

Hooker Forrestine Cooper

The Long Dim Trail



Forrestine Hooker
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Hooker Forrestine C. Forrestine Cooper

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

"Everything all right, Limber?" asked Allan Traynor, boss of the Diamond H ranch, as a cowboy with jingling spurs reined his pony before the closed gates of the corral.

Doctor Powell, standing beside Traynor, scrutinized the rider, whose broad-brimmed Stetson, caught by the wind, flapped from his face, exposing the sun-brown skin, firm chin and grey eyes. It needed no student of psychology to decide that Limber was not a man who would flinch when facing a six-shooter held by a rustler.

The cowboy nodded answer to Traynor's query. Limber's eyes scanned the herd, then, satisfied, he leaned across the neck of his pinto pony, and said, "Paddy Lafferty wants to sell out."

"Who told you?" Traynor spoke with undisguised surprise.

"Dillon. Paddy tol' him he was gettin' too old, that the rheumatiz is botherin' again, an' he's goin' to quit because he won't trust no one to run his herd when he can't get 'round to it hisself."

"Did Paddy say how much he wanted?"

"Nope," was the laconic reply. "I'll find out. It's a mighty good bunch of stuff. Lots of three-year steers, an' thar ain't many three-year-olds left in these parts, now."

"It's worth looking up," commented Traynor. "I'm glad you spoke of it. How soon will you be ready to hit the trail?"

"'Bout ten minutes."

"Keep the boys out of mischief this trip, if you can."

There was a twinkle in Traynor's eyes that was reflected in the grey ones of the cowboy, who said soberly, "I'll do my best. But when they get to mixin' in things they're slipperier than a bunch of quicksilver. You think you got hold of it and you find you ain't."

Limber turned his pony toward the corrals, twisting in his saddle as Traynor called after him, "Tell some one to saddle my pony and Doctor Powell's. We'll ride out with you."

As the cowboy disappeared, Traynor said, "It will give you a faint idea of the work. You'll find it mighty different from the cowpuncher's life of moving pictures."

The doctor laughed. "I feel like a small boy about to wriggle under the canvas of a circus tent. I never dreamed that Arizona was such a wonderland."

The eyes of the two men swept across the Sulphur Spring Valley that undulated twenty miles from the Galiuro Mountains on the west to the Grahams on the east; starting sixty miles north of the Diamond H in the narrow Aravaipa Cañon, it gradually broadened into a great plain that terminated at the Mexican border.

"Of course," continued the doctor, "I had a vague idea of its mineral wealth and cattle interests, but I must confess that until I reached here the name of Arizona conjured visions of burning desert, Gila monsters, rattlesnakes, horn-toads and Apaches. Even when I stepped from the train and met you, the impression of a 'No-Man's Land' was strong upon me. Yet now that I have been here a month I feel as though I shall never want to leave it."

"You can make sure of that," retorted Traynor, "if you will go to the Hasayampa River, kneel on the brink and drink of the water. You must be very careful, though, to kneel above the crossing. This will keep you from ever wishing to leave Arizona and you will receive the gift of absolute truthfulness;

but, should you drink while kneeling below the crossing, truth and you will be divorced the balance of your life."

"Did you drink below the crossing or above?" challenged the doctor with an amused smile.

"There is only one case on record where a man acknowledged that he drank the water below the crossing. His name was Hasayampa Bill. He died a year ago. Hasayampa Bill was a victim of circumstances, not intention. He said that he was drinking above the crossing when he lost his balance and fell into the stream which carried him far below. Though Hasayampa swore solemnly that he kept his mouth shut – for the first time on record – his reputation was thoroughly established. A letter addressed to the 'Biggest Liar in Arizona' was accorded him by popular vote."

The doctor was about to reply, when the air was filled with ear-splitting whistles and staccato cries. Then the big gates of the corral swung open, and an avalanche of cattle tumbled madly through and headed in a wild rush down the road that led south toward Willcox – excited bellows and plaintive lowing of calves seeking their mothers, mingled with the voices of invisible men, completely obliterated by the clouds of alkali dust.

Traynor led the way into the stable where two saddled ponies twisted nervously. The men looked at each other and smiled as the doctor approached the pinto pony. Its eyes showed whites, its ears went back. It sheered nervously, but Powell gained the saddle and, with Traynor close beside him, they reached the moving herd.

Through the haze of dust a shadowy rider would loom momentarily, then disappear. Traynor rode on the outer edge of the herd. Doctor Powell became aware that Limber had materialized at his side, and forgot everything else in his admiration of the cowpuncher's unconscious grace as his lithe, swaying figure adjusted itself to each movement of the wiry, dancing pony.

"Head off that buckskin," shouted Limber, rising in his stirrups and waving his quirt at a cow that was making a wild dash for freedom.

Bronco's pony emerged from the haze and tore madly after the cow, reaching her side just as she made up her bovine mind that she had no intention of deserting. Her expression of injured innocence as she ambled quietly back roused Doctor Powell's mirth and Bronco's ire.

The cowpuncher reined his pony beside Powell's, muttering imprecations that finally ended in a verbal explosion.

"Durn her! Whenever you turn an old buckskin cow like that loose in the herd it's as bad as sickin' a mother-in-law on a happy family. She won't rest till she gets 'em millin' and stampedes everything in sight, and then she picks up her knittin' and looks innercent and says she never allowed to start nothin' noways! Gee! I wish I could strike a ranch where there warn't nothin' but steers. The minute you mix up with a female critter, cow or petticoats, you're roundin' up trouble for yourself and lots of others."

He paused long enough, to jerk out a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers, letting the reins fall on his pony's neck as he glared at the cow. She was slowly dropping to the rear of the herd, but Bronco and his pony did not relax their vigilance.

"Mebbe you thought I didn't know you, you old buckskin bag o' bones," apostrophized Bronco. "I'd know that derved twisted horn if I was dead twenty years!"

Holy Dick galloped up, grinning broadly.

"Hello, Bronc! Ain't that your ol' buckskin friend?"

Bronco snorted. "Yep! An' you bet she's goin' to keep movin' until she's loaded in the car and headed for trouble somewhar else. Arizona ain't big enough to hold her an' me."

Holy rode off, turning in his saddle and screaming in a shrill nasal whine that he fondly imagined was singing:

"'Tis ye-a-a-rs since las-s-s-st we-e-ee met
An' we ma-a-aa-ay not me-ee-et agin.

I stru-ug-gle to-o-oo forgit
But I stru-ug-g-g-gg-g-ll-l-ll-le aa-aal in va-aa a-in."

Holy's pony contributed to the tremolo effect by its short, nervous trot.

"I'm glad she's a gittin' offen the range," soliloquized Bronco, "but I'll always be sorry we didn't butcher her on the ranch so's I could help chaw her up. If ever I get to Heaven all I'll ask is to eat buckskin cows for everlastin'."

As he uttered the last words Bronco raced ahead, leaving Doctor Powell at liberty to laugh and wonder what the mystery of the buckskin hoodoo might be. Then his eyes wandered from the dust-cloud ahead of him to the purple-blue peaks that reached thousands of feet upward as if striving to pierce the brilliant sky; across the valley clumps of greyish brown saccaton grass, slender tufts of waving gietta interspersed by tall spikes of Spanish Dagger formed a typical Arizona landscape.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Traynor, riding up to him.

Powell's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "It's a wonderful country! How far away is Hasayampa River? I'm ready to start now for that drink!"

They laughed together as their ponies' heads were reined toward the ranch, but Powell could not resist a backward glance at the herd which had now settled down to a steady amble. The sunlight filtering through the dust formed a golden mist in which the cowpunchers and their ponies were dimly silhouetted.

"Of course there are annoyances, unpleasant people to encounter at times, bad seasons to offset the good ones," – Traynor deftly rolled a cigarette with his right hand as he spoke, his left resting lightly on the high pommel of his saddle. "Taking it all in all, though, when I ride across the valley or reach a high peak and look down where thousands of cattle graze undisturbed by the in-roads of civilization, I feel it is a royal heritage. Do you think I would barter it, like Esau, even though my menu might read, 'Pottage a la champagne and truffles'?"

"Is the role of Prodigal Son necessary to qualify for a fatted calf in Arizona?" queried Powell. "I'm as hungry as the proverbial bear. Oh, that reminds me. Bronco was bewailing the fact that a certain buckskin cow had not been butchered at the ranch. He seems a bit sensitive regarding buckskins. What's the trouble?"

Traynor's mouth twitched as he answered, "Ask him. It's too good a story for any one else to spoil in the telling."

They reached the stables and left the ponies with the Mexican stableman. As they entered the large court-yard which formed the center of the house, they were greeted by the welcome sound of the lunch bell and Fong, in immaculate white and with neatly coiled queue, smiled amiably from the dining room door.

After lunch the two men sat smoking and chatting in the deep porch between the dining room and living room, where easy chairs, a hammock, a table littered with newspapers and magazines, tempted one to loiter. The stable boy interrupted them, speaking in Mexican, and Traynor explained that there was some trouble with the acetelyn plant.

"I always take care of that myself, and unless I do so we will have to resort to coal-oil lamps. I'll be back shortly. Make yourself comfortable."

Powell leaned back lazily in his chair, trying to reconcile Traynor who had just spoken with the Traynor he once knew; a young chap fresh from college, unlucky enough to lose his last remaining relative at the same time he inherited a fairly good-sized fortune.

It had been the usual story of "wild oats." Then Traynor's revulsion had been complete, though not in time to avoid a quarrel with the girl to whom he was engaged. Exaggerated stories of various episodes, exploited by a Sunday paper, caused her to return his ring and refuse absolutely to see him or listen to his explanations.

Traynor thrashed the reporter, paid a heavy fine for that privilege and started on a trip West with no definite idea except to get as far as possible from a place filled with bitter memories.

During the journey he met a young army officer returning from leave of absence, and the lieutenant's invitation to visit Fort Grant had been accepted by Traynor. Some months later Traynor, disposing of all his Eastern interests, had purchased the Diamond H ranch, the owner of which had recently died.

In the seven years after this purchase, Cuthbert Powell was the only one of Traynor's former acquaintances who ever heard from the young rancher. Powell had promised to visit the ranch, but not until now had that promise been fulfilled. It was not easy to recognize the tanned, alert chap who grasped his hands as he alighted from the Pullman. As days went by, it was a constant source of surprise to the doctor to note that the mental change in his friend was more marked than the physical. It was as though the breadth and strength of the country had been absorbed by the owner of the "Diamond H."

Traynor returned and slipped into the chair he had vacated.

"You see, on a ranch one becomes blacksmith, veterinarian, doctor, cowpuncher, carpenter, farmer – . In fact, a veritable jack of all trades. No one cares what your family is, how much money you own or what your social status elsewhere, past, present or future, may be. It is yourself that is judged. There is no court of appeal if you are condemned. You've got to look a man in the eyes, grip his hand as a comrade, shoot as quickly as the other chap, roll in your blanket and take any weather that comes, without growling. If you can do these things the life will suit you and the vastness of the place sinks into your soul. It mends one's broken faith in humanity."

Powell, watching his friend, saw the lines about his mouth harden and knew that the memory of the past was burning like a corroding acid. Then the mood passed and Traynor turned with a half-smile.

"Well, what do you think of your first experience as a cowhand?"

"I'm thankful that I knew how to ride before I came here," laughed Powell. "That was rather a gay little nag I had this morning."

"That animal's name is Hot Tamale. The boys wanted to try you out a bit. I knew you could take care of yourself, so did not say anything. The joke is on them now; but you have won their respect and will be free from other pranks."

"I think I'll insist on riding Hot Tamale hereafter," asserted Powell. "By the way, when Limber spoke to you about that bunch of cattle, I thought I would like to buy them, provided you, yourself, did not intend to do so. Of course, I realize that I am a tenderfoot, ignorant of the first rudiments of the cattle business, but what would you advise about my locating in this section?"

"It would be a good move," responded Traynor. "Paddy's range lies between my own and the Hot Springs country across the Galiuros. He has permanent water, which is a gold mine, especially during a dry season. The mountains between here and Hot Springs are rich in feed, so Paddy's cattle work that way." He puffed silently on his cigar for a few seconds, then turned suddenly to Powell. "Look here, Cuthbert, if you are really serious about locating in this section, why don't you get in touch with Doctor King who owns the Hot Springs? The place would interest you professionally, for the water comes out of solid rock at a temperature of 140 degrees and is the purest water I have ever tasted. It is noted in the Territory as a cure for various complaints."

"I would certainly like to see it," answered the doctor enthusiastically, "if you can arrange it for me."

"King only held Squatter's Right until recently. Under that, the possessor loses title unless he stays on the ground. It is not under government survey yet, so could not be patented like surveyed land. I advised King to patent it under Indian Script and make his title secure. He has just done this. King has been hoping to erect a sanitarium at the Springs, but lack of funds, and his flat refusal to consider anyone as a partner except a resident physician able to finance the plans, has blocked his scheme."

"It might appeal to him to let me carry out my own idea of establishing a sanitarium for tubercular children in Arizona. I don't mean wealthy invalids, attended by a retinue of nurses and other impedimenta, but poor children who otherwise would have no hope of health. The climate, altitude and all conditions would be simply ideal. I should like to talk to him myself."

"Do you know that you are setting forth the very ideas that King discussed with me the last time I saw him? That was, a place for poor, tubercular children. He loves every child that he sees. His own boy died at the age of six. The mother died soon after. King gave me no details, and I doubt whether anyone else besides myself, knows this much. I fancy his thought was to make the place a memorial to the boy he lost."

"It would be a splendid idea to carry out with such a man!" exclaimed Powell, deeply moved. "How soon do you think it could be arranged for me to meet him?"

"It's a waste of time to write. No one but King and a family named Glendon live in that section. Mail lies at the Willcox post-office until one or the other happens to be in town. It's thirty-five miles from Willcox to Hot Springs, and twenty-four across the Galiuro trail from here. When Limber gets back, you and he could ride over the mountains, have a look at the Springs and talk it over with Doctor King. I feel very confident that you might join forces."

"Fine!" ejaculated Powell. "Now, what about that cattle deal?"

"You are determined to 'jump in with both feet' as the boys would say," laughed Traynor. "However, it would be wise to take that matter up as soon as possible. Paddy is a queer character, so you had better stay out of the deal until I get it arranged with him. If you make the buy and at any time wish to sell out, I will take the herd and ranch at the same price you pay for it, so you will not run any risk of being tied up here if you wish to leave."

"I asked you to tell me how far it is to the Hasayampa River?" reminded the doctor. "Even if I do not indulge in a drink from that historic stream, I am here to stay."

"You'll make good," asserted Traynor, heartily. "The man who is a real man wins out here in the end, if he lets whiskey and cards alone. Living on ranches, miles away from civilization, one does not have the problem of women. 'Cherchez la femme' does not apply to this section of the country, thank the good Lord! That's why this place appealed most strongly to me. Unless I go to Willcox I can forget there is such a creature as woman in the universe."

"All women are not the same, Allan," protested Powell, placing his hand on Traynor's arm and looking at him earnestly. "I hope the right one will come into your life some day. One who can appreciate you as you deserve, and who will be big enough and fine enough to be a wife in the best sense of the word. Why, man! Think of the pride and pleasure you would have in this place, knowing that it was the heritage of your son!"

Traynor rose hastily, turned abruptly from his friend and stood staring through the open door of the porch across the wide pastures. His face was white when he confronted Powell.

"What would you do if you found that the patient upon whom you are operating has not succumbed to the anaesthetic, Cuthbert? Cut without pity?"

"Yes," answered Powell, "if it meant life or death to waver or hesitate a second."

"I thought I was numb; that it would not hurt any more; but when you spoke of – a son – it cut into my heart. I've tried to forget – it's like burying something that is alive. In the night I hear its voice; I see its shadow even in the darkness."

He rose and moved restlessly; his face white. "No one knows what it meant to give her up. She believed those damned reports and gave me no chance to prove the truth, and I – , why – it would not have mattered of what she was accused; the blackest charges proved against her, – I would have held her and fought the world for her, innocent or guilty. I believed she loved me as I loved her – she refused to hear my story."

"Did she never know the truth?" asked Powell.

"Returned my ring, asked me to spare her the humiliation of talking to me. Yet, after I came here, I wrote telling her that the man in my automobile with that woman, was not myself. You remember the newspapers spared the woman's name. She had a husband and child – eloping with that cad, Brunton. Cheap machine broke down at two o'clock in the night. I recognized them. Put 'em in my machine and told her to get back home before it was too late. Oh, she was ready enough then to be decent. Brunton took her to her door, then he went to his place, but that fool reporter saw the number of the machine, and wrote the story. You know it. Woman's name kept out, my name not mentioned outright, but description sufficient to identify me beyond doubt. Couldn't sue the paper, my lawyer said, and Brunton lit out for Europe. Rotten mess all around.

"I wrote the full truth to Nell, begged a word from her as a man dying of thirst begs for a drop of water. She never answered the letter. A year later I wrote again, and that one was returned unclaimed."

"You say that the second letter came back unclaimed," spoke Powell, "but, you have no proof that the first one ever reached her. Had you thought of that?"

"Yes. Both letters had my Arizona address on the envelope as well as inside. When I did not hear in reply to the first letter, and it was not returned to me, I communicated with the Dead Letter Office, but no such letter had been turned over to that department. The only logical conclusion was that she did not wish to answer."

The doctor made no comment. Traynor's reasoning was too convincing for suggestions.

"Yet, I made a second effort," went on the boss of the Diamond H. "After that, there was nothing more to do but accept the situation. Now you know the truth, Cuthbert. No other woman will ever fill her place in my life, – but, I cannot keep her out of my thoughts, day or night."

"I'm sorry I spoke, old man," answered the doctor.

"I'm glad you did," replied Traynor. "Now, you understand."

As the shadows lengthened on the prairie the two friends smoked and spoke of other things. And yet – both Traynor and Powell – and many another – had read with the careless glance of the unscathed, the account of a train wreck in Kansas, in which the loss of life had been appalling, and the loss of mail had not been mentioned.

CHAPTER TWO

The cattle that Powell and Traynor had watched starting from the Diamond H, constituted the first shipment of the season, contracted to an Eastern buyer. Official inspection by the Live Stock Sanitary Board was exacted, not only regarding the health of shipped cattle, but also to protect cattlemen from rustlers on the miles of open range.

After reaching Willcox, the boys of the Diamond H drove the herd into the shipping pens beside the railroad track, locked the gates and turned with joyous expectation toward the main street of town. Limber parted from the others a short distance from the corrals.

"I'll tell the inspector we'll be ready tomorrow mornin' soon as the cars get in," he said, and without waiting reply rode toward the part of town where the more pretentious houses were bunched.

Like schoolboys out for a holiday, Bronco, Holy and Roarer raced their ponies to the Cowboys' Rest Corral. Here they were greeted vociferously by Buckboard Bill, who had retired from driving a skeleton stage and established the only place where horses or vehicles might be hired.

A few minutes elapsed before the three cowpunchers, afoot, made their way along the street. Ponies standing with dangling reins and hoofs buried fetlock deep in the fine, white alkali sand in front of the stores, told that many other cowpunchers from other ranches were in town. The Diamond H boys quickly identified the owner of each pony by its brand.

A row of irregular buildings, consisting of three stores, a Chinese restaurant, several saloons and a hotel, formed the principal street of Willcox. Facing the stores across the dusty expanse, lay the Southern Pacific depot which was the heart of the town, while radiating from it east and west, like great arteries, ran the steel tracks of the railroad. Pack burros, loaded with miners' supplies, shuffled out on the road to Dos Cabezas. Many of these tiny animals were animated woodpiles – only legs and wagging ears visible from beneath a canopy of split wood destined for a camp where fuel was not procurable, otherwise. The only break in the grey monotone of the landscape was the few cottonwood trees, planted by optimistic souls around their dwelling places.

It was a typical frontier town of three hundred people, two-thirds of whom were Mexicans speaking no English. If, by chance, a stranger alighted from the "passenger" train, the arrival of which was the most important event of each day, the town, like a naughty child with dirty face and torn clothes, looked the new-comer over critically. If he met the inspection squarely, it held out a friendly hand, and as long as he "played fair" that hand was ready to fight for him and his.

The boys from the Diamond H sauntered leisurely along the street, exchanging greetings with those they knew, until, under their usual pretext of expecting mail, they reached the combination store and post-office. It was an important duty to ascertain beyond doubt whether any letters were waiting to be claimed by Peter N. Hewland, Dick Reynolds and Henry Jackson, who were thus able to keep their legal identification. At all other times they were known as Bronco Pete, Holy Dick, whose vocabulary of cuss-words held the Arizona record, and Hell-roarer Jack, with a gentle falsetto voice which under stress of emotion became a tiny squeak. Convenience had curtailed these names to Bronc, Holy and Roarer.

Having digested the information that no mail awaited them, they entered into conversation. One could learn the news of territory, county and nation in the post-office, besides ascertaining what outfits were in town. Additional attractions were found in the posters to be read, notices of round-up work, advertisements of stolen horses or stray cattle.

It was while browsing on such literature that Bronco halted with mouth half-open and disbelieving eyes. He read the hand-written notice deliberately to the end twice before he turned to where Roarer and Holy were inspecting silver-mounted spurs – which they did not need, but intended to buy because they had to spend their money someway.

"Say, boys, thar's goin' to be a ice-cream festival tonight!"

"Shucks!" squeaked Roarer. "Try something else, Bronc. You all know that thar ain't no ice any nearer than Tucson. And nobody's fool enough to send ninety miles and pay cut-throat rates for ice just to make ice-cream, except a regular ijit."

The grin on Roarer's face and the faces of other by-standers recalled Bronco's exploit of ordering ice from Tucson, and reaching the Diamond H with nothing but a wet blanket in the wagon.

Succumbing to the alluring display in a mail order catalogue, Bronco had bought an ice-cream freezer, declaring he was going to get filled up on that delicacy for once in his life – if it took three months' pay. The episode became historic, and the freezer kindling wood.

"If you don't believe me," challenged Bronco, "come and see for yourself! What's more, it says here, it's goin' to be free with cake throwed in," he finished triumphantly.

Holy edged beside Bronco and peered over his shoulder. "Derned if it ain't so," he acknowledged at last. "But, mebbe that air paper's lyin'."

"What do you think of that?" ruminated Bronco, his mouth watering in anticipation. "Ice-cream – and cake throwed in free gratis for nothin'. Looks like some one's struck it rich – turnin' all that loose on the range for everybody to corral."

"I don't believe it," gloomily asserted Holy, who had acted as escort for Bronco and the ice that failed. "You can't get ice from Tucson so's thar'd be anything left unless you order a whole carload at onct."

"Well," retorted Bronco in self-defence, "it depends on who's cartin' the ice. You would keep on cussin' all the way to the ranch that time, Holy, an it's no wonder the ice was all melted up. But, this yer ice is goin' to be in the church and won't have its constitution tried so hard."

Holy and Roarer looked at each other uncertainly. They hungered for that ice-cream and cake; but the necessity of treading consecrated board floors made the matter serious.

"I wonder if you've got to have 'em deal you a ticket if you don't belong in the pasture?" speculated Bronco, unable to tear himself from the vicinity of the poster. "Say, Larry," he called to the store-keeper, "how about this here ice-scream layout? Is it a bluff, or sure enough free-for-all?"

"Sure enough," answered Larry. "There's a new minister come to town and the women-folks have pitched in and fixed this up so he can get acquainted with people. You boys had better take it in. Every one's going to be there. We're shutting up the stores at seven o'clock tonight, so everybody can go."

"Say, Larry, did they sure enough get the ice here all right?" questioned Holy doubtfully.

"They sure did! And that ice-cream and cake is way up in G. Home-made, every bit of it. What's more, the ladies went to the saloon-keepers and got them all to promise to shut up the saloons from seven till eleven tonight. So every one's got to go to the Festival or else go home to bed."

"I guess we're headed for the ice-scream, boys;" announced Bronco, and the others nodded acquiescence.

They filed out of the store and, after registering on the empty page of the hotel book, received a key and mounted the protesting stairs that ascended outside the hotel to the upper rooms.

While they were engaged in splashing soapy water over faces and hands, brushing dusty coats and plastering down anarchistic locks, Limber joined them and was informed of the evening plans.

"Well, I'll see you over there," he promised. "I'm goin' to supper now. Then I've got to have a talk with Paddy Lafferty and find out what he's holdin' his herd at."

He reached the door, paused and looked back quizzically. "I reckon you boys'll be all right tonight, seein' as how you'll all be in church. So long."

After supper the three cowboys joined a stream of people moving toward the church, where open doors emitted rays of welcoming light. It was a medley of humanity possible only in a frontier town. Women had resurrected dresses more or less old in style, from the depths of swaddling sheets necessary to keep them from the dust of sandstorms penetrating chests and trunks. Husbands, whose "best suits" smelled of camphor, helped shoo small girls in stiffly starched white dresses, tied with

varied-coloured sashes, and boys who twisted and squirmed uneasily under the galling yoke of white collars and shirts.

Fortified with promises of ice-cream and cake, the youngsters were distributed on a double row of chairs back of the minister and facing the audience, where they had a full view of the other victims. Many miners had wandered into town for their usual Saturday-night and Sunday recreation, only to face the unprecedented situation of the closed stores and saloons – learning that there was no "balm in Gilead" from seven till eleven, for the first time on record in the Territory, they headed voluntarily for the church. Mexicans, whose own Catholic church was only opened twice a year, when the Padre came to marry and baptize wholesale – and frequently married the parents when he baptized the infant – rubbed elbows with clerks from the stores, bartenders and prospectors.

Holy, Bronco and Roarer, with amiable, though uneasy grins, faced the pretty school-teacher, Miss Gordon, a recent importation from San Francisco. She smiled sweetly at them and held out a small, white hand, which Bronco took hold of as gingerly as though it were a hot branding-iron, and let it drop as quickly. Holy, not to be outdone, extended his own horny hand, but Miss Gordon said, "I have to ask for your pistols, please, until you are ready to go. There are so many people here tonight we had to make this rule."

In consternation that was almost paralysis, they stared at her outstretched hand, then looked at her wheedling smile. Reluctantly, half-bewildered, each man slowly drew his beloved gun from the holster in which it reposed, and helpless, watched her add it to the stack on a table behind her. Then they looked at each other forlornly. Still under the influence of that dazzling smile, they made no resistance as Miss Gordon drove them forward. They were as embarrassed as though stripped of more conventional apparel than six-shooters, but they hoped the contortions of their faces might be classed as happy smiles when they saw they were expected to shake hands with the long, rigid line of the Committee of Ladies which flanked the minister.

As Limber entered the church, he saw his outfit run the gauntlet of introductions, then they turned precipitately with relieved countenances and slipped into chairs at the centre of the room. Bronco advised this location. "Ice-cream might give out if we get too fur back. Thar's a lot of people here tonight."

A program followed in which the school children sang a song, pitched in as many keys as there were voices. A recitation by a boy of fourteen, starting in a megaphone voice, and after the fifth line lapsing into a whisper, a gasp, silence – a bobbing head – and ending in hasty exit.

Next a five-year old carefully starched youngster galloped breathlessly without a pause through a couple of verses, exploiting her knowledge that she knew the audience would be surprised that "one my age should speak in public on the stage." The applause had hardly died when a buxom lady with white kid slippers three sizes too small, appropriated the piano. She arranged her toes on the pedals, then wiggled her feet until the heels slid out. An expression of beatitude adorned her face, her chubby hands were lifted and came down on the tinkling keys.

The assaulted, helpless piano responded with the familiar "Maiden's Prayer," while an apparition in a white lace curtain materialized at the back door of the room, flopping and twisting toward the spell-bound spectators. The number had been announced as an "Interpretative dance," and Holy whispered cautiously to Bronco, "Is it an Apache dance, or has she just taken carbolic acid?"

"Search me," was the response. "Looks like a mixture of both of 'em."

The dancer was agile and angular. She had the distinction of being the only old maid in the county. Her bare, thin arms waved, gyrated, supplicated; her knees cracked audibly several times, but her mind was far away. She was mentally repeating the instructions she had studied so carefully from a book entitled, "The Art of Classic Dancing without a Teacher." Then with a last squirm, a convulsive shudder, she flopped to the floor, and ended the agony with one or two feeble kicks.

"It was a fit!" decided Bronco. "But it's the wust one I ever seed anything have."

The last number on the program was a little, weazened man with brilliant red hair, lighter red beard, faded blue eyes, who had brought a small talking machine. With stupendous dignity he wound it up, then stood with a new record ready to immediately replace the one being scratched out by the needle. The pile of records was formidable and he was apparently determined to skip none, until the head committee lady gently, but firmly and diplomatically, came to the rescue.

He bowed his appreciation of the tumultuous applause, assuming it was intended for him. It continued unabated. He opened his mouth wide, to express his gratification at the ovation accorded. The muscles of his face twitched, his eyes stared wildly and as the audience leaned forward anxiously, a terrific sneeze smote the air and a set of false teeth catapulted like a meteor in the midst of the audience.

A suppressed titter, a bobbing of bodies in the vicinity of the teeth, and then one of the children, groping on the floor, located the lost property and rose with a triumphant squeal.

"I got 'em!"

The red-haired individual grasped the rescued property with a smile that proved Nature may abhor a vacuum but sometimes permits it to exist. The owner of the touring teeth surveyed them, then nonchalantly popped them into their accustomed place before he gathered up his records, machine, and resumed his seat in the front row of the audience, which directed its attention to the minister.

He was a tall, raw-boned man in long-tailed coat and the white muslin tie needed a woman's touch, for one end had escaped and hung like the tail of a kite, as he advanced to the table on which stood a white pitcher, decorated with brilliantly coloured flowers; a part of the china set loaned by one of the ladies, whose artistic soul scorned such trifles as proportion, perspective or the mere "holding the mirror up to Nature."

In a few words the minister expressed his delight at this large gathering when he had expected a small one, and thanked the dear ladies who had arranged the beautiful program. Then he beamed graciously at the wiggling children.

"I know these little ones are growing impatient, so will only hold you long enough to relate an incident that returned to my memory as I sat here tonight.

"Many years ago I was travelling through an unsettled Southern district, and passing a high, board fence heard a child's voice praying. I stood up in my buggy and looked over. I saw a little girl, a dog, a cat and a small Jersey calf. I waited till her prayer ended, then asked, 'My dear, what are you doing?'

"'I'm playing Sunday school,' she replied. 'Kitty and Ponto and the calf are my Sunday-school scholars, and I'm the preacher.'

"A few more words and I went on my way, meditating upon the beauty of the child's devotion. I did not happen to return for nearly a year, but when I approached the fence I paused and peered over. The child was there alone.

"'How is your Sunday-school getting along?' I asked. She broke into sobs.

"'Kitty and Ponto got to fighting something awful,' she answered, 'and –'

"'And where is the calf?' I said.

"'He got too big to come – unless I had a box of grain for him to eat!'

"The story came back to me and I wondered how many of you who are here tonight will get 'too big to come' to services tomorrow morning?"

There were amused titters from many, guilty faces and sidelong glances, but the tension was relieved by the next words of the minister; "Now, we will enjoy the refreshments so generously provided by our dear sisters!"

At the back of the room were three immense ice-cream freezers. The committee, armed with heaping plates of the frozen delicacy, flanked by generous slices of chocolate layer cake, moved swiftly among the audience. Miss Jenkins carried a large tray to the group formed by Holy, Bronco and Roarer.

Their eyes appraised the huge heaps of tri-coloured cream – chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, without a doubt. Their hands were reaching to appropriate the plates when Miss Jenkins, who had danced the Maiden's Prayer, lisped affectedly, "Won't you boys help me a tiny, tiny bit, peath?"

She held out the tray and rolled her eyes pathetically. "It's awfully heavy for poor little me, and there are so many people to wait on. Won't you, peath, path it around and when it's all gone I'll have some more ready for you to therve."

Appalled they stared at her, as she continued her baby appeal and kept the tray in front of them so there was no possible retreat. The three reached out simultaneously. By some slip the tray lowered a bit and Holy's hand went into a cold, wet mess. With a half-choked oath he jerked back – and the tray crashed to the floor. A scream rose from the lady who had lent her hand-painted plates, and in the confusion that followed the three cowpunchers slipped out of the church obsessed with visions of a tri-coloured milky way that wended between gobs of squashed chocolate cake and hand-painted flowers.

Down the street they moved. It was no time for mere words. Even Holy's vocabulary was inadequate to express their feelings. Everything was dark, every place was closed. It was not later than eight o'clock and there was no place to go except to their room in the hotel.

In gloomy silence they mounted the stairs and sought refuge in the little room. Through the window they had a view of the church and the moving silhouettes within. The iron entered more deeply.

Roarer went to the window, and like the prophet of old contemplated the Promised Land that his feet were not to tread. Suddenly his gentle, falsetto voice pierced the silence.

"I hope that ice-scream will choke that outfit, especially that lace-curtain female critter! Why didn't she let us alone, anyhow? We was gettin' along all right until she went and butted in!"

There was no response, and he continued forlornly, "Gosh! There was strawberry and chocolate and vanilly all on the same plate, and that hunk of cake was as big as my fists! And every one in town's eatin' it exceptin' us!"

They lighted the tiny coal oil lamp and tried to reconcile themselves to the inevitable. As the smoke from their cigarettes filled the room their effervescent spirits reasserted themselves. Holy minced over to one of the narrow beds and robbed it of a sheet which he proceeded to pull over his shoulders and twist about his wrists while the other two watched him curiously. Then the empty corridors and rooms rang with shouts of laughter as Holy twisted, cavorted and gyrated, waved his long arms and extended supplicating hands in an amusingly accurate imitation of the dance of the Maiden's Prayer. It was their revenge for the loss of the cream.

An unexpected climax was reached when the sheet slipped and precipitated Holy full-length on the floor, but the sounds that rose on the air could never be confused with the words of any Maiden's Prayer.

Bronco leaned forward listening intently, and as silence reigned once more, he announced, "Say, Holy, that was the best you ever done yet. I counted sixteen new cuss words that I never heard you use before. That was the best Maiden's Swear I ever listened to!"

Roarer looked up suddenly. "Say, did you notice them freezers was right along side the back door? Mebbe we kin slip over and corral one of 'em without being cotched. I'm powerful thirsty and there ain't no place to get nothin' till eleven o'clock except the church."

"We could make a try at it," responded the others hopefully.

They slipped down the stairs. At the bottom, Bronco suggested they get spoons from the hotel kitchen. It was a matter of generalship to boost Roarer through the window, where his collision with pots and pans was no impediment to his triumphal return with a soup ladle and two large spoons. In the darkness Roarer was able to retain the ladle for himself, handing the spoons to the other boys. Thus equipped they sneaked to the rear of the church and crawled cautiously to the open door. One

of the cans was within easy reach – the other two some distance from the door. Conversation was in full swing and every one's attention was directed toward the minister at the front part of the room.

"Slip her quick," whispered Bronco, "and then we kin pack her out on the prairie and eat all we want."

The plan was carried out successfully. Roarer and Bronco slid the freezer until it was outside the door. Swiftly they lifted the tin can from the tub of ice and hastened away with their prize, while Holy kept pace with them.

At a safe distance from the church, they paused and removed the cover. Roarer thrust his dipper down, but had to reach further than he expected. Deeper he scooped without reward. Once more he tried. It was too dark to see inside of the can.

"Say, are you tryin' to hog it all yourself?" protested Bronco.

"Nope, Take your turn now."

Bronco wasted no time, and the other two listened to the click of his spoon against the tin can. After a few seconds, he raised up, saying, "All right, Holy. You're next!"

"How is it?" asked Holy as he leaned over the can.

"Fine as silk," was Bronco's recommendation.

"Best ice-scream I ever et," asserted Roarer.

Holy's spoon tattooed on the tin; it scraped forlornly, then there was breathless silence, a grunt, followed by the sound of an empty ice-cream freezer receiving several vigorous kicks accompanied by a terrific volley of cuss-words.

"You darn chumps," he gasped at last, "what made you go and take the one that hadn't northin' in it!"

"Oh, darn it all. What's the use," piped Roarer's gentle voice. "Let's go back and go to bed. Thar ain't nothin' else to do in this yere town."

They were settled in their beds when Limber opened the door and peered into the room.

"Hello! I been lookin' all over for you," he announced. "When did you get back? I was up here a while ago and none of you was in."

"Oh, we was just walkin' around town a piece," was Bronco's answer.

"Well, I got your guns for you. You all went off in sech a hurry from the church that you forgot 'em. It's too bad you boys didn't stay for the feed. It was fine."

"Oh, we knowed we had a hard day's work ahead of us," drawled Bronco, "so we figured we'd better come home and git to bed."

"Some one stole one of the freezers," continued Limber, soberly. "But whoever done it got the empty one."

"Served the derved galoots right," pronounced Bronco virtuously.

"That's what I say," endorsed Roarer, while Holy expressed his sentiments more forcibly.

Limber struck a match which he held to his cigarette, but his eyes regarded the grave faces of the boys. The match flickered out and the room was again in darkness, but not before they had seen the ghost of a twinkle in Limber's grey eyes.

"They got the freezer all right," he continued in the darkness.

"Who found it?" asked Bronco carelessly, pretending to smother a yawn.

"I done it," said Limber. "I was just a walkin' around town a piece, like you all was doin', and I come across it accidental like."

Silence was the only comment.

"The Inspector will be ready for us at eleven o'clock. Agent says the cars will be here by that time, so we can load out and get back to the ranch by supper."

"All right," chorused three voices in the dark, and Limber went to his own room. As he lighted the lamp there was a broad grin on his face, and his eyes danced with laughter, while he reiterated Bronco's denunciation, "Served the darned galoots right!"

Willcox slept late Sunday morning, so no one noticed shadowy figures dismount from three cowponies two hours before daylight. A struggling calf was making a heroic fight for freedom, but found itself propelled toward the picket fence surrounding the church and thrust through the gate. The mysterious men hitched the animal firmly inside the fence, then two placards of pasteboard, tied loosely together, were thrown across the calf's back and secured like a pack-saddle by strong cord. This accomplished, the three men mounted their ponies and disappeared in the starlight.

Willcox woke, rubbed its eyes and remembered a minister was to hold Divine Services that day of the year. Ten o'clock arrived. The first youngsters and their adult family connections approached the church gate. They congregated in animated groups, were joined by others, and finally spectators across the street, realizing that something interesting was detaining the congregation from entering the church, sauntered over. These inquirers hastened back to town and circulated news that caused a veritable stampede.

By the time the minister reached the scene the crowd composed the entire population of the town – men, women, children and dogs, several of the latter adding to the excitement by proceeding to settle feuds of long standing.

The Reverend Silas Hunter passed through the gate and his eyes swept the crowd, then rested on the centre of attraction – a husky, white-faced calf tethered to the fence by a rope. The animal had been lying down, in no way disturbed by the people or dog-fights, but as the Dominie scrutinized it, it rose and bellowed loudly into his face amid shouts of laughter. Across the calf's back swung the placards on which, printed in irregular letters, were the words;

I AM NOT TO BIG TO KUM

BUT FOR GODS SAKE HEAD

OF THE PROJIGUL SON

"Oh!" ejaculated the Reverend Hunter, beaming upon the assemblage. "I see we have a donation. We will keep the calf, sell it and apply the proceeds to our Church Funds. Now," he addressed two half-grown lads, "you boys sit close to the door during services and see that the calf does not get away. Some unprincipled person might try to steal it, you know. We will find a place to care for it after services."

Across the street Bronco, Roarer and Holy stood in consultation. They had hovered on the edge of the crowd when the minister made his announcement, and they realized there was to be no opportunity to get possession of that calf in order to turn it loose – as they had planned.

"Say, he sure called our hands," said Holy despondently. "He's too derved smart to be a minister. What the devil are we goin' to do about it?"

"Let him keep the doggone calf and we'll have to put up a jackpot for the feller that owns it," advised Bronco.

"It ain't marked," squeaked Roarer excitedly. "Did any of you see the brand on the cow it was with?"

None of them had noticed such a trifle in their desire to capture the calf and accomplish the trick without discovery.

"Well, I guess we'll have to own up," asserted Holy, as they dropped side by side on the wooden bench in front of the hotel, and stared hopelessly across at the calf and the widely-opened church door.

"We sure got a hoodoo on us this trip," said Bronco. "First we got buncoed out of the ice-scream by that female window-curtain, then we goes and steals an empty ice-cream freezer and now we're stuck about that air calf. It'd be easy enough, to pay for it if we knowed the mother's brand, but seein' as we didn't pay attention to that, we've just got to buck up and go to that gospel-shark and tell him we done it. There's no tellin' what he'll do about it, let alone the feller that owns the calf. Darn it all, why didn't Limber stick along with us all the time and keep us from gettin' into this mix-up?"

"Looks to me like Limber can't do nothin' more'n he's done, except he chloroforms us the next time we get in town," replied Holy emphatically.

Then the unexpected happened. The restless calf, working against the stiff, new rope, untied it. Before any one in the church had observed it, the animal was down the railroad track and pushing its way among numbers of cattle that always congregated near the inspection chutes. It moved to and fro, searching for its mother. The watching cowboys could see the two placards still firmly in place.

"Gee! If we could just get them pasteboards off'n her, nobody would know what calf it is"; Bronco said breathlessly.

"Come along!"

It was Holy who spoke and led the way to where their ponies stood tied and saddled ready for work when Limber and the Inspector arrived.

"We kin ride down there and scoop it off in no time."

The ponies dashed forward in a cloud of dust, but as they neared the group, a long-horned buckskin cow turned angrily as the calf pushed against it, and with a sidesweep of her horn she caught the string that held the placards. The string broke, but the placards snapped over the cow's eyes, twisted lightly to her horn, and with a frightened bellow she dashed down the railroad track, past the emerging congregation, with the pasteboards banging and flapping across her face until she disappeared.

"That's the fust decent buckskin cow I ever seed," said Bronco. "She may have a yeller hide but she's a thoroughbred Hereford inside, you bet!"

Then Limber and the Inspector came toward them, and joined in the ride to the corrals. As they passed the group of cattle they saw the calf contentedly taking nourishment from a cow that was evidently its mother. Bronco, Holy and Roarer cast surreptitious glances at the ear-marks and brand of the cow. Their eyes met. Idiotic grins spread over each face. The cow was branded Diamond H. None of them spoke.

The cattle were inspected and loaded without any untoward incident, and Limber breathed more easily as the time approached for him to head his men toward the ranch. It was only during leisure hours in town that mischief hatched, and the foreman could never tell what might develope in a very short time.

It was with a feeling of relief from responsibility that Limber tucked the certified check in his pocket, but as they started homeward the boys were as glad as he. Bronco's ear-splitting whistles, "Home, sweet home," found sympathetic response in the breasts of the other men. It had been a strenuous trip. The ranch loomed like a haven of rest.

The next morning Powell and Traynor discussed Paddy's proposition with Limber, as they sat in the court-yard of the ranch, after Limber had started the men for their day's work.

"Thirty-five thousand in gold coin is what he wants," said the foreman, "and his bunch of stuff is worth every cent of it with the ranch throwed in. He won't count anything under six months old, if you want to tally the herd out, and tail 'em."

"It's a good buy," Traynor replied. Then turned to Powell. "Paddy is unique. He is seventy-six years old and has toiled many years to accumulate a herd. He cannot read or write a word, and carries every item of his accounts in his memory. The storekeepers say that Paddy never makes an error when their statements for six months are read to him, no matter whether the mistake is to his advantage or not. He lives alone. Refuses to accept silver or paper money and insists on gold for all

sales. He buries his money secretly, as he has no faith in banks. He is a joke in the corrals, but no joke, however, when he is roused. A bunch of rustlers found that out to their sorrow."

Limber's eyes twinkled, as Traynor added, "Tell the doctor what happened. You were there, I wasn't."

"Well, the rustlers rounded up a band of fine horses and cattle and was makin' for the Mexican border. Pretty near got thar when ol' Paddy run into them alone. Him and me had just parted trails, and when I heerd shootin' I hurried to him. The rustlers was back of some rocks on the hill-slope, Paddy a lyin' down in back of a bit of brush not big enough to hide a good-sized jack-rabbit. His head was hid and all the rest of him in plain sight, and those rustlers was pumpin' lead as fast as they could. So was Paddy, but they had the advantage of him every way. Four of 'em back of the rocks. Paddy had shot two of their horses from under them, and they let the stolen stock run whilst they hunted shelter afoot. Jest as I got near enough to help him, he got a cartridge jammed in his Winchester, and couldn't get it out. He worked and cussed around, then got right up on his feet and walked around that hillside, as if he was prospectin' for a mine, takin' his time to find something to pry out that cartridge. And those rustlers kept popping away at him. Every time the dust kicked up close, Paddy'd squint at the rocks and cuss harder. Then jest as I got into the game, he got that gun fixed, and derned if he didn't jest walk slow up the hill, and fust thing, the rustlers come a humping out from the rocks in every direction, and all of 'em – four men – with their hands helt up over their heads, and Paddy back of 'em."

"That was one of the times Paddy did not whisper," laughed Traynor. "Well, I'll see Paddy for you, and now, Limber, Doctor Powell wants to go see the Hot Springs and talk with Doctor King."

"Doctor Powell could cut across the Galiuros the day the boys start from here with the herd," said Limber, "or, if Doctor Powell wanted to stay at the Springs a couple of days with King, I could take him there and then go on to Willcox to attend to the loadin', and go back to the Springs. Anyway suits me that suits him and you."

"That would be the best," commented Traynor. "You and Doctor Powell can leave here the same day that the herd starts to Willcox. Then let the doctor wait at Hot Springs until you get back there after the shipment."

"It would suit me perfectly," was Powell's hearty reply. "That is if I will not be imposing unwarrantedly on Doctor King's hospitality."

"If you knew him you would not say that," Traynor spoke earnestly. "He is one of the biggest-hearted men I have ever known. You and he will find many topics of mutual interest apart from your profession. I am pretty sure he will be delighted with your idea of sanitarium for children as he loves children dearly. He has not an enemy in Arizona. Every one likes him."

So the matter was settled, and four days later Limber and Doctor Powell started just after daylight breakfast for their ride of twenty-six miles across the Galiuro Mountains to the Hot Springs.

CHAPTER THREE

Katherine Glendon stood outside the door of the Circle Cross ranch house. On every side the view was blocked by the tall Galiuro Mountains above which loomed a sky of intense, glaring blue without a cloud to soften it – a sky as hard and defiant as the mountains that stared back at it; a masculine sky – a masculine country.

For eight years she had called four crude adobe rooms home. Other women had attempted to live in the Hot Springs Cañon. But the isolation was too oppressive, and one by one the squatters drifted away, leaving deserted ranches to testify to their defeat, until only the Glendons and old Doctor King, three miles distant, remained.

The morning meal was over, and Juan led a saddled pony from the stable to a hitching-post in front of the house. A tall, heavily set man slouched out, and the Mexican paused to ask; "Shall I saddle my pony, señor?"

"Not now," Glendon replied. "I want you to mend the fence in the lower pasture. When you get done you can follow me."

"Bueno, señor!" The man tied the pony and went back to the barn, and Glendon dropped on the steps of the porch, scowling at the ground. Accustomed to these spells of moodiness, his wife made no attempt to rouse him, knowing it would only increase his surliness.

A child appeared at the side of the house; glanced quickly from the man to the woman and then, seeing his mother smile, made his way quietly to her side as she seated herself on the steps. He held a book in his hand, and as he leaned against her knee, with her arm about his shoulder, turned the pages slowly, looking at her occasionally but uttering no word.

The sound of hoofs on the road caused the three to start curiously, for it was not very often that a visitor passed the Circle Cross. Only on a few occasions during the past eight years had anyone except a cowboy or a prospector entered the house. Once Doctor King had ridden down at intervals, but Glendon's aggressive disposition made these calls unpleasant for all of them.

Katherine, knowing her husband was in one of his ugliest tempers, was sorry when she recognized the white-haired old doctor, who loped his grey pony up to the gate, smiling as he dismounted and slipped his reins over the post.

"Hello, everybody!" he called cheerily. "A day like this makes a man glad to be alive, even if he is old enough to die."

Glendon stared at the ground, making no response. Doctor King, with a comprehensive look, passed him by and smilingly held out his hand to Katherine, who came down the steps while Donnie ran ahead of her, holding up his book.

"It's about Sir Galahad and the Holy Grail," the child began eagerly, "and there's a picture –"

"His mother is always filling his head with a lot of trash," growled Glendon, and the boy shrank back, the happy light dying from his little face; but the doctor smiled down at him as he took the book and turned over the pages.

"It's just the right kind of a story for Donnie to read," asserted the old man warmly. "This world would be a happier, better place if we all had the strength to live up to our Vision."

Turning to Mrs. Glendon, he continued: "I can only say 'howdy and good-bye' today. I'm on my way to see a couple of sick people on the San Pedro River, but will stop when I come back in three or four days. By the way," he said to Glendon, "when I was in town last week, there was a telegram from Fort Apache to Fort Grant saying that old Geronimo and about a hundred and twenty-five Chiricahua Apaches have jumped the reservation and the troops are out after them."

"Do you suppose there is any real danger?" asked Katherine, who had lived too long in Arizona to be frightened at rumors.

"No one can count on an Apache. He's a twin-brother to Mark Twain's jack-rabbit – 'Here he comes – there he goes!' He knows that Army officers are tangled with red tape and unable to use their own judgment in pursuing him and takes advantage of that fact. However, you know there is one safe place in Arizona and that is the Hot Springs; because the Apaches are superstitious about the water. The house is safer than any fortress for that reason. I've lived there twenty-five years and never been bothered by them. Even Indians employed as Government scouts have the fear, and will not camp within a mile of the Springs, I've been told by officers and interpreters. I wish you folks lived a bit closer to me."

He rose as he spoke. "Well, I'll stop on my way back, Mrs. Glendon. It's hardly neighbourly, rushing off this way, but you know a doctor is not his own master. Take my advice, young man," he added to Donnie, "never be a doctor, whatever you may do. Why, just think how ungrateful people are! You get them well, or try to help them, and when they see you they stick out their tongues at you!"

Donnie laughed, and King continued: "I don't believe those people on the San Pedro would mind if I took time to give you a ride. You see, a little bird told me that today was your birthday, and we haven't had a ride for a long time."

Placing the book in his mother's hand, the boy hastened to the old grey horse and was lifted up in front of the saddle. Doctor King mounted and slipped his arm about the little fellow as the pony started at an easy lope down the road towards Hot Springs lying south of the Circle Cross in the opposite direction from the San Pedro River.

"So you are six years old today?" quizzed the Doctor. "Getting a big boy now, and it won't take many birthdays for you to be a man."

"Marmee gave me a book." Donnie spoke freely, now that he was not in the vicinity of his father. "She made a cake for me with white icing and six little red candles; and Juan bought a mouthorgan for me when he was in Willcox, and he is going to show me how to play on it when Daddy isn't home, so the noise won't make him nervous. Daddy is going to Jackson Flats, and Marmee and I are going to read the book tonight. We lit the candles and cut the cake this morning, so Daddy and Juan could see it and have some in their lunch. I'll give you a piece of it when we get back home. It was awful pretty."

The doctor's hand reached over the boy's shoulder. "You can't guess what I have in it," he challenged, and Donnie shook his head slowly.

"Open my hand, and findings shall be keepings," bade the old man.

After several futile attempts, the fingers relaxed and Donnie gave a cry of delight. It was a penknife with four bright blades – a real penknife like those men carried – the first knife he had ever owned in his life.

"Oh!" the child's surprise could find no other word for a few seconds, as he surveyed his treasure; then he lifted his happy face. "I always kiss Marmee when she 'sprises me," he said shyly, "but Daddy says men don't slobber."

The grey horse came to a halt and began nibbling contentedly at the bunch grass between the rocks. He was accustomed to these halts when Donnie and the doctor rode and talked of many things. When one is young in the world it is easy to clasp hands with those who are nearing the border of another world. Together they see life in the same light. Youth has not learned to place a false value on imitations and age has turned from them in disgust. So the child and the old man understood each other.

"Once upon a time, Donnie, many years ago, I had a little boy, and when he was six years old I gave him that knife, and when I gave it to him, he kissed me. Then, afterward, we made a wonderful boat with sails. When I come back from the River, you and I will make a boat like it to sail in the big pond at the Springs."

The child looked up, then his arms went about the neck of the old man and their lips met.

As the grey horse turned back toward the Circle Cross, Donnie was silent for a few minutes, then asked, "Where is your little boy, now?"

King's face bent over the child's curls, his chin rested on his chest, his eyes were dim with recollection, as he answered gently, "He went away from me, Donnie."

"Did he die?"

"Yes; and that was when he gave his knife for them to give to me when I got back home."

They neared the porch where Katherine stood talking earnestly to her husband. Doctor King let the child slip from the saddle without himself dismounting. Donnie ran to show his new gift.

"What a perfectly splendid knife!" exclaimed his mother, opening the blades. "Why! It has four blades!"

Gratified, the child turned uncertainly to his father, holding out the knife for his inspection and approval. "See, Daddy!"

Glendon impatiently brushed away the hand and knife. Katherine's eyes dimmed with sudden tears at the crestfallen face of the boy and she held out her hand again for the knife. King's eyes flashed angrily, and he checked the horse he was riding away.

"Marmee, can't I give doctor a piece of my birthday cake?" begged the child, and Katherine with hearty assent went into the house, followed by the boy. In a few seconds they emerged, Donnie proudly bearing a bit of cake crudely decorated with white icing and a tiny red candle that had burnt low. No words had been exchanged between the two men in the interval.

Doctor King regarded the cake with admiration; ate it and was loud in his praise as the finest birthday cake he had ever tasted, and Donnie's face lighted up once more.

Glendon paid no attention to this episode and moved to the hitching-post where his pony waited. He unfastened the tie-rope without uttering a word. Doctor King studied the sullen face.

"Which way are you going?" he asked pleasantly as Glendon swung on the pony and dug spurs into the animal's sides, yanking viciously at the cruel Spanish bit as the pony started.

"Jackson Flats," was the curt answer.

"Do you think it wise? This report is reliable."

"Back tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll ride as far as the forks of the trail with you," said King, ignoring the surliness of the other man and congratulating himself upon having an opportunity to broach a topic that had occupied his thoughts for many months.

Glendon's look was not inviting, but side by side, the two men rode into the Hot Springs Cañon toward the San Pedro River. The wagon road terminated at the stable of the Circle Cross, and from there merged into a narrow, rocky trail which twisted zig-zag at the bottom of the cañon for five miles, then divided. One fork of the trail struck up the side of the mountain and led to Jackson Flats, twenty odd miles distant; the other followed the bed of the dry creek to the San Pedro River, fifteen miles away. In the rainy season the sandy cañon became a raging mountain stream that was impassable.

The two men carried on a perfunctory conversation at intervals, the doctor trying to find a suitable opening that he might not antagonize the other and so defeat his purpose; while Glendon, submerged in his mood, replied in monosyllables. King looked at the younger man in disgusted anger; but remembering the woman and child, restrained the bitter words that burned on his tongue.

"I wish it were not necessary for me to make this trip just now," the doctor said, assuming a casual tone, "but I cannot put it off any longer. I was thinking this morning, Glendon, that it might be wise to have Mrs. Glendon and Donnie stay in Willcox until things are more settled."

"If I kept them there till rumours of Apaches are settled, they would never come home at all," retorted Glendon. "You know as well as I do there is less danger when the Indians are reported off the reservation than when it is supposed they are quiet. Besides, they will be in too much of a hurry just now, trying to get across the Mexican border before the Tenth Cavalry catches them. They won't be up to any deviltry for a while."

King could not help acknowledging the truth in Glendon's words, but a sense of uneasiness oppressed him.

They reached the parting of the trails. "So long!" muttered Glendon, but King laid a detaining hand on his shoulder. Glendon turned his bloodshot eyes on the old man and hitched his shoulder from the wrinkled hand.

"Glendon, there's something I have wanted to say to you for a long time. I'm an old man, and being a doctor gives me many privileges, you know."

Glendon's lips tightened. He made no reply as he slouched in his saddle, slapping his leather 'chaps' with his quirt. King hesitated a second and then went on speaking in his kindly voice.

"My life has been long, Glendon, and my trail has led over many rough places. I'm almost at the end of it now. When one looks back, one can see more clearly. You are just starting life. It is easy to avoid the places where others have stumbled, if someone points them out. You have a splendid wife and a fine boy; the future holds many possibilities for you – possibilities that I and many other men envy. Glendon, don't sell your birthright for a mess of pottage."

The other man scowled, but was silent, and King hoped that his words were reaching the man's heart.

"Let me help you," pleaded the doctor eagerly. "I understand what a struggle it is to overcome one's self. Years ago I threw away my chances, and I know the cost. I saw friends avoid me, and I did not care. My patients deserted me, because I was not to be relied upon; my wife and boy were taken from me while I was too drunk to know they were dead. My father pleaded with me and I cursed him. Then I became a tramp, drifting from place to place, my only ambition in life to get whiskey. The train crew threw me off a freight car one day and I wandered around in Arizona, penniless and friendless, until I was able to conquer myself and find my lost manhood. Thirty years ago!" His head sunk and his voice trembled as he added, "Nothing can ever give back the things I threw away, nor can I undo the suffering I caused those who loved me best. I saw the Vision, but had not the strength to follow it."

Glendon laughed sneeringly; "So, like most reformed characters, who have had their own fling to their heart's content, you want to drag everyone by the hair of the head into the particular straight and narrow path you select for him. Thank you for your interesting sermon, King. I prefer stumbling alone. I'm perfectly able to look out for myself. By your own admission I couldn't place much confidence in your assistance. Hereafter, mind your own business and keep away from me and my family!" He jerked his pony toward the upper trail, and kicked it with his spurred heels. As it snorted and jumped, Glendon sawed its mouth with the reins.

Doctor King watched this unnecessary brutality, then moved his pony beside Glendon's. The man's eyes gleamed with fury, but the old man made one more appeal.

"Glendon, think of your wife and boy, just a moment! You are crushing all the happiness from their lives. It is taking advantage of their helplessness. Only a coward would do that!"

King had said more than he intended; but now that he had spoken his true thoughts he gazed steadily into Glendon's bloodshot eyes. He did not flinch as Glendon wheeled his horse against the grey pony. Leaning over the doctor, the other man volleyed a stream of oaths. The doctor's face expressed only pity. Glendon realized it, and his fury broke all bounds. He lifted the heavy leather whip that hung on his wrist and struck viciously at King's face. The grey pony leaped in fright, so the blow glanced to the old man's shoulder. Glendon raised the whip a second time, then let it fall by his side. There was no resentment in the doctor's face, only infinite pity as he held out his hand.

"Glendon, I understand. I struck and cursed the man who tried to wake me. It was my own father."

"You mind your own business after this," snarled Glendon. "I'm sick of your meddling, posing and preaching. I won't let you, Katherine, or anyone else dictate to me about what I shall do. Damn the whole bunch of you, anyhow!"

His pony scrambled up the steep trail under the sharp prods of the spurs and the lashing of Glendon's whip. Doctor King looked after him, sadly.

"The same old road – each one stumbling over the same rough places – learning only from his own bruises and wounds. God pity the broken hearts of those who commit no sin save loving."

The peculiar foreboding that had oppressed him all day, returned more strongly. King wondered whether he had better retrace the trail and put off his trip till tomorrow. Then, recalling that Juan was at the Circle Cross with Katherine and Donnie, and that Glendon would return the next evening, while Leon's sick baby needed sorely the doctor's care, he finally headed the grey pony toward the San Pedro determined to make the trip as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

The shadows on the ground told Katherine's practised eyes that it was nearly ten o'clock when she closed the book she had been reading to Donnie.

"We'll finish it this afternoon," she said, "and now the bread has to be worked, you know."

"I wish I could be like Sir Galahad, Marmee," answered the child wistfully. "Do knights hunt for the Sangreal any more?"

"Not in suits of armour, my dear; but we all can be like Sir Galahad, even today. The Vision of Right and Wrong comes to everyone. Then the true knight puts on his invisible armour and takes the oath of the Round Table; – never to wrong rich or poor; never to be cruel; to show mercy to those that ask it; always to be true; to take no part in wrongful quarrel, but to help the weak and helpless and serve the King loyally."

"Can't I be a knight? I'm six years old and Doctor King said I would soon be a real man."

His mother looked down at the eager face, then said tenderly, "Yes, dear. You can be mother's little Knight. Kneel down, like Sir Galahad and take the oath."

Slowly and solemnly the childish voice repeated the words of the Round Table oath, while the distant yelp of a coyote quivered faintly in the air and the hooting of an owl sounded like derisive laughter for the woman and child alone in the wild cañon. Neither of them heard the sounds. Lightly the child's mother touched him on the shoulder. Her eyes were misty as she gazed down at the little knight who must someday go out alone against the hordes of invisible foes. Would he have the strength to live up to the Vision? A leering face with bloodshot eyes seemed to confront her, and the child's father drew the boy away, saying, "He is mine as well as yours." She put the thought from her.

"Rise, Sir Knight! Defender of the weak and helpless!" she said, while her hand rested on the boy's shoulder.

The child rose with serious eyes, then remembering what the book had said, he knelt and kissed his mother's hand, looking up as he said, "Marmee, now I'm your knight really and truly and I'm going to take care of you all the time."

Katherine caught him in her arms, and the newly-made knight forgot the dignity just conferred, to nestle against her breast and talk of the wonderful things he was going to do for her when he was a big man; but not once did he speak the name of his father.

As they talked, Katherine's eyes glanced at the high edge of the cañon, where the trail led to Jackson Flats; she was surprised at seeing something that moved along the trail toward the house. Two horsemen were distinctly silhouetted against the sky, then a turn in the trail hid them from view.

She rose hastily, speaking to the child. "Your father and Juan are coming back," she said. "So, if you will run and get some dry wood, I'll start the stove."

Donnie laid his book on the front room table and hurried out the back door, but Katherine, knowing the riders would reappear at another turn of the trail, took a pair of field glasses from a nail, and focused them on the point. She wondered if her imagination tricked her when she saw several other figures in the gap where the first two had appeared. Three, this time; then more followed, a fourth group loomed for a few minutes, then they, too, vanished like wraiths.

Her breath fluttered, her heart pounded heavily, for she knew too well what that line of riders meant. The glasses crashed from her nerveless hands, and Donnie came running to her side. She looked at him, paralyzed by the knowledge that those coming down the trail toward the little home, were Geronimo, the grim, blood-thirsty Medicine Man of the Apaches, and his band of bronco Indians.

Stories of the hideous fates that had befallen women and children at various times of the Apache outbreaks, flashed across her brain. Then she recalled Doctor King's words, "You can't get an Indian

within a mile of my place." To remain in her home and barricade herself was hopeless, but she could try to reach the protection of the Hot Springs with her boy.

Donnie asked no questions when she went into the house and returned at once, buckling a belt of cartridges about her waist. A pistol swung in the holster. The field glasses had not been broken in the fall; she lifted them and looked once more at the gap of the trail. There was nothing to be seen. The Indians could not make fast time down from that point, she knew, nor could they see the ranch or cañon until almost upon the little corral back of the house.

"Come, dear," she said, as she seized the child's hand, and together they hurried down the steps through the dense mesquite and shrubbery, on the road to Hot Springs.

The child could not keep pace with her nerve-driven feet. She felt him lag, and looked down into his white face and tear-filled eyes, and realized that he understood their danger. She stopped and clasped him in her arms.

"Don't be afraid, dear. They won't find us."

He tried to smile, but his lips quivered. In her desperation a thought was born. It would be impossible to reach the Springs, but up on the side of the cañon was a large cave. She and the child had often gone there pretending they were explorers. The entrance was concealed by heavy brush and surrounded by huge boulders. It had been a place of refuge many times for the child when his father's irascible temper awakened.

"We'll go to our cave," she said, "and you know we're the only ones who can find it."

Donnie's hand gripped hers tightly, and with a sharp survey of the trail to Jackson, she started the climb up the steep cañon side, always keeping in the thickest part of the mesquite. Down the cañon they had to cross the bed of the dry creek, but once that was passed the boulders stood thickly. Slowly they made their way, for the rarefied Arizona air, the sharp pitch of the incline, the almost dead weight of the stumbling child, the fear of those who rode back of them made the climb doubly hard.

At last they reached the entrance of the cave, and sinking to her knees, she half-pushed, half-dragged the terrified child into their place of refuge. With her arm about the boy, she sat huddled against the side of the cave, but through the brush at the mouth, she could discern the Indians riding down the trail that ended at the corral. They circled cautiously about the ranch, then growing bolder broke into three bunches. Two groups approached the house from front and rear, while the third party dashed into the corral where the milk calf was kept, and in a few minutes it was dead. The Apaches, apparently in frenzied haste, slaughtered and quartered the calf, not taking time to skin the carcass which was tied in sections to the ponies. Others chased and captured all the chickens possible, wringing their necks and adding them to other plunder, until the leader, whom Katherine recognized as Geronimo, gave a command which was reluctantly obeyed. The entire cavalcade mounted and dashed down the cañon, following the road toward the Hot Springs ranch.

Katherine knew that the real danger now confronted her. Though the cañon was a mass of rocks, the roadbed where she had crossed was sandy, making it possible that her footprints might be discovered by the sharp-eyed hostiles, who were constantly on the alert for signs. A short distance from the spot which might betray her steps, several of the Indians halted suddenly, whirling their ponies and gesticulating to the others. The woman in the cave gripped the revolver more tightly.

"They will have to come up single file," she thought, then wondered why she no longer feared.

Carefully she calculated her chances, grateful for the obstructing brush, the gloom of the cave and its projecting sides which would protect her so long as her ammunition held out. One by one, she counted the cartridges in the belt, without taking her eyes from the figures in the cañon below. The distance across the cañon was so narrow, that the call of a quail on the other side of the Apaches could be distinctly heard by the woman.

"Six, seven, eight," the pitifully few cartridges slipped through her hands until the last two lay in her upturned palm.

She looked at them, then her eyes travelled to the child, and she knew that she would not flinch at the last moment. It was the only thing for a mother to do in Arizona, miles away from any living being except 'bronco' Apaches.

Donnie's eyes met hers, but he asked no question with his lips. The Indians were becoming more excited. Their voices reached the place where the mother and boy had found refuge. Katherine peered through the bushes. Geronimo was speaking, the others listened, and in obedience to his gesture, wheeled their ponies and rode up the side of the cañon opposite the cave. They reached the ridge, halted a few minutes in consultation, then turned their ponies' south-east along the backbone of the elevation until they vanished like a hideous nightmare.

"They are gone," she spoke with white-lipped tenseness, as she held the trembling boy in her arms, and the full realization of their narrow escape swept over her.

Immediate danger was past, but it would not be safe to venture from the cave. Stragglers might arrive at any moment. Familiar with Apache superstition which prevents raids or fighting during night, she decided to remain in the cave until it was dark, then creep to the house and obtain food and water. Sunrise was the favourite time with Apaches in making attacks. She dared not further attempt to reach the Hot Springs. Then she wondered if her husband and Juan had escaped the Indians or not.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was almost noon when Katherine saw two horsemen coming along the road that led from Hot Springs, and her fears returned. But as the riders approached more closely, a look of almost incredulous relief showed on her pale face. Hastening from the cave, she stood on the slope of the cañon, holding out her arms.

"Limber! Limber!" she called, half-laughing, half-sobbing.

The men jerked their ponies suddenly, stared up and exchanged a few hasty words, then sprang from their saddles and hurried toward her.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Glendon?" Limber was the first to reach her, and his face was almost as white as hers, as she swayed slightly. Her outstretched hands were caught in his firm grasp and the touch steadied her. She tried to smile into his eyes.

"I'm all right now," she said, making a brave effort to control her faltering voice, "but, you see, the Indians passed here this morning. Donnie and I hid in the cave. I thought they were coming back when I saw you."

"Whar's Glendon?" demanded Limber sharply, his eyes narrowing as he spoke.

"At Jackson Flats with Juan. They will be home tonight."

"He had no business leavin' you alone;" the cowboy's voice was angry. "He knowed the Indians was restless. I warned him last week when I seen him down in town, and he promised me he wouldn't take no chances with you and Donnie."

"Doctor King told us this morning, but we did not think there was any immediate danger, Limber," she said. The man understood the gentle reproof.

"I didn't mean to knock Glendon, but it was takin' a heap of chances, jest the same, and Glen hadn't orter done it when he knowed Geronimo had jumped the Reservation an' your ranch right on the old Indian trail to Mexico."

He turned to Powell who had been observing the woman.

"This is Doctor Powell, Mrs. Glendon. We rid across from the Diamond H to see Doctor King. He ain't home today, though."

Powell clasped the extended hand and felt the quivering nerves, but before he could speak, Donnie appeared at the entrance of the cave, his darkly-circled eyes telling the hours of fear.

"Hello, Donnie!" called Limber cheerfully, placing a calloused hand gently on the lad's shoulder. "You fooled ol' Geronimo that time, all right. We've got the laugh on him, haven't we?"

A faint smile rewarded the cowboy, whose glance now rested on the little pile of cartridges and the pistol. Limber said nothing, but stooped for the gun and ammunition, then he saw the two cartridges lying apart from the others. The muscles of his jaws twitched. As he picked up the last two, he hesitated and looked closely at the ground. His eyes travelled toward the rear of the cave then past the brushy entrance. Katherine and Powell were making their way down the side of the cañon and Donnie's hand was held by the doctor. Limber followed them, lifted the child to Peanut's back, and with a nod at Powell, mounted the other pony and rode slowly toward the ranch house, while the doctor and Katherine talking earnestly together, took a shorter cut.

They found the kitchen of the ranch in chaos. It had been rifled of all provisions, but owing to the haste of Geronimo nothing but blankets and some Navajo rugs had been taken from the rest of the house. Limber, hearing the milk cow bawling at the corral, left Powell, Donnie and Katherine in the house taking inventory while he announced his intention of milking the cow.

When the cowboy opened the corral gate, Beauty, the cow, rushed into the corral and sniffed the ground suspiciously. She caught the scent of fresh blood and lifted her head, her eyes rolling wildly as she bellowed rapidly and shrilly, sucking her breath audibly between her cries, like terrible sobs.

"You may be only a cow, but you know enough to have it hurt you jest like humans," said Limber pityingly, as he offered feed which she refused to touch. Gently he stroked her heaving sides, and she paused in her cries, looking at him with eager, appealing eyes. Then, as though understanding he could not help her, she resumed her shrill grief.

Limber tied her to the fence, milked her and carried the bucket to the kitchen. He put it on the table, glanced at the empty wood-box and left the room. In a few minutes the sound of splitting wood mingled with Donnie's chatter and Powell's occasional remarks to Limber. From the kitchen they heard the cheerful clatter of pans and the hum of an egg-beater.

The little dining-room into which Powell was summoned half an hour later, showed no traces of the hurried visit of the Apaches. The table was spread with fresh linen and decorated with a bowl of wild flowers. Despite the raid on her larder, Katherine had managed to provide a luncheon to tempt even a jaded palate.

"You must have Aladdin's lamp hidden somewhere," Powell remarked admiringly as he took the place opposite Limber.

Katherine glanced up smiling, as she served a dainty omelette.

"Nothing so magical as that," she said. "The truth is that the Indians overlooked the springhouse where we keep surplus stores. Limber helped more than Aladdin, for he milked the cow, found a few eggs and chopped the wood. With that much accomplished, any woman could manage a meal."

"We must agree to disagree," dissented Powell, but the conventional compliment was sincere. He was filled with admiration for the woman, who within twenty-four hours had gone through such experiences, yet retained her poise. "I wish some of my hysterical women patients could meet you, Mrs. Glendon."

Her surprise was not assumed. "Don't give me credit that I do not deserve," she answered simply. "When circumstances conspire against one, there is no time to plan or think. You just do things instinctively. Then, too, women living on ranches learn to adapt themselves to many things that would seem hardships to other women. Beside, you and Limber reached me just as I was beginning to quake. So I don't feel entitled to any praise."

"I am thankful that we happened to come when you needed us most," the doctor responded heartily. "We wanted to see Doctor King; but, finding him away from the ranch, Limber suggested that we ride down here and possibly find out when he might return."

"Leon's baby was sick," she explained, and Limber nodded. "He'll be back in a couple of days, he said."

"I want to find out whether the doctor will consider a proposition of mine regarding building a sanitarium at the Springs," Powell went on. "Mr. Traynor said King had such an idea, himself, and needed a partner-physician. That was how Limber and I came this way today."

"You know our Arizona custom – our homes are the homes of our friends. You are royally welcome to the best we have until Doctor King returns."

The two men exchanged sudden glances, and Limber hastened to say, "I've got to get to Willcox this evening, for the boys are on the road with a shipment of stock. But, Doctor Powell could wait here till King gets back. I was thinkin' I had better ride down to Leon's and head King back this way. Then he and Doctor Powell could talk together, whilst I kin go to Willcox by the San Pedro road instead of comin' back here."

"Don't change any plans on my account," the woman said quickly, sensing their thoughts. "My husband and Juan will be home tonight, so there is no occasion for anxiety."

"We'll wait till they come," Powell's voice was decided. "After they reach here, Limber and I can follow Doctor King. We have a new moon tonight and Limber says the trail is plain." Then Powell changed the conversation by asking Donnie if he spoke Spanish, and the child nodded assent.

"Marmee and I talk with Juan in Spanish all the time."

The doctor continued, "I used to live in South America, so I learned it down there. It varies a bit, but I have been able to understand and make myself understood, so far."

Luncheon over, the doctor went on the porch with mother and child, and Limber sauntered back to the stables to water their ponies. He was holding the halter-ropes of the animals while they stood by the water-trough, when he saw Glendon and Juan riding down the trail back of the house.

"Hello, Limber!" called Glendon as he swung from his saddle.

Limber regarded him with angry eyes. "Well, Glen, you sure kept your word to me in fine shape," he said in open disgust.

The other man shrugged his shoulders. "There's no danger. I can't sit around the place all the time holding a gun because some fool rumour is started about the Indians."

He was unfastening the double cinches of his saddle, but the leather straps fell from his fingers when Limber said slowly and meaningly; "No. Thar ain't no danger now! The whole bunch headed by ol' Geronimo passed here today. That's all!"

Glendon's face paled; "Katherine – "

Limber relented. "Mrs. Glendon seen 'em in time to get away, or else the Apaches would of got her and Donnie. She hid in a cave, and when we found her thar was two cartridges put one side. You know what that means. 'Tain't a pleasant thing for any woman to be alone and get to a point where she has to save two cartridges. No man has any right to ast her to take such chances – and if he is skunk enough to expect it, he ain't wuth doin' it for."

"How did you happen to find her?" asked Glendon, fingering the hanging strap of the cinch, and avoiding the other man's eyes.

"I come over with Doctor Powell. He's a friend of Mr. Traynor's and been at the Diamond H over a month. We come to see Doc King and rid down here to trail him up. He wasn't at the Springs. That's how we found Mrs. Glendon, and it made me hot all the way through."

"Oh, she's able to take care of herself. I guess there wasn't so much danger. Katherine always exaggerates things. She's too melodramatic. I'm used to her ways, you aren't."

Limber's eyes flashed and he grasped Glendon's arm roughly, compelling the man to face him.

"Look here, Glen! I've stood by you when every other decent man has throwed you down for a yellow cur. I done it because I thought mebbe thar was a white streak in you that didn't show on top, but the bunch you're getting mixed with ain't goin' to do you no good, and you've got to pull up mighty quick. Best thing you kin do, and what you'd oughter done without any one telling you, is quit this country. If you ain't man enough to do it for your own sake, do it for their'n;" Limber's head jerked toward the house.

"You've been a true friend, Limber, or else I wouldn't let you talk to me that way. I can't leave here now, but I will pull out as soon as I can arrange it. I give you my word of honour."

Limber gripped the outstretched hand, "I'm durned glad you told me," he said earnestly. "I'll do anything I know how for you and Mrs. Glendon any time you call on me."

Juan approached and removed the bridle from Glendon's pony, replacing a halter on it he was turning away, when Limber spoke, "Thar's fresh lion tracks leadin' to that cave whar Mrs. Glendon and Donnie hid this mornin'. I didn't tell 'em, but they'd better keep away from the cave. *Lucky the lion wasn't thar*. You lay for it, Juan."

"Si, Señor," the Mexican's promise was emphatic, and Glendon, too, declared he would "run the brute down."

"I've been having a lot of bad luck lately," Glendon said as he and Limber walked to the house. "This rough range is hard to work and cattle so wild you can't round 'em up without running all the fat off their bones. By the time they are driven thirty-five miles to Willcox, no butcher wants 'em. The longer I stay here the worse off I will be. I've written the old man and asked him to give me a chance somewhere else. He may not answer my letter, but it won't be any worse than now, if he doesn't. I didn't have enough money when I started to pay expenses."

They reached the house where Glendon welcomed Doctor Powell effusively. Something of the charm that had attracted friends in other days, still was apparent when Glendon was not drinking. Powell's keen eyes observed the handsome face marred by lines of weakness and self-indulgence.

"Glad to meet you," Glendon's voice sounded sincere and he grasped Doctor Powell's hand warmly. "We don't have very many visitors around here, but from what Limber tells me, it's been a regular reception day at the ranch. I wouldn't have gone away from the house if I had thought there was any real danger."

Powell, remembering that Limber had warned Glendon previously about the Indians, and that Mrs. Glendon had spoken of Doctor King's warning them, knew Glendon was lying, and Powell hated a liar. Glendon's eyes shifted under the steady gaze of the doctor, and he hastened to say, "I don't suppose Katherine offered you a drink. Lucky I don't keep it in the closet or Geronimo would have it by this time."

He started to get the liquor, but Powell prevented it by rising from his chair and holding out his hand to Mrs. Glendon.

"Now that you are not alone, I think Limber and I had better be on our way, trailing Doctor King. I am anxious to meet him as soon as possible."

Katherine and Donnie bade him farewell. Glendon kept talking volubly. "I'm glad we know the Apaches have passed here. No danger when you have a line on their whereabouts, but when you don't know, they always bob up. They hike for the Mexican border when the soldiers make it too hot for 'em in Arizona." Limber now led the ponies to the gate, and Glendon held out his hand to Powell, saying, "Glad to have met you, Doctor, and let me know if there is anyway in which I can show my appreciation for what you have done for Mrs. Glendon and Donnie."

Katherine smiled her gratitude, then Powell and Limber rode down the trail to the San Pedro River, followed by the eyes of husband and wife who stood on the porch of the Circle Cross ranch.

As the turn of the trail back of the stables hid the riders from view, Glendon said to his wife, "I wonder what they want to see King about. Looks urgent, chasing him that way."

"Doctor Powell said that he and Doctor King might form a partnership to build a Sanitarium at the Springs. You know that has been Doctor King's dream for many years; but he never has found any one who could qualify as physician and also have sufficient capital. I hope they may carry out the plan. It is such a splendid idea!"

"Oh, you do, eh?" Glendon snarled the words as he scowled at his wife. "Well, you may be interested in knowing that I'm figuring on getting the Springs myself. I've written father about the place. The only hitch would be that it is on unsurveyed ground, and no one can get a title except Squatter's Rights."

"But Doctor King won't sell to any one except a physician who will live there with him and establish a Sanitarium," Katherine asserted. "I've heard him say that so many times. He also told me that Mr. Traynor had made a good offer for the place, but it was refused for those reasons. Maybe Mr. Traynor wrote Doctor Powell about it. You see, Doctor Powell could qualify as a physician, and if he has not the money to finance the buildings, Mr. Traynor could supply that, or interest other capital."

Glendon did not answer, but sat on the lower step of the porch, staring moodily down the cañon trail toward San Pedro. His wife, learning from Juan that they had not eaten the lunch in their saddle bags, busied herself preparing an early dinner, for the hands of the clock announced four. She arranged the table then came to the front door and spoke quietly. Glendon did not hear her.

She moved to his side and touched him lightly on the shoulder, saying, "Dinner is ready, Jim. Juan said you had not eaten lunch."

He leaped violently to his feet uttering an oath and glaring at her.

"What are you doing? Spying on me?" he demanded furiously, and brushed past her, knocking against her shoulder as she stood in the doorway.

Her face paled. She made no answer, but turned to the dining-room where Juan was at the table. Glendon fortified his ragged nerves with a generous drink of whiskey and slumped into his chair, only to grumble at everything before him and finally push away his untasted food. Then he rose so suddenly that his chair fell backward with a crash. He started, glanced at the chair, gave it a kick and with another oath, flung himself from the house. Through the window Katherine saw him again mount his pony.

She sat with trembling lips, tears slowly forcing themselves from the drooping eyelids and wetting her white cheeks. Juan's face was filled with pity, but he knew he could do nothing – say nothing, and he rose softly and slipped away that she might be alone with her misery. Donnie's hand touched her cheek, and she opened her eyes and smiled at him, thankful that the child was safe. Nothing else mattered, after all. So while she removed and washed the dishes, she talked cheerfully to Donnie.

Back in the front room again, the boy moved to and fro, and at last turned his anxious face to his mother.

"I can't find my book, Marmee. Do you think the Indians took it?"

"Why, no, dear," she replied, looking at the table. She had noticed the book where Donnie had left it. It had been there when she called Glendon from the porch for dinner. No one had passed through the room since then but Glendon.

Carefully she and Donnie searched the room, but no trace of the book could be found. She stood staring down the front walk to the gate, unwilling to acknowledge her suspicions against the father of her child. Then on the walk she saw something that caused her to hurry out.

The wind carried a torn page to her feet. She stooped and picked up the fluttering, tell-tale bit of paper, and as she held it in her trembling hand, the words caught her eyes, "and he shall be a better man than his father." On the upper part of the page rode Sir Galahad.

"Donnie, dear," she called and the boy came quickly to her side. "Come and help me look out here for the book. Maybe we can find it in the bushes, somewhere. See, here is a page, and the rest of it must be close by."

They found it torn, soiled, the covers broken and cracked, and the child's sobs came unchecked as his mother's arms went about him; the ache in her heart was too great for tears.

"Donnie, we can mend it so it will be almost as good as ever," she cheered him, and the child's sobs were choked though the quiet tears rolled down his cheeks, as he went back to the house with his mother, the mutilated book held in his little hands.

CHAPTER SIX

In the meantime Powell and Limber were riding down the cañon, immersed in deep thought until Limber said, "Thar was fresh lion tracks leadin' into that cave."

Powell jerked about, "Good Lord!" he ejaculated, realizing what it would have meant had the brute been there when the woman and child sought the place of refuge.

"I told Glendon and Juan, and they're layin' for it, and Juan'll tell Mrs. Glendon to keep away from the cave. He won't forget it."

"Well," Powell commented, "I'm glad you told the Mexican. That fellow Glendon thinks of no one but himself. I was watching the child when his father came on the porch, and I'd hate to have any child or animal look at me with such abject fear. It made me sick with fury. How can that woman stand such a life!"

"Glen really does think a heap of her, in his own way," Limber replied slowly, "But when he gets the smell of the cork of a whiskey bottle, he goes plum loco. That's what made the row between him and his folks back East. His father has heaps of money, but won't have nothin' to do with Glen. Leastways, that's what Glen tole me hisself, onct. He said today that he's goin' to pull up stakes as soon as he kin fix it to move, and take his fambly where the Apaches can't run 'em like they done today."

"I'll give him credit for some decent instincts when he moves them to a half-civilized place; but I wouldn't take his word for anything. He's a natural liar, I think. I'm sorry for that wife of his, and for the child."

"She's one of the finest women that ever drawed breath," answered Limber. "She's stood a lot, and she'll stand a heap more."

Conversation ceased until the cowboy pointed to a high peak.

"See that peak up yonder? An ol' fellow lived thar fifteen years prospectin' for gold. Stayed all alone. He was always cocksure he was goin' to find a big mine someday. Some one called him Monty Cristy, and the name stuck to him like a cockle-burr in a horse's mane. One day I was deer-huntin' and run into his camp. He had a dugout in the side of the mountain and a tunnel whar he'd been prospectin'. I went into the tunnel to look at the ore, and found him sittin' thar against the side wall. His pick was across his knees and a piece of ore in his hand, but he had been dead over a week. I buried him up thar."

"Was the mine ever developed?"

"Twarn't nothin' to develope. The bit of rock in his hand was like all the stuff on the dump outside the tunnel. Plum worthless. Chock full of iron pyrites – not worth a damn. 'Fools' Gold' is what the miners calls it."

The cowboy leaned over and petted his pony's neck gently, then straightened up in the saddle and went on; "I've often wondered whether ol' Monty knowed at the last that it was only 'Fools' Gold.' Thar's a heap of people besides ol' Monty that keeps on diggin', hopin' for a strike and gettin' nothin' but 'Fools' Gold.' Tain't no use talkin' to them. It's the lucky ones what don't find out the truth, after they've put in the best of their lives workin' on a false lead."

Powell's thoughts went back to the woman at the Circle Cross, and he answered soberly, "You are right, Limber."

A number of buzzards circled in the cañon a short distance ahead of them, but not directly on the trail. Limber called the doctor's attention to them, and added, "We'd better go over and see what it is that interests them. Maybe only a dead cow; but when the Indians is out, you never know what you're running into. You learn not to pass anythin' by when you find buzzards."

They left the trail, worked through the dense underbrush that was matted with dead grass and other debris from past heavy floods. Buzzards flew up thickly at their approach. Then they sat looking down at a grey horse huddled in the rocks. Saddle and bridle were gone. A few feet away was the

body of an old man, his white hair clotted with blood from a bullet wound in the left temple; his sightless grey eyes upturned to the blue skies, as though in mute questioning.

"God!" ejaculated Limber, as he leaped from his horse. "It's ol' Doctor King! Damn them Apaches!"

Powell's shock was not less than the cowboy's, and he knelt beside the body of the man whom he had hoped to work with at the Springs. He did not think of the annihilation of his own plans, but the things he had heard of the kindly old man. Death had been instantaneous. The bullet had entered the left temple, ranged downward and out behind the right ear. The two men looked at each other, then Powell's eyes went up to the broken side of the cañon. From back of one of those rocks had sped the messenger of death, with no warning to the old doctor who was on his errand of mercy to a little Mexican baby.

"Why didn't the Indians take the horse?" was Powell's question.

"Because it's grey. They ain't got no use for a grey or white horse, specially when they're out for trouble."

Limber studied the ground about the horse and its dead owner.

"Too rocky to show any trail," he commented at last.

"He's been dead over night," Powell asserted as he finished examining the body.

"The Apaches have been hangin' about for several nights in the Graham range. Thar's two bunches. I seen 'em signalling three nights ago right back of Fort Grant where the soldiers couldn't catch sight of their fires. They keep lookouts on the high peaks and hold a blanket in front of the fire. Beats a telegraph office. Thar ain't nothin' smarter 'n an Apache, unless it's two Apaches. You can't trust one unless he's dead. Chances is that the two bunches figure to come together at Point of Mountains, seven miles north of Willcox. Then when it's dark they'll jump across the valley to Cochise Stronghold and work into Mexico."

"But, the soldiers could head them off," Powell interposed.

Limber snorted. "Sounds that way all right. But, if you jest look at these mountains and cañons, you'll pretty soon see that the soldiers has jest as much chanct against them Apaches as an elephant would have if you set him in a hayfield to kill a flea by trompin' on it. When they're tired of killin' people and want a vacation and no hard work, they come in and give themselves up and go home to the Reservation."

"There's nothing to be done here now, except to notify the proper authorities at Willcox, I suppose," Powell resumed. "We found him – but it's a different ending from the way we thought."

Limber unstrapped a Navajo blanket from the back of his saddle, and together they wrapped the stiffened form of the old doctor.

"Thar's heaps of people goin' to miss him," the cowpuncher said slowly, as they stood looking down. "Nobody ever called him that he didn't go, rain or shine. He never took one cent for what he done. Jest tol' 'em to feed him an' his ol' grey horse and that was all the pay he wanted. He was sure a good man;" both heads were uncovered in silent homage.

"I'll stay here," continued Limber, "if you'll ride back to Glendon's and get his spring wagon, so we kin take the body to Willcox. It'll be hard gettin' the wagon in the cañon, but I guess we kin make it. We'll lead our ponies behind the wagon."

Powell was already mounting his horse, as Limber added, "'Twon't take a Coroner's jury long to bring in a verdict. I'm doggone glad, though, we ain't a packin' Mrs. Glendon and Donnie along with Doctor King. They sure had a close call this mornin'. If Geronimo hadn't been in a hurry to get across to that other bunch, they'd sure trailed Mrs. Glendon to that cave."

"It is no place for any woman to live," Powell's voice vibrated with indignation. "I can't understand how any man could bring a woman like her to such surroundings. I'm glad he intends to move his family away. Any place would be better than this, for her."

Limber watched his companion ride off, then busied himself with a second examination of the ground in the vicinity of the dead man and horse. Satisfied at last that he had overlooked no trace, he dropped on a boulder and rolled a cigarette, but as he shook the tobacco from the sack into the brown paper, a portion of it fell to the ground unnoticed. Limber was staring into space, an expression of doubt lurking in his grey eyes.

"Derned if I kin understand why they took so much trouble hidin' their trail, Peanut," he spoke to the little pinto pony at his side. "The main bunch must of rid higher up and one of 'em come down for the bridle and saddle after King was shot; but, thar ain't a moccasin or any other track nowhars. It beats me."

When Powell returned he was accompanied by Glendon, who climbed into the driver's seat and picked up the reins after they placed King's body in the wagon. Limber, leading Powell's pony, followed the wagon, mounted on Peanut. The vehicle bumped and jerked over large rocks of a trail that never before had been traversed by wagon wheels.

Powell was not inclined to talk, but Glendon forced conversation, though it savoured of a monologue.

"King told us he had no one belonging to him," Glendon's voice broke the silence of the cañon, while the team headed for the Circle Cross. "Katherine said you expected to form a partnership with him and establish a sanitarium at the Springs. I suppose his death will alter your plans. All this part of the country, you know, is unsurveyed ground and title held by possession only. I'd have bought the Springs myself if there had been a regular title. Hesitated at it because I only could acquire Squatter's Rights, you know. However, I took the matter up recently with my father, and am now waiting his reply. I don't understand why King didn't let you know I was figuring on it. Did he give you any option?"

"No;" answered the Doctor, wondering at the statement which conflicted with what Limber had just said regarding Glendon's plans to leave the cañon. Then he recalled that Traynor had asserted King would not sell to any one except a physician who would co-operate with him in his plans. He knew the man beside him was lying for some reason, but what that reason was, Powell could not decide. "I have not even broached the matter to Doctor King. I came over today to look at the place and if it suited me, to make a proposition to him. I never met him and I don't believe he ever heard of me."

"Of course," Glendon went on, as Powell stopped abruptly wondering if Glendon had no sense of decency to keep talking while the dead man lay in the wagon they were driving, "I had no written agreement with King. Out here, a verbal contract is all we ask of a man. So I ought to have prior right because of our understanding. I don't suppose he made any will, as he had no heirs, and could not will the Springs, anyway, without a legal title to it himself. In that case, the estate would revert to the Territory. A Government Patent would have made less complication."

He glanced furtively at Powell, who made no reply, as they had reached the corral of the Circle Cross. Katherine Glendon stood on the porch, her eyes blinded with tears, her lips quivering.

Glendon climbed heavily from the driver's seat, and Powell saw that his steps were uncertain. Limber tied his pony, Peanut, and the doctor's horse to the back axle of the wagon. A few quiet words were spoken by the two men to Mrs. Glendon, then they went on their way with their tragic burden, and each man was busy with his own thoughts.

It was past sunset when they reached Willcox. After reporting the tragedy and turning the body over to the authorities, there was nothing more they could do, and Powell went to the Willcox Hotel where he obtained a room. Limber parted from him at the door.

"I guess I'd better hunt up the boys and see how things is goin' along with the cattle."

Though neither spoke of it, the uppermost thoughts in the minds of the two men was the woman at the Circle Cross, alone with a man whose indifference to her danger had almost cost her life and that of her boy's.

Back in the lonely cañon a coyote skulked past the empty house at the Hot Springs. Further down the road a woman stood at the door of her home staring into the darkness.

When she had made her final visit to see if Donnie were all right for the night, and leaned over to press a kiss on the child's cheek, something slipped from his relaxed hand. Wondering which of his toys he had smuggled to bed with him, she stooped and saw the pen-knife that old Doctor King had treasured through his long, lonely years. A wave of realization overwhelmed her. There would be no more visits from this loyal old friend, now. The future loomed ahead of her as black as the night that wrapped the cañon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The second shipment of the Diamond H cattle had reached Willcox a little after noon, and Holy lingered at the Cowboys' Rest with Buckboard Bill, while Bronco and Roarer proceeded up the street. They were not visible when Holy, hastening through the corral gate, encountered Montgomery Walton. The latter's manner was so cordial that Holy halted in surprise.

Montgomery Walton, the most unpopular man in Southern Arizona, was almost seventy years old, though as alert as a man of forty. His white, flowing hair and patriarchal beard were contradicted emphatically by ferret-like face and shifty eyes, while his oily smile exposed yellowed tusks. He owned a fairly good-sized herd of cattle that were preternaturally prolific, as his cows were very often seen with twin calves following them. Walton discouraged calls from other cattle men, and lived alone except for a half-witted Mexican – Loco.

To the disgust as well as amazement of Holy, Walton ambled along at his side, and finally, tugging at the cowboy's blue flannel sleeve, drew him to a bench on the edge of the sidewalk. Then he produced a letter, extracted a small photograph and handed it to Holy.

"What do you think about her?" asked Walton with a smirk, as he pressed more confidentially towards the cowpuncher.

Holy studied the picture of a sweet-faced girl.

"Why!" he ejaculated enthusiastically, "She's a regular peacherina. Who is she?"

Walton replaced the picture as he said, "She's coming on the west-bound train today and we're going to be married at once."

"Gee! You sly old dog!" commented Holy jocularly, while he wondered if the picture really looked like the girl, and if so, why she was going to marry a man like old Walton. Then an inspiration dawned upon him, and he turned to Walton, clapping him heartily on the shoulder.

"Well! Why shouldn't you get married, I'd like to know?" he demanded as though that privileged had been questioned by some invisible individual. "A man's age ain't to be reckoned by his years. No, sirree! I've seed some men who was ready to die of old age when they was twenty-five, and I've seed others that was young when they'd past eighty. Now, no one would ever think you was a day over forty, Walton, if it wasn't for that air white hair and beard of yourn."

Walton preened foolishly and tried to look incredulous, as he replied, "Do you really think so, Holy?"

"Sure thing!" asserted the other.

He looked contemplatively at Walton, then leaned closer and whispered, "Say, Walton, why don't you get Dunning to dye your hair and beard before the girl gets here. It'll make a difference of thirty years in your looks."

Walton hesitated. "Maybe I will," he temporized. "You see, I sent her a picture of myself, but it was taken when I was about twenty-five. So I was a bit worried how she would act when she found I was not so young as she expected. I hadn't thought of getting my hair dyed, though. It's a good suggestion, I think."

"You bet it is!" Holy waxed enthusiastic. "Women is queer critters, an' a young and pretty woman likes the man she marries to be somewhar near her own age. She don't want to risk other women thinkin' that she had to go to an Ol' Man's Home and kidnap a husband. You jest take my advice, Walton, an' have a heart to heart talk with Dunning right away."

"I'll think about it," evaded Walton, as Holy with congratulations, parted from him, knowing Bronco and Roarer could be located behind the swinging doors that led to the bar-room of the Willcox Hotel.

Holy's smile expanded to a broad grin as he recognized his friends at the end of the room and made his way to them.

"Thar's somethin' interestin' goin' to be cut loose if you fellows will chip in," he announced confidentially. "Now, don't waste time talkin' or askin' fool questions. You jest come along with me down to Dunning's and fix it up with him. We ain't got no time to lose."

Before he had finished speaking, he was half-way to the door – the other two close at his heels. Holy vouchsafed no explanations for his mysterious actions. Hurrying down the street they entered a small barber-shop which was unoccupied save for the owner. Dunning was the only barber in Willcox. He was an autocrat.

A chair, facing the wall on which was a fly-specked mirror, a row of wooden seats, and a conspicuous placard bearing the pleasant, but misleading fiction, "Fresh towel for each customer," constituted the furnishings of the place. Dunning's hair shone glossy brown; his moustache curled tightly as a pug dog's tail, a gorgeous red four-in hand, tight, grey trousers with broad black stripes made him brilliantly conspicuous among the citizens of Willcox. Between shaves and haircuts the barber delved into sentimental fiction.

With reluctance he put aside a yellow-backed novel and rose leisurely to his feet. His speculative survey was interrupted by Holy.

"Say, Dunning, you know ol' man Walton," he began.

"Lived round here fifteen years, never had his hair nor beard cut onct;" catalogued Dunning. "So derved stingy that he'd skin a flea to get its hide and tallow!"

"Mebbe you'll git a chanct at him today;" encouraged Holy. "He's goin' to git married!"

The others snorted in surprise, and Bronco announced contemptuously, "There ain't a bunch of calico in Arizona that would let him near enough to rope her, let alone carry his brand."

"Oh, you make me tired," Holy retorted. "Who said he was workin' any Arizona range? The girl's comin' from the East on today's train. He showed me her picture. I give him a fill about his white hair makin' him look old, and said he'd oughter get Dunning to fix him up. Say! – he swallered it like a rattlesnake swallows a gopher."

"She must be locoed," growled Bronco, suspiciously.

"I own I ain't been dazzled by the charm that draws her," acknowledged Holy, "but what interests me is that the Diamond H owes ol' Walton for a heap of things he ain't done. Say, Dunning, there's twenty-five pesoes for you, if you fix him good and proper. I got an idee – but you may have to go out of town for a few days."

"That's all right. Business ain't pressing. I figured on goin' out prospecting for a couple of weeks, anyhow. If any of the boys wants a hair-cut they can wait till I get back."

"Say Dunning, stay away three weeks," begged Bronco. "I'll make it thirty dollars if you do."

It was not solicitude for Dunning's safety that prompted this request, but Bronco, remembering that Dunning was the only barber, had a vision of the entire male population of Willcox sporting Rip Van Winklish hair, unless their flowing locks were mutilated by connubial scissors during Dunning's absence.

"Thirty goes," agreed Dunning. "Now, what is it you boys want done?"

Holy explained, interrupted by bursts of laughter from Bronco and Roarer, and finally, Dunning, with a grin, ended the consultation by saying, "You fellers get him in here and I'll earn that thirty."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Walton left Soto's store after giving orders that his purchases be ready when he came with his wagon at four o'clock, then he walked slowly down the street, weighing Holy's suggestion. Vanity struggled with parsimony.

He reached Dunning's shop and paused uncertainly, without suspicioning three pairs of eyes that peered from a small window in the hotel. Dunning, inside the shop, was seemingly oblivious to the man on the sidewalk but looked up with a professional smile when Walton entered the door.

"Well, Walton," Dunning's attitude was almost affectionate, "What can I do for you? Shave? Hair trimmed a leetle bit? I don't wonder you kept away from me all this time, and I'm just artist enough to say if you want me to cut off your beard or hair, I won't do it for you or nobody else. But a leetle bit of trimming would improve it lots."

"I – Do you ever dye hair or whiskers, Dunning?"

"Sure;" was the answer. "I guarantee my work and mix my own dyes, and you'd be surprised if I told you the names of people I've fixed up. But, my work is confidential. My customers trust me and I never betray them."

"Well, do you think you could fix mine?" asked Walton with an uneasy smile.

"Bet your boots! Nothing would please me better. Now, I suppose you'd want it dark, wouldn't you?"

"Black. That's what it used to be," Walton replied. "But how long will it take?"

The barber cocked his head sideways, squinted an eye critically, then walked solemnly around Walton several times, and finally slipped his fingers through the beard and hair.

"It's a fine growth," he announced. "I can finish it in an hour."

"How much will it cost?" Walton paused in front of the chair which Dunning was adjusting for him.

"Well, I usually charge fifteen dollars for such a job, but I'm willing to do it for five, if you promise not to let any one else know I cut the price to you."

"I won't give over three," asserted Walton firmly, moving to the door.

Dunning, fearing flight and the attendant loss of the thirty dollars, followed Walton humbly.

"Now, see here, Walton, why can't we split the difference? If I come down a dollar, you can sure raise one. I'll do a first-class job for four dollars. My regular price is fifteen. Why, man! It will make you look twenty years younger!"

Impervious to flattery, Walton kept edging nearer the door.

"Three and a half," compromised Dunning desperately.

"Three dollars;" declared Walton, reaching for the knob, but watching Dunning sharply.

"All right," consented the barber. "Three dollars. But don't you fool yourself into believing you are going to get an everyday, ordinary dye. It's my own invention. Guaranteed permanent or money cheerfully refunded. Results astonish everybody."

"Sure you will get it done by train time?" asked Walton anxiously, as Dunning led him to the chair and deftly pinned a sheet about his neck.

Dunning glanced at the clock, "Just time to do it fine," he assured Walton, who stretched out luxuriously, determined to get his three dollars' worth as far as possible. Dunning was engaged in mixing various liquids.

"Going on a trip?" he asked, standing with his back to Walton while he stirred vigorously.

"Not exactly. I'm going to be married. The young lady will arrive on the west bound train, and we're to be married at once and go out to the ranch."

"Well, you did the right thing in coming to me," announced Dunning, as he finished manipulating the concoction. "That white hair did make you look old, Walton, and I often wondered

why you didn't touch it up a bit. I bet when I get you fixed up, that she won't ask how old you are. Say, I'll stake ten dollars on that bet."

"Will it stay black, or have to be done over again?"

"Guaranteed permanent. Only way to remove or change the colour after it is once on, is keep the hair shaved close to the roots for six months."

Walton twisted nervously. "I wish you'd draw down that shade and lock the door. I don't want any one hanging around while you are busy."

"That's what I figured on doing," agreed the barber, acting as he spoke; but winking at the boys of the Diamond H who were sauntering past as the shade was lowered.

Walton sank back with a sigh of relief. The silence of the dimly lighted room and the movement of the barber's hands, had a soporific effect on the customer, who closed his eyes and snored peacefully, while Dunning kept a wary eye on the clock until he heard the whistle of the approaching train from the East.

"Better hurry, Walton! Train's pretty near the depot, now. I just got done in time."

Walton waked with a start as the sheet was jerked off, and Dunning's voice sounded jubilantly in his ears, "Job's done fine. I'm proud of you!"

With a hasty glance at the small mirror in the dimly-lighted room, Walton's blinking eyes saw a dark flowing beard, a mass of dark hair. The noise of the train warned that time was precious and fleeting. Thrusting the three dollars into Dunning's palm, he grabbed his hat and ran across the street to the depot, where the train was puffing to a stop.

Walton scanned the rows of windows with passengers looking aimlessly at the town. Their bored faces suddenly became animated with smiles. Walton found the tourist sleeper, where he saw a girl in a grey suit on the platform of the car descend the steps, while the porter helped a delicate-looking boy.

The bridegroom-elect moved more swiftly, and reached the girl just as the porter shook hands with the child and said, "You'll be a big cowboy before long, Ah reckon;" then the train went on its way, leaving the girl looking about nervously.

Among the loiterers at the depot, Bronco, Holy and Roarer glanced at each other in consternation.

"Good Lord!" "Holy, that ain't the girl, is it?"

Holy did not answer. The enjoyable flavour of the joke had evaporated, like a dose of castor oil in orange-juice, and a decidedly disagreeable taste remained. Holy acknowledged to himself only, that his preconceived idea of the picture as a fake, sent to old man Walton by an unattractive, elderly woman, was without any foundation. This girl was much prettier than the photograph. Any doubt as to the identity was dispelled when Walton sallied up to the girl and took off his hat with an elaborate flourish.

She started back, her frightened eyes travelling slowly over Walton's hair and beard. Meeting that prolonged glance, he attributed it to his fascinating appearance, and smirked and preened consciously.

"I'm Montgomery Walton," he said unctuously. "Everything is arranged so we can be married without delay and get out to the ranch tonight. The Justice of Peace is waiting for us."

The girl's pretty colour faded suddenly as she saw him pick up her valise with an air of proprietorship. She looked at the child, took a step toward Walton – stopped, then cried out, "No! No! I can't do it!"

Walton scowled, but controlled himself and said, "You are tired from your long trip just now, I know. It won't take long to get started for the ranch after we are married."

He beamed on the child, "Come along, Sonny."

The boy shrank back, clung to the girl, who clutched the thin little hand and looked about her desperately. Her eyes swept over strange faces, rough-looking men, then, like an animal at bay, she

ran to the waiting-room with the child, and slammed the door violently. Walton stared at the closed door, then at the valise in his hand.

The listeners outside heard hysterical sobs, and the soothing voice of Mrs. Green, the agent's wife. Walton, pale with rage, glared at the grinning faces about him, drew himself up, entered the waiting-room and closed the door behind him with a bang. The mingled sounds of a girl's sobs, a woman's angry tones, Walton's voice in *crescendo* notes, then the door opened and he dashed out, scattering those who obstructed his wildly waving arms, and stopping at the door of Dunning's shop. It was closed. A notice hung on the door. "OUT OF TOWN."

Walton hurried to the bar-room of the Willcox Hotel. His face was aflame with rage; the hand he rested on the bar was shaking as though with palsy. The occupants of the room grinned at him.

"Them the latest style in whiskers?" joked the bartender, winking at another man.

"Mind your own affairs and give me a glass," ordered Walton.

Purposely misunderstanding him, the barkeeper held out a glass of liquor and said, "You seem a leetle nervous, Walton."

The glass was struck to the counter. Walton screamed in maniacal fury, "A looking-glass is what I want, you doggone idiot! I want to gaze on my 'seraphic countenance' that seems to paralyze everybody. Look like the 'green fields of Virginia,' do I? 'Rent me out during a drouth,' will they? Where's a glass?"

"Keep calm, Walton, here's one;" the bartender handed out a small mirror.

Silently Walton gazed at hair and beard of vivid emerald green. The venomous glitter of his eyes was like that of an angry rattlesnake. He laid the glass down and spoke with a voice that was quiet, but deadly.

"Some one put Dunning up to this, and I'll find out who it was, before I get through." He flung out of the place and the men in the room glanced at one another. They knew that some day, somebody would pay. Walton was a man whose debts of personal animus, never outlawed by time, were sure to be settled in full with compound interest.

CHAPTER NINE

"The boys don't mean no harm, but it jest seems they can't come to town without things happenin' when they mix in," Limber had said when he parted from Powell.

The cowpuncher went to the corral, mounted his pony and rode down the railroad track to the shipping pens. The cattle were in good shape, gates fastened securely. No matter what the shortcomings of the boys of the Diamond H, they never slighted any detail of the work; but Limber felt the responsibility of it all.

When Peanut was properly cared for, his master ambled carelessly along the street until he reached the swinging doors of the bar-room of the Willcox Hotel.

"Any of my outfit here?" he asked the man behind the bar. "I jest got in from Hot Springs with Doctor Powell."

A number of men in the place called to him, others came nearer Limber and held out hands, and he was the centre of a small group when he uttered his next words.

"The Apaches killed ol' Doctor King last night in the Hot Springs Cañon below the Circle Cross. We jest brung in his body for the Coroner."

Exclamations of sincere regret were voiced by his hearers, for each of them could recall little acts of kindness to himself or to some one he knew. Limber was plied with questions, and gave the meagre details, but he did not speak of the narrow escape of Mrs. Glendon and her child.

Comments were interrupted as the doors swung back once more. Bronco, Holy and Roarer stood bunched together and surveyed the assemblage with brooding eyes. Then, they saw Limber. Their solemn countenances lightened, and Bronco grasped the foreman's arm, leading him to a table at the rear of the room, where they all slumped into chairs. Limber studied each face.

"Well, what have you done this time?" he asked in a resigned voice.

"Say, Limber, we're in a hell of a mess," confessed Bronco abjectly. The other two punchers confirmed the assertion by silence. "We was waitin' for you to get us straightened out, someway."

Limber made no comment until the situation had been fully explained, but his eyes were anxious and his lips harboured no smile.

"It ain't a question now of how we got into it," he finally said, assuming the onus of the episode with the culprits, as a matter of course.

They had slept side by side in their blankets, bunkhouse and range; had shared chuck and tobacco, storms and fair weather, and, if necessary, each would have used his last cartridge in defense of the others. "The wust of it was that we all promised the Boss not to stir up trouble this time. It's all right about Walton; he don't count in this deal, but it's damn tough on the woman. I don't know what to do about it."

"Gosh! Limber, we've got to fix it up – someway," Bronco's tones were desperate. "If we don't, the whole bunch of women in this yer town will be on the war-path after our scalps, and the Diamond H outfit will be huntin' new ranges. You kin lick a man if he gits fresh and sassy, but when a petticoat goes on the rampage, the only thing a feller kin do is cut and run."

"It's because a woman is mixed in it that I'm bothered," Limber went on. "You boys know the Boss will stand for pretty near anythin', so long's thar ain't women in it. He's been pretty plain about that, and it's the one thing he'll fire the whole bunch for. It's the worst mix-up we ever got into."

The foreman looked at the floor, and the other men looked at him. Limber knew he must either tell the truth and clear himself in the eyes of Traynor, or remain silent and take the blame with the others; even though this might mean losing his job as foreman of the Diamond H. His admiration for Traynor was deep and sincere. It hurt to lose Traynor's faith in him.

"We're sure all down and out," Holy's voice was lugubrious, and he let the cigarette he had made, fall unlighted on the table.

"I jest felt that if you were turned loose on the range today that you would stampede. I didn't figure you'd get here so quick with the cattle, and, the trouble about King kept me back. I wisht I'd got here sooner, so's to round you up before any damage was done. What started you, anyway, Holy?"

"I thought it was a fake picter Walton showed me, until I seen the woman get off'n the train," responded Holy feebly. "Thar's a Kid, too. 'Bout five or six years old. Kinder peaked and sickly and scarey."

A long, low whistle was Limber's only comment on this additional complication.

"She looks young to have a Kid that big," Bronco put in, "But, then you can't look inter a woman's mouth to tell her age, like it was a horse."

Limber's meditations covered many moments, but neither Bronco, Roarer nor Holy interrupted his thoughts. At last he looked up, and they leaned across the table hopefully.

"Thar don't seem anythin' to do exceptin' ask Mrs. Green to help us figure it out," was his decision.

"Gee! That's just the medicine!" agreed the rest with alacrity, nodding at each other in happy approval. "You kin sure fix it up with her, Limber," was Holy's verdict. Limber's grey eyes were sombre as he contemplated the relieved faces.

"Yep!" he said positively, rising as he spoke, "It's the only thing to do. Come along."

Consternation eclipsed the smiles; none of them got up from their chairs. Limber looked at them, then said, "Come along."

Slowly the chairs were pushed back with a loud rasping noise; slowly the sombreros were transferred from wooden pegs above the table to the heads of the three cowpunchers; slowly the spurred feet moved toward the door, passed draggingly through it, and trailed meekly behind Limber until he reached the rooms above the depot, occupied by the Agent and his wife. Limber knocked. The cowboys' hearts were thumping more loudly than Limber's knuckles, it seemed to them.

The door opened, they did not look up, but the feminine voice that bade them enter, sounded ominous. With eyes still downcast, and hats in hands, they followed Limber's heels. They saw nothing else in that room except the rugs on the floor. Then Limber's voice broke the deadly silence.

"The boys say they've got into more trouble on the range, Mrs. Green," Limber said soberly.

"I should say they have," she retorted vehemently. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves, putting a woman in such a position in a strange place! Making her the laughing stock of the whole country! She's been crying her eyes out, ever since she got here. And, you almost frightened the boy to death with your idiot ideas of fun! It takes a big brain to do those things!" she paused breathlessly to look at them with flashing eyes.

Not one of the Diamond H boys would have hesitated at any danger, but now, their one desire was to scurry ignominiously down stairs and hit the home trail without delay. They cast longing eyes at the door that led to freedom and safety. It was closed. Between them and it stood an angry woman.

"We came to you because we all are stampeded, Mrs. Green," pleaded Limber, and the men, hearing the incriminating pronoun, swore allegiance to Limber for the rest of their lives. "Can't you get us headed right, somehow?"

Mollified, she answered, "What had you thought of doing?"

No one had thought of anything, but they were all loathe to admit it, so each one cudgelled his brains vigorously.

"Say, so long as we busted up the weddin'," gasped Bronco, "we'll chip in and refund her fare – ship her back in a box car – I mean – pay her way to whar she come from. Won't we, boys?"

"Sure!" was the chorus.

Now that the ice had been broken, the situation was less strained.

"Derned – hanged – ! Oh, say, Mrs. Green! We'll do any damned thing you say, to put an end to this yer doggone millin'," floundered Holy, struggling to be intelligible without profanity. "We

never figgered it would buffalo no one but ol' Walton, and to Hell – Oh, shucks! I mean he don't count nowadays!"

Holy paused and wiped his perspiring face with a red cotton handkerchief that was not more vivid than his own complexion. His effort had been heroic. Mrs. Green recognized it, and her smile refused to be suppressed longer. A dimple sneaked into her cheek. The boys breathed more freely. Dimples didn't frighten them very badly, unless one of them was alone with it.

"Sit down," suggested Mrs. Green, "and let's talk it over together. Maybe we can work out the trouble." Roarer, Bronco and Holy deposited themselves cautiously on edges of chairs, their huge hands hanging pathetically helpless between their leather-clad knees. Their hats decorated the floor and they were conscious of tousled heads.

"You see it all came through the child being delicate. Lung trouble, the doctor said, and Arizona the only hope."

"He sure does look peaked," Bronco hastened to agree. If Mrs. Green had said the King of England was hiding in the kitchen pantry at that moment, Bronco would have backed that statement with his very life.

"Her folks are all dead," continued the Agent's wife, "and she has been supporting the child. It took all the money she had saved, to get here."

"That's tough luck," commented Roarer with a squeak of emotion. Then startled at the sound of his own voice, he subsided.

"She has got to stay in Arizona on account of the child's health," Mrs. Green explained. "Walton answered her advertisement asking for a place where she could work in return for board for herself and the child. Nobody else answered her. Then he proposed marriage, and she agreed. She says the boy means more to her than her own life."

"Well, if she wants to marry Walton," Limber volunteered, "we'll rope him and get her brand on him before you can wink, and you tell her so for us. But, I don't know but we'd be handin' her a worse deal than the fust time."

"I told her what kind of a man he was. She never wants to see him again." Mrs. Green's voice was sharp, hope seemed to die in the breasts of the four men.

"Well," Roarer's tones rose shrilly in his excitement and nervousness, "Do you think any of us'd do in place of ol' Walton? Seems to be up to one of us to make good. Of course, Limber ain't in on this deal; but the rest of us is, ain't we, boys?"

Weakly the rest assented. With deliberate cruelty Mrs. Green critically surveyed each candidate for matrimonial honours. Her eyes roved slowly from their heads to their boots, while their ears grew red, feet shuffled uneasily and mouths were compressed grimly. Cost what it might, the boys of the Diamond H were going to see the trouble straightened out. The clock measured two minutes, but it seemed two hours to those under inspection.

"I don't believe that would be the remedy," she concluded. The men sighed with unconcealed relief, and each registered a vow to get even with Roarer later on. It had been a close shave. The agony would never be forgotten.

"I think she had better stay with me until she finds work," offered the Agent's wife. "She can help me about the place, and I've got some sewing I want to finish up. Then, you know, I have to help Jack a good bit down in the office. Meantime, she could be prospecting for a place that would suit her. She understands house-keeping, cooking and has been employed in office work. So it won't be long before some one will snap her up, out here."

Limber nodded and said gratefully, "We sure are much obliged to you, Mrs. Green," then his hand was thrust into a hip pocket. Had Mrs. Green been a man, she might have been alarmed at the movement, but the hand came out clutching crumpled greenbacks. "It's up to the Diamond H outfit to look out for her till she gets on her feet good and square, and we'll sure be proud to do it."

With hasty awkwardness Holy, Roarer and Bronco added to the donation Limber laid on the table, glad there was something at last that could be done.

"I'm sure we can get things straightened out before long, some way, and I'll do all I can to help her and you, too;" promised the woman.

"I'll talk it over with the Boss when we get home," suggested Limber.

The other men looked at him quickly, but after they said "good-bye" to Mrs. Green, Limber parted from them. They sat side by side on a wooden, backless bench in front of the Willcox Hotel, and discussed the situation with its new angles.

"Limber ain't to blame, and we're goin' to let the Boss know it, too – and then we'll take our medicine like little men," was Bronco's ultimatum, which was endorsed by Holy and Roarer; but their hearts were heavy at the prospect of being "fired" by the Boss of the Diamond H. No other ranch, or Boss, or foreman would ever be the same to them.

CHAPTER TEN

Limber started the boys to the ranch at dawn, to make sure they would be safe while he and Doctor Powell attended the inquest over King's body.

Holy, Bronco and Roarer reached the Diamond H without adventure, and after caring for their ponies, grouped in the office at the end of the court-yard, waiting Traynor's advent.

One comprehensive glance told him that something had happened. "Trouble" was written in capital letters across each face. The Boss seated himself at his desk, looked up and said, "What's the matter, boys? Been fined for shooting up the town again?"

"Gee! I wisht it was that," groaned Bronco, as he dropped astride a chair with his arms draped over the back.

"Any of you killed any one?" the voice was more serious now.

"Nope! It's our funeral this time," squeaked Roarer's falsetto.

Traynor twisted about and looked apprehensively at them all. "Great guns! You haven't all gone and gotten married, have you?"

"It's worsen'n that," Holy's sepulchral accents boomed, "This yer damn fool outfit has been an' busted up a weddin'! That's all we done this time!"

The worst was over. The men relaxed and waited the effect of their news.

"Well, go ahead. Tell the rest," ordered Traynor curtly, with knit eyebrows.

Interspersed with interruptions, interjections and gestures, the three managed to acquaint the Boss with the situation. When their story ended, he said very sternly, "You boys know that I am always ready to stand by you, but I gave you all fair warning when I hired you, that if you got into any trouble or mix-up with a woman, it would mean your time. I certainly never anticipated such a scrape as this. I'm disgusted with you all!"

"We knowed that before you said it," Bronco agreed meekly, "but what we want to make plain is – we don't want Limber to get any blame for what we done. He wasn't in town when we busted loose. But Limber's liable to tell you jest as if he was right thar hisself."

"You say the woman is looking for ranch work?"

"That's what Mrs. Green told us," was Bronco's reply, reinforced by nods from the other two men. "Says she can cook an' keep house and sew an' work in a orfice, an' Mrs. Green says she can stay thar until they find work for her, somewhars."

Traynor sat looking thoughtfully at the paper-knife he held in his hand. The eyes of the cowpunchers also stared at the paper-knife, as though hoping it would solve their problem. The knife dropped on the desk and Traynor looked up.

"I'll write to Mrs. Green and tell her that if the woman wants to bring her child and come here to supervise the house, I will pay her seventy-five dollars and board her and the boy. Fong is kicking because he doesn't like the housework, and if I get a Mexican woman to come, there's got to be some one to oversee her. This is the only daylight I can see in the muddle you have made of things."

"Say, Mr. Traynor," Bronco leaned over the desk and spoke earnestly, "You tell her to say we're ready to lay down in the corral and let her put her iron on us without a squeal."

"An' we're all halter-broke, gentle and trained to feed from the hand," piped Roarer over Bronco's shoulder. Holy joined them. "If she don't find things pan out like she wants 'em, anytime, all she's got to do is chaw the rag and cuss, an' you bet your sweet life this yer outfit will see that she gets things her own way."

Bronco and Roarer nodded vehemently, and Holy waxed more eloquent. "Tell Mrs. Green if she acts like she's goin' to buck, to talk her into tryin' us out. You know, we're a Hell of a sight better'n we look or act, Mr. Traynor. I'll promise to put hobbles on the damn cuss words the minute she gits here."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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