

Bennett Henry Holcomb

Mason of Bar X Ranch



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CHAPTER I – A HARD PROPOSITION

Jack Mason, a young man of twenty-one years, was intently watching a billiard game in progress at a fashionable club in New York City. It was a hot sultry day in June and he was wondering how people could enjoy knocking a bunch of balls around a table and getting all heated up. He had about decided to take a run in his motor when a messenger boy handed him a message. It was from his father bidding him to come at once to his office. His father was president of a bank in New York and independently rich. Mason thrust the message in his pocket, musing as he did so.

“I’m in for a call from Dad, he’s probably read about the scrape the bunch and I got into last week.”

Calling one of the club members aside he demanded: “Say, Smithy, how did the story of my automobile accident leak out in the papers?”

“Don’t know, Jack,” his friend replied; “you know as much about that as I do.”

“Thought I had that automobile affair hushed up,” grumbled Mason. “What gets me,” he continued, “is how my part in the club boxing match got in the papers. I just received a message from the old man and expect he has heard all about it.”

“This won’t be the first time you have been bawled out by the old man,” replied Smithy with a broad grin.

“No, but I expect something serious this time,” declared Mason gravely. “Damn those meddling reporters!” he burst out savagely. “You know, Smithy, I have been in worse scrapes before, but always managed to patch them up some way. Now, this story gets in the papers, and that prize fight – well, I suppose the quicker I get this matter settled with Dad, the sooner I will know my fate.” He finished, starting for his car.

“Wish you luck, old man,” called Smithy as Mason started his motor, “give my best regards to your father.” This his parting shot, but Mason was out of hearing and speeding to his father’s office in his favorite racing car.

Arriving at the bank he went immediately to the private office. His father was busy reading a paper on his desk, and Mason sank indolently into a chair and waited for him to speak. After a period of waiting he got impatient and remarked:

“Well, Dad, let’s hear the fireworks.”

“Huh,” snorted his father, “you took your time getting here.”

“I started for the bank shortly after receiving your message, Dad,” he answered quietly.

“What deviltry have you got into now?” the elder man demanded sternly, pointing to a newspaper on his desk. “Here’s an account of you in the paper of going into the ring at your club and fighting six rounds, a choice bit of scandal for the society column. Not being satisfied with that you had to take a party of chorus girls out joy-riding and have a smash-up.”

“There’s no use getting excited about it, Dad. I know how you and mother feel about this affair.”

“You’re a disgrace to the family,” thundered his father. “I was going to disinherit you, Sir, but I talked the matter over with your mother, and I am going to make you a proposition.”

Mason was all attention now, he remembered once before when his father threatened to cut him off.

“Well, let me hear the proposition, Dad,” he said, his face showing grave concern.

“You know, Jack,” his father continued, “I have done better by you than you deserve. You won’t work in the bank or try to make a man of yourself. I’m through paying out good money on you for

gambling debts and to spend for drink. I'll give you one more chance and if you fail to make good I wash my hands of you. Early this morning I got in touch with a friend of mine who owns a ranch in Nevada. You go out there and after one year come to me and show me you have made a man of yourself. Then I'll start you in business."

"I can't see for the life of me, Dad, how my going out there will benefit me," he declared soberly.

"Son, I know it is a rough life, but if you come through as you should it will make a man of you. You have a good college education, and you can come back East fitted to tackle any business enterprise."

"Well, Dad, I'm game to try it," agreed Mason after calm deliberation.

"Here's your letter of introduction," said his father, handing him a letter.

The younger man, glancing at the envelope, read:

Tom Walters

Bar X Ranch, Nevada

Noting his son's look of surprise he explained:

"The nearest town is called Trader's Post, and it is about four hours' ride on horseback. I got in touch with Tom at Trader's Post by wire."

"Whew," whistled Mason, "I suppose I will have to make that trip on horseback. You know, Dad, I'm soft for that sort of thing, having had all my joy rides in a high powered car."

"Very true," admitted his father, "you have been living a life of ease and luxury, and your health is none too good. Now, I want you to get out of this rut. You will have a lot of hard work to do on the ranch, and the quicker you get used to it the better."

"You're right, Dad, but tell me more about this man Walters."

"I knew him years ago," his father began. "Tom made a deal in stocks here, married and took his wife to Nevada. He invested his money in land and a few cattle, and now owns one of the finest ranches in Nevada. I remember that they have a girl, but I can't recall just how old she is; I should judge about sixteen or eighteen."

"This promises to be interesting," commented Mason. "Do they know I'm coming?"

The elder man smiled. "You don't need to worry about that. I received a wire from Tom.

"I am sending two men with a shipment of cattle to the Post, and with orders to remain until your son arrives."

"Tom certainly showed speed," said Mason, looking at his watch. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Four P. M. I must be going if I start in the morning as I have a lot of things to see to. Good-bye, Dad; see you at dinner."

Hurrying from the office he started his car and drove rapidly home. Going at once to his mother's room he told her how he had come to an agreement with his father.

"Yes, I know, Jack," she said, "your father and I talked it over this morning. Perhaps it will be best for you, but it is hard to have our only boy leave us. Do be careful for my sake. Your sister has been in tears since I told her you are going away."

"Don't worry, mother. I'll see Ethel and explain matters to her."

In the summer garden he found his sister reading in a hammock.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, "is it true you are going away?"

"Yes, sis, I leave in the morning."

Ethel was two years younger than Jack and very fond of him.

“Listen, sis,” he said earnestly, “I want you to comfort mother while I am away, and I’ll make you a promise. After I have been on this ranch long enough to get the run of things I’ll see that you and mother pay me a visit. Won’t that be great?”

“Yes, I want to visit you,” she agreed, “but I will be so lonesome until you send for us.”

“Why, sis, you have your girl friends, and let’s see, who is that young fellow you have been going with quite steadily?” he asked, smiling down at her.

“Now, you are trying to tease me,” she answered, “that young fellow you speak of, his name is George Burk, and you know I don’t care for him.”

“Sis, you’re hard to suit, maybe you can find some one in the West to marry.”

“I don’t know, Jack, just now I’m not worrying about getting married. I hope you like it out there and make good. Mother told me that father wrote to the man who owns the ranch about your coming, and also wired him. Wish I were going with you now,” she added wistfully.

“Never mind, sis, it won’t be long before I’ll send for you and mother. Be a good girl now, and help me pack.”

Going into the house, they were soon busy packing and thinking of the future.

The next morning Mason bid his parents goodbye and started on his trip West.

After long and tiresome travel on hot and dusty trains Mason alighted at a small station on the Union & Pacific where he was to take the stage that met all trains for Trader’s Post. Walking around the small platform of the depot he spied a dilapidated stage and a scraggy looking pair of horses. The driver was busily engaged filling a black clay pipe while talking with the telegraph operator. “Starting soon?” queried Mason pleasantly. The driver turned and looking Mason over, drawled:

“Thought I was going back empty, train stopped to let off some mail, but I didn’t see you get off. Be you the man the Bar X boys are expecting?”

“Guess I am,” said Mason, smiling.

“The boys are at the Grand Hotel,” explained the driver. “Jump in, we’ll be there in about an hour.”

“It’s four miles to the Post,” he added.

It was seven A. M. and Mason was anxious to get started on the long ride to the ranch. The driver kept up a running fire of talk as the stage rattled over the rough road.

“Yep,” he was saying, “old man Walters sent two men with a shipment of cattle to the Post. They have been there two days now, and one of them is hitting up old John Barleycorn right hard.”

Having delivered this bit of news he started the team at a faster pace.

“What sort of men are they at the ranch?” queried Mason. “Does Walters allow them to drink?”

The driver shook his head.

“No, he don’t allow them to drink on the ranch, but the assistant foreman sent Scotty Campbell and Red Sullivan to meet you and Scotty had to celebrate, but a better pair of cow punchers never stepped in boots. Let me tell you one thing, young fellow.”

The driver leaned over confidentially.

“If those punchers take to you, you will have two good friends.”

They were now in sight of the town, and Mason looked it over with interest.

Trader’s Post boasted of one hotel and dance hall, a general store, and a few scattered houses. As they drew near the hotel they heard a succession of whoops that would have put an Indian to shame. Mason looked at the driver inquiringly.

“That’s Scotty,” he explained.

“Well, he’s got a good pair of lungs,” laughed Mason.

The driver tied his team and Mason followed him into the hotel. As they entered, two men at the bar turned and looked Mason over. One, a good-natured looking Irishman, seemed satisfied and asked: “Are you the man that’s going to Bar X ranch?”

“Yes,” he replied, offering his hand. “I’m Jack Mason.”

Red shook hands and roared:

“Scotty, shake hands with our new recruit.”

Scotty looked Mason over from head to foot.

“Glad to meet you, laddie,” he said slowly, as he lurched heavily against the bar. “Don’t mind me, I had to have a little fun, don’t come to the Post very often.”

Red was grinning from ear to ear.

“If you don’t get called down by Miss Josephine when we get back to the ranch, I’ll buy you the best horse on the range.”

Scotty turned and looked at Mason.

“Laddie, don’t pay any attention to Red, let’s all have a drink on me.”

“I’m not drinking, Scotty, but I’ll take a cigar with you.”

“Well, Jack, we start in half an hour,” announced Red. “I’ll strap your luggage on my horse and send the supply wagon after the rest of your stuff.”

Going out on the hotel porch, Mason watched the scene with interest.

Scotty was leading two tough and wiry looking horses. He appeared so unsteady on his feet that Red started to help him.

“Steady there!” he called out sharply.

Scotty stiffened and glared at him.

“Don’t think I’m all in,” he growled, frowning at his partner.

With a flying leap he was in the saddle and dashed up to Mason leading a spare horse.

“What kind of a horseman are you, laddie?” he asked.

“Well, I never took any medals for fancy riding,” he confessed.

Scotty grinned. “We have a nice little ride ahead of us,” he said, as he turned and watched Red coming up.

Mason mounted his horse and the party started. Scotty was leading and singing snatches of Scotch songs. Mason lapsed into a moody silence and Red looked at him curiously as they rode along. The Easterner was thinking of the girl Red had mentioned and wondered if she was the girl his father had spoken of. Turning to Red he asked:

“Who is this Miss Josephine you spoke to Scotty about?”

“That’s old man Walters’ girl,” answered Red, as he rode his mount closer to Mason’s horse.

“She’s the idol of the ranch,” he continued, “and the boys would fight for her at the drop of the hat. With the exception of one or two,” he added with an oath.

“How’s that?” queried Mason in surprise.

“Well,” grumbled Red, “there’s two cursed onery punchers on our range that I don’t trust no more then I would a rattlesnake.”

Mason glancing ahead, noticed that Scotty had pulled his horse in and was listening with jaws tightly set. “Red, why don’t Walters get rid of these men?” queried the Easterner, coming back to the subject.

“Oh, they are good men on the range, and the old man hates to let them go,” replied Red with a vicious look. “Ain’t I right, Scotty?”

“Good, hell,” the Scot snarled, “if I had my way I would have cleaned up for them long ago.”

“Well,” declared Red with a grin, “he’s got that out of his system. Scotty and those two punchers get along just like two strange bulldogs.”

Mason was getting decidedly interested. “What particular thing have you got against these men?” he asked.

The face of the cowboy took on a grim look.

“I have a suspicion they are running our cattle, and the foreman thinks so, too,” he explained, “but they are slick about it and we can’t get anything on them yet. Our foreman is sheriff of this county, and if he ever gets any evidence he will push them to the limit, for he is a bad man when

he gets started. You see, Jack,” Red continued, “there’s a ranch up the valley from us run by a man named Ricker. His boundary line touches ours and these two men used to work for him. Ricker is as crooked as they make them and we think these two men are spotting our cattle for Ricker and helping him run them over the line.”

“It begins to look as if I am going to have an interesting time out here,” mused Mason to himself.

“Do you know, Red, I think I am going to like this life; that is, if I can get used to this rough riding,” he finished tersely, as he squirmed in the saddle.

Red laughed.

“You’ll soon get used to hard riding if you stick with us,” he said.

“Yes,” chimed in Scotty with a grin, “but don’t let that redhead try to show you how to do any trick riding.”

Sullivan had a shock of red hair, but he didn’t like to be reminded of the fact.

“Why you grinning idiot,” he said with withering sarcasm, “I can stop you on any stunt you want to try with a horse.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” flared Scotty; “there’s going to be games at the ranch next month, and if you can beat me on trick riding, you can pick out the best Stetson hat at the Post that money will buy.”

“That bet goes,” agreed Red, shaking hands with him.

Mason looked on with an amused smile as he listened to the two friends wrangle.

“Scotty thinks he’s the only thing that ever stepped in boots when it comes to riding a horse,” declared Red testily.

“I don’t see why those two men you speak of should have anything against Miss Josephine,” said Mason, breaking a long silence.

“I can explain that,” replied Red with a chuckle, “one of these men goes by the name of Tom Powers. He came from the East, and is well educated. He had the nerve to try to make love to her, and one day he became offensive. Then she turned him down cold and he got sore on her. The other cuss is a half-breed Mexican, and goes by the name of Pete Carlo. He went to work with Powers for the Bar X outfit.”

“The only thing Pete can do well is to throw the reata,” broke in Scotty.

“Yes, he’s a fiend at that stunt,” assented Red. “Buck Miller is the only man on the range that’s got a chance with Pete. They had a contest a short time ago, and Buck got an even break with him. I expect – ”

Red broke off suddenly and stared hard to the right. Mason following his gaze saw a girl on horseback. She was too far off for him to make out her features, but he could see that she sat her horse with perfect ease, and was riding at a moderate pace.

Scotty saw her at the same instant, and pulled his horse sharply to the right as he whistled shrilly to her. The girl looked around and raised her hand in recognition, then bending low in the saddle she urged her horse at a breakneck pace.

“Miss Josephine herself,” exclaimed Red with a broad grin. “She’s spotted us and wants to beat us in.”

Scotty had accepted the challenge and the race was on. Soon both riders were lost to vision in a cloud of dust.

“It’s two miles from here to the ranch, and Scotty ain’t got a chance to overtake her,” Red said at last. Mason heaved a sigh of relief when Red soon after pointed out the ranch to him. It was a large roomy building with a wide porch and immense cottonwood trees for shade. Mason dismounted and followed Red who was leading his horse to the corral.

CHAPTER II – THE GIRL

Red Sullivan, having secured both horses, started with Mason to the house. As they neared the porch they heard the girl talking in a tone of reproof to Scotty. He was twirling his hat like an awkward school boy. Red stopped Mason and whispered:

“Jack, if you want to hear a man get called down right and proper, listen. That’s her father on the porch,” he added.

Mason drew back and watched the scene with keen amusement.

“Scotty!” the girl was saying, “you have been drinking, I’m ashamed of you, and of all times when you should have kept sober. What will this gentleman from New York think of us?” she demanded imperiously.

Suddenly catching sight of Mason she turned swiftly and entered the house. Red was fairly exploding with laughter at Scotty’s discomfiture.

“Come on, Jack,” he said with a grin. “I’ll make you acquainted with Mr. Walters.”

Scotty had started for the corral. As he was passing them Red could not restrain from a sly dig.

“Guess I was right on that call down stuff, eh?”

Scotty scowled and strode past him without a word.

Red introduced Mason to the owner of the ranch. Mr. Walters was a tall and powerfully built man with a face tanned and wrinkled from long exposure to sun and wind.

“So, you are Mason’s boy, eh?” he said, shaking hands with a vise-like grip. “Glad to meet you. Used to know your dad years ago back East. Hope you will like this country, great air and will do you all kinds of good.”

Mason took to him on the instant, for all of his bluff ways.

“Jack, come into the house; no, wait a minute and I’ll make you acquainted with my daughter. Josephine,” he called in a stentorian voice.

“Yes, coming, Daddy,” came the answer in bell-like tones. Suddenly the girl appeared at the door. Mason gave a start of surprise. When he first saw her on the porch with her father she was dressed in riding habit, but now she wore a dress of some fluffy creation such as the girls of his acquaintance wore back East. It was a delicate shade of blue and matched her hair which was a golden brown. Her eyes were of a grayish blue.

Taken by surprise, he could only stammer through the introduction which her father made. The girl was quick to see his distress and said:

“Daddy, you show Mr. Mason to his room while mother and I see about supper.”

“You must be about famished,” she added, turning to Mason with an arch smile.

He had recovered his composure to some extent by this time, saying, “I am somewhat hungry, Miss Walters, and accept your invitation to supper with pleasure.”

The girl hastily withdrew to help her mother in the kitchen.

“She’s a thoroughbred,” declared her father, gazing after her fondly.

While being conducted to his room, Mason attempted to show Mr. Walters the letter of introduction which his father had given him, but the ranch owner wouldn’t consider it.

“Guess I know your father well enough to recognize his son.”

After a wash and a change of clothes, Mason felt refreshed. Making his way downstairs he was presented to Mrs. Walters. It was a merry party that gathered around the supper table. Red, having been invited, told some stories with such droll wit that he kept Mason laughing throughout the meal. The girl was an interested listener and occasionally put in a word. She appeared anxious to make the Easterner feel at home. After supper the party sat on the porch while the ranch owner entertained his guest with tales of life on the range.

A little later the ranch owner excused himself, saying he was getting old and must retire early to bed. The girl coaxed her mother to remain up a little longer and soon the three were talking on general subjects. The open-hearted hospitality of these Western people was pleasing to Mason, and that night after retiring to his room, he confessed to himself that he was beginning to look upon his new career with growing favor.

The next morning he awoke to find the sun streaming in his window, and hearing sounds of activity below, he dressed hastily. Going downstairs he was greeted with a cheery good morning from Mrs. Walters who was busily preparing the morning meal.

"Breakfast will be ready in about half an hour, and you can look around a bit if you wish," she announced.

"Josephine is outdoors somewhere," she added.

Mason nodded pleasantly and started for a walk to the corral. As he turned the corner of the house he came across a sight that filled him with amusement. It was the girl; she was romping with a great St. Bernard dog.

Quickening his pace, he soon came up to her.

"Good morning, Miss Walters," he said, his eyes twinkling.

The girl looked up quickly, exclaiming,

"Oh, it's you, Sir New Yorker. Well, I wish to make a bargain with you. You may call me Josephine and I'll call you Jack."

"That goes," he agreed, falling in with her humor.

The girl was fondling her dog again and Mason murmured softly,

"Love me, love my dog."

"What did you say?" the girl asked, looking up brightly.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Well, it was something about a dog," she declared.

"You must be great friends with my dog. His name is Rover. Shake hands with the gentleman, Rover."

The dog offered a huge paw, which Mason shook in solemn friendship.

"There," declared the girl gaily, "you now have a friend for life."

"What I would like to know," he questioned, "is where all the cowboys keep themselves?"

"Oh," the girl answered. "I supposed that Red or Scotty had shown you the bunk-house. It is that building you see just beyond the corral. All the boys sleep there. Come, let's go in to breakfast."

After the meal the girl motioned for Mason to follow her. When they were outside she said:

"Daddy is down to the bunk-house. I have ordered Scotty to saddle Fleet and a horse for you; then we are going to see Dad, and I'll have him introduce you to the boys."

"Did you beat Scotty in yesterday?" he asked.

"Did I?" Josephine tossed her head proudly. "Outside of Bud Anderson's horse, there isn't one on the range that can overtake Fleet."

"Who is Bud Anderson?" he queried, getting interested.

"Why, didn't you know?" she asked in surprise. "Bud Anderson! he's the foreman of our ranch, and Sheriff of this County. He taught me how to shoot and ride. I have known him ever since I can remember."

"I do remember of Red telling about a foreman and Sheriff but he didn't mention his name," he answered vaguely.

"Here comes Scotty with our horses," the girl cried, clapping her hands with glee.

Mason was a little stiff from being in the saddle the day before.

"I'm afraid I'll prove a poor rider if I have to keep up with you, Miss Josephine," he said dismally.

The girl gave him a swift look.

“We are going to have a nice little ride and I am going to teach you how to ride fast and shoot,” she declared with fine assurance.

Mason noticed for the first time that she carried in her belt a small Colt’s revolver. Scotty had come up with the horses and after greeting him they mounted and rode slowly to the bunk-house.

“Some of the boys are riding the range, Jack,” she explained as they dismounted at the door. Putting a whistle to her lips she blew a long shrill note.

“Coming,” called a voice from within.

The door flew open and the ranch owner appeared.

“Daddy,” the girl began before he could speak, “I would like you to make Jack acquainted with the boys.”

“Jack, eh,” he said with a grin, winking at Mason.

The girl blushed and glanced reprovingly at her father.

The ranch owner stepped inside and called briskly,

“Tumble out here, boys, I want to make you acquainted with a friend of mine from New York.”

The men were soon lined up, and the ranch owner starting with the largest one of the lot, said, “Jack, this is my assistant foreman, Joe Turner.”

Then he named them in turn. Mason shook hands heartily with them all, but when he came to Carlo and Powers he took an instant dislike to them. Carlo had squinting eyes and his hand had a cold snaky feeling. Mason drew back in disgust and could hardly repress a shiver down his back.

The girl broke the tension by saying,

“Daddy, Jack and I are going to take a little ride.”

“Don’t make him tired of you the first day,” he warned her, nudging Mason in the ribs.

“That’s not nice of you, Daddy,” she called back to him as they rode off.

Mason noticed that Powers had a sneer on his face as Josephine rode past him, and it increased his dislike for the man. They had gotten well out of sight of the ranch buildings when the girl again spoke, “Jack, I am going to take you over some of our range land and in return you must tell me about New York and your folks. Also, may I ask, why did you get so confused when Daddy introduced me last night?”

“Why,” he countered, “did you rush into the house when you caught sight of me?”

“I didn’t want you to hear me calling Scotty down,” she replied demurely, “but you have not answered my question.”

“I was surprised to see you in such a pretty dress.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, her eyes opening wide, “do you think we are barbarians out here and don’t know how to dress?”

“No,” he answered lamely, “but I was pleasantly surprised with you.”

Josephine rode in silence.

“I don’t know if I am to take that for a compliment or not,” she said at last.

“I am sure I meant it for a compliment,” he interposed hastily.

“You have a ready tongue,” she laughed, “but be careful you don’t slip up.”

“How is it that I didn’t see this Bud Anderson you tell about?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, he’s away on business for Dad; we expect him back most any time now.”

They were riding at an easy canter and had covered about fifteen miles. Mason was gradually getting over his lameness of the day before. The air was bracing and spicy with the smell of sage brush. Far off down the valley he could see cattle grazing. It was his first view of a large herd. In the distance he could see the mountains with their lofty peaks looming up in majestic splendor. The grandeur of it all filled him with awe.

Josephine broke his reverie by saying, “Oh, I hope you will like it out here. Look! off there to the West is Devil’s Gap.”

“Devil’s Gap,” he repeated.

“Yes, come, we’ll ride out that way and I’ll tell you about it.”

Putting the spurs to his horse he tried to keep up with her.

“I am afraid you’re going too fast for me,” he called after her ruefully.

A silvery laugh floated back to him as she checked her horse to a slower pace. Her eyes were sparkling with mischief as he rode up to her.

“Forgive me, Sir Jack,” she said. “I forgot you are not used to the saddle.”

He looked keenly at her.

“I must appear an awful big dub in your eyes,” he said slowly.

He was thinking of the poor comparison he would make if Bud Anderson was along. A severe look came into Josephine’s face.

“If you think I feel that way,” she said gravely, “we’ll go back to the ranch.”

He laughed boyishly.

“Let’s not quarrel, you said we would ride out to this Devil’s Gap and you promised to tell me the story of it.”

“Please set the pace, but not too fast,” he added with mock seriousness.

“I said we would ride out that way,” Josephine corrected him. She was smiling now.

“Here’s a girl I can’t fathom,” admitted Mason to himself.

“I am waiting to hear that story, Josephine,” he said, coming back to the subject.

“Devil’s Gap,” she began, “is an opening in that ridge of mountains you see ahead of us. It leads up a winding trail to a plateau that joins another ridge. About a year ago a band of lawless outlaws and ex-cowboys had been operating around these parts. They were led by a desperado named Banty Hayes; he’s a cousin to the man who owns the Ricker ranch. It touches our boundary line where you saw our cattle grazing – ”

“Yes,” cut in Mason, “Red told me about this man Ricker. He says your foreman thinks he is running your cattle over the line. He also spoke about Powers trying to get fresh with you.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Powers to steal Dad’s cattle,” the girl resumed, “and as for Tom Powers, he is a sneak. But I am getting away from my story. This gang numbered about six members and they had been terrorizing the miners and ranch owners for miles around. The last hold-up they pulled off was at the little station four miles south of Trader’s Post. They held up the midnight through train, and ordered the express messenger to open the safe. He refused and they shot and killed him. It caused great excitement among the cattlemen, and the Railroad Company offered a large reward for their capture.

“A posse was hastily organized with Big Joe Turner leading them. Bud Anderson was away on business at the time. Daddy wired him to come home at once. When he arrived, Buck Miller had just ridden in with the news that they had trailed the gang to Devil’s Gap.

“Bud buckled on his guns and with Miller they beat it for the Gap. When they arrived at the foothills, Scotty and Red had received bullet wounds and were in a killing mood.

“Banty Hayes had always boasted that he and his men could hold off a regiment of men, once they had gained the plateau. They had made it a sort of a rendezvous in the past, but no one had been able to round them up.

“Bud led Scotty and Red with the rest of the posse up the Gap trail. It was a hot fight while it lasted. They forced the outlaws to the top where they made a stand. Bud and Red and Scotty charged them, their guns spitting a stream of lead. Banty Hayes was down with a bullet through his head.

“The rest of the gang seeing their leader fall, surrendered. One of the band told Joe Turner that they had intended to hold the posse off until night and make their escape.

“Most all of Bud’s men had been hit, but Joe said the outlaws were nervous for they never dreamed that Bud would dare to follow them up to the plateau. So that is the reason there is bad blood between Bud Anderson and Ricker,” the girl concluded.

They had turned and were riding the back trail. On the way home Mason told the girl about New York and his sister Ethel.

Josephine was all attention when he explained why he came to leave home, and how his father had made him a proposition to stay a year on her father's ranch.

"Do you think you can be good out here?" the girl asked mischievously.

"Yes, I think I can, with you for company," he replied, smiling.

The girl looked him straight in the eyes.

"We are going to be great friends," she said with a rare smile. "You must invite your mother and sister out here."

"I certainly will, and I am going to send for my ninety horse-power car."

"Oh, that will be fine," the girl cried with enthusiasm. "I am just crazy about riding fast. You must teach me how to drive. We will have great fun with it. We have a negro cook and the boys call him Smoke, he is so black. Bud took him on a trip to Chicago last summer and to show Smoke a good time he hired a high powered car and told the chauffeur to drive the limit.

"Well, Smoke never got over raving about that ride. Bud said his eyes fairly popped out of his head and he was scared stiff. When he got back home he told the boys in the mess room that Bud would never 'get him in one of them go-devils again!'"

Mason laughed heartily at her narrative.

The girl touched him on the shoulder and pointed in the direction where he had seen the cattle grazing. He made out a horseman coming their way.

"That's Tex," she said, "one of our boys, I can tell by the way he rides."

The rider halted and waited for them to come up. Mason noticed the cowboy took his hat off when the girl spoke to him.

"Tex, this is Jack Mason from New York," she said, introducing the Easterner.

"How de do?" he jerked out in an offhand manner, "just rode in from the boundary line. Sort of keeping an eye on the Ricker gang," he added, addressing his conversation to the girl.

"What's the matter, Tex, have they been kicking up any trouble?" she queried in an anxious voice.

"Don't exactly know," he snapped out, "they have been acting mighty queer since them two punchers joined our outfit. Joe gave me orders to keep watch of them."

Tex was a tall lanky cowboy and extremely nervous. He had a peculiar habit of pulling his belt up to the last notch and letting it out again while talking. Mason sized him up as a hard man to handle at close quarters.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"I know who you mean, Tex," the girl said, "Powers and Carlo."

He nodded grimly.

"Never mind, Tex. I guess Bud can take care of them. You ride in with us, we will tire Jack out with all our troubles."

"I reckon I could take care of them if I get half a chance," declared Tex with a grunt.

He had hitched his belt up until it seemed to Mason that his waist was small as a bean pole, started ahead, riding his horse like one born to the saddle.

The girl rode close to Mason, keeping up an easy conversation. He was surprised at her knowledge of all things in general.

"Some day," she was saying, "we will ride out to the boundary line and I will show you the Ricker ranch. It is a fine place and they have as much range as Daddy has. They have a girl working for them, too. She is Spanish and a beauty, that is, if you like a brunette." Josephine was half laughing, and watching him out of the corner of her eyes.

"I can tell better after I have seen her," he replied, evasively.

CHAPTER III – MASON MEETS THE SHERIFF

They had arrived at the bunk-house and Tex was talking to a man in a dusty khaki suit. The girl saw him and with a bound was out of the saddle and shaking hands with him. Mason knew that this man was Bud Anderson whom the girl had talked so much about.

Tex had gone on ahead to the corral. Mason paused, and was slowly stroking his horse's mane when Josephine suddenly turned and motioned to him.

"Tex tells me the Ricker gang are acting suspicious," he overheard her saying in a strained voice as he rode up.

The man in the dusty khaki suit muttered something under his breath. Josephine was plainly ill at ease.

"Mr. Mason, I want to make you acquainted with Bud Anderson, our sheriff," she said in a low voice.

Mason shook hands and winced. Anderson had a grip of steel. He was built on the lines of an athlete with powerful shoulders and an easy carriage that denoted quickness of action. He had sharp, piercing gray eyes that seemed to read one's innermost thought. Standing close on to six feet, he was a magnificent specimen of manhood.

"Mr. Mason, you have come at just the right time if you like excitement," he said, looking the Easterner over sharply.

"That's my middle name," returned Mason easily.

Anderson nodded approval.

"We are going to have some stormy times around these parts," he declared. "I understand that Miss Josephine has told you about some of our bad neighbors, the Ricker outfit.

"Well," he went on, "I just discovered today that four more men joined forces with them, and I took the trouble to look up their names. They are the same bunch I rounded up in that shooting scrape five years ago," he concluded.

"Oh, I remember," the girl cried in evident distress, "they wrote you from prison that they would get you when their term was up."

They had turned their horses into the corral and were walking slowly to the house. Anderson shut up like a clam and refused to say anything further on the subject. Mason figured it was on account of the nervousness of the girl. That night Anderson told Mason all the ins and outs of the affair.

The trouble had occurred in a small town called Atwater, situated a few miles from Trader's Post. Anderson having business to attend to there had stumbled on to the case shortly after it happened.

An old retired silver miner living alone in a cabin had been set upon and robbed by four men. He was found bound and gagged, with a bullet wound in his shoulder.

Anderson took the trail and followed it untiringly for a week until he landed his men. After being convicted and sentenced to five years in prison they had friends write the sheriff a letter swearing vengeance after their term expired.

Two weeks passed by and nothing of importance had occurred in the actions of the Ricker faction to verify the suspicions of Tex. Mason took long rides each day and got so he could keep up with the best riders. His face had taken on a deep tan, his wind was good and his muscles were like iron.

"If I felt any better I couldn't stand it, I'd be in the hospital," he declared one day to the ranch owner, in answer to a query as to his health.

His thoughts often turned to home and at times he had to fight hard to overcome a fierce longing to chuck up the whole thing and return East to his old haunts and habits.

“But I won’t,” he gritted to himself, “I told Dad I’d be game, and I’ll stick. When I get that racing car of mine out here I’ll make the natives gasp.”

Then he remembered he had promised the girl he would teach her how to drive, and his thoughts grew tender, for he admitted to himself that he was growing in love with her each day. Then he thought of her deep friendship for Anderson and his face clouded.

Mason had started out alone this morning and was riding a horse given him by the ranch owner. He had determined to see the Ricker ranch and pay her owners a visit.

“If ever I get in a scrap with Bud it will be over Josephine,” he said aloud to his horse. “Still, he has always used me white, eh, Sport, old boy?”

The horse raised his ears as though in sympathy with his master.

Mason had been covering ground at a good clip while voicing expression to his thoughts. An hour later the dim outline of the Ricker ranch came into view. He intended to make a short stay at the ranch and then make for Trader’s Post. He wanted to send a hurry order home for his car which he had ordered the week before.

Mason slowed his horse down to a walk as he came up to the ranch and was eagerly scanning the premises for signs of life. A moment later he dismounted and tied his horse to a post of a low porch that ran the entire length of the ranch building. About the center of the porch there was a door leading into a spacious room filled with saddles, boots and other cowboy paraphernalia.

He boldly tried the door and found it unlocked.

A spirit of adventure seized him and he flung the door open and entered the room. As he did so, he failed to notice a misshapen creature, who had watched him with bright, gleaming eyes, disappear with lightning rapidity through a door at the end of the building.

The place seemed deserted, but what impressed Mason most was the fact that the boots, spurs and other trappings were richly studded and embossed.

“Hum,” mused Mason softly, “pretty swell outfit for a bunch of low down cattle thieves as Bud seems to think they are.”

He had about made up his mind to make a tour of all the rooms and had started towards a door leading into a hall when he heard a noise behind him.

“Move, and I shoot!” the command was fairly barked at him.

Quickly he raised his hands above his head, glancing over his shoulder as he did so.

Through a hole in the wall a bony hand produced, grasping a long blue-barreled Colt aimed directly at his head. Mason heard his captor fumbling with a lock and slowly a door swung outward revealing to his astonished gaze the most hideous-looking object he had ever set eyes upon. It was a hunchback with massive frame and great powerful arms that reached to his knees.

He advanced slowly towards Mason with a horrible leer on his lips, eyes twitching and bright with rage. Mason’s thoughts flew swiftly as he watched the hunchback close in on him.

He had come away from the ranch unarmed as he never had cared for the use of firearms. Now, he wished most heartily that he had taken Josephine’s advice when one day she had urged him to carry a gun.

“Guess I’ve got maw’s fool in a fuss,” he said grimly to himself as he braced his body for a struggle. “This thing is dippy or I’m foolish.”

When within a few feet of Mason the hunchback suddenly dropped his revolver and grappled with him.

Mason met the onslaught with a terrific swing to the dwarf’s jaw. Hard as the blow was, it did not seem to have any effect. Mason felt the bony hands of his assailant close about his throat with crushing force. Bright lights flashed before his eyes and he could hear the hunchback’s breath come and go in a sharp whistle. Mason realized the hunchback had him at a disadvantage, and allowing his body to become limp, he sank slowly to his knees. The ruse worked, for the hunchback released the strangle hold about his neck.

Like a flash Mason straightened up and throwing his left arm around his assailant's neck he seized his right arm and exerting tremendous pressure forced it sharply up between his shoulder blades. It was the hammerlock and he soon had the hunchback begging for mercy.

Mason was thoroughly angered by this time and threw the loathsome creature into the corner, a groveling mass.

Picking up the gun he slipped it into his pocket.

"Why did you wish to take my life?" he demanded, gazing down at his fallen foe.

"I know you," the dwarf grated in a cracked voice. "Your name is Mason, the new man at Walters' ranch, and I got orders to watch you."

"Why watch me?" Mason asked, his curiosity aroused.

"That's for you to find out," the dwarf answered, a crafty look coming into his eyes.

Mason suddenly whipped the gun out of his pocket and leveled it at the dwarf.

"Tell me the truth," he commanded sternly.

"I thought you was trying to steal something, and there was nobody about and I was left to guard the place," the dwarf whined.

"That's a lie and you know it," Mason retorted, his ire rising once more. "You claim you were told to watch me, who gave you those orders?"

Great beads of sweat stood out on the dwarf's ugly face, and his claw-like fingers were working like the talons of some great bird.

"Ricker gave me orders to watch you. He has spies everywhere, he knows you and your father and hates you both. If you want to save your hide you had better clear out of these parts," he snarled at last.

Mason was astounded. That Ricker should know his father and have set this half-witted dwarf to watching his son was a puzzle. He was inclined to doubt the dwarf's sanity. So far as he knew his father had no enemies in the world. He determined to sound the dwarf thoroughly.

"Stand up," he commanded him sternly, holding the gun into the pit of the dwarf's stomach. "I am going to get at the bottom of this thing. What do you mean by saying that Ricker hates my father?" The dwarf rose in abject terror and started to mumble through chattering teeth.

"Cut that out and talk like a man," Mason commanded him sharply.

"Ricker claims that your father did him an injury long ago while they were in the lumber business in the East. He says it is in his power to ruin him now and he will ruin you, too," the dwarf snarled, glaring savagely at him.

Mason smiled grimly.

"I've found out what I wanted to know and will act accordingly if it is true," he said, backing slowly out of the room.

"Tell your precious master I will keep this little toy," tapping the gun he was holding, "to remember him by, and also tell him I said the Masons are hard to drive."

Reaching the door he dropped the gun in his pocket and mounting his horse rode slowly towards Trader's Post. He breathed a sigh of relief when well out of sight of the ranch buildings.

"Well, this is a rum go," he said softly to himself. "What will Josephine say when I tell her of my adventure. She'll say right off quick that I need a guardian, and bawl me out for not waiting for her to take me to the ranch as she promised."

Still, he was troubled over what he had heard, and made up his mind that if he didn't get a letter from his father soon he would write him all about it, or better still, take a trip East to warn him that Ricker was a desperate character.

He was fast getting on to the ways of the West, and feeling the red blood flowing swiftly through his veins, he felt like getting into action on any trouble that might involve his father in peril.

He meant to take Josephine into his confidence as soon as he got home, and Scotty, too, whom he felt sure he could trust. Thus musing to himself he was covering ground at a slow canter.

Again his thoughts would travel Eastward to his old friends, and the hope of getting his car soon raised his spirits high. Then he remembered Roy Purvis to whom he had said good-bye just before he had started for the West.

Roy had been a keen and enthusiastic automobile racer along with Mason, and had just gone in for aviation. He had several bad spills in learning, but was keener for flying than he ever had been for automobile racing. He had laughingly made the remark to Mason that he might expect a birdman to visit him in his chosen god-forsaken country.

“Just the thing,” he said aloud to Sport, who was so startled that he broke into a swift run. “Steady, old boy,” he called softly, slowing him down. “When I get to Trader’s Post I will telegraph for Roy to come on, and send in a hurry order for my car at the same time.”

It was an ideal day with a gentle wind blowing, and Mason drank in deep breaths of the pure air for his brain was still whirling with the adventures of the past hour. He could not connect his father’s past with Ricker’s life, try as he would. Then he remembered his father never had taken him into his confidence to any great extent, for he was a man of few words.

Mason knew that he held vast holdings in coal, and in the iron industry, besides holding the controlling interest in his New York bank. As for himself, he never had questioned his father on business affairs, being content to follow his own usual mad pursuits.

Now, he wished he had taken more interest in his father’s affairs, as he was getting old. The two weeks he had been away from home had given him time to think over some of his own mad enterprises of the past, and he mentally resolved he would square himself with his father and prove he was a chip of the old block.

The Masons came of good fighting stock, his father was born in Virginia and served through the Civil War. Mason’s eyes were taking in the surrounding country with keen delight as his thoughts ran in this channel. Like most rich Americans, he had toured the principal cities of Europe and seen little of his own country.

“America for mine,” he said aloud, his eyes aglow with health.

He was but a few miles from Trader’s Post now, and he wondered if he would meet any of the boys from the ranch there. A few minutes later he entered the town and was giving his horse over to the care of a hostler with instructions to feed him well, along with a generous tip, when he heard a woman scream.

Running out into the hotel inclosure he beheld a sight that made his blood boil.

It was a girl struggling in the arms of Pete Carlo, the halfbreed. With a bound, Mason was by her side and tearing the Mexican away from her, he promptly knocked him down.

“Great work,” called a voice from the hotel porch.

Mason turned and saw Bud and Scotty grinning at him. In the same instant, Bud’s hand flashed from his hip, followed by a sharp report.

He heard a cry of pain behind him, and bewildered, he turned again to see the halfbreed nursing a pair of bleeding knuckles.

Bud and Scotty strode toward them with burning wrath in their eyes.

“The dirty skunk,” Scotty was saying, as he kicked a gun out of the halfbreed’s reach. “He tried to bore you. Never turn your back on a greaser.”

“He’s drunk,” cut in Bud, “but that don’t excuse him. Get up, you whelp, and make tracks out of here, you’ll lose your job for this.”

Bud took his gun and the halfbreed slunk away with muttered threats. Mason looked at the girl. She had recovered from her fright and was regarding him with large dark eyes filled with gratitude, and suspiciously close to the point of tears.

He saw at a glance that she was a Spanish girl of unusual beauty. Taking off his hat he made her a bow and in return he was rewarded with a dainty curtesy.

Turning to Bud he shook his hand warmly and said,

“Thanks, old man, you saved my life.”

“That’s all right, Jack,” the big fellow returned heartily. “You have to watch them greasers. Come, Scotty, let’s play a game of cards. Coming in soon?” he questioned of Mason.

The latter nodded. He had turned his attention again to the girl.

“Do you know that brute of a half breed?” he asked kindly.

“Yes,” she answered in a low musical voice.

He was surprised at her command of grammar. She spoke almost pure English.

“He used to work on the Ricker ranch where I work,” she added.

Mason was surprised. So this was the Spanish girl that Josephine had spoken to him about. He remembered she had said the girl was pretty. He remembered, also, his non-committal answer when she had asked him if he liked brunette beauty.

The girl had stood silently while he was turning these thoughts over in his mind. Suddenly with a quick impulse she extended her hand to him, her great eyes filled with deep pathos.

“I wish to thank you for defending me against that beast. Oh, how I hate him,” she said with a shudder. “He made life miserable for me while he was at the ranch, and you disposed of him so easily.”

Her great eyes swept his stalwart build in silent admiration.

“Please don’t mention it. I am very glad to have been of some assistance to you,” he said, a trifle embarrassed.

“May I ask whom I am indebted to?” she questioned, as he turned to leave.

“Certainly,” he answered with a smile, “my name is Jack Mason.”

The girl gave a sudden start, and he fancied her face had turned pale.

“My name is Waneda, good-bye,” she said, and was gone quickly.

“Now, why in the deuce did she turn pale at the mention of my name?” he asked himself, as he started to join Bud and Scotty.

Making his way to the card room he found only Scotty waiting for him.

“Bud has gone on ahead,” explained Scotty, “said he had almost forgotten a package that he wanted to get to the old man as soon as possible.”

“All right, Scotty, old top,” Mason replied cheerfully, “come over with me to that little dump of a telegraph station we have here. I want to send a message.”

The dispatch sent, they made quick time home to the ranch, and Mason told Scotty all about his adventure at the Ricker ranch.

They arrived home about dusk and put their horses up. Mason went at once to the house. On the porch he found Bud and Josephine talking earnestly.

“Good evening, Miss,” he greeted her as he came up to the porch. “I suppose that Bud has told you all about me getting in Dutch at the Post and how I came near getting shot only for Bud here.”

“I heard all about it, sir,” she said with icy coolness. “And also about the girl,” she added as a parting shot, disappearing in the house.

Mason was taken completely by surprise.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said weakly to himself.

CHAPTER IV – A NEW ARRIVAL

The few remaining days of June passed swiftly and it was nearing the time set for the annual games at the ranch, which were to be held on the Fourth of July. Mason had received word that his car had arrived, and starting out early one morning for Trader's Post with Scotty and Buck Miller, he drove the machine back to the ranch, giving Scotty the ride of his life.

Buck Miller was left behind with orders to bring the horses in, a job he accepted with relief when he saw Mason and Scotty flash by him at express speed.

"Don't want to ride in any contraption like that," he growled to himself as he watched the car disappear in a cloud of dust.

There still remained two days for the men to get ready for the various sports, and they were hard at it when Mason drove his racer into the midst of them with Scotty clinging on for dear life.

Mason said afterwards that he left his finger prints on the car door. The boys crowded about the machine, making various comments and kidding Scotty who was trying to catch his breath.

"Well, boys, what do you think of her?" queried Mason as he stood off and looked his racer over.

"A hoss is plenty good enough for me," spoke up Joe Turner with a drawl. "What do you think about it?"

He turned to Scotty with a grin.

"That's not a fair question for Scotty to answer on his first ride." Mason interposed, with a hearty laugh. "We burned the wind some in getting here and Scotty was up in the air most of the time."

Josephine and her father had now joined the group and Mason noticed the eyes of the girl sparkle as she stood close and admired the trim lines of the racer.

He had not found a chance to talk with her since the Trader's Post incident. It appeared to him that she had deliberately tried to avoid him, a fact which puzzled him not a little bit.

He had learned on inquiry that the incident at the Post had been settled by the ranch owner. He had learned the particulars from his foreman and was for discharging the halfbreed on the spot, but Josephine had interceded with such good results that her father had relented and promised to give the roan another chance. The ranch owner had warned him to go straight in the future or he would be kicked off the ranch.

The girl's manner was a puzzle to Mason and he determined to meet her coolness with unconcern. He had befriended the Spanish girl as any man would have done under similar circumstances.

He was turning these thoughts over in his mind when he happened to look up and saw the girl smiling at him. His resolution vanished in thin air when she requested him to show her the fine points of the racer.

Josephine proved an apt pupil and was listening eagerly to his explanation of the workings of the car when they were interrupted by an exclamation from Tex.

"Here comes Buck riding like he was mad," he was saying, as he gave his belt an extra hitch and shaded his eyes with his hand.

Mason looked up and made out a horseman coming towards them leading two horses. It was Buck Miller, and as Tex said, he had been riding his horse until it was almost winded. He seemed to be in a surly mood and it was some time before he answered the ranch owner's question as to why he had ridden so fast.

"Well, I've just come from the Post, and had a run-in with the damnedest freak of a man that it's ever been my misfortune to see," he exploded at last.

The ranch owner breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't see why that reason should call for a cowboy to run his horse to death and told Buck as much in plain words.

“Must have been some man to get you riled up that way,” Scotty cut in, smiling broadly. Buck silenced him with a withering glance.

“Wait until I tell you how I come to meet up with this nut,” Buck retorted, addressing the ranch owner. “And see if you wouldn’t have got all het up same as I did.”

The boys gathered around him and at a nod from the ranch owner he continued.

“After Mr. Mason and Scotty left in the machine, I figured I would go into the hotel, have a few drinks and play a game of pool.

“I had the drinks all right and had lit a cigar and was waiting for some one to turn up that could play pool, when the door opened and the freshest duck in loud clothes I had ever set eyes on came strolling in, walked up to me, calmly took my cigar out of my mouth, lit a cheap stogie with it, and in a voice like a girl, said:

“‘Lovely morning, isn’t it?’

“I don’t know why I didn’t kill him on the spot. He plumb took my breath away. When I got my wind back I pulled my gun and covered him.

“‘Stranger,’ I said in a hard voice, ‘I’ve killed men for less than that.’

“‘Oh, but these are not worth it, you know. I buy them in thousand lots,’ he said in his woman’s voice, referring to his stogie and smiling at me sweetly.

“Then, before I could answer, he asked me if I knew where the Bar X ranch was located, said he was coming out to Mr. Walters’ ranch for a long stay as his health was bad.

“I answered him by saying his health wouldn’t survive his nerve if I had anything to do with it. He wanted me to show him the way out here, and I told him to find his own way.

“As I left, he called after me that I could expect him out here as soon as he could find a horse.

“He’s crazy, or I’m a fool,” growled Buck in conclusion, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

The ranch owner’s face wore an amused smile as he listened to the expressions of indignation that arose from the men at Buck’s recital. Some were for giving the stranger a warm reception when he arrived, while others insisted that he was probably a harmless lunatic.

“Well, boys,” said the ranch owner, breaking in on their conversation, “we won’t worry about Buck’s *find* until he gets here, and when he comes I want you men to refer him to me before you start any rough work. You may knock off training for the day.”

This advice was taken as a command by the men and they silently made their way to the corral. Mason drove his racer to the shed where he intended to give the engine a general inspection.

That night he had a long talk with Bud Anderson. He gave the latter a minute description of his encounter with the hunchback at the Ricker ranch. He also told him of the hunchback’s revelation that Ricker had known Mason’s father in the past and harbored a deadly hatred for his son. When Mason came to this part of his narrative, Bud whistled and looked keenly at him.

“So, Ricker has got you mixed up in his crooked designs, too,” he said at last, a steely look coming into his gray eyes. “What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know what to make of it,” Mason confessed.

“I wrote home to father telling him of the incident, and expect an answer soon, which I hope will clear the mystery up. I didn’t know that my father had an enemy in the world.”

“All big and successful men have,” Bud replied kindly, as he noticed a troubled look in the other’s face, “cheer up, Jack, and we’ll run this thing to earth together.”

The two men shook hands in sincere friendship and talked far into the night. Mason told Bud of the rich trimmings of cowboy paraphernalia he had discovered at the Ricker ranch and his own impressions of the general air of mystery that surrounded the place. The news threw Bud into a deep study. Mason was more than ever impressed with the strong personality of the foreman and sheriff.

The day set for the games broke bright and cheerful. A group of cowboys had gathered around the corral. They were laughing and jesting, and it seemed to Mason they were just like a lot of schoolboys, all good-natured and jolly. He had taken a position close to the corral with Josephine and

her father where they were waiting for the first event of the day to be pulled off. It was to be a horse race between Red Sullivan and Scotty. It promised to be an exciting contest, and they were exchanging good-natured raillery while they sat in their saddles waiting for the signal to start.

Bud Anderson was master of ceremonies and raising his gun in the air, sang out:

“Ready! Go!”

The words and the report blended together and the racers were off.

Mason witnessed some of the finest riding it had ever been his fortune to see. The men were to race over a given course, picking up objects off the ground tied up in handkerchiefs, wheel, and continue their run to the corral.

The yelling of the cowboys broke into a roar as it was seen that Red Sullivan had taken the lead. Mason’s blood tingled with excitement as the men cheered their respective favorites. The ranch owner’s face was wreathed in smiles while Josephine was clapping her hands and cheering for Scotty, as he had always been a favorite of hers.

As the riders made the turn and started on the home stretch it was seen that Scotty had pulled slightly into the lead. It was a straight race now with nothing to pick up, and the riders urged their mounts to the limit, with both horses again running neck and neck.

When almost to the goal, Scotty threw his horse forward in a last heroic effort, flashing by the judge, the winner by a few feet.

A cheer went up from the cowboys as they crowded around Scotty to shake his hand.

“Guess I win that Stetson hat, don’t I, Red?” he called out to his late opponent, his eyes twinkling.

“You sure do,” answered Red, his manner a trifle piqued, “but this thing ain’t settled for good. I mean to have another go with you and it won’t be so close next time.”

“Any time or place will suit me,” answered Scotty cheerfully.

The next contest was to be a roping duel between Buck Miller and Pete Carlo the halfbreed. Buck had protested against having anything to do with the greaser, as he had named him in contempt, but Bud’s reasoning had prevailed and Buck finally agreed to go on with him.

Bud Anderson, acting as the judge, was explaining the rules for the expert ropers to observe, when a commotion was heard from some of the cowboys at the far end of the corral.

“Here comes Buck’s friend,” yelled a cowboy from this group.

All looked, and sure enough, it was the stranger that Buck had told them about. Buck muttered something suspiciously like an oath, and glanced at Mason. The latter was intently watching the newcomer. All sport came to a standstill, and eyes were turned towards the stranger. He was near enough for them to see that he rode a small horse, or else he was a very tall man for his feet just cleared the ground. He was riding at a snail’s pace and fanning himself with a wide rimmed hat. A suit that fairly groaned with loud checks graced his tall and angular form.

Silence fell upon the group of cowboys as they watched the apparition dismount in front of them.

Dismount is not the word, for he simply stuck his feet on the ground and let the horse walk out from under him, after which he turned and faced the cowboys.

“Somebody dead?” he questioned, gazing solemnly at the group, and bowing blandly to each one.

“I take it, this is the Bar X ranch,” he rattled on, before anyone could speak.

“Yes, you’ve hit it,” came quietly from the ranch owner. He was trying to figure out if this stranger was a freak or a fool.

“Met one of your men the other day, nice pleasant fellow,” the freak began again, in his small piping voice.

He smiled serenely at Buck Miller. That worthy’s face turned black with anger.

“My name is Ed. MacNutt, at your service,” the stranger rambled on. “I inquired at the hotel for a good place to recruit up, as the doctor says one of my lungs is affected. From the hotel man’s description, I take it you’re the proprietor of this outfit, and I ask you to let me put up here until I feel strong again.”

The request seemed fair enough, and after a short talk with his wife the ranch owner told MacNutt he could stay with them, after first warning him against the fresh way he talked to the cowboys.

It was arranged for him to have quarters at the bunk house. On account of the delay caused by MacNutt, the match was called off between the halfbreed and Buck Miller, much to the latter’s satisfaction.

The next event was to be a wrestling match. Tom Powers, the man that Mason disliked, was one of the contestants. He soon proved himself a superior wrestler, throwing all his opponents in rapid succession, and boasting loudly that he could throw any three men on the range within an hour’s time.

Mason had been observing Powers’ methods closely, and remarked to Bud, who stood close by, that the wrestler appeared muscle bound.

He had spoken in a low voice, but Powers overheard him and a sneer came into his face.

“Perhaps the dude would like to try me out!” he said insolently, motioning towards Mason, the sneer curling the corners of his mouth.

Mason felt the hot blood rush to his face. Quickly throwing off a light sweater which he wore, he stepped towards Powers. Anderson and the ranch owner caught him by the arm, telling him it would be madness to wrestle Powers, as he was regarded as the champion for miles around.

“Oh, let him come on, and I’ll show him up,” sneered Powers.

Mason laughed in his face.

“I’ll go on with him,” he said briskly to Anderson.

Walking up to Powers he said, “I am going to warn you, Powers, that I’ve wrestled before, so be on your guard. I don’t wish to take any unfair advantage of you.”

“Bluff,” sneered Powers, glaring at him.

MacNutt was apparently enjoying himself to the fullest extent. He was here, there, and all over, talking to each and every person as if he had known them all his life. Ambling up to Josephine, he whispered:

“Young feller’s got it all over the other guy,” pointing to Powers.

The girl nodded. She wasn’t sure if she liked this stranger or not, and just now, she was worried for fear the Easterner would get hurt.

The wrestlers were circling about each other looking for an opening. Suddenly they came together with Mason underneath. Powers tried several holds which he broke with ease. There were surprised remarks from the men, who had expected to see the Easterner crushed. The girl was staring with wide open eyes expecting every minute the life would be crushed from his body.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said a voice in her ear, and turning she beheld the stranger again.

“Oh,” she cried with a shudder. “Do you really think the young fellow has a chance?”

“Sure thing,” he answered in his high pitched voice. “The young lad is merely playing with him.”

The girl rewarded his assurance with a grateful smile and turned her attention again to the two men. Mason had broken every hold his opponent had tried and had the fellow pretty nearly winded.

Baffled at every turn, Powers resorted to dirty work. He fouled Mason again and again, until the latter worked to his feet and cautioned him against fouling. As he was protesting, Powers rushed in and securing a body hold, lifted Mason off his feet. As he felt himself falling he twisted his body in the air, bringing Powers underneath him and pinned both his shoulders to the ground, scoring a clean fall.

There was a burst of applause from the men, the girl joining in, her face radiant with smiles.

All present had thought sure that Mason would lose the first fall when they had seen him lifted off his feet. This was scientific wrestling, and the men began to appreciate it. Powers was furious

over his defeat and swore the fall was a trick. The black nature of the man had Mason fighting mad by this time, and when the next bout was called, he darted in on Powers.

What followed brought a cry of wonder from the crowd. Powers' heels had described an arc in the air; and he fell with such force that he lay stunned. Mason had secured a hold called *the flying mare* and had used it with telling effect.

CHAPTER V – THE ABDUCTION OF JOSEPHINE

A quiver ran through the form of the man on the ground. After two vain attempts, he rose slowly to his feet, his face contorted with rage.

Unobserved, the halfbreed had edged up close to the circle formed by the men and drawing his gun, fired point blank at Mason, who fell to the ground with a low moan. The assassin, not waiting to see the effect of his shot, sprang with a bound into the saddle of the nearest horse. Sinking his spurs deep into the animal's flank he was away before anyone thought to stop him. It all happened so quickly the men stood dazed.

Bud was the first to rouse them to action. Emptying his gun after the fugitive he called out sharp orders to the men.

There was a scramble for horses as the cowboys responded. A cry of dismay went up from the men when it was discovered that the halfbreed had taken the fastest horse of the lot, Josephine's famous Fleet.

As Mason fell, the girl had rushed to his side and partly caught him in her arms.

She was supporting his head and trying to stop the flow of blood that trickled from a wound in his right temple. The girl was deathly pale and watched the stricken man anxiously, as with tender care she loosened his shirt at the front. Bud's face was set tense as he bent over and examined the wound.

"Bullet just creased him," he announced briefly, his face lighting up. "He will be all right in an hour or two."

Josephine's heart leaped at the words. She had a deep admiration for this Easterner who had come among them to fight life's battle anew. She shuddered as she realized how close the bullet had struck. Then a wave of reaction seized her and she trembled violently.

Bud had noticed her agitation and said kindly,

"Come, girl, this is no place for you. I will take you to the house."

On his return, Mason had partly recovered and was talking with the ranch owner, who had bound up his wound. Mason smiled feebly as Bud came up to them.

"Fool stunt of mine to topple over the way I did," he said, feeling of the bandage gingerly.

"Not so," Bud protested quickly, while admiring the other's iron nerve. "That was a close call you had, son. Lucky for you the halfbreed's aim was bad."

"I seem to get in bad all around," Mason answered ruefully.

"The ranch owner tells me that Powers has cleared out, too," he added.

"Glad of it," Bud growled, "hope my men run that greaser down, but they ain't got much of a chance, with him on Josephine's horse."

Late that night the men came trooping in. They had been thrown off the trail when darkness set in, but all vowed they would get the halfbreed if it took them all summer. They were overjoyed when told that Mason would be all right in a day or two. He had won them all by his exhibition of strength and nerve, and they would fight for him to the last man. Bud questioned the cowboys about their hunt for the halfbreed, and Buck Miller, acting as spokesman, gave his opinion that when they lost the halfbreed's trail he was making for Devil's Gap and would circle back to the Ricker ranch.

"We'll pay Mr. Ricker a visit," Bud said grimly, his gray eyes flashing.

"This is the halfbreed's revenge for your knocking him down that day at Trader's Post, Jack," he added.

The following day as the cowboys were starting out to track the halfbreed down, Scotty, who had made an early trip to the Post, thrust a letter in Mason's hand. It was from his father, and hastily tearing it open he read the contents.

The letter read:

My dear Son:

In reply to your letter I will say that I am greatly concerned about you after reading its contents, and believe you to be in great danger. In brief, this man Ricker you mention in your letter was an old schoolmate of mine. In my early days I was engaged in the lumber business and took Ricker in as my bookkeeper. I had always believed him to be honest, until one day I happened to be looking over the books and discovered evidence that false entries had been made. I had other clerks in my employ and they all came under my suspicion. I then hired a detective and had them watched. The thefts in money ran into the thousands and were traced directly to Ricker. He was a married man and the detective found that he had been spending money lavishly and far beyond his means. I had the matter hushed up as his wife was sickly, and instead of pressing the charge against him, I discharged him from my employ.

The shock of his exposure killed his wife, and he became morbid and several times threatened my life. He finally disappeared after warning me in a letter that in the future he would live only for revenge on me. It has been ten years since I last heard of him, and I had hoped that he was dead.

My son, be on your guard as I believe Ricker will try to strike me through you.

The best news I can send is that your mother and sister are making preparations to visit you soon.

I hear good news of you from Mr. Walters and I'm proud of you, my son.

Your father,
John Mason

Mason glanced up from his letter to find MacNutt regarding him with a curious expression in his eyes.

The strange man had taken a great liking to Mason, and the latter found himself in his company a good bit of his time. Mason had come to think that MacNutt wasn't such a fool as most people seemed to take him for.

The leaders of the searching party were far in advance by this time and, as Mason intended to take part in the hunt, he pocketed his letter and called to MacNutt and Scotty. As they rode he explained the letter to them in detail.

"You have got to get this Ricker or he'll get you," Scotty said, after a long silence.

"But I haven't even seen the man yet," Mason protested.

"I heard Bud say this morning that we are going to call on that delightful gentleman," MacNutt chirped up.

Scotty favored him with a warning scowl.

"You'll have a chance to see him to-day, but I'm going to watch him sharp for he's the quickest man in these parts with a gun," Scotty declared, still keeping his eyes on MacNutt and frowning darkly.

The latter, not one bit abashed, was whistling gaily, and opened his eyes in child-like wonder at Scotty's words. The cowboy mentally put him down as cracked. There was a stiff wind blowing and the sky was overcast with ominous looking clouds. The cowboy was casting an anxious eye on the horizon.

"We are going to get a hard storm before night," he said uneasily.

"Do you get very hard storms in these parts?" queried MacNutt timidly.

"Well, rather," drawled Scotty with a grin.

They were riding fast now, and had begun to overtake the party in front.

“Wo don’t want to be too far in the rear when they get to the ranch,” the Scot explained, as he urged his horse faster.

The rest of the ride was made in silence, Mason turning over in his mind the news from his father.

Soon they were approaching the outbuildings of the ranch, and Mason’s blood tingled as he remembered his first experience on this ranch. The cowboys ahead had halted and were waiting for Mason and his party to come up.

“I am going right up and call Ricker out,” Bud said as they came within hearing distance, “and don’t none of you men pull a gun unless you see Ricker start to draw.” The men agreed, but there were sullen mutterings among them, and there was a doubt in Mason’s mind whether they would control themselves if the halfbreed showed himself.

Bud and the ranch owner with Scotty and Red Sullivan rode up to the house and knocked.

“What’s wanted?” a gruff voice called from within.

“I want to talk with you, Ricker,” Bud answered, recognizing the owner of the voice.

“Does it take a small army to come here and talk to me?” the same voice said with a snarl.

The door was flung violently open, and Ricker stood in the doorway with his arms folded across a brawny chest. There was a sarcastic smile on the man’s face as he sneered at Bud.

“Never mind the army,” Bud answered curtly, his eyes keenly watching for any move the other might make.

“I’m here to find out if that halfbreed Mexican you used to have working for you has showed up here in the last twenty-four hours.”

“How should I know anything about the greaser?” Ricker questioned with an oath. “Your employer hired him to work for the Bar X, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and a precious rascal he was,” the ranch owner replied bitterly.

“He shot at my guest, Mr. Mason here, and stole my daughter’s favorite horse. He’s a man after your own heart, Ricker.”

Ricker shot a hard look at Mason when the ranch owner mentioned his name. Bud was growing impatient.

“You haven’t answered my question, Ricker,” he said in an even voice.

“No, and I’ll be damned if I will,” the man burst out in sudden fury, “and I don’t want any damn sheriff nosing around my place.”

As he spoke, five men from within silently took their places alongside of him.

The lines on Bud’s face tightened. There was a stir among his men and a stiffening of muscles. It seemed to Mason as if the air was suddenly charged with electricity, so tense was the situation.

“I’m watching you, Ricker!” the word came from Bud like a crack of a pistol. “I see that you and your men are itching for a fight. Steady! Take your hand away from your hip, Ricker, or I’ll bore you!”

Bud sat his horse facing Ricker. Both his hands were carelessly toying with his scarf knot, about breast high where the butt of a six-shooter protruded. It was a position feared by all his enemies.

Ricker laughed mirthlessly.

“Oh, well,” he said in a changed tone, “take a look around, but you won’t find the greaser here.”

Mason breathed a sigh of relief. The danger point seemed past for the moment. Bud left half of his men on guard in front of the house and made a careful search of the premises, but found no trace of the halfbreed.

“I suppose you are satisfied now,” Ricker sneered, as Bud gave the command for his men to leave.

“No, I’m not satisfied,” Bud answered him sharply. “I am certain the Mexican has visited you since yesterday. My men trailed him to Devil’s Gap and he was swinging in a circle towards your place when they lost his trail. That’s all I’ve got to say, but you’ll hear from me again.”

Bud gave a signal and the cowboys set a fast pace for home as the storm showed signs of breaking on them at any moment. Mason rode with Bud, and they kept up a conversation with difficulty amid flashes of lightning and the crash of thunder.

“Gee, this is some storm,” gasped Mason after an unusually bright flash of lightning, followed by a deluge of rain.

“Yes,” Bud roared in his ear to make himself heard, “we get them like this out here, but what I am sore about is that we didn’t get that greaser.”

Mason started to answer, but his words were drowned by the thunder. When the party finally arrived at the Bar X corral it was dark and lights were flashing in and out of the ranch house.

“Something must be wrong at the house,” Bud muttered as they hastily put their horses up.

As Bud and Mason started for the house, some one came towards them with a lantern. It proved to be Mrs. Walters, and she seemed to be in great distress.

“Oh, I am so frightened,” she cried, as she caught sight of them. “Josephine has disappeared. She went for a ride soon after you men left, and here it is nine o’clock and she hasn’t returned. I fear something has happened to her.”

Mason was shocked to think of Josephine out alone and in the storm.

“For God’s sake, Bud,” he cried in anguish, “get the men together and let’s find her.”

Bud blew a whistle and the cowboys rallied around him.

“Boys,” he said sternly, “there’s been hellish doings on this ranch lately. Josephine has disappeared and it’s up to us to find her. I lay this to that halfbreed’s work. Mount your horses and take lanterns along with you and see if you can’t pick up her trail before the rain washes all traces of it away.”

The cowboys obeyed with alacrity and muttered deep threats against the halfbreed. It would fare hard with him if he fell into their hands this night; his punishment would be swift and sure.

Mrs. Walters gave the men the direction that Josephine had taken and they started off with a rush.

Buck Miller was leading the way as he was the best trailer among them. He could follow a trail equal to an Indian. Aided by an occasional flash of lightning, the men picked their way slowly. The rain had ceased, but the wind was blowing almost a gale.

Buck had picked up Josephine’s trail about a hundred yards from the corral. After following it for about an hour they found it led towards Devil’s Gap, a favorite ride of Josephine’s when she wished to be alone. According to her mother, the girl had taken a horse from the corral that had been used as a pack horse to bring provisions from Trader’s Post.

The ranch owner had insisted on joining them in the search, and it seemed to Mason as if he had grown years older in the last hour. His manner was pitiful as the shock of his daughter’s possible fate showed in his eyes. The trail was very difficult to follow on account of the hard fall of rain. The men were proceeding with caution for fear of losing it altogether.

In this manner they rode for two hours when there came a cry from Buck who was far in advance of them. There was an answering yell from the cowboys as they pressed their horses hard and rode up to him.

“Buck, what have you discovered?” Mason demanded anxiously.

Buck motioned for them to keep back before he answered. He had dismounted and was eagerly scanning the ground. Bud joined them at this juncture and repeated Mason’s question. Buck for an answer held up a piece of cloth.

“Other horses’ tracks join here,” he said sagely, pointing to the ground. “The girl was held up here, for there is evidence of a struggle.”

Bud examined the piece of cloth and handed it to the ranch owner.

“It’s from Josephine’s dress,” the unhappy father declared with a groan.

“The girl put up a fight here,” Buck continued, “and it looks as if there were two or more persons that waylaid her.”

The ranch owner was nearly frantic and it was with difficulty that the men restrained him from plunging blindly alone on the trail.

“Keep cool,” Bud advised him. “Buck tells me the trail divides here. They have one lead horse and one carrying double. I am going to send one of my men home with you as you are in no condition to go on. Besides, your wife needs your counsel just now. I am going to divide my forces and we will stay on the trail night and day until we find her, then God help them if they have harmed her in any way.”

Bud choked at the last sentence, his emotions overcoming him. After a short argument with the heartbroken father, Bud’s advice prevailed and the party set out on their quest.

CHAPTER VI – JOSEPHINE’S PERIL

After the men had left for the Ricker ranch, Josephine felt lonesome and, telling her mother she was going for a short ride, she hastily slipped into a khaki riding dress, for the air felt like rain. Her mother tried to persuade her not to go, as the halfbreed and Powers were at large and might do her harm if she should happen to run across them.

“You know, dear,” she said as a final argument, “Powers hasn’t liked you since you refused to let him pay you court, and it would be just like him to take up with that Mexican.”

“I know he hates Mr. Mason and would do him an injury if he got a chance,” she added.

“I guess the shoe pinches the other foot,” the girl answered with a happy laugh. “From what I have seen of Mr. Mason, Powers had better keep away from him. He seems perfectly able to take care of himself.”

The fond mother looked keenly at her daughter. Was it possible she was in love with this New Yorker? The question she asked herself struck home with heavy force. It had seemed only yesterday that she was carrying her in her arms. Now, as she looked, she realized her daughter was fast growing into womanhood.

Josephine was watching her mother in amusement.

“Cheer up, mother,” she cried with a laugh, throwing her arms around her neck and kissing her. “You look as though you had been to a funeral. I’m not going to elope or run away, I’m only going for a short ride, and just think of the old plug of a horse I’ve got to take. All the best ones are in use; darn that old Mexican, anyway, I hope Bud gets Fleet back for me,” she wound up, angrily stamping her foot.

“Bud will get him back for you if possible; run along now dear if you must go, and get home early as I think we are going to have a storm,” her mother said, smiling at her daughter’s outburst of anger.

Josephine kissed her again and tripped lightly to the corral. On her way she passed Mason’s car in the shed. “Wish I knew how to run the rig-ama-jig,” she mused to herself as her eyes caught sight of it. Arriving at the corral she soon had a saddle and bridle on the horse she had spoken so lightly to her mother about, and rode leisurely off in the direction of Devil’s Gap. The beast had seemed surprised to feel a saddle and rider on its back, and started to cut all sorts of capers. The animal had been discarded for some time as a range horse, and was now used for pack carrying. Josephine was pleased at the ginger it displayed, but felt sad and blue again when she thought of how her own fast horse, Fleet, had been stolen from her. She allowed the animal to set its own pace as her thoughts traveled back over the events of the past twenty-four hours. The cowboys had been gone about four hours when she started on her ride, and she figured she would go towards Devil’s Gap and return home about the same time they would arrive.

Josephine had ridden about ten miles when the first flash of lightning warned her that she would have to change her plans and start back. Just ahead, the trail branched off towards the Ricker ranch. At this point there was a large cottonwood tree on a slight elevation, where she could command a view of the surrounding country. The girl determined to ride to the cottonwood, then turn back for home, as she thought she could make it before the storm broke. As she drew up to the cottonwood she dismounted to stretch her limbs as the ride had tired her, for she was more used to riding her own horse.

She climbed the slight rise and stood leaning against the tree taking in the view when she heard a step behind her. The girl turned in sudden terror, to find herself confronted by Powers. She realized instantly that he must have been hiding behind the tree and had watched her approach. She hated the man intensely, and as he stood there before her smiling, her dislike increased. She drew herself

up and coldly waited for him to speak. “Did I scare you, my proud little maid?” he put the question suddenly, his eyes drinking in her girlish beauty.

“What were you hiding here for, Powers?” Josephine questioned, her anger rising. “The men are looking for the halfbreed, and if they run into you, you won’t fare any better than he will, for they will string him up.” The man’s eyes glittered.

“They won’t find me or the halfbreed,” he said with a savage oath. “So, you have joined forces with the Mexican,” the girl spoke with cutting emphasis. “I thought as much, he’s just about your speed, Powers.” The man saw his slip and winced. Josephine saw she had hit the truth and regarded him scornfully. Her words had seemed to raise a fury in the man, and the girl began to fear him, though she tried hard to appear natural.

“Don’t come any of your high-toned airs on me,” he cried, his voice thick with passion. “Since that New Yorker come here you’ve been too nice for common folks. I know you’re dead stuck on him, but you’ll never marry him, I’ll kill him first.”

Josephine faced him pale and resolute. “You, you beast,” her words rang out with withering scorn. “You’re not fit to breathe the same air he does. I’ll tell Bud about your threat and he will run you out of the country.” At the last words the girl started to leap on her horse. “No, you don’t,” the man grated, darting swiftly after her and grabbing her brusquely by the arm. Josephine swung around, something bright glistening in her hand; it was a small Colt revolver she always carried.

“Take your hands off me, you brute,” she cried, leveling the weapon at him. Her voice was trembling between fear and hate. “Stand back, or so help me God, I’ll shoot!” Powers recoiled. He could see that the girl was in deadly earnest, and sought to modify his tone. “Now, you know, Josephine, I didn’t mean you any harm,” he began in a wheedling voice. “I’m taking no chances with you,” the girl answered sharply. “I’m going to hold you here until some of the boys show up, if I have to keep you here all night. There’s the dead line, cross it at your peril.” She pointed to an imaginary line halfway between them. Powers’ eyes glowed and a crafty look came into them. “There comes one of your friends, now,” he cried suddenly, pointing behind her.

Not suspecting a ruse Josephine turned and looked over her shoulder, her weapon half lowered. Too late she saw her mistake as she heard a hiss above her.

A lariat thrown by the skillful hand of the halfbreed had settled about her waist, pinning her arms helplessly to her side.

The girl realized with a sinking heart that the halfbreed had been hiding in the tree all the time, and along with Powers he had watched her movements from the start.

She struggled desperately to free herself, but the tough lariat only cut deeper into her arms.

Powers watched her frantic efforts with a gloating smile.

“We could have captured you long ago,” he said with his sneering laugh, as the halfbreed slid down out of the tree at his feet. “Only we wanted to hear which you had to say about that gang of fools that are trailing the halfbreed.”

The Mexican leered at her.

“I fool them quick,” he boasted.

Josephine gave him a look of contempt.

“What did you want to capture me for?” she asked, looking Powers straight in the eye. “Bud Anderson will kill you both if you harm me.”

Once more her words threw the man into a furious passion.

“I’m going to lay for him and that upstart Mason, and I’ll get them both,” he ground out the words with an oath. “And as for you, my proud beauty, I am going to make you my wife, or mistress, just as you choose.”

“Are you mad?” Josephine gasped in terror, shrinking away from him.

Powers had turned his back to her and was talking in a low voice to the Mexican. Josephine shivered. It was getting dark and had started to rain hard. Her heart sank lower as she realized she was completely in the power of these outlaws.

“Oh, if some of the cowboys would only show up,” she wailed to herself.

After a short consultation between the two men, the halfbreed left on some mission.

“Pull yourself together,” Powers ordered her roughly. “The halfbreed has gone for our horses just over the knoll, and we will be a good many miles from here by morning.”

“You mean that he has gone to get my horse,” Josephine flared up at him indignantly. Powers chuckled maliciously.

“The Mexican wouldn’t trade your horse, Fleet, for any horse in the country,” he said shortly.

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