, maybe," said Ronicky, peering calmly into the darkness, "but he'll live to trap somebody else, curse him!" And, picking up their suit cases again, they started to retrace their steps.

Chapter Seven
The First Clue

They did not refer to the incidents of that odd reception in New York until they had located a small hotel for themselves, not three blocks away. It was no cheaper, but they found a pleasant room, clean and with electric lights. It was not until they had bathed and were propped up in their beds for a good-night smoke, which cow-punchers love, that Bill Gregg asked: "And what gave you the tip, Ronicky?"

"I dunno. In my business you got to learn to watch faces, Bill. Suppose you sit in at a five-handed game of poker. One gent says everything with his face, while he's picking up his cards. Another gent don't say a thing, but he shows what he's got by the way he moves in his chair, or the way he opens and shuts his hands. When you said something about our wad I seen the taxi driver blink. Right after that he got terrible friendly and said he could steer us to a friend of his that could put us up for the night pretty comfortable. Well, it wasn't hard to put two and two together. Not that I figured anything out. Just was walking on my toes, ready to jump in any direction."

As for Bill Gregg, he brooded for a time on what he had heard, then he shook his head and sighed. "I'd be a mighty helpless kid in this here town if I didn't have you along, Ronicky," he said.

"Nope," insisted Ronicky. "Long as you use another gent for a sort of guide you feel kind of helpless. But, when you step off for yourself, everything is pretty easy. You just were waiting for me to take the lead, or you'd have done just as much by yourself."

Again Bill Gregg sighed, as he shook his head. "If this is what New York is like," he said, "we're in for a pretty bad time. And this is what they call a civilized town? Great guns, they need martial law and a thousand policemen to the block to keep a gent's life and pocketbook safe in this town! First gent we meet tries to bump us off or get our wad. Don't look like we're going to have much luck, Ronicky."

"We saved our hides, I guess."

"That's about all."

"And we learned something."

"Sure."

"Then I figure it was a pretty good night.

"Another thing, Bill. I got an idea from that taxi gent. I figure that whole gang of taxi men are pretty sharp in the eye. What I mean is that we can tramp up and down along this here East River, and now and then we'll talk to some taxi men that do most of their work from stands in them parts of the town. Maybe we can get on her trail that way. Anyways, it's an opening."

"Maybe," said Bill Gregg dubiously. He reached under his pillow. "But I'm sure going to sleep with a gun under my head in this town!" With this remark he settled himself for repose and presently was snoring loudly.

Ronicky presented a brave face to the morning and at once started with Bill Gregg to tour along the East River. That first day Ronicky insisted that they simply walk over the whole ground, so as to become fairly familiar with the scale of their task. They managed to make the trip before night and returned to the hotel, footsore from the hard, hot pavements. There was something unkindly and ungenerous in those pavements, it seemed to Ronicky. He was discovering to his great amazement that the loneliness of the mountain desert is nothing at all compared to the loneliness of the Manhattan crowd.

Two very gloomy and silent cow-punchers ate their dinner that night and went to bed early. But in the morning they began the actual work of their campaign. It was an arduous labor. It meant interviewing in every district one or two storekeepers, and asking the mail carriers for "Caroline Smith," and showing the picture to taxi drivers. These latter were the men, insisted Ronicky, who would eventually bring them to Caroline Smith. "Because, if they've ever drove a girl as pretty as that, they'll remember for quite a while."

"But half of these gents ain't going to talk to us, even if they know," Bill Gregg protested, after he had been gruffly refused an answer a dozen times in the first morning.

"Some of 'em won't talk," admitted Ronicky, "but that's probably because they don't know. Take 'em by and large, most gents like to tell everything they know, and then some!"

As a matter of fact they met with rather more help than

they wanted. In spite of all their efforts to appear casual there was something too romantic in this search for a girl to remain entirely unnoticed. People whom they asked became excited and offered them a thousand suggestions. Everybody, it seemed, had, somewhere, somehow, heard of a Caroline Smith living in his own block, and every one remembered dimly having passed a girl on the street who looked exactly like Caroline Smith. But they went resolutely on, running down a thousand false clues and finding at the end of each something more ludicrous than what had gone before. Maiden ladies with many teeth and big glasses they found; and they discovered, at the ends of the trails on which they were advised to go, young women and old, ugly girls and pretty ones, but never any one who in the slightest degree resembled Caroline Smith.

In the meantime they were working back and forth, in their progress along the East River, from the slums to the better residence districts. They bought newspapers at little stationery stores and worked up chance conversations with the clerks, particularly girl clerks, whenever they could find them.

"Because women have the eye for faces," Ronicky would say, "and, if a girl like Caroline Smith came into the shop, she'd be remembered for a while."

But for ten days they labored without a ghost of a success. Then they noticed the taxi stands along the East Side and worked them as carefully as they could, and it was on the evening of the eleventh day of the search that they reached the first clue.

They had found a taxi drawn up before a saloon, converted into an eating place, and when they went inside they found the driver alone in the restaurant. They worked up the conversation, as they had done a hundred times before. Gregg produced the picture and began showing it to Ronicky.

"Maybe the lady's around here," said Ronicky, "but I'm new in this part of town." He took the picture and turned to the taxi driver. "Maybe you've been around this part of town and know the folks here. Ever see this girl around?" And he passed the picture to the other.

The taxi driver bowed his head over it in a close scrutiny. When he looked up his face was a blank.

"I don't know. Lemme see. I think I seen a girl like her the other day, waiting for the traffic to pass at Seventy-second and Broadway. Yep, she sure was a ringer for this picture." He passed the picture back, and a moment later he finished his meal, paid his check and went sauntering through the door.

"Quick!" said Ronicky, the moment the chauffeur had disappeared. "Pay the check and come along. That fellow knows something."

Bill Gregg, greatly excited, obeyed, and they hurried to the door of the place. They were in time to see the taxicab lurch away from the curb and go humming down the street, while the driver leaned out to the side and looked back.

"He didn't see us," said Ronicky confidently.

"But what did he leave for?"

"He's gone to tell somebody, somewhere, that we're looking for Caroline Smith. Come on!" He stepped out to the curb and stopped a passing taxi. "Follow that machine and keep a block away from it," he ordered.

"Bootlegger?" asked the taxi driver cheerily.

"I don't know, but just drift along behind him till he stops. Can you do that?"

"Watch me!"

And, with Ronicky and Bill Gregg installed in his machine, he started smoothly on the trail.

Straight down the cross street, under the roaring elevated tracks of Second and Third Avenues, they passed, and on First Avenue they turned and darted sharply south for a round dozen blocks, then went due east and came, to a halt after a brief run.

"He's stopped in Beekman Place," said the driver, jerking open the door. "If I run in there he'll see me."

Ronicky stepped from the machine, paid him and dismissed him with a word of praise for his fine trailing. Then he stepped around the corner.

What he saw was a little street closed at both ends and only two or three blocks long. It had the serene, detached air of a village a thousand miles from any great city, with its grave rows of homely houses standing solemnly face to face. Well to the left, the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge swung its great arch across the river, and it led, Ronicky knew, to Long Island City beyond, but here everything was cupped in the village quiet.

The machine which they had been pursuing was drawn up on the right-hand side of the street, looking south, and, even as Ronicky glanced around the corner, he saw the driver leave his seat, dart up a flight of steps and ring the bell.

Ronicky could not see who opened the door, but, after a moment of talk, the chauffeur from the car they had pursued was allowed to enter. And, as he stepped across the threshold, he drew off his cap with a touch of reverence which seemed totally out of keeping with his character as Ronicky had seen it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.