

Cullum Ridgwell

The Law-Breakers



Ridgwell Cullum
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CHAPTER I

WATCHING THE LINE

There was no shade anywhere. The terrible glare of the summer sun beat down upon the whole length of the wooden platform at Amberley. Hot as was the dry, bracing air, it was incomparable with the blistering intensity of heat reflected from the planking, which burned through to the soles of the feet of the uniformed man who paced its length, slowly, patiently.

This sunburnt, gray-eyed man, with his loose, broad shoulders, his powerful, easy-moving limbs, seemed quite indifferent to the irritating climatic conditions of the moment. Even the droning of the worrying mosquitoes had no power to disturb him. Like everything else unpleasant in this distant northwestern land, he accepted these things as they came, and brushed them aside for the more important affairs he was engaged upon.

He gazed out across the wide monotony of prairie with its undulating wavelets, a tawny green beneath the scorching summer sun. He was thinking deeply; perhaps dreaming, although dreaming had small enough place in his busy life. His

lot was a stern fight against crime, and, in a land so vast, so new, where crime flourished upon virgin soil, it left him little time for the more pleasant avenues of thought.

Inspector Stanley Fyles came to a halt at the eastern end of the long platform. Miles of railroad track stretched away in a dead straight line toward the distant, shimmering horizon. For miles ahead the road was unbroken by a single moving object, and, after a long, keen survey, the man abruptly turned his back upon it.

In a moment he became aware of a hollow-chested man hurrying toward him. He was coming from the direction of the only building upon the platform – the railroad office, or, as it was grandiloquently called, the “booking hall.”

Fyles recognized the man as the railroad agent, Huntly, who controlled the affairs of his company in this half-fledged prairie town.

He came up in a flurry of unusual excitement.

“She’s past New Camp, inspector,” he cried. “Guess she’s in the Broken Hills, an’ gettin’ near White Point. I’d say she’d be along in an hour – sure.”

“Damn!”

For once in his life Stanley Fyles’s patience gave way.

The man grinned.

“It ain’t no use cussin’,” he protested, with a suggestion of malicious delight. “Y’see, she’s just a bum freight. Ain’t even a ‘through.’ I tell you, these sort have emptied a pepper box of gray around my head. Yes, sir, there’s more gray to my head by reason

of their sort than a hired man could hoe out in half a year.”

“Twenty minutes ago you told me she’d be in in half an hour.”

There was resentment as well as distrust in the officer’s protest.

“Sure,” the man responded glibly. “That was accordin’ to schedule. Guess Ananias must have been the fellow who invented schedules for local freights.”

The toe of Fyles’s well-polished riding-boot tapped the superheated platform.

His gray eyes suddenly fixed and held the ironical eyes of the other.

“See here, Huntly,” he said at last, in that tone of quiet authority which never deserted him for long. “I can rely on that? There’s nothing to stop her by the way – now? Nothing at all?”

But the agent shook his head, and his eyes still shone with their ironical light.

“I’d say the prophet business petered out miser’bly nigh two thousand years ago. I wouldn’t say this dogone prairie ’ud be the best place to start resurrectin’ it. No, sir! There’s too many chances for that – seein’ we’re on a branch line. There’s the track – it might give way. You never can tell on a branch line. The locomotive might drop dead of senile decay. Maybe the train crew’s got drunk, and is raisin’ hell at some wayside city. You never can tell on a branch line. Then there’s that cargo of liquor you’re yearnin’ to – ”

“Cut it out, man,” broke in the officer sharply. “You are sure

about the train? You know what you're talking about?"

The agent grinned harder than ever.

"This is a prohibition territory –" he began.

But again Fyles cut him short. The man's irrepressible love of fooling, half good-humored, half malicious, had gone far enough.

"Anyway you don't usually get drunk before sundown, so I guess I'll have to take your word for it."

Then Inspector Fyles smiled back into the other's face, which had abruptly taken on a look of resentment at the charge.

"I tell you what it is," he went on. "You boys get mighty close to the wind swilling prohibited liquor. It's against the spirit of the law – anyway."

But the agent's good humor warmed again under the officer's admission of his difficulties. He was an irrepressible fellow when opportunity offered. Usually he lived in a condition of utter boredom. In fact, there were only two things that made life tolerable for him in Amberley. These were the doings of the Mounted Police, and the doings of those who made their existence a necessity in the country.

Even while weighted down with the oppressive routine of his work, it was an inspiring thing to watch the war between law and lawlessness. Here in Amberley, situated in the heart of the Canadian prairie lands, was a handful of highly trained men pitted against almost a world of crime. Perhaps the lightest of their duties was the enforcing of the prohibition laws, formulated by a dear, grandmotherly government in an excess of senile zeal

for the welfare of the health and morals of those far better able to think for themselves.

The laws of prohibition! The words stuck with Mr. Huntly as they stuck with every full-grown man and woman in the country outside the narrow circle of temperance advocates. The law was anathema to him. Under its influence the bettering, the purification of life in the Northwestern Territories had received a setback, which optimistic antagonists of the law declared was little less than a quarter of a century. Drunkenness had increased about one hundred per cent, since human nature had been forbidden the importation and consumption of alcohol in any form stronger than four per cent. beer.

Huntly knew that Inspector Fyles was almost solely at work upon the capture of contraband liquor. Also he knew, and hated the fact, that his own duty required that he must give any information concerning this traffic upon his railroad which the police might require. Therefore there was an added vehemence in his reply to the officer's warning.

"Sakes, man! What 'ud you have us do?" he cried, with a laugh that was more than half angry. "Do you think we're goin' to sit around this darned diagram of a town readin' temperance tracts, just because somebody guesses we haven't the right to souse liquor? Think we're goin' to suck milk out of a kid's feeder, just because you boys in red coats figure that way? No, sir. Guess that ain't doin' – anyway. I'm sousing all the liquor I can get my hooks on, an' it's all the sweeter because of you boys. Outside

my duty to the railroad company I wouldn't raise a finger to stop a gallon of good rye comin' into town, no, not if the penitentiary was yearnin' to swallow me right up."

Fyles's purposeful eyes surveyed the man with a thoughtful smile.

"Just so," he said coolly. "That clause about 'duty' squares the rest. You'll need to do your duty about these things. That's all we want. That's all we intend to have. Do you get me? I'm right here to see that duty done. The first trip, my friend, and you won't talk of penitentiary so – easily." The quietness with which he spoke did not rob his words of their significance. Then he went on, just a shade more sharply. "Now, see here. When that freight gets in I hold you responsible that the hindmost car – next the caboose – is dropped here, and the seals are intact. It's billed loaded with barrels of cube sugar, for Calford. Get me? That's your duty just now. See you do it."

Huntly understood Fyles. Everybody in Amberley understood him. And the majority recognized the deliberate purpose lying behind his calmest assurance. The agent knew that his protest had touched the limit, consequently there was nothing left him but to carry out instructions to the letter. He hated the position.

His face twisted into a wry grin.

"Guess you don't leave much to the imagination, inspector," he said sourly.

Fyles was moving away. He replied over his shoulder.

"No. Just the local color of the particular penitentiary," he

said, with a laugh.

CHAPTER II

WHITE POINT

Mr. Moss was the sole employe of the railroad company at White Point flag station. His official hours were long. They extended round the dial of the clock twice daily. Curiously enough, his leisure extended to practically the same limits. The truth was, in summer, anyway, he had no duties that could seriously claim him. Thus the long summer days were spent chiefly among his vegetables, and the bits of flowers at the back of the shanty, which was at once his home and his office, in short, White Point.

Jack Huntly at Amberley grumbled at the unenlivening conditions of his existence, but compared with those of Mr. Moss he lived in a perfect whirlwind of gaiety.

There was no police station at White Point. There were no farms in the neighborhood. There was not even a half-breed camp, with its picturesque squalor, to break up the deadly drear of the surrounding plains. The only human diversion that ever marred the calm serenity of the neighborhood was the rare visit of some lodge of Indians, straying from the reservation, some sixty miles to the south, on a hunting pass.

But if White Point lacked interest from human associations its setting at least was curiously arresting. Nature's whim was the

inspiration which had brought the station into existence. To the north, south, and west the prairie stretched away in the distance for untold miles; but immediately to the east quite another aspect prevailed. Here lay the reason of White Point station.

Almost from the very foot of the walls of Mr. Moss's shanty the land rose up with, as it were, a jolt. Great forest-clad hills reared their torn and barren crests to enormous heights out of the dead level of the prairie. A tumbled sea of Nature's wreckage lay strewn about unaccountably, for a distance of something like two miles, east and west, and double that distance from north to south. It was an oasis of natural splendor in the heart of a calm sea of green grass.

These strange hills necessitated a watchful eye upon the railroad track, which pierced their heart, in winter and spring. In summer there was nothing to exercise the mind of Mr. Moss. But in winter the track was constantly becoming blocked with snow, while during the spring thaw there was always the dread of a "wash-out" to disturb his nightly dreams. At such times these things kept the agent far more alive than he cared about.

Just now, however, it was the height of summer, and no such anxieties prevailed. Therefore Mr. Moss fell back upon the less exciting pastime of a perspiry afternoon among his potatoes and other vegetable luxuries.

He was hoeing the rows of potatoes with a sort of dogged determination to find interest in the work. He believed that physical effort was the only safety-valve for healthy feelings all

too long bottled up. Even the streaming sweat suggested to him a feeling that it was at least hygienic, although the moist mixture of muddy consistency upon his face, merging with the growth of three days' beard, left his appearance something more than a blot upon the general view.

Just now he had nothing to disturb the blank of his mind. The only possible interruption to the work in hand, of an official character, was the passing of a local freight train. However, a local freight was a matter of no importance whatever. It might come to-day, or it might come to-morrow. He would signal it through in due course, after that he didn't much care what happened to it.

The potatoes fully occupied him, and as he came to the end of each row he took the opportunity of straightening out the crick in his back, and gazing upon his handiwork with the look of a man who feels he has surely earned his own admiration.

Once he varied this procedure by glancing up while still in the middle of a row. His glance was sharp and startled. He had heard an unaccustomed sound, distinct but distant. It seemed to him that a horse had neighed. There came an answering neigh. It was quite disturbing.

A long and careful scrutiny of the plains in every direction, however, left him with a feeling of doubt. There was no horse in sight anywhere, and the great hills adjacent offered no inducement whatsoever for any straying quadruped. He assured himself that the solitude of his life was rendering him fanciful,

and forthwith returned to his work.

For some time the measured stroke of his hoe clanked upon the baking soil, and later on he paused to fill and light his pipe. He had just cut the flakes of tobacco from his plug, and was rolling them in the palms of his hands, when the thought occurred to him to glance at the time. His great coin-silver timepiece pointed the hour when he felt he might safely signal the freight train through.

Lounging round to the front of the station building he walked down the track to the foot of the semaphore, and flung the rusty lever over. His action expressed something of the contempt in which he held all "local freights." Then he sauntered back to his work with his pipe under full blast.

But his day has yet surprises in store. In half an hour's time he received his second start. A distant rumble and grinding warned him that the freight was approaching through the hills. He smiled at the sound, and his smile was largely satirical. He glanced up once, but promptly continued his work. But it was only for a few moments. The sound which had been growing had almost died out and was being replaced by the hammering of the cars as they closed up against each other. The train was stopping.

He was looking up now full of interest, and one hand went up to his head, and its fingers raked among the roots of his hair. Suddenly the engine bell began to clang violently. There was distinctly a note of protest in the sound. Something was wrong. He swung round and looked at his signal. Say – was he dreaming? What on earth – ? Half an hour ago he had lowered

the semaphore, at least he had set the lever over, and now – now it was set against the train!

For a second he stared at the offending arm, then, as the bell clanged still more violently, he dashed across the intervening space to remedy his mistake.

But now incident crowded upon him. He was quite right. The lever was set as it should be set. His practiced eye glanced rapidly down the connecting rod to discover the source of the trouble, and further amazement waited upon him. The explanation of the mystery lay before his eyes. There at the triangular junction, where the connecting rod linked with the down-haul of the semaphore, the bolt had fallen out, and the whole thing was disconnected. The bolt with its screw nut and washer were lying on the ground, where, apparently, they had fallen.

The furious clanging of the engine bell, where the head of the train stood just in view round the bend of the track where it entered the hills, left him no time for consideration of the mishap. The protesting train must be passed on without further delay. Therefore, with deft hands, he quickly readjusted the bolt, and once again set the lever. This time the arm of the signal dropped.

It was not until these things were accomplished that he had time to study the cause of the disconnection. Then, at once, a curious feeling of incredulity swept over him. It was an impossibility for the thing to have happened. The bolt fitted horizontally, and the washered nut had full two inches to unscrew! Besides this, the whole thing was well rusted with years

of exposure. Yet the impossible had happened!

He stood gazing at the bolt with a sort of uncanny feeling stirring within him. The engine at the head of its long string of box cars approached. It passed him, and he heard its driver hurl some uncomplimentary remark at him as the rattling old kettle clanked by. Then, as the last car passed him, and rapidly grew smaller as the distance swallowed it up, he turned back to his vegetable patch with the mystery still unsolved.

The journey through the hills was nearly over, and White Point was but a short distance ahead. The conductor and crew of the local freight were lounging comfortably in the caboose.

The brakeman's life is full of risk and little comfort, and such moments as these were all too few. When they came they were more than gratefully received. Now the men were spread out in various attitudes of repose, and, for the most part, were half asleep.

Suddenly, without the least warning, they were startled into full wakefulness by the familiar clatter, beginning at the head of the train and passing rapidly down its full length, as the cars closed up on each other. The resting men knew that the locomotive was either stopping, or had already come to a halt.

The conductor, or head brakeman, sat up with a jolt.

"Hey, you, Jack!" he cried peevishly. "Get up aloft an' get a peek out. Say, we sure ain't goin' to get held up at a bum flag layout."

His contempt was no less for the flag station than Mr. Moss's

for a local freight.

The man addressed as “Jack” sprang alertly to the roof of the caboose. A moment later his voice echoed through the car below him.

“Can’t see a thing,” he cried. “We’re on the last bend, just outside White Point. She’s stopped – dead sure. Guess the flag has got us held up.” With a few added curses he clambered down into the car again.

As the brakeman left the roof of the caboose the enactment of a strange scene began at the fore part of the car immediately in front of it.

A glance down at the coupling would have revealed the cautious appearance of a shock of rough hair covering a man’s head from under the last box car. Slowly it twisted round till a grimy, dust-covered face was turned upward, and a pair of expectant eyes peered up at the tops of the two cars.

Apparently the preliminary survey was satisfactory, for, in a moment, the head was withdrawn, only to be replaced by an outstretched bare hand and forearm. The hand reached up and caught the iron foot rail, gripping it firmly. Then another hand appeared, and with it came the same head again and part of a man’s body. The second hand reached toward the coupling-pin, which, with a dexterous movement, was slowly and noiselessly removed. The pin was lowered to the length of its chain. Then, once more the hand reached toward the coupling. This time it seized the great iron link. This, without a moment’s delay,

was lifted from its hook and noiselessly lowered till it swung suspended from the car in front. Then both arms, head, and body vanished once more under the car, beneath which the man must have traveled for miles.

A few moments later the welcome jolting of couplings reached the crew in the caboose, who promptly settled themselves down to await the next call of duty. The conductor's relief at the brevity of the delay was expressed in smiling contempt at the expense of all flag stations.

"Trust a darned outfit like that to hold you up," he cried witheringly. "They got to act fresh, or the company 'ud get wise they ain't no sort o' use on the line. Say –"

But he broke off listening.

The jolting had ceased. The grinding of wheels of the moving train was plainly heard. But – the caboose remained stationary.

He leaped to his feet.

"Hell!" he cried. "What the –"

But the brakeman, Jack, was on his feet, too. With a bound he sprang at the door of the caboose. But instantly he fell back with a cry.

Four gun muzzles were leveled at his body, and, behind them, stood the figures of two masked men.

One of the two spoke in the slow easy drawl of the West, which lacked nothing in conviction.

"Jest keep dead still – all o' you," he said. "Don't move – nor nothin', or we'll blow holes through your figgers that'll cause a

hell of a draught. We ain't yearning to make no sort o' mess in this yer caboose. But we're going to do it – 'cep' you keep quite still, an' don't worry any."

The conductor was a man of wide experience on the railroad. He had seen many "hold-ups." So many, he was almost used to them. But without being absolutely sure of the purpose of these men he thanked his genius of good luck that he had not seen the "pay train" for nearly a month. He was quite ready to obey. For all he cared the raiders could take locomotive, train, caboose and all, provided he was left with a whole skin.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLD-UP

Just beyond the flag station at White Point, where the forest-clad slopes of the great hills crowded in upon the railroad track, a scene of utter lawlessness was being silently enacted.

The spot was a lonely one, lonely with that oppressive solitude always to be found where the great hills of ages rear their towering heads. It was utterly cut off, too, from the outer world, by a monstrous abutment of hill which left the track a mere ribbon, like the track of some invertebrate, laboriously making its way through surroundings all uncongenial and antagonistic. Yet the station was but a few hundred yards beyond this point, where it lay open to the sweep of at least three of the four winds of Heaven. But even so, the two places were as effectually separated as though miles, and not yards, intervened.

No breath of air stirred the generous spruce and darkening pinewoods. The drooping, westerling sun, already athwart the barren crown of the hill tops, left a false, velvety suggestion of twilight in the heart of the valley, while a depressing superheat enervated all life, except the profusion of vegetation which beautified the rugged slopes. For the most part the stillness was profound, only the most trifling sounds disturbing it. There was an uneasy shuffle of moving feet; there was the occasional crisp

clip of a driven axe; then, too, weighty articles being dropped into the bottom of a heavy wagon sent up their dull boom at long intervals.

The outlaws worked swiftly, but without apparent haste. The success of their efforts depended upon rapidity of execution, that and the most exact care for the detail of their organization. Provided these things were held foremost in their minds there was small enough chance of interruption. Had not the train, with its all unconscious driver, passed upon its rumbling way toward Amberley? Had not all suspicion been lulled in the mind of the bucolic agent, who was even now laboriously expending a maximum of energy for a minimum return of culinary delicacies in his vegetable patch? What was there to interfere? Nothing. These men well knew that except for the flag station there was not a habitation within ten miles, and the ruggedness of the hills barred them to every form of traffic except the irresistible impulse of railroad enterprise.

Three men carried out the work of unloading the box car, while the two others held the train crew at bay. All were masked with one exception, and he, from his evident authority and mode of dress, was obviously the leader of the gang.

He was a slight, dark man, of somewhat remarkable refinement of appearance. He was good looking, and almost boyish in the lack of hair upon his face. But this was more than counterbalanced by the determined set of his features, and the keen, calculating glance of his eyes. The latter, particularly, were

darkly luminous and lit with an expression of lawless exhilaration as the work proceeded. Compared with his fellows, who were of the well-known type of ruffian, in whom the remoter prairie lands abound, he looked wholly out of place in such a transaction. His air was that of a town-bred man, and his clothing, too, suggested a refinement of tailoring, particularly the rather loose cord riding breeches he affected. The others, masked as they were, with their coatless bodies, and loose, unclean shirts, their leather chapps, and the guns they wore upon their hips – well, they made an exquisite picture of that ruffianism which bows to no law of civilization, but that which they carry in the leather holsters hanging at their waists.

The trackside was strewn with disemboweled whitewood barrels. The wreckage was grotesque. The ground was strewn in every direction with a litter of white cube sugar, like the wind-swept drifts of a summer snowfall. Barrels were still being dragged out of the car and dropped roughly to the ground, where the sharp stroke of an axe ripped out the head, revealing within the neatly packed keg of spirit, embedded so carefully in its setting of sugar. The cargo had been well shipped by men skilled in the subtle art of contraband. It was billed, and the barrels were addressed, to a firm in Calford whose reputation for integrity was quite unimpeachable. Herein was the cunning of the smugglers. The sugar barrels were never intended to reach Calford. They were not robbing the consignees in this raid upon the freight train. They were simply possessing themselves, in unorthodox fashion,

of an illicit cargo that belonged to their leader.

Fifteen kegs of spirit had been removed and bestowed in the wagon. There were still five more to complete the tally.

The leader, in easy tones, urged his men to greater speed.

“Get a hustle, boys,” he said, in a deep, steady voice, while he strove with his somewhat delicate hands to lift a keg into the wagon.

The effort was too great for him single-handed, and one of his assistants came to his aid.

“There’s no time to spare,” he went on a moment later, breathing hard from his exertion. “Maybe the loco driver’ll whistle for brakes.” He laughed with a pleasant, half humorous chuckle. “If that happens, why – why I guess the train’ll be chasing back on its tracks to pick up its lost tail.”

He spoke with a refined accent of the West. The man nearest him guffawed immoderately.

“Gee!” he exclaimed delightedly. “This game’s a cinch. Guess Fyles’ll kick thirteen holes in himself when that train gets in.”

“Thirteen?” inquired the leader smilingly.

“Sure. Guess most folks reckon that figure unlucky.”

The third man snorted as he shouldered a keg and moved toward the Wagon.

“Holes? Thirteen?” he cried, as he dropped his burden into the vehicle. Then he hawked and spat. “When that blamed train gets around Amberley he’ll hate hisself wuss’n a bank clerk with his belly awash wi’ boardin’ house wet hash.”

Again came the leader's dark smile. But he had nothing to add.

Presently the last keg was hoisted into the wagon. The leader of the enterprise sighed.

It was a sigh of pent feeling, the sigh of a man laboring under great stress. Yet it was not wholly an expression of relief. If anything, there was regret in it, regret that work he delighted in was finished.

One of the men was removing his mask, and he watched him. Then, as the face of the man who had been concealed under the car was revealed, he signed to him.

"Get busy on the wagon," he said.

The man promptly mounted to the driving seat, and gathered up the reins.

"Hit the south trail for the temporary cache," the leader went on. "Guess we'll need to ride hard if Fyles is feeling as worried as you fellows – hope."

The man winked abundantly.

"That's all right, all right. He'll need to hop some when we get busy. Ho, boys!" And he chirruped his horses out of the shallow cutting, and the wagon crushed its way into the smaller bush.

The leader stood for a moment looking after it. Then he turned to the other man, still awaiting orders.

"Get the other boys' horses up," he said sharply. "Then stand by on horseback, and hold the train crew while they tumble into the saddle. Then make for the cache."

The man hurried to obey. There were no questions asked

when this man gave his orders. Long experience had taught these men that there was no necessity to question. Hardy ruffians as they were they knew well enough that if they had the bodies for this work, he had a head that was far cleverer even than that of Inspector Fyles himself.

Meanwhile the leader had moved out into the center of the track, and his eyes were turned westward, toward the bend round the great hill. They were pensive eyes, almost regretful, and somehow his whole face had changed from its look of daring to match them. The exhilaration had gone out of it; the command, even the determination had merged into something like weakness. His look was soft – even tender.

He stood there while the final details of his enterprise were completed. He heard the horses come up; he heard the two men clamber from the caboose and get into the saddle. Then, at last, he turned, and moved off the track.

Once more the old look of reckless daring was shining in his luminous eyes. He dashed off into the bush to mount his horse, leaving his softer mood somewhere behind him – in the West.

There was a clatter and rattle of speeding hoofs, which rapidly died out. Then again the hills returned to their brooding silence.

The withdrawal of the outlaws was the cue for absurd activity on the part of the train crew. A whirlwind of heated blasphemy set in, which might well have scorched the wooden sides of the car. They cursed everybody and everything, but most of all they cursed the bucolic agent at White Point.

Then came a cautious reconnoitering beyond the door. This was promptly followed by a pell-mell dash for the open. In a moment they were crowding the trackside, staring with stupid eyes and mouths agape at the miniature snowfall of sugar, and the wreckage of whitewood barrels.

The conductor was the first to gather his scattered faculties.

“The lousy bums!” he cried fiercely. Then he added, with less ferocity and more regret, “The – lousy – bums!”

A moment later he turned upon his comrades in the aggrieved fashion of one who would like to accuse.

“Taint no use in gawkin’ around here,” he cried sharply. “We’re up agin it. That’s how it is.” Then his face went scarlet, as a memory occurred to him. “Say, White Point’s around the corner. And that’s where we’ll find that hop-headed agent – if he ain’t done up. Anyways, if he ain’t – why, I guess we’ll just set him playin’ a miser-arey over his miser’ble wires, that’ll set ’em diggin’ out a funeral hearse and mournin’ coaches in that dogasted prairie sepulcher – Amberley.”

Mr. Moss was disentangling the crick in his back for the last time that day. His stomach had forced on him the conviction that his evening meal was a necessity not lightly to be denied.

His back eased, he shouldered his hoe and moved off toward his shanty with the dispirited air of the man who must prepare his own meal. As he passed the lean-to, where his kindling and fuel were kept, he flung the implements inside it, as though glad to be rid of the burden of his labors. Then he passed on round to the

front of the building with the lagging step of indifference. There was little enough in his life to encourage hopeful anticipation.

At the door he paused. Such was his habit that his eyes wandered to the track which had somehow become the highway of his life, and he glanced up and down it. The far-reaching plains to the west offered him too wide a focus. There was nothing to hold him in its breadth of outlook. But as his gaze came in contact with the frowning crags to the east, a sudden light of interest, even apprehension, leaped into his eyes. In a moment he became a creature transformed. His bucolic calm had gone. The metamorphosis was magical.

In one bound he leaped within the hut. Then, in a moment, he was back at the door again, his tensely poised figure filling up the opening. His powerful hands were gripping his Winchester, and he stood ready. The farmer in him had disappeared. His eyes were alight with the impulse of battle.

Along the track, from out of the hills, ran four unkempt human figures. They were rushing for the flag station, gesticulating as they came. In the loneliness of the spot there was only one interpretation of their attitude for the waiting man.

Mr. Moss's voice rang out violently, and caught the echo of the hills.

“What in hell – ?” he shouted, raising the deadly Winchester swiftly to his shoulder. “Hold up!” he went on, “or I’ll let daylight into some of you.”

The effect of this challenge was instantaneous and almost

ludicrous. The oncoming figures stopped, and nearly fell over each other in their haste to thrust their hands above their heads. Then the eager, anxious shout of the gray-headed brakeman came back to him.

“Fer Gawd’s sake don’t shoot!” he cried, in terrified tones. “We’re the train crew! The freight crew! We bin held up! Say – !”

But the lowering of the threatening gun saved him further explanation at such a distance.

The light of battle had entirely died out of Mr. Moss’s eyes, but it was the brakeman’s uniform, rather than his explanation, that had inspired the white flag of peace.

The man came hastily up.

“What the – ?” began the agent. But he was permitted to proceed no further.

The angry eyes of the brakeman snapped, and his blasphemous tongue poured out its protesting story as rapidly as his stormy feelings could drive him. Then, with an added violence, he came to his final charge of the agent himself.

“What in hell did you flag us for?” he cried. “You, on this bum layout? Do you stand in with these ‘hold-ups’? I tell you right here this thing’s goin’ to be just as red-hot for you as I can make it. That train was flagged *without official reason*,” he went on with rising heat. “Get me? An’ you’re responsible.”

Having delivered himself of his threat, he assumed the hectoring air which the moral support of his companions afforded him.

“Now, you just start right in and get busy on the wires. You can just hammer seven sorts of hell into your instruments and call up Amberley quick. You’re goin’ to put ’em wise right away. Macinaw! When I’m done with this thing you’re goin’ to hate White Point wuss’n hell, an’ wish to Gawd they’d cut ‘flag station’ right out o’ the conversation of the whole durned American continent.”

Mr. Moss had listened in a perfect daze. It was his blank acceptance of the brakeman’s hectoring which had so encouraged that individual. But now that all had been told, and the man’s harsh tones ceased to disturb the peace of their surroundings, his mind cleared, and hot resentment leaped to his tongue.

He sat down at his instrument and pounded the key, calling up Amberley; and as the Morse sign clacked its metallic, broken note he verbally replied to his accuser.

“You’ve talked a whole heap that sounds to me like hot air,” he cried, with bitter feeling. “Maybe you’re old, so it don’t amount to anything. As for your bum freight it was late – as usual. It wasn’t my duty to pass it through till you shouted for signals. There ain’t any schedule for bum freights. When they’re late it’s up to them.”

But for all Mr. Moss’s contempt, and righteous indignation, the brakeman’s charge had had its effect. Well enough he remembered the disjointed connecting rod, and he wondered how these “hold-ups” had contrived it under his very nose. In his own phraseology, he felt “sore.” But his ill humor was not alone

due to the brakeman's abuse. He was thinking of something far more vital. He knew well enough that his explanation would never satisfy the heads of his department. Then, too, always hovering somewhere in the background, was the, to him, sinister figure of Inspector Fyles of the Mounted Police.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE FOOT OF AN AGED PINE

Waiting for word from the agent, Huntly, Inspector Fyles had retreated to the insignificant wooden shack which served the police as a Town Station in Amberley. It consisted of two rooms and a loft in the pitch of the roof. Its furniture was reduced to a minimum, and everything, except the loft above where the two troopers and the corporal in charge slept, was a matter of bare boards and bare wooden chairs.

The officer sat in the smaller inner room where the telephone was close to his hand, while the non-commissioned officer and his men occupied the outer room.

Fyles faced the window with his hard Windsor chair close beside the office table. His elbow rested upon its chipped and discolored surface, and his chin was supported on the palm of his hand. Just now his busy thoughts were free to wander whithersoever they listed. This was an interim of waiting, when all preparations were made for the work in hand, and there was nothing to do but await developments. So used was he to this work of seizing contraband spirits that its contemplation had not power enough to quicken one single beat of his pulse. And in this, too, he displayed that wondrous patience which was so much a part of his nature.

Stanley Fyles's reputation in these wild regions was decidedly unique. Scarcely a day passed but what some strenuous emergency arose demanding quick thought and quicker action, where life, frequently his own, hung in the balance. Yet the most strenuous of them found him always easy, always deliberate, and, as his subordinates loved to declare, he always managed to "beat the game by a second."

There were people outside, civilians, who confidently and contemptuously declared him to be a bungler; a patient, hard-working bungler. These were the men who saw few of his successes, and always contrived to smell out his failures. These people were those who had no understanding of the difficulties of a handful of men pitted against a country eaten up with every form of criminal disease. There were others, again, who insisted that far more crime slipped through his well "oiled" hands than ever was held by them. These were the people who sneered at his reputation for stern discipline, and declared it to be a mere pose to cover his tracks, while he patiently piled up a fortune through the shady channels of "graft." A small minority admitted his ability, but averred that his patience erred on the side of slackness, which was one of the causes that the flood of prohibited liquor in the country showed no abatement.

Nevertheless, one and all admitted his patience, whether it was in bungling, in harvesting his graft, or whether it was a form of slackness. Nor could they help doing so, for patience, a wonderful purposeful patience, was his greatest characteristic. Every other

feature of his personality was subservient to it, and so it was that the most hardened criminals began at once a nervous scrutiny of their tracks the moment the news reached them that the lean nose of Stanley Fyles had caught their scent.

Those who knew Fyles best ignored the patience which caught the public mind so readily. They saw something more beneath it, something much more to their liking. His patience only masked a keen, swift-moving, scheming brain, packed to the uttermost with a wonderful instinct for detection. He worked on no rule-of-thumb method as so many of his comrades did. He was the fortunate possessor of an imagination, and, long since, he had learned its value in his crusade against crime.

But this man was by no means a mere detection machine. He was full of ambition. Police work was merely serving its purpose in his scheme of things. He saw advancement in it – advancement in the right direction. In five years he had raised himself from the lowest rung of the police ladder to a commissioned rank, and from this rank he knew he could reach out in any of the directions in which he required to proceed.

There were several directions in which his ambitious eyes gazed. There were politics, with their multifarious opportunities for fortune and place. There was the land, crying aloud of the fortunes lying hidden within its bosom. There was official service upon higher planes, from which so many names were drawn to fill the roll of fame to be handed down to an adoring posterity. He was not yet thirty years of age, and he felt that any one of these

things lay well within the focus his present position presented.

But the time for his next move was not yet; and herein was the real man. In his mind there were still purposes which required complete fulfilment before that further upward movement began. It was the more human side of the man dictating its will upon him, that will which can never be denied when once it rouses from its slumbers amid the living fires which course through the veins of healthy manhood.

Just now, as he leaned back in his unyielding chair, luxuriating in a comfort which only a man as hard as he could have extracted from it, the hot, living fires were stirring in his veins. His mind had gone back to a picture, one of the many pictures which so often held him in his scant leisure, that represented the first waking of those dormant fires of manhood.

The scene was a memory forming the starting point of a long series of other pictures, which always came with a rush, changing and changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity till they developed into a stream of swiftly flowing thought.

It was the picture of a quaint, straggling prairie village, half hidden in the multi-hued foliage of a deep valley, as viewed from his saddle where his horse stood upon the shoulder of land which dropped away at his feet. It was one of those wondrous fairy scenes with which the prairie, in her friendlier moods, delights to charm the eye. Perhaps "mock" would better express her whim, for many of these fair settlements in the days of the Prohibition Laws were veritable sepulchers of crime, only whitewashed by

the humorous mood of nature.

Ten yards below him an aged pine reared its hoary, time-worn head toward the gleaming azure of a noonday summer sky. It was a landmark known throughout the land; it was the landmark which had guided him to this obscure village of Rocky Springs. It had been in his eye all the morning as he rode toward it, and as he drew near curiosity had impelled him to leave the trail he was on and examine more closely this wonderful specimen of a far, far distant age.

But his inspection was never fully made. Instead, his interest was abruptly diverted to that which he beheld reposing beneath its shadow. A girl was sitting, half reclining, against the dark old trunk, with a sewing basket at her side, and a perfect maze of white needlework in her lap.

She was not sewing, however, as he drew near. She was gazing out over the village below, with a pair of eyes so deep and darkly beautiful that the man caught his breath. Just for one unconscious moment Stanley Fyles had followed the direction of her gaze, then his own eyes came back to her face and riveted themselves upon it.

She was very, very beautiful. Her hair was abundant and dark. Yet it was quite devoid of that suggestion of great weight so often found in very dark hair. There was a melting luster in the velvet softness of her deeply fringed eyes. Her features were sufficiently irregular to escape the accusation of classic form, and possessed a firmness and decision quite remarkable. At that moment the

solitary horseman decided in his mind that here was the most beautiful creature he had ever looked upon.

She was dressed in a light summer frock, through the delicate texture of which peeped the warm tint of beautifully rounded arms and shoulders. She was hatless, too, in spite of the summer blaze. To his fired imagination she belonged to a canvas painted by some old master whose portrayals suggested a strength and depth of character rarely seen in life. Even the beautiful olive of her complexion suggested those southern climes whence alone, he had always been led to believe, old masters hailed.

To him it was the face of a woman whose heart and mind were crowding with a yearning for something – something unattainable. Such was her look of strength and virility that he almost regretted them, fearing that her character might belie her wondrous femininity.

But in a moment he had denial forced upon him. The girl turned slowly, and gazed up into his face with smiling frankness. Her eyes took him in from his prairie hat to his well-booted feet. They passed swiftly over his dark patrol jacket, with its star upon its shoulder, and down the yellow stripe of his riding breeches. There was nothing left him but to salute, which he did as her voice broke the silence.

“You’re Inspector Stanley Fyles?” she said, with a rising inflection in her deep musical voice.

The man answered bluntly. He was taken aback at the unconventional greeting.

“Yes – ” He cleared his throat in his momentary confusion. Then he responded to her still smiling eyes. “And – that’s Rocky Springs?” he inquired, pointing down the valley. The information was quite unnecessary.

The girl nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “a prairie village that’s full of everything interesting – except, perhaps, honesty.”

The man smiled broadly.

“That’s why I’m here.”

The girl laughed a merry, rippling laugh.

“Sure,” she nodded. “We heard you were coming. You’re going to fix a police station here, aren’t you?” Then, as he nodded, her smile died out and her eyes became almost earnest. “It’s surely time,” she declared. “I’ve heard of bad places, I’ve read of them, I guess. But all I’ve heard of, or read of, are heavens of righteousness compared with this place. Look,” she cried, rising from the ground and reaching out one beautifully rounded arm in the direction of the nestling houses, amid their setting of green woods, with the silvery gleam of the river peeping up as it wound its sluggish summer way through the heart of the valley. “Was there ever such a mockery? The sweetest picture human eyes could rest on. Fair – far, far fairer than any artist’s fancy could paint it. It’s a fit resting place for everything that’s good, and true, and beautiful in life, and – and yet – I’d say that Rocky Springs, very nearly to a man, is – against the law.”

For a moment Fyles had no reply. He was thinking of the

charm of the picture she made standing there silhouetted against the green slope of the far side of the valley. Then, as she suddenly dropped her arm, and began to gather up the sewing she had tumbled upon the ground when she stood up, he pulled himself together. He beamed an unusually genial smile.

“Guess there are things we police need to be thankful for, and places like Rocky Springs are among ’em,” he said, cheerfully. “I’d say if it wasn’t for your Rocky Springs, and its like, we should be chasing around as uselessly as hungry coyotes in winter. The Government wouldn’t fancy paying us for nothing.”

By the time he had finished speaking the girl’s work was gathered in her arms.

“That’s the trail,” she said abruptly, pointing at the path which Fyles had left for his inspection of the tree. “It goes right on down to the saloon. You see,” she added slyly, “the saloon’s about the most important building in the town. Good-bye.”

Without another word she walked off down the slope, and, in a moment, was lost among the generous growth of shrubs.

This was the scene to which his mind always reverted. But there were others, many of them, and in each this beautiful girl’s presence was always the center of his focus. He had seen and spoken to her many times since then, for his duty frequently took him into the neighborhood of that aged pine. But in spite of her frankness at their first meeting she quickly proved far more elusive than he would have believed possible, and consequently his intimacy with her had progressed very little.

The result was a natural one. The man's interest in her was still further whetted, till, in time, he finally realized that the long anticipated move upwards, which he was preparing for, could no longer be made – alone.

These were the thoughts occupying him now as he stared out through the dusty window at the scattered houses which lined Amberley's main street. These were the thoughts which conjured on his bronzed, strong features, that pleasant half-smile of satisfaction. He wanted her very much. He wanted her so much that all impulse to rush headlong and make her his was thrust aside. He must wait – wait with the same patience which he applied to all that which was important in his life, and, when opportunity offered, when the moment was ripe, he would make the great effort upon which he knew so much of his future happiness depended.

Thus he was dreaming on pleasantly, hopefully, and yet not without doubts, when a sharp knock at his door banished the last vestige of romance from his mind. In an instant he was on his feet, alert and waiting.

“Come!”

His summons was promptly answered, and the tall figure of the corporal stood framed in the doorway.

“Well?”

The question came with the sharp ring of authority.

“It's Huntly, sir,” the man explained briefly. “He's got a message. There's been a 'hold-up' of the freight, just beyond

White Point. The ‘jumpers’ have dropped off the two hindermost cars and held the crew prisoners. Seems the train was flagged on the bend out of the hills and then allowed to pass. While it was standing the cars were cut loose. Then the train came on without them. She’s in sight now. Huntly’s outside.”

The Inspector gave no sign while his subordinate talked. His eyes were lowered at a point of interest on the floor. At the conclusion of the man’s brief outline he glanced up.

“Has Huntly got the message with him?”

“Yes, sir.”

Fyles made a move, and the other stepped back to let him pass out.

The agent was waiting in the outer office. His eyes were wide with excitement.

“Well? Where’s the message?” the officer demanded.

Huntly thrust a paper into his hand.

“It just came through.”

Fyles took it, and his strong brows drew together as he read the long story of the “hold-up” which the man had taken down from his instrument.

A deep silence prevailed while the officer read the news which so completely frustrated all his plans.

At last he looked up. Favoring the man Huntly with one inquiring glance, he turned to the corporal.

“It says here the brakeman heard the leader tell his men to make for the south trail. That was either bluff – or a mistake.

They sometimes make mistakes, and that's how we get our chances. The south trail is the road into Rocky Springs. Rocky Springs is twenty-two miles from White Point. They've probably had an hour's start with a heavily loaded wagon. Rocky Springs is twenty-six from here by trail. Good. Say, tell the boys to get on the move quick. They'll strike the south trail about seven miles northeast of Rocky Springs. If they ride hard they should cut them off, or, any way, hit their trail close behind them."

"Yes, sir."

As Fyles turned back to the inner room and picked up the telephone, ignoring the still waiting agent, the corporal hurried away.

In a moment the telephone bell rang out and the officer was speaking.

"Yes, sir, Fyles. Yes, at the Town Station. I'm coming up to barracks right away. It's most important. I must see you. The whisky-runners have – doubled on us."

CHAPTER V

BOUND FOR THE SOUTHERN TRAIL

Three uniformed men rode hard across the tawny plains. They rode abreast. Their horses were a-lather; their lean sides tuckered, but their gait remained unslackening. It was a gait they would keep as long as daylight lasted.

Sergeant McBain's horse kept its nose just ahead of the others. It was as though the big, rawboned animal appreciated its rider's rank.

Quite abruptly the non-commissioned officer raised an arm and pointed.

"Yon's the Cypress Hills, boys," he cried. "See, they're getting up out of the heat haze on the skyline. We're heading too far south."

He spoke without for a moment withdrawing the steady gaze of his hard blue eyes.

One of the troopers answered him.

"Sure, sergeant," he agreed. "We need to head away to the left."

The horses swung off the line, beating the sun-scorched grass with their iron-shod hoofs with a vigor that felt good to the riders.

The bronzed faces of the men were eager. Their widely gazing

eyes were alert and watchful. They were trailing a hot scent, a pastime as well as a work that was their life. They needed no greater incentive to put forth the best efforts of bodily and mental energies.

The uniform of these riders of the western plains was unassuming. Their brown canvas tunics, their prairie hats, their black, hard serge breeches, with broad, yellow stripes down the thighs, possessed a businesslike appearance not to be found in a modern soldier's uniform. These things were for sheer hard service.

The life of these men was made up of hard service. It was demanded of them by the Government; it was also demanded of them by the conditions of the country. Lawlessness prevailed on these fair, sunlit plains; lawlessness of man, lawlessness of Nature. Between the two they were left with scarce a breathing space for those comforts which only found existence in dreams that were all too brief and transitory.

Nominally, these men were military police, yet their methods were far enough removed from all matters martial. Theirs it was to obey orders, but all similarity ended there. Each man was left free to think and act for himself. Brief orders, with little detail, were hurled at him. For the rest his superiors demanded one result – achievement. A crime was committed; a criminal was at large; information of a contemplated breach of the peace was to hand. Then go – and see to it. Investigate and arrest. The individual must plan and carry out, whatever

the odds. Success would meet with cool approval; failure would be promptly rewarded with the utmost rigor of the penal code governing the force. The work might take days, weeks, months. It mattered not. Nor did it matter the expense, provided success crowned the effort. But with failure resulting – ah, there must be no failure. The prestige of the force could not stand failure, for its seven hundred men were required to dominate and cleanse a territory in which half a dozen European countries could be comfortably lost.

Presently Sergeant McBain spoke again. His steady eyes were still fixed upon the horizon.

“Say, that’s her,” he said. “There she is. Coming right up like a mop head. That’s the pine at Rocky Springs. Further away to the left still, boys.”

He turned his horse, and the race against time was continued. Somewhere ahead, on the southern trail, a gang of whisky smugglers were plying their trade. Inspector Fyles had said, “Go, and – round them up.”

The odds were all against these men, yet no one considered the matter. Each, with eyes and brain alert, was ready to do all of which human effort was capable.

Now that definite direction over those wastes of grass had been finally located, the sergeant, a rough, hard-faced Scot, relaxed his vigilance. His mind drifted to the purpose in hand, and a dry humor lit his eyes.

“Eh, man, but it’s a shameful waste, spilling good spirit,” he

said, addressing no one in particular. “Governments are always prodigal – except with pay.”

One of the troopers sniggered.

“Guess we could spill some of it, sergeant,” he declared meaningly.

“Spill it!” The sergeant grinned. “That isn’t the word, boy. Spill don’t describe the warm trickle of good liquor down a man’s throat. Say, I mind – ”

The other trooper broke in.

“Fyles ’ud spill champagne,” he cried in disgust. “A man like that needs seeing to.”

The sergeant shook his head.

“Fyles would spill anything or anybody that required spilling, so he gets his nose to windward of the game. He’s right, too, in this God-forgotten land. If we didn’t spill, we’d be right down and out, and our lives wouldn’t be worth a second’s purchase. No, boys, it breaks our hearts to spill – but we got to do it – or be spilt ourselves.”

The man shook his reins and hustled the great sorrel under him. The animal’s response was a lengthening of stride which left his companions hard put to it to keep pace.

The brief talk was closed. It had been a moment of relaxed tension. Now, once more, every eye was fixed on the shimmering skyline. They were eagerly looking out for the southern trail.

Half an hour later its yellow, sandy surface lay beneath their feet, an open book for the reading.

All three leaped from the saddle and began a close examination of it, while their sweating horses promptly regaled themselves with the ripe, tufty grass at the trail side.

Sergeant McBain narrowly scrutinized the wheel tracks, estimating the speed at which the last vehicle to pass had been traveling. The blurred hoofmarks of the horses warned him they had been driven hard.

“We’re behind ’em, boys,” he declared promptly, “an’ their gait says they’re taking no chances.”

Further down the trail one of the troopers answered him:

“There’s four saddle horses with ’em,” he said thoughtfully. “Two shod, and two shod on the forefeet only. Guess, with the teamster, that makes five men. Prairie toughs, I’d guess.”

The sergeant concurred, while they continued their examination.

Then the third man exclaimed sharply —

“Here!” he cried, picking something up at the side of the trail.

The others joined him at once.

He was quietly tearing open a half-burned cigarette, the tobacco inside of which was still moist.

“Prairie toughs don’t smoke *made* cigarettes around here. It’s a Caporal. Get it? That’s bought in a town.”

“Ay,” said McBain quickly. “Rocky Springs, I’d say. It’s the Rocky Springs gang, sure as hell. It’s the foulest hole of crime in the northwest. Come on, boys. We need to get busy.”

Two minutes later a moving cloud of dust marked their

progress down the trail in the direction of Rocky Springs. Presently, however, the dust subsided. The astute riders of the plains were giving no chances away; they had left the tell-tale trail and rode on over the grass at its edge.

The westering sun was low on the horizon. The air was still. Not a cloud was visible anywhere in the sky. The world was silent. The drowsing birds, even, had finished their evensong.

Low bush-grown hills lined the trail where it entered the wide valley of Leaping Creek, which, six miles further on, ran through the heart of the hamlet of Rocky Springs.

It was a beauty spot of no mean order. The smaller hills were broken and profuse, with dark woodland gorges splitting them in every direction, crowded with such a density of foliage as to be almost impassable. Farther on, as the valley widened and deepened, its aspect became more rugged. The land rose to greater heights, the lighter vegetation gave way to heavier growths of spruce and blue gum and maple. These too, in turn, became sprinkled with the darker and taller pines. Then, as the distance gained, a still further change met the eye. Vast patches of virgin pine woods, with their mournful, tattered crowns, toned the brighter greens to the somber grandeur of more mountainous regions.

The breathless hush of evening lay upon the valley. There was even a sense of awe in the silence. It was peace, a wonderful natural peace, when all nature seems at rest, nor could the chastened atmosphere of a cloister have conveyed more perfectly

the sense of repose.

But the human contradiction lay in the heart of the valley. It was the abiding place of the hamlet of Rocky Springs, and Rocky Springs was accredited with being the very breeding ground of prairie crime.

Just now, however, the chastened atmosphere was perfect. Rocky Springs, so far away, was powerless to affect it. Even the song of the tumbling creek, which coursed through the heart of the valley, was powerless to awaken discordant echoes. Its music was low and soft. It was like the drone of the stirring insects, part of that which went to make up the atmosphere of perfect peace.

The sun dropped lower in the western sky. A velvet twilight seemed to rise out of the heart of the valley. Slowly the glowing light vanished behind a bluff of woodland. In a few minutes the trees and undergrowth were lit up as though a mighty conflagration were devouring them. Then the fire died down, and the sun sank.

But as the sun sank, a low, deep note grew softly out of the distance. For a time it blended musically with the murmuring of the bustling creek and the wakeful insect life. Then it dominated both, and its music lessened. Its note changed rapidly, so rapidly that its softer tone was at once forgotten, and only the harshness it now assumed remained in the mind. Louder and harsher it grew till from a mere rumble it jumped to a rattle and clatter which suggested speed, violence, and a dozen conflicting emotions.

Almost immediately came a further change, and one which

left no doubt remaining. The clatter broke up into distinct and separate sounds. The swift beat of speeding hoofs mingled with the fierce rattle of light wheels, racing over the surface of a hard road.

All sense of peace vanished from the valley. Almost it seemed as if its very aspect had changed. A sense of human strife had suddenly possessed it, and left its painful mark indelibly set upon the whole scene.

The climax was reached as a hard driven team and wagon, escorted by four mounted men, precipitated themselves into the picture. They came over the shoulder of the valley and plunged headlong down the dangerous slope, regardless of all consequences, regardless both of life and limb. The teamster was leaning forward in his seat, his arms outstretched, grasping a rein in each hand. He was urging his horses to their utmost. In his face was that stern, desperate expression that told of perfect cognizance of his position. It said as plainly as possible, however great the danger he saw before him, it must be chanced for the greater danger behind.

Two of the horsemen detached themselves from the escort and remained hidden behind some bush at the shoulder of the hill. They were there to watch the approach to the valley. The others kept pace with the racing vehicle as the surefooted team tore down the slope.

Rocking and swaying and skidding, the vehicle seemed literally to precipitate itself to the depths below, and, as the

horses, with necks outstretched and mouths beginning to gape, with ears flattened and streaming flanks, reached the bottom, the desperate nature of the journey became even more apparent. There was neither wavering nor mercy in the eyes of the teamster and his escort as they pressed on down the valley.

One of the escort called sharply to the teamster.

“Can we make it?” he shouted.

“Got to,” came back the answer through clenched jaws. “If we got twenty minutes on the gorn darned p’lice they won’t see us for dust. Heh!”

The man’s final exclamation came as one of his horses stumbled. But he kept the straining beast on its legs by the sheer physical strength of his hands upon the reins. The check was barely an instant, but he picked up the rawhide whip lying in the wagon and plied it mercilessly.

The exhausted beasts responded and the vehicle flew down the trail, swaying and yawing the whole breadth of the road. The dust in its wake rose up in a dense cloud. Into this the escort plunged and quickly became lost to view behind the bush which lined the sharply twisting trail.

Faster and faster the horses sped under the iron hand of the teamster, till distance took hold of the clatter and finally diminished it to a rumble. In a few minutes even the rising cloud of dust, like smoke above the tree tops, thinned and finally melted away, and so, once more, peace returned to the twilight valley.

A wagon was lumbering slowly toward Rocky Springs. It was less than a mile beyond the outskirts of the village, and already an occasional flash of white paint through the trees revealed the sides of some outlying house in the distance ahead.

The horses were dejected-looking creatures, and their flanks were streaked with gray lines of caking sweat. They were walking, and the teamster on the wagon sat huddled down in the driving seat, an exquisite picture of unclean ease.

He was a hard-faced, unwashed creature, whose swarthy features were ingrained with sweat and dirt. He was clad in typical prairie costume, his loose cotton shirt well matching the unclean condition of his face. One cheek was bulging with a big chew of tobacco, while the other sank in over the hollows left by absent back teeth.

He certainly was unprepossessing. Even his contented smile only added to the evil of his expression. His contentment, however, was by no means his whole atmosphere. In fact, it was rather studied, for his eyes were alight and watchful with the furtive watchfulness so easy to detect in those of partial color. They suggested that his ears, too, were no less alert, and now and again this suggestion received confirmation in the quick turn of the head in a direction which said plainly he was listening for any unusual sound from behind him.

One of these turns of the head remained longer than usual. Then, with quite a sharp movement of the body, he swung one of the great pistols hanging at his waist, so that its barrel rested

across his thigh, and its butt was ready to his hand. Then, with a malicious chuckle, he took a firmer grip of his reins, and his jaded horses raised their drooping heads.

The object of his change of attitude quickly became apparent, for, a few moments later, the distant sound of hoof-beats, far behind him, echoed through the still valley.

He checked his horses still more, and it became evident that he wished those who were behind him to come up before he reached the village. The smile on his evil face became more humorous, and he spat out a stream of tobacco juice with great enjoyment.

The sounds grew louder, and he turned about and peered down the darkening valley. There was nothing and no one in sight yet amid the woodland shadows. Only the clatter of hoofs was growing with each moment. He finally turned back and resettled himself. His attitude now became one of even more studied indifference, but his gun remained close to his hand.

The sounds behind him were drawing nearer. His tired horses pricked their ears. They, too, seemed to become interested. The pursuers came on. They were less than a hundred yards behind. In a few moments they were directly behind. Then the man lazily turned his head. For some moments he stared stupidly at the three uniformed figures who had descended upon him. Then he suddenly sat up and brought his horses to a standstill. The policemen were surrounding his wagon.

Sergeant McBain was abreast of him on one side, one trooper drew up his horse at the other side, while the third came to a halt

at the rear of the wagon and peered into it.

“Evenin’, sergeant,” cried the teamster, with deliberate cheeriness. “Makin’ Rocky Springs?”

McBain’s hard blue eyes looked straight into the half-breed’s face. He was endeavoring to fix and hold those dark, furtive eyes. But it was not easy.

“Maybe,” he said curtly.

Then he glanced swiftly over the outfit. The sweat-streaked horses interested him. The nature of the wagon. Then, finally, the contents of the wagon covered with a light canvas protection against the dust.

“Where you from?” he demanded peremptorily.

“Just got through from Myrtle,” replied the man, quite undisturbed by the other’s manner.

“Fourteen miles,” said McBain sharply. “Guess your plugs sweated some. What’s your name, and who do you work for?”

“Guess I’m Pete Clancy, an’ I’m Kate Seton’s ‘hired’ man. Been across to Myrtle for fixin’s for her.”

“Fixings?”

The sergeant’s eyes at last compelled the other’s. There was something like insolence in the way Pete Clancy returned his stare. There was also humor.

“Sure,” he returned easily. “Guess you’ll find ’em in the wagon ef you raise that cover. There’s one of them fakes fer sewin’ with. There’s a deal o’ fancy canned truck, an’ say, the leddy’s death on notions. Get a peek at the colors o’ them silk duds. On’y keep

dirty hands off'n 'em, or she'll cuss me to hell for a fust-class hog."

McBain signed to the trooper at the rear of the wagon and the man stripped the cover off. The first thing the officer beheld was a sewing machine in its shining walnut case. Beside this was an open packing case filled with canned fruits and meats, and a large supply of groceries. In another box, packed under layers of paper, were materials for dressmaking, and a roll of white lawn for other articles of a woman's apparel.

With obvious disgust he signed again to the trooper to replace the cover. Then Clancy broke in.

"Say," he cried ironically, "ain't they dandy? I tell you, sergeant, when it comes to fancy things, women ha' got us skinned to death. Fancy us wearin' skirts an' things made o' them flimsies! We'd fall right through 'em an' break our dirty necks. An' the colors, too. Guess they'd shame a dago wench, an' set a three-year old stud bull shakin' his sides with a puffic tempest of indignation. But when it comes to canned truck, well, say, prairie hash ain't nothin' to it, an' if I hadn't been raised in a Bible class, an' had the feel o' the cold water o' righteousness in my bones, I'd never ha' hauled them all this way without gettin' a peek into them cans. I - "

"Cut it out, man," cried the officer sharply. "I need a straight word with you. Get me? Straight. Your bluff'll do for other folks. You haven't been to Myrtle. You come from White Point, where you helped hold up a freight. You ran a big cargo of liquor in this

wagon, which is why your plugs are tuckered out. You've cached that liquor in this valley, at the place you gathered up this truck. I don't say you aren't 'hired man' to Miss Seton in Rocky Springs, but you're playing a double game. You fetched her goods and dumped 'em at the cache, only to pick 'em up when you were through with your other game."

The man laughed insolently.

"Gee! I must be a ter'ble bad feller, sergeant," he cried. "Me, as was raised in a Bible class." His eyes twinkled as he went on. "An' I done all that? All that you sed, sergeant? Say, I'm a real bright feller. Guess I'll get a drink o' that liquor, won't I? It 'ud be a bum trick –"

The sergeant's eyes snapped.

"You'll get the penitentiary before we're through with you. You and the boys with you. We've followed your trail all the way, and that trail ends right here. We're wise to you –"

"But you ain't wise where the liquor's cached," retorted the man with a chuckle.

Then he looked straight into the officer's eyes.

"Say," he cried with his big laugh. "You can talk penitentiary till you're sick. Ther' ain't no liquor in my wagon, an' if there ever has been any, as you kind o' fancy, it's right up to you to locate it, and spill it, an' not set right there keepin' me from my work."

As he finished speaking, with elaborate display, he shook his reins and shouted at his horses, which promptly moved on.

As the wagon rolled away he turned his head and spoke over

his shoulder.

“You can’t spill canned truck an’ sewin’ machines, sergeant,” he called back derisively. “That penitentiary racket don’t fizz nothin’. Guess you best think again.”

The officer’s chagrin was complete. It was the start the outlaws had had that had beaten him. This was the wagon; this was one of the men. Of these things he was convinced. There were others in it, too, but they – . He turned to his troopers.

“I’d give a month’s pay to get bracelets on that feller,” he said with a grin that had no mirth in it. Then he added grimly, as he gazed after the receding wagon: “And I’m a Scotchman.”

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN-HUNTERS

The girl's handsome face was turned toward the valley below her. She was staring with eyes of dreaming, half regretful, yet not without a faint light of humor, at the nestling village in the lap of the woodlands, which crowded the heart of the valley, where the silvery thread of river wound its way.

The wide foliage of the maple tree, beneath which she sat, sheltered her bare head from the burning noonday sun. And here, so high up on the shoulder of the valley, she felt there was at least air to breathe.

The book on the ground beside her had only just been laid there; its pages, wide open, had been turned face downward upon the dry, grassless patch surrounding the tree trunk.

Only a few feet away another girl, slight and fair-haired, was nimbly plying her needle upon a pile of white lawn, as to the object of which there could be small enough doubt. She was working with the care and obvious appreciation which most women display toward the manufacture of delicate underclothing.

As her companion laid her book aside and turned toward the valley, the pretty needlewoman raised a pair of gray, speculative eyes. But almost at once they dropped again to her work. It was

only for a moment, however. She reached the end of her seam and began to fold the material up, and, as she did so, her eyes were once more raised in the direction of her sister, only now they were full of laughter.

“Kate,” she said, in a tone in which mirth would not be denied, “do you know, it’s five years to-day since we first came to Rocky Springs? Five years.” She breathed a profound sigh, which was full of mockery. “You were twenty-three when we came. You are twenty-eight now, and I am twenty-two. We’ll soon be old maids. The folks down there,” she went on, nodding at the village below, “will soon be speaking of us as ‘them two old guys,’ or ‘them funny old dears, the Seton sisters.’ Isn’t it awful to think of? We came out West to find husbands for ourselves, and here we are very nearly – old maids.”

Kate Seton’s eyes wore a responsive twinkle, but she did not turn.

“You’re a bit of a joke, Hel,” she replied, in the slow musical fashion of a deep contralto voice.

“But I’m not a joke,” protested the other, with pretended severity. “And I won’t be called ‘Hel,’ just because my name’s Helen. It – it sounds like the way Pete and Nick swear at each other when they’ve been spending their pay at Dirty O’Brien’s. Besides, it doesn’t alter facts at all. It won’t take much more climbing to find ourselves right on the shelf, among the frying pans and other cooking utensils. I’m – I’m tired of it – I – really am. It’s no use talking. I’m a woman, and I’d sooner see a pair of

trousers walking around my house than another bunch of skirts – even if they belong to my beloved sister. Trousers go every time – with me.”

Kate withdrew her gaze from the village below and looked into her sister’s pretty face with smiling, indulgent eyes.

“Well?” she said.

The other shook her fair head. Her eyes were still laughing, but their expression did not hide the seriousness which lay behind them.

“It’s not ‘well’ at all,” she cried. She drew herself up from the ground into a kneeling position, which left her sitting on the heels of shoes that could never have been bought in Rocky Springs. “Now, listen to me,” she went on, holding up a warning finger. “I’m just going to state my case right here and now, and – and you’ve got to listen to me. Five years ago, Kate Seton, aged twenty-three, and her sister, Helen Seton, were left orphans, with the sum of two thousand dollars equally divided between them. You get that?”

Her sister nodded amusedly. “Well,” the girl went on deliberately. “Kate Seton was no ordinary sort of girl. Oh, no. She was most *un*ordinary, as Nick would say. She was a sort of headstrong girl with an absurd notion of woman’s independence. I – I don’t mean she was masculine, or any horror like that. But she believed that when it came to doing the things she wanted to do she could do them just as well, and deliberately, as any man. That she could think as well as any man. In fact, she didn’t believe

in the superiority of the male sex over hers. The only superiority she did acknowledge was that a man could ask a woman to marry, while the privilege of asking a man was denied to Kate's sex. But even in acknowledging this she reserved to herself an alternative. She believed that every woman had the right to make a man ask her."

The patient Kate mildly protested. "You're making me out a perfectly awful creature," she said, without the least umbrage. "Hadn't I better stand up for the – arraignment?"

But her sister's mock seriousness remained quite undisturbed. "There's no necessity," she said, airily. "Besides, you'll be tired when I'm through. Now listen. Kate Seton is a very kind and lovable creature – really. Only – only she suffers from – notions."

The dark-eyed Kate, with her handsome face so full of decision and character, eyed her sister with the indulgence of a mother.

"You do talk, child," was all she said.

Helen nodded. "I like talking. It makes me feel clever."

"Ye – es. People are like that," returned the other ironically. "Go on."

Helen folded her hands in her lap, and for a moment gazed speculatively at the sister she knew she adored.

"Well," she went on presently. "Let us keep to the charge. Five years ago this spirit of independence and adventure was very strong in Kate Seton. Far, far stronger than it is now. That's by the way. Say, anyhow, it was so strong then that when these two

found themselves alone in the world with their money, it was her idea to break through all convention, leave her little village in New England, go out west, and seek 'live' men and fortune on the rolling plains of Canada. The last part of that's put in for effect."

The girl paused, watching her sister as she turned again toward the valley below.

With a sigh of resignation Helen was forced to proceed. "That's five years – ago," she said. Then, dropping her voice to a note of pathos, and with the pretense of a sob: "Five long years ago two lonely girls, orphans, set out from their conventional home in a New England village, after having sold it out – the home, not the village – and turned wistful faces toward the wild green plains of the western wilderness, the home of the broncho, the gopher, and the merciless mosquito."

"Oh, do get on," Kate's smile was good to see.

"It's emotion," said Helen, pretending to dab her eyes. "It's emotion mussing up the whole blamed business, as Nick would say."

"Never mind Nick," cried her sister. "Anyway, I don't think he swears nearly as much as you make out. I'll soon have to go and get the Meeting House ready for to-morrow's service. So –"

"Ah, that's just it," broke in Helen, with a great display of triumph in her laughing eyes. "Five years ago Kate Seton would never have said that. She'd have said, 'bother the old Meeting House, and all the old cats who go there to slander each other in – in the name of religion.' That's what she'd have said. It's

all different now. Gone is her love of adventure; gone is her defiance of convention; gone is – is her independence. What is she now? A mere farmer, a drudging female, spinster farmer, growing cabbages and things, and getting her manicured hands all mussed up, and freckles on her otherwise handsome face.”

“A successful – female, spinster farmer,” put in Kate, in her deep, soft voice.

Helen nodded, and there was a sort of helplessness in her admission.

“Yes,” she sighed, “and that’s the worst of it. We came to find husbands – ‘live’ husbands, and we only find – cabbages. The man-hunters. That’s what we called ourselves. It sounded – uncommon, and so we used the expression.” Suddenly she scrambled to her feet in undignified haste, and shook a small, clenched fist in her sister’s direction. “Kate Seton,” she cried, “you’re a fraud. An unmitigated – fraud. Yes, you are. Don’t glare at me. ‘Live’ men! Adventure! Poof! You’re as tame as any village cat, and just as – dozy.”

Kate had risen, too. She was not glaring. She was laughing. Her dark, handsome face was alight with merriment at her sister’s characteristic attack. She loved her irresponsible chatter, just as she loved the loyal heart that beat within the girl’s slight, shapely body. Now she came over and laid a caressing hand upon the girl’s shoulder. In a moment it dropped to the slim waist about which her arm was quickly placed.

“I wish I could get cross with you, Helen,” she said happily.

“But I simply – can’t. You know you get very near the mark in your funny fashion – in some things. Say, I wonder. Do you know we have more than our original capital in the bank? Our farm is a flourishing concern. We employ labor. Two creatures that call themselves men, and who possess the characters of – hogs, or tigers, or something pretty dreadful. We can afford to buy our clothes direct from New York or Montreal. Think of that. Isn’t that due to independence? I admit the villagy business. I seem to love Rocky Springs. It’s such a whited sepulcher, and its inhabitants are such blackguards with great big hearts. Yes, I love even the unconventional conventions of the place. But the spirit of adventure. Well, somehow I don’t think that has really gone.”

“Just got mired – among the cabbages,” said Helen, slyly. Then she released herself from her sister’s embrace and stood off at arm’s length, assuming an absurdly accusing air. “But wait a moment, Kate Seton. This is all wrong. I’m making the charge, and you’re doing all the talking. There’s no defense in the case. You’ve – you’ve just got to listen, and – accept the sentence. Guess this isn’t a court of men – just women. Now, we’re man-hunters. That’s how we started, and that’s what I am – still. We’ve been five years at it, with what result? I’ll just tell you. I’ve been proposed to by everything available in trousers in the village – generally when the ‘thing’ is drunk. The only objects that haven’t asked me to marry are our two hired men, Nick and Pete, and that’s only because their wages aren’t sufficient to get them drunk enough. As for you, most of the boys sort of stand in awe of

you, wouldn't dare talk marrying to you even in the height of delirium tremens. The only men who have ever had courage to make any display in that direction are Inspector Fyles, when his duty brings him in the neighborhood of Rocky Springs, and a dypsomaniac rancher and artist, to wit, Charlie Bryant. And how do you take it? You – a man-hunter? Why, you run like a rabbit from Fyles. Courage? Oh, dear. The mention of his name is enough to send you into convulsions of trepidation and maidenly confusion. And all the time you secretly admire him. As for the other, you have turned yourself into a sort of hospital nurse and temperance reformer. You've taken him up as a sort of hobby, until, in his lucid intervals, he takes advantage of your reforming process to acquire the added disease of love, which has reduced him to a condition of imbecile infatuation with your charming self.”

Kate was about to break in with a laughing protest, but Helen stayed her with a gesture of denial.

“Wait,” she cried, grandly. “Hear the whole charge. Look at your village life, which you plead guilty to. You, a high-spirited woman of independence and daring. You are no better than a sort of hired cleaner to a Meeting House you have adopted, and which is otherwise run by a lot of cut-throats and pirates, whose wives and offspring are no better than themselves. You attend the village social functions with as much appreciation of them as any village mother with an unwashed but growing family. You gossip with them and scandalize as badly as any of them, and,

in your friendliness and charity toward them, I verily believe, for two cents, you'd go among the said unwashed offspring with a scrub-brush. What – what is coming to you, Kate? You – a man-hunter? No – no,” she went on, with a hopeless shake of her pretty head, “tis no use talking. The big, big spirit of early womanhood has somehow failed you. It's failed us both. We are no longer man-hunters. The soaring Kate, bearing her less brave sister in her arms, has fallen. They have both tumbled to the ground. The early seed, so full of promise, has germinated and grown – but it's come up cabbages. And – and they're getting old. There you are, I can't help it. I've tripped over the agricultural furrow we've ploughed, and – . There!”

She flung out an arm dramatically, pointing down at the slight figure of a man coming toward them, slowly toiling up the slope of the valley.

“There he is,” she cried. “Your artist-patient. Your dypsomaniac rancher. A symbol, a symbol of the bonds which are crushing the brave spirits of our – ahem! – young hearts.”

But Kate ignored the approaching man. She had eyes only for the bright face before her.

“You're a great child,” she declared warmly. “I ought to be angry. I ought to be just mad with you. I believe I really am. But – but the cabbage business has broken up the storm of my feelings. Cabbage? Oh, dear.” She laughed softly. “You, with your soft, wavy hair, dressed as though we had a New York hairdresser in the village. You, with your great gray eyes, your charming little

nose and cupid mouth. You, with your beautiful new frock, only arrived from New York two days ago, and which, by the way, I don't think you ought to wear sprawling upon dusty ground. You – a cabbage! It just robs all you've said of, I won't say truth, but – sense. There, child, you've said your say. But you needn't worry about me. I'm not changed – really. Maybe I do many things that seem strange to you, but – but – I know what I'm doing. Poor old Charlie. Look at him. I often wonder what'll be the end of him.”

Kate Seton sighed. It seemed as though there were a great depth of motherly tenderness in her heart, and just now that tenderness was directed toward the man approaching them.

But the lighter-minded Helen was less easily stirred. She smiled amusedly in her sister's direction. Then her bright eyes glanced swiftly down at the man.

“If all we hear is true, his end will be the penitentiary,” she declared with decision.

Kate glanced round quickly, and her eyes suddenly became quite hard.

“Penitentiary?” she questioned sharply.

Helen shrugged.

“Everybody says he's the biggest whisky smuggler in the country, and – and his habits don't make things look much – different. Say, Kate, O'Brien told me the other day that the police had him marked down. They were only waiting to get him – red-handed.”

The hardness abruptly died out of Kate's eyes. A faint sigh,

perhaps of relief, escaped her.

“They’ll never do that,” she declared firmly. “Everybody’s making a mistake about Charlie. I’m – sure. With all his failings Charlie’s no whisky-runner. He’s too gentle. He’s too – too honest to descend to such a traffic.”

Suddenly her eyes lit. She came close to Helen, and one firm hand grasped the soft flesh of the girl’s arm, and closed tightly upon it.

“Say, child,” she went on, in a deep, thrilling tone, “do you know what these whisky-runners risk? Do you? No. Of course you don’t. They risk life as well as liberty. They’re threatened every moment of their lives. The penalty is heavy, and when a man becomes a whisky-runner he has no intention of being taken – alive. Think of all that, and see where your imagination carries you. Then think of Charlie – as we know him. An artist. A warm-hearted, gentle creature, whose only sins are – against himself.”

But the younger girl’s face displayed skepticism.

“Yes – as we know him,” she replied quickly. “I’ve thought of it while he’s been giving me lessons in painting, when I’ve watched him with you, with that wonderful look of dog-like devotion in his eyes, while hanging on every word you uttered. I’ve thought of it all. And always running through my mind was the title of a book I once read – ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.’ You are sure, and I – I only wonder.”

Kate’s hand relaxed its hold upon her sister’s arm. Her whole expression changed with a suddenness which, had she observed

it, must have startled the other. Her eyes were cold, very cold, as she surveyed the sister to whom she was so devoted, and who could find it in her heart to think so harshly of one whom she regarded as a sick and ailing creature, needing the utmost support from natures morally stronger than his own.

“You must think as you will, Helen,” she said coldly. “I know. I know Charlie. I understand the gentle heart that guides his every action, and I warn you you are wrong – utterly wrong. Everybody is wrong, the police – everybody.”

She turned away and moved a few steps down the slope toward the approaching figure.

CHAPTER VII

CHARLIE BRYANT

As Kate stood out from the shadow of the trees, the man approaching, looking up, beheld her, and his dark eyes gladdened with a smile of delight. His greeting came up to her on the still air in a tone thrilling with warmth and deep feeling.

“Ho, Kate,” he cried, in his deeply musical voice. “I saw you and Helen making this way, and guessed I’d just get around.”

He was breathing hard as he came up the hill, his slight figure was bending forward with the effort of his climb. Kate watched him, much as an anxious mother might watch, with doubtful eyes, some effort of her ailing child. He reached her level and stood breathing heavily before her.

“I was around watching the boys at work down there on the new church,” he went on. His handsome boyish face was flushing. The delicate, smooth, whiskerless skin was almost womanish in its texture, and betrayed almost every emotion stirring behind it. “Allan Dy came along with my mail. When I’d read it I felt I had to come and tell you the news right away. You see, I had to tell someone, and wanted you – two to be the first to hear it.”

Kate’s eyes were full of a smiling tender amusement at the ingenuousness of the man. Helen was looking on with less

tenderness than amusement. He had not come to tell her the news – only Kate. The Kate whom she knew he worshipped, and who was the only rival in his life to his passionate craving for drink.

She surveyed the man now with searching eyes. What was it that inspired in her such mixed feeling? She knew she had a dislike and liking for him, all in the same moment. There was something fascinating about him. Yes, there certainly was. He was darkly handsome. Unusually so. He had big, soft, almost womanish eyes, full of passionate possibilities. The delicate moulding of his features was certainly beautiful. They were too delicate. Ah, that was it. They were womanish. Yes, he was womanish, and nothing womanish in a man could ever appeal to the essentially feminine heart of Helen. His figure was slight, but perfectly proportioned, and quite lacking in any suggestion of mannish strength. Again the thought of it brought Helen a feeling of repugnance. She hated effeminacy in a man. And yet, how could she associate effeminacy with a man of his known character? Was he not the most lawless of this lawless village? Then there was his outward seeming of gentleness. Yes, she had never known him otherwise, even in his moments of dreadful drunkenness, and she had witnessed those frequently enough during the past few years.

The whole personality of the man was an enigma to her. Nor was it altogether a pleasant enigma. She felt that somehow there was an ugly streak in him which her sister had utterly missed, and she only half guessed at. Furthermore, somehow in the back

of her mind, she knew that she was not without fear of him.

In spite of Kate's denial, when the man came under discussion between them, her conviction always remained. She knew she liked him, and she knew she disliked him. She knew she despised him, and she knew she feared him. And through it all she looked on with eyes of amusement at the absurd, dog-like devotion he yielded to her strong, reliant, big-hearted, handsome sister.

"What's your news, Charlie?" she demanded, as Kate remained silent, waiting for him to continue. "Good, I'll bet five dollars, or you wouldn't come rushing to us."

The man turned to her as though it were an effort to withdraw his gaze from the face of the woman he loved.

"Good? Why, yes," he said quickly. "I'd surely hate to bring you two anything but good news." Then a shadow of doubt crossed his smiling features. "Maybe it won't be of much account to you, though," he went on, almost apologetically. "You see, it's just my brother. My big brother Bill. He's coming along out here to – to join me. He – he wants to ranch, so – he's coming here, and going to put all his money into my ranch, and suggests we run it together." Then he laughed shortly. "He says I've got experience and he's got dollars, and between us we ought to make things hum. He's a hustler, is Bill. Say, he's as much sense as a two-year-old bull, and just about as much strength. He can't see the difference between a sharp and a saint. They're all the same to him. He just loves everybody to death, till they kick him on the shins, then he hits out, and something's going to break. He's just

the bulliest feller this side of life.”

Kate was still smiling at the man’s enthusiasm, but she had no answer for him. It was Helen who did the talking now, as she generally did, while Kate listened.

“Oh, Charlie,” Helen cried impulsively, “you will let me see him, won’t you? He’s big – and – and manly? Is he good looking? But then he must be if he’s your – I’m just dying to see this Big Brother Bill,” she added hastily.

Charlie shook his head, laughing in his silent fashion.

“Oh, you’ll see him all right. This village’ll just be filled right up with him.” Then his dark eyes became serious, and a hopeless shadow crept into them. “I’m glad he’s coming,” he went on, adding simply, “maybe he’ll keep me straight.”

Kate’s smile died out in an instant. “Don’t talk like that Charlie,” she cried almost sharply. “Do you know what your words imply? Oh, it’s too dreadful, and – and I won’t have it. You don’t need anybody’s support. You can fight yourself. You can conquer yourself. I know it.”

The man’s eyes came back to the face he loved, and, for a moment, they looked into it as though he would read all that which lay hidden behind.

“You think so?” he questioned presently.

“I’m sure; sure as – as Fate,” Kate cried impulsively.

“You think that all – all weakness can be conquered?”

Kate nodded. “If the desire to conquer lies behind it.”

“Ah, yes.”

The man's eyes had become even more thoughtful. There was a look in them which suggested to Helen that he was not wholly thinking of the thing Kate had in her mind.

"If the desire to conquer is there," he went on, "I suppose the habits – diseases of years, even – could be beaten. But – but –"

"But what?" Kate's demand came almost roughly.

Charlie shrugged his slim shoulders. "Nothing," he said. "I – I was just thinking. That's all."

"But it isn't all," cried Kate, in real distress.

Helen saw Charlie smile in a half-hearted fashion. For some moments his patience remained. Then, as Kate still waited for him to speak, his eyes abruptly lit with the deep fire of passion.

"Why? Why?" he cried suddenly. "Why must we conquer and fight with ourselves? Why beat down the nature given to us by a power beyond our control? Why not indulge the senses that demand indulgence, when, in such indulgence, we injure no one else? Oh, I argue it all with myself, and I try to reason, too. I try to see it all from the wholesome point of view from which you look at it, Kate. And I can't see it. I just can't see it. All I know is that the only thing that makes me attempt to deny myself is that I want your good opinion. Did I not want that I should slide down the road to hell, which I am told I am on, with all the delight of a child on a toboggan slide. Yes, I would. I surely would, Kate. I'm a drunkard, I know. A drunkard by nature. I have not the smallest desire to be otherwise, from any moral scruple. It's you that makes me want to straighten up, and you only. When I'm

sober I'd be glad if I weren't. And when I'm not sober I'd hate being otherwise. Why should I be sober, when in such moments I suffer agonies of craving? Is it worth it? What does it matter if drink eases the craving, and lends me moments of peace which I am otherwise denied? These are the things I think all the time, and these are the thoughts which send me tumbling headlong – sometimes. But I know – yes, I know I am all wrong. I know that I would rather suffer all the tortures of hell than forfeit your – good will.”

Kate sighed. She had no answer. She knew all that lay behind the man's passionate appeal. She knew, too, that he spoke the truth. She knew that the only reason he made any effort at all was because his devotion to herself was something just a shade stronger than this awful disease with which he was afflicted.

The hopelessness of the position for a moment almost overwhelmed her. She knew that she had no love – love such as he required – to give him in return. And when that finally became patent to him away would go the last vestige of self-restraint, and his fall would be headlong.

She knew his early story, and it was a pitiful one. She knew he was born of good parents, rich parents, in New York, that he was well educated. He had been brought up to become an artist, and therein had lain the secret of his fall. In Paris, and Rome, and other European cities, he had first tasted the dregs of youthful debauchery, and disaster had promptly set in. Then, after his student days, had come the final break. His parents abandoned

him as a ne'er-do-well, and, setting him up as a rancher in a small way, had sent him out west, another victim of that over-indulgence which helps to populate the fringes of civilization.

The moment was a painful one, and Helen was quick to perceive her sister's distress. She came to her rescue with an effort at lightness. But her pretty eyes had become very gentle.

She turned to the man who had just taken a letter from his pocket.

"Tell us some more about Big Brother Bill," she said, with the pretense of a sigh. Then, with a little daring in her manner: "Do you think he'll like me? Because if he don't I'll sure go into mourning, and order my coffin, and bury me on the hillside with my face to the beautiful east – where I come from."

The man's moment of passionate discontent had passed, and he smiled into the girl's questioning eyes in his gentle fashion.

"He'll just be crazy about you, Helen," he said. "Say, when he gets his big, silly blue eyes on to you in that swell suit, why, he'll just hustle you right off to the parson, and you'll be married before you get a notion there's such a whirlwind around Rocky Springs."

"Is he – such a whirlwind?" the girl demanded with appreciation.

"He surely is," the man asserted definitely.

Helen sighed with relief. "I'm glad," she said. "You see, a whirlwind's a sort of summer storm. All sunshine – and – and well, a whirlwind don't suggest the cold, vicious, stormy gales

of the folks in this village, nor the dozy summer zephyrs of the women in this valley. Yes, I'd like a whirlwind. His eyes are blue, and – silly?"

Charlie smiled more broadly as he nodded again. "His eyes are blue. And big. The other's a sort of term of endearment. You see, he's my big brother Bill, and I'm kind of fond of him."

Helen laughed joyously. "I'm real glad he's not silly," she cried. "Let's see. He's big. He's got blue eyes. He's good looking. He's – he's like a whirlwind. He's got lots of money." She counted the attractions off on her fingers. "Guess I'll sure have to marry him," she finished up with a little nod of finality.

Kate turned a flushed face in her direction.

"For goodness sake, Helen!" she cried in horror.

Helen's gray eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Why, whatever's the matter, Kate?" she exclaimed. "Of course, I'll have to marry Big Brother Bill. Why, his very name appeals to me. May I, Charlie?" she went on, turning to the smiling man. "Would you like me for – a – a sister? I'm not a bad sort, am I, Kate?" she appealed mischievously. "I can sew, and cook, and – and darn. No, I don't mean curse words. I leave that to Kate's hired men. They're just dreadful. Really, I wasn't thinking of anything worse than Big Brother Bill's socks. When'll he be getting around? Oh, dear, I hope it won't be long. 'Specially if he's a – whirlwind."

Charlie was scanning the open pages of his letter.

"No. Guess he won't be long," he said, amusedly. "He says

he'll be right along here the 16th. That's the day after to-morrow."

Helen ran to her sister's side, and shook her by the arm.

"Say, Kate," she cried, her eyes sparkling with pretended excitement. "Isn't that just great? Big Brother Bill's coming along day after to-morrow. Isn't it lucky I've just got my new suits? They'll last me three months, and by the time I have to get my fall suits he'll have to marry me." Then the dancing light in her eyes sobered. "Now, where shall we live?" she went on, with a pretense of deep consideration. "Shall we go east, or – or shall we live at Charlie's ranch? Oh, dear. It's so important not to make any mistake. And yet – you see, Charlie's ranch wants some one *capable* to look after it, doesn't it? It's kind of mousy. Big Brother Bill is sure to be particular – coming from the east."

Her audience were smiling broadly. Kate understood now that her irresponsible sister was simply letting her bubbling spirits overflow. Charlie had no other feelings than frank amusement at the girl's gaiety.

"Oh, he's most particular," he said readily. "You see, he's accustomed to Broadway restaurants."

Helen pulled a long face.

"I'm afraid your shack wouldn't make much of a Broadway restaurant." She shook her head with quaint solemnity. "Guess I never could get you right. Here you run a ranch, and make quite big with it, yet you never eat off a china plate, or spread your table with anything better than a newspaper. True, Charlie, you've got

me beaten to death. Why, how you manage to run a ranch and make it pay is a riddle that 'ud put the poor old Sphinx's nose plump out of joint. I – ”

Kate suddenly turned a pair of darkly frowning eyes upon her sister.

“You're talking a whole heap of nonsense,” she declared severely. “What has the care of a home to do with making a ranch pay?”

Helen's eyes opened wide with mischief.

“Say, Kate,” she cried with a great air of patronage, “you have a whole heap to learn. Big Brother Bill's coming right along from Broadway, with money and – notions. He's just bursting with them. Charlie's a prosperous rancher. What does B. B. B. expect? Why, he'll get around with fancy clothes and suitcases and trunks. He'll dream of rides over the boundless plains, of cow-punchers with guns and things. He'll have visions of big shoots, and any old sport, of a well-appointed ranch house, with proper fixings, and baths, and swell dinners and servants. But they're all visions. He'll blow in to Rocky Springs – he's a whirlwind, mind – and he'll find a prosperous rancher living in a tumbled-down shanty that hasn't been swept this side of five years, a blanket-covered bunk, and a table made of packing cases with the remains of last week's meals on it. That's what he'll find. Prosperous rancher, indeed. Say, Charlie,” she finished up with fine scorn, “you know as much about living as Kate's two hired men, and dear knows they only exist.” Suddenly she broke out into a rippling laugh.

“And this is what my future husband is coming to. It’s – it’s an insult to me.”

The girl paused, looking from one to the other with dancing eyes. But the more sober-minded Kate slipped her arm about her waist and began to move down the hill.

“Come along, dear,” she said. “I must get right on down to the Meeting House. I – have work to do. You would chatter on all day if I let you.”

In a moment Helen was all indignant protest.

“I like that. Say, did you hear, Charlie? She’s accusing me, and all the time it’s you doing the talking. But there, I’m always misjudged – always. She’ll accuse me of trying to trap your brother – next. Anyway, I’ve got work to do, too. I’ve got to be at Mrs. John’s for the new church meeting. So Kate isn’t everybody. Come along.”

Helen’s laughter was good to hear as she dashed off in an attempt to drag her elder sister down the hill at a run. The man looked on happily as he kept pace with them. Helen was always privileged. Her sister adored her, and the whole village of Rocky Springs yielded her a measure of popularity which made her its greatest favorite. Even the women had nothing but smiles for her merry irresponsibility, and, as for the men, there was not one who would not willingly have sacrificed even his crooked ways for her smile.

Halfway down to the village Charlie again reverted to his news.

“Helen put the rest of it out of my head,” he said, and his manner of speaking had lost the enjoyment of his earlier announcement. “It’s about the police. They’re going to set a station here. A corporal and two men. Fyles is coming, too. Inspector Fyles.” His eyes were studying Kate’s face as he made the announcement. Helen, too, was looking at her with quizzical eyes. “It’s over that whisky-running a week ago. They’re going to clean the place up. Fyles has sworn to do it. O’Brien told me this morning.”

For some moments after his announcement neither of the women spoke. Kate was thinking deeply. Nor, from her expression, would it have been possible to have guessed the trend of her thoughts.

Helen, watching her, was far more expressive. She was thinking of her sister’s admiration for the officer. She was speculating as to what might happen with Fyles stationed here in Rocky Springs. Would her beautiful sister finally yield to his very evident admiration, or would she still keep that barrier of aloofness against him? She wondered. And, wondering, there came the memory of what Fyles’s coming would mean to Charlie Bryant.

To her mind there was no doubt but that the law would quickly direct its energies against him. But she was also wondering what would happen to him should time, and a man’s persistence, finally succeed in breaking down the barrier Kate had set up against the officer. Quite suddenly this belated news assumed

proportions far more significant than the coming of Big Brother Bill.

Her tongue could not remain silent for long, however. Something of her doubt had to find an outlet.

“I knew it would come sooner or later,” she declared hopelessly.

She glanced quickly at Charlie, across her sister, beside whom he was walking. The man was staring out down at the village with gloomy eyes. She read into his expression a great dread of this officer’s coming to Rocky Springs. She knew she was witnessing the outward signs of a guilty conscience. Suddenly she made up her mind.

“What – ever is to be done?” she cried, half eagerly, half fearfully. “Say, I just can’t bear to think of it. All these men, men we’ve known, men we’ve got accustomed to, even – men we like, to be herded to the penitentiary. It’s awful. There’s some I shouldn’t be sorry to see put away. They’re scallywags, anyway. They aren’t clean, and they chew tobacco, and – and curse like railroaders. But they aren’t all like – that – are they, Kate?” She paused. Then, in a desperate appeal, “Kate, I’d fire your two boys, Nick and Pete. They’re mixed up in whisky-running, I know. When Stanley Fyles gets around they’ll be corralled, sure, and I’d hate him to think we employed such men. Don’t you think that, Charlie?” she demanded, turning sharply and looking into the man’s serious face.

Then, quite suddenly, she changed her tone and relapsed into

her less responsible manner, and laughed as though something humorous had presented itself to her cheerful fancy.

“Guess I’d have to laugh seeing those two boys doing the chores around a penitentiary for – five years. They’d be cleaner then. Guess they get bathed once a week. Then the funny striped clothes they wear. Can’t you see Nick, with his long black hair all cut short, and his vulture neck sticking out of the top end of his clothes, like – like a thread of sewing cotton in a darning needle? Wouldn’t he look queer? And the work, too! Say, it would just break his heart. My, but they get most killed by the warders. And then for drink. Five years without tasting a drop of liquor. No – they’d go mad. Anybody would. And all for the sake of making a few odd dollars against the law. I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t do it, not if I’d got to starve – else.”

The man made no answer. His eyes remained upon the village below, and their expression had become lost to the anxious Helen. She was talking at him. But she was thinking not of him so much as her sister. She knew how much it would mean to Kate if Charlie Bryant were brought into direct conflict with the police. So she was offering her warning.

Kate turned to her quietly. She ignored the reference to her hired men. She knew at whom her sister’s remarks were directed. She shook her head.

“Why worry about things, Sis?” she said, in her deliberate fashion. “Lawbreakers need to be cleverer folks than those who live within the law. I guess there won’t be much whisky run into

Rocky Springs with Fyles around, and the police can do nothing unless they catch the boys at it. You're too nervous about things." She laughed quietly. "Why, the sight of a red coat scares you worse than getting chased by a mouse."

The sound of Kate's voice seemed to rouse Charlie from his gloomy contemplation of the village. He turned his eyes on the woman at his side – and encountered the half-satirical smile of hers – which were as dark as his own.

"Maybe Helen's right, though," he said. "Maybe you'd do well to fire your boys." He spoke deliberately, but with a shade of anxiety in his voice. "They're known whisky-runners."

Kate drew Helen to her side as though for moral support. "And what of the other folks who are known – or believed – to be whisky-runners – with whom we associate. Are they to be turned down, too? No, Charlie," she went on determinedly, "I stand by my boys. I'll stand by my friends, too. Maybe they'll need all the help I can give them. Then it's up to me to give it them. Fyles must do his duty as he sees it. Our duty is by our friends here, in Rocky Springs. Whatever happens in the crusade against this place, I am against Fyles. I'm only a woman, and, maybe, women don't count much with the police," she said, with a confident smile, "but such as I am, I am loyal to all those who have helped me in my life here in Rocky Springs, and to my – friends."

The man drew a deep breath. Nor was it easy to fathom its meaning.

Helen, eyeing her well-loved sister, could have thrown her

young arms about her neck in enthusiasm. This was the bold sister whom she had so willingly followed to the western wilds. This was the spirit she had deplored the waning of. All her apprehensions for Charlie Bryant vanished, merged in a newly awakened confidence, since her brave sister was ready to help and defend him.

She felt that Fyles's coming to Rocky Springs was no longer to be feared. Only was it a source of excitement and interest. She felt that though, perhaps, he might never have met his match during the long years of his duties as a police officer, he had yet to pit himself against Rocky Springs – with her wonderful sister living in the village.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SOUL-SAVERS

Helen parted from her sister at the little old Meeting House. But first she characteristically admonished her for offering herself a sacrifice on the altar of the moral welfare of a village which reveled in every form of iniquity within its reach. Furthermore, she threw in a brief homily on the subject of the outrageous absurdity of turning herself into a sort of "hired woman" in the interests of a sepulcher whose whitewash was so obviously besmirched.

With the departure of the easy-going Kate, Charlie Bryant suddenly awoke to the claims of the work at his ranch. He must return at once, or disaster would surely follow.

Helen smiled at his sudden access of zeal, and welcomed his going without protest. Truth to tell, she never failed to experience a measure of relief at the avoidance of being alone with him.

Left to herself she moved on down toward the village without haste. Her enthusiasm for the new church meeting at the house of Mrs. John Day, who was the leading woman in the village, and, incidentally, the wife of its chief citizen, who also owned a small lumber yard, was of a lukewarm character. She had much more interest in the building itself, and the motley collection of individuals in whose hands its practical construction lay.

She possessed none of her sister's interest in Rocky Springs. Her humor denied her serious contemplation of anything in it but the opposite sex. And even here it frequently trapped her into pitfalls which demanded the utmost exercise of her ready wit to extricate her from. No, serious contemplation of her surroundings would have certainly bored her, had it been possible to shadow her sunny nature. Fortunately, the latter was beyond the reach of the sordid life in the midst of which she found herself, and she never failed to laugh her merry way to those plains of delight belonging to an essentially happy disposition.

As she walked down the narrow trail, with the depths of green woods lining it upon either hand, she remembered how beautiful the valley really was. Of course, it was beautiful. She knew it. Was she not always being told it? She was never allowed to forget it. Sometimes she wished she could.

Down the trail a perfect vista of riotous foliage opened out before her eyes. There, too, in the distance, peeping through the trees, were scattered profiles of oddly designed houses, possessing a wonderful picturesqueness to which they had no real claims. They borrowed their beauty from the wealth of the valley, she told herself. Like the people who lived in them, they had no claims to anything bordering on the refinements or virtues of life. No, they were mockeries, just as was the pretense of virtue which inspired the building of the new church by a gathering of men and women, who, if they had their deserts, would be attending divine service within the four walls of the penitentiary.

She laughed. Really it was absurdly laughable. Life in this wonderful valley was something in the nature of a tragic farce. The worst thing was that the farce of it all could only be detected by the looker-on. There was no real farce in these people, only tragedy – a very painful and hideous tragedy.

On her way down she passed the great pine which for years had served as a beacon marking the village. It was higher up on the slope of the valley, but its vast trunk and towering crest would not be denied.

Helen gazed up at it, wondering, as many times she had gazed and wondered before. It was a marvelous survival of primæval life. It was so vast, so forbidding. Its torn crown, so sparse and weary looking, its barren trunk, too, dark and forbidding against the dwarfed surroundings of green, were they not a fit beacon for the village below? It suggested to her imagination a giant, mouldering skeleton of some dreadfully evil creature. How could virtue maintain in its vicinity?

She laughed again as she thought. She knew there was some weird old legend associated with it, some old Indian folklore. But that left no impression of awe upon her laughter-loving nature.

Farther on the new church came into view. It was in the course of construction, and at once her attention became absorbed. Here was a scene which thoroughly appealed to her. Here was movement, and – life. Here was food for her most appreciative observation.

It was a Church. Not a Meeting House. Not even a Chapel.

She felt quite sure, had the villagers had their way, it would have been called a Cathedral. There was nothing half-hearted about these people. They recognized the necessity of giving their souls a lift up, with a view to an after life, and they meant to do it thoroughly.

They had no intention of mending their ways. They had no thought of abandoning any of their pursuits or pleasures, be they never so deplorable. But they felt that something had better be done toward assurance of their futures. A Meeting House suggested something too inadequate to meet their special case. It was right enough as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough. They realized the journey might be very long and the ultimate destination uncertain. A Chapel had its claims in their minds, but Church seemed much stronger, bigger, more powerful to help them in those realms of darkness to which they must all eventually descend. Of course, Cathedral would have been *the* thing. With a cathedral in Rocky Springs they would have felt certain of their hereafter. But the difficulties of laying hands on a bishop, and claiming him for their own, seemed too overwhelming. So they accepted Church as being the best they could do under the circumstances.

Quite a number of men were standing idly around the structure, watching others at work. It was a weakness of the citizens of Rocky Springs to watch others work. They had no desire to help. They rarely were beset with any desire to help anybody. They simply clustered together in small groups,

chewing tobacco, or smoking, and, to a man, their hands were indolently thrust into the tops of their trousers, which, in every case, were girdled with a well-laden ammunition belt, from which was suspended at least one considerable revolver.

There was no doubt in Helen's mind but that these weapons were loaded in every chamber, and the thought set her merry eyes dancing again.

These men wanted a church, and were there to see they had it. Woe betide – but, was there ever such a gathering of unclean, unholy humanity? She thought not.

Helen knew that every man and woman in the village had had some voice in the erection of the new church. There was not a citizen – they all possessed the courtesy title of “citizens” – in Rocky Springs, who had not contributed something toward it. Those who had wherewithal to give in money or kind, had given. Those who had nothing else to give gave their labor. She guessed the present onlookers had already done their share of giving, and were now there to see that their less fortunate brethren did not attempt to shirk their responsibilities.

For a moment, as the girl drew near, she abandoned her study of the men for a rapid survey of the building itself, and, in a way, it held her flattering attention. As yet there was no roof on it, but the walls were up, and the picturesqueness of the design of the building was fully apparent. Then she remembered that Charlie Bryant had designed the building, and somehow the thought lessened her interest.

The whole thing was constructed of lateral, raw pine logs, carefully dovetailed, with the ends protruding at the angles. There was no great originality of design, merely the delightful picturesqueness which unstripped logs never fail to yield. She knew that every detail of the building was to be carried out in the same way. The roof, the spire, the porches, even the fence which was ultimately to enclose the churchyard.

Then the inside was to be lined throughout with polished red pine. There was not a brick or stone to be used in the whole construction, except in the granite foundations, which did not appear above ground. The lumber was hewn in the valley and milled in John Day's yard. The entire labor of hauling and building was to be done by the citizens of Rocky Springs. The draperies, necessary for the interior, would be made by the busy needles of the women of the village, and the materials would be supplied by Billy Unguin, the dry goods storekeeper. As for the stipend of the officiating parson, that would be scrambled together in cash and kind from similar sources.

The church was to be a monument, a tribute to a holy zeal, which the methods of life in Rocky Springs denied. Its erection was an attempt to steal absolution for the sins of its citizens. It was the pouring of a flood of oil upon the turbulent waters of an after life which Rocky Springs knew was waiting to engulf its little craft laden with tattered souls. It was a practical bribe to the Deity its people had so long outraged, were still outraging, and had every intention of continuing to outrage.

Helen's merry eyes glanced from group to group of the men, until they finally came to rest upon an individual standing apart from the rest.

She walked on toward him.

He was a forbidding-looking creature, with a hard face, divided in its expression between evil thoughts and a malicious humor. His general appearance was much that of the rest of the men, with the exception that he made no display of offensive weapons. It was not this, however, that drew Helen in his direction, for she well enough knew that, in fact, he was a perfect gunpark of concealed firearms. She liked him because he never failed to amuse her.

"Good morning, Dirty," she greeted him cheerfully, as she came up, smiling into his bearded face.

Dirty O'Brien turned. In a moment his wicked eyes were smiling. With an adept twist of the tongue his chew of tobacco ceased to bulge one cheek, and promptly distended the other.

"Howdy," he retorted, with as much amiability as it was possible for him to display.

The girl nodded in the direction of the other onlookers.

"It's wonderful the interest you all take in the building of this church."

"Int'rest?" The man's eyes opened wide. Then a gleam of scorn replaced the surprise in them. "Guess you'd be mighty int'rested if you was sittin' on a roof with the house afire under you, an' you just got a peek of a ladder wagon comin' along, an' was guessin'

if it 'ud get around in time.”

Helen's eyes twinkled.

“I s'pose I should,” she admitted.

“S'pose nuthin'.” The saloonkeeper laughed a short, hard laugh. “It's dead sure. But most of them boys are feelin' mighty good. You see, the ladders mostly fixed for 'em. I'd say they reckon that fire's as good as out.”

The interest of the onlookers was purely passive. They displayed none of the enthusiasm one might have expected in men who considered that the safety of their souls was assured. Helen remarked upon the fact.

“Their enthusiasm's wonderful,” she declared, with a satirical laugh. “Do you think they'll ever be able to use swear words again?”

Dirty O'Brien grinned till his discolored teeth parted the hair upon his face.

“Say, I don't reckon to set myself up as a prophet at most things,” he replied, “but I'd like to say right here, the fixin' of that all-fired chu'ch is jest about the limit fer the morals of this doggone city. Standin' right here I seem to sort o' see a vision o' things comin' on like a pernicious fever. I seem to see all them boys – good boys, mind you, as far as they go – only they don't travel more'n 'bout an inch – lyin', an' slanderin', an' thievin', an' shootin', an' – an' committin' every blamed sin ever invented since Pharo's daughter got busy makin' up fairy yarns 'bout them bulrushes – ”

“I don’t think you ought to talk like that,” Helen protested hastily. “There’s no necessity to make – ”

But Dirty O’Brien was not to be denied. He promptly cut her short without the least scruple.

“No necessity?” he cried, with a sarcasm that left the girl speechless. “How in hell would you have me talk standin’ around a swell chu’ch like that? I tell you what, Miss Helen, you ain’t got this thing right. Within a month this durned city’ll all be that mussed up with itself an’ religion, the folks’ll grow a crop o’ wings enough to stock a chicken farm, an’ the boys’ll get scratchin’ around for worms, same as any other feathered fowl. They’ll get that out o’ hand with their own glory, they’ll get shootin’ up creation in the name of religion by way o’ pastime, and robbin’ the stages an’ smugglin’ liquor fer the fun o’ gettin’ around this blamed church an’ braggin’ of it to the parson. Say, if I know anything o’ the boys, in a week they’ll be shootin’ craps with the parson fer his wages, an’, in a month, they’ll set up tables around in the body o’ the chu’ch so they ken play ‘draw’ while the old man argues the shortest cut to everlastin’ glory. You ain’t got the boys in this city right, miss. Indeed, you ain’t. Chu’ch? Why they got as much notion how to act around a chu’ch as an unborn babe has of shellin’ peanuts. Folks needs eddicatin’ to a chu’ch like that. Eddicatin’? An’ that’s a word as ain’t a cuss word, and as the boys of this yer city ain’t wise to.”

“It seems rather hopeless, doesn’t it?” said Helen, stifling a violent inclination to laugh outright.

Dirty O'Brien was less scrupulous. He laughed with a vicious snort.

"Hopeless? – well, say, hopeless ain't a circumstance. Guess you've never seen a 'Jonah-man' buckin' a faro bank run by a Chinaman sharp?"

Helen shook her head while the saloonkeeper spat out his chew of tobacco with all the violence of his outraged feelings.

"He surely is a gilt-edged winner beside it," he finally admitted impressively, before clipping off a fresh chew from his plug with his strong teeth.

Helen turned away, partly to hide the laugh that would no longer be denied, and partly to watch the approach of a team of horses hauling a load of logs. In a moment swift anger shone in her pretty eyes.

"Why!" she cried, pointing at them. "Look, Dirty! That's our team; and Pete Clancy is driving it."

The man followed the direction in which she was pointing.

"Sure," he agreed indifferently.

"Sure? Of course it's sure," retorted Helen sharply; "but what – what – impertinence!"

Dirty O'Brien saw nothing remarkable in the matter, and his face displayed a waning interest.

"Don't he most gener'ly drive your team?" he inquired without enthusiasm.

"Of course he does. But he's s'posed to be right out in the hay sloughs – cutting. I heard Kate tell him this morning."

O'Brien's eyes twinkled, and a deep chuckle came from somewhere in the depths of his beard.

"Ken you beat it?" he inquired, with cordial appreciation. "Do you get his play?"

"Play?" The girl turned a pair of angry, bewildered eyes upon her companion. "Impertinence!"

The man nodded significantly.

"Sure. Them two scallywags of yours ain't got nothin' to give to the building of the chu'ch. Which means they'll need to get busy workin' on it. Guess work never did come welcome to Mister Peter Clancy and Nick. They hate work worse'n washin' – an' that's some. Guess they borrowed your team to do a bit o' haulin', which – kind o' squares their account. They're bright boys."

"Bright? They're impertinent rascals and – and – oh!"

Helen's exasperation left her almost speechless.

"Which is mighty nigh a compliment to them," observed the man.

But Helen's sense of humor utterly failed her now.

"It's – too bad, Dirty," she cried. "And poor Kate thinks they're out cutting our winter hay. I begged of her only this morning to 'fire' them both. I'm – I'm sure they're going to get us into trouble when – when the police come here. I hate the sight of them both. Last time Pete got drunk he – he very nearly asked me to marry him. I believe he would have, only I had a bucket of boiling water in my hand."

Again came the man's curious chuckle.

"It won't be you folks they get into trouble," he declared enigmatically. "An' I guess it ain't goin' to be 'emselves, neither. But when the p'lice get hot after 'em, why, they'll shift the scent – sure."

Helen's eyes had suddenly become anxious.

"You mean – Charlie Bryant," she half whispered.

The man nodded.

"Sure. An' anybody else, so —*they* get clear." O'Brien's eyes hardened as they contemplated the distant teamster. "Say," he went on, after a brief pause, "there are some low-down bums in this city. There's Shorty Solon, the Jew boy. He's wanted across the border fer shootin' up a bank manager, and gettin' off with the cash. Ther's Crank Heufer, the squarehead stage robber, shot up more folks, women, too, in Montana than 'ud populate a full-sized city. Ther's Kid Blaney, the faro sharp, who broke penitentiary in Dakota twelve months back. Ther's Macaddo, the train 'hold-up,' mighty badly wanted in Minnesota. Ther's Stormy Longton, full of scalps to his gun, a bad man by nature. Ther's Holy Dick, over there," he went on, pointing at a gray-bearded, mild-looking man, sitting on a log beside a small group of lounging spectators. "He owes the States Government seven good years for robbing a church. Ther's Danny Jarvis and Fighting Mike, both of 'em dodgin' the law, an' would shoot their own fathers up fer fi' cents. It's a dandy tally of crooks, but they ain't a circumstance beside them two boys of yours. They're bred

bad 'uns, an' they couldn't play even the crook's game right. I'd sure say they'd be a fortune to Fyles, when he gets busy cleaning up this place. They'd give Satan away if they see things gettin' busy their way."

The anxiety deepened in Helen's eyes as the man denounced the two men who were her sister's hired help. She knew that all he said of them was true. She had known it for months. Now she was thinking of Charlie Bryant and Kate. If Fyles ever got hold of Charlie it would break poor Kate's heart.

"You think they'd give – any one away?"

The man shook his head.

"I don't think. Guess I know." Then, after a pause, he went on, speaking rapidly and earnestly. "See here, Miss Helen, I don't hold no brief fer nobody but myself, an' I guess that brief needs a hell of a piece of studyin' right. There's things in it I don't need to shout about, and anyway I don't fancy Fyles's long nose smudging the ink on it. You an' Miss Kate are jest about two o' the most wholesome bits o' women in this township, an' there ain't many of us as wouldn't fix ourselves up clean an' neat to pay our respec's to either of you. Wal, Miss Kate's got a hell of a notion for that drunken bum, Charlie Bryant. That bein' so, tell her to keep a swift eye on her two boys. They're in with him, sure, an' they'll put him away if it suits 'em. Savee? Tell her I said so – since Fyles is goin' to butt in around here. I don't want to see Charlie Bryant in a stripe soot, penitentiary way. I need him. An' I need the liquor he runs."

The man turned away abruptly. He had broken the unwritten law of Rocky Springs, where it was understood that no man spoke of another man's past, or questioned his present doings, or even admitted knowledge of them. But like all the rest of the male portion of Rocky Springs, he possessed a soft spot in his vicious heart for the two sisters, who, in the mire of iniquity which flooded the township, contrived a clean, wholesome living out of the soil, and were womanly enough to find interest, and even pleasure, in their sordid surroundings. Now, he hurried off down to his saloon, much in the manner of a man who fears the consequences of feelings which have been allowed to run away with him.

Left to herself, Helen only remained long enough to pass a few cheery greetings with the rest of the onlookers; then she, too, took her departure.

For some moments she certainly was troubled by the direct warning of a man like Dirty O'Brien. With all the many criminal attainments of the other citizens of Rocky Springs, she knew him to be the shrewdest man in the place. A warning from him was more than significant. What should she do? Tell her sister? Certainly she would do that, but she felt it to be well-nigh useless. Kate was the gentlest soul in the world. She was the essence of kindness, of sympathy, of loyalty to her friends, but she was determined to a degree. She saw always with her own eyes, and would go the way she saw.

Had she not warned her herself before? Had she not

endeavored to persuade her a dozen times? It was all quite useless. Kate was something of an enigma, a contradiction. For all her gentleness Helen knew she could be as hard as iron.

Finally, with a sigh, she dismissed the matter from her mind until such time as opportunity served. Meanwhile she must put in an appearance at Mrs. John Day's house. Mrs. John Day was the social pivot of Rocky Springs, and, to disobey her summons, Helen knew would be to risk a displeasure which would find reflection in every woman in the place.

That was a catastrophe she had no desire to face. It was enough for her to remember that she had imprisoned herself in such a place. She had no desire to earn the ill-will of the wardresses.

She laughed to herself. But she really felt that it was very dreadful that her life must be passed among these people. She wanted to be free – to live all these good years of her life. She wanted to attend parties, and – and dances among those people amid whom she had been brought up. She craved for the society of cultured folks – of men. Yes, she admitted it, she wanted all those things which make a young girl's life enjoyable – theatres, dances, skating, hockey and – and, yes, flirtations. Instead of those things what had she – what was she? That was it. What was she? She had been planted in the furrows of life a decorative flower, and some terrible botanical disaster had brought her up a – cabbage.

She laughed outright, and in the midst of her laugh, looking out across the valley, she beheld her sister leaving the Meeting

House, which stood almost in the shadow of the great pine, far up on the distant slope.

Her laugh sobered. Her thoughts passed from herself to Kate with a feeling which was almost resentment. Her high-spirited, adventure-loving, handsome sister. What of her? It was terrible. So full of promise, so full of possibilities. Look at her. She was clad in a big gingham apron. No doubt her beautiful, artistic hands were all messed up with the stains of scrubbing out a Meeting House, which, in turn, right back to the miserable Indian days, had served the purposes of saloon, a trader's store, the home of a bloodthirsty badman, and before that goodness knows what. Now it was a house of worship for people, beside whom the scum of the earth was as the froth of whipped cream. It was – outrageous. It was so terrible to her that she felt as if she must cry, or – or laugh.

The issue remained in doubt for some moments. Then, just as she reached the pretentious portals of Mrs. John Day's home, her real nature asserted itself, and a radiant smile lit her pretty face as she passed within.

CHAPTER IX

THE “STRAY”-HUNTER

The real man is nearest the surface after a long period of idle solitude.

So it was with Stanley Fyles, riding over the even, sandy trail of the prairies which stretched away south of the Assiniboine River. His sunburnt face was sternly reposeful, and in his usually keen gray eyes was that open staring light which belongs to the man who gropes his way over Nature's trackless wastes, and whose mind is ever asking the question of direction. But there was no question of such a nature in his mind now. His look was the look of habit, when the call of the trail is heard.

He sat his horse with the easy grace of a man whose life is mostly spent in the saddle. His loose shoulders and powerful frame swayed with that magical rhythm which gives most ease to both horse and rider. His was the seat of a horseman whose poise is the poise of perfect balance rather than the set attitude of the riding school.

The bit hung lightly in the horse's mouth, but lightly as the reins were held in the man's hand there was a firmness and decision in the feeling of them that communicated the necessary confidence between horse and rider.

Stanley Fyles was as nearly a perfect horseman as the prairie

could produce.

Just now the man beneath the officer's habit was revealed. His military training was set aside, perhaps all thought of it had been left behind with his uniform, and just the "man" was reassumed with the simple prairie kit he had adopted for the work in hand.

To look at him now he might have been a ranch hand out on the work of the spring round-up. He was dressed in plain leather chapps over his black cloth riding breeches, and, from his waist up, his clothing was a gray flannel shirt, over which he wore an open waistcoat of ordinary civilian make. About his neck was tied a silk handkerchief of modest hue, and about his waist was strapped a revolver belt. The only visible detail that could have marked him as a police officer was the glimpse of military spurs beneath his chapps.

His thoughts and feelings as he covered the dreary miles of grass were of a conflicting nature, and, roaming at will, they centered, as thoughts so roaming will center, chiefly upon those things which concerned his most cherished ambitions.

At first a feeling of something bordering on anxious resentment pretty fully occupied him. There was still in his mind the memory of an interview he had had with his immediate superior, Superintendent Jason, just before the time of his setting out. It had been an uncomfortable half-hour spent listening to the sharp criticisms of his chief, whose mind was saturated with the spirit of his official capacity, almost to the exclusion of common sense.

Superintendent Jason was still angry at the manner in which the great whisky-running coup had been effected, and of the manner in which the perpetrators of it had slipped through the official fingers. He blamed everybody, and particularly Inspector Fyles, in whose hands the case had been placed.

Nor had he been wholly appeased by the inspector's final offer. Goaded by the merciless pin-prick of his superior's tongue, Fyles had finally offered to set out for Rocky Springs, the place, both were fully agreed, whence the trouble emanated, and bring all those concerned in the smuggling to book.

At first Jason had been inclined to sneer, nor was it until Fyles unfolded something of his scheme that he began to take it seriously. Finally, however, the younger man had had his way, and the necessary permission was granted. Then the superintendent dealt with the matter as the cold discipline of police methods demanded.

Fyles remembered his words well. They meant far more to him than they expressed. They were full of a cold threat, which, to a man of his experience, could not be mistaken.

The picture remained in his mind for many a long day. It was doubtful if he would ever forget it. It was a moment of crisis in his official life, a crisis when it became necessary to back himself against all odds – or ultimately sacrifice his position.

He was standing beside the superintendent, and both men were bending over one of those secret official charts of the district surrounding Rocky Springs. They were alone in Jason's

bare, even mean office. Fyles's long, firm forefinger was pointing along a trail, and his sharp, incisive words were explaining something of his convictions as his finger moved. The other was listening without interruption. At last, as the quiet, confident tones ceased, the superintendent straightened himself up, and his small, quick-moving, dark eyes shot their gleam of cold authority into his companion's.

"It's up to you," he said, with a callous upraising of his shoulders. "You've talked a good deal to me here, and you've made your talk sound right. But talk doesn't put these men in the penitentiary. You've made a mess of this job so far. Guess it's up to you to make good. You've got your chance now. See you don't miss it. The authorities don't stand for two mistakes on one job, not even when they're made by Inspector Fyles. You get me? You've *got* to make good."

Fyles left the office fully aware that sentence had been passed on him, just as surely as though he had stood before the Commissioner, a prisoner.

Thus, at the outset of his journey, his feelings had been scarcely pleasant, but, as the distance between him and headquarters increased, his confidence and sense of responsibility returned, and the shadow of threat retreated into the background. His plans were carefully laid, and all the support he could need was arranged for. This time the work before him was no mere capture of whisky-runners, but to make all whisky-running, as associated with Rocky Springs, impossible, and to

break up the gang who had for so long defied the law. Yes, he felt confident in the result, and, as the long miles were put behind him, his thoughts wandered into more pleasant channels.

Rocky Springs certainly offered him inducement. And curiously enough he found himself wondering how much he was influenced by that inducement in accepting the odds against him in cleaning up the place, and dusting the cobwebs of crime from its corners.

Kate Seton. He had not seen her for something running into weeks. The thought that he was to renew an acquaintance, which, though almost slight, still had extraordinary power to hold him, was a delightful one. Sometimes he had found himself wondering at the phenomenon of her attraction for him. But he was incapable of analyzing his feelings closely. His life had been spent on these fringes of civilization so long, and the generality of the women he had come into contact with had been so much a part of the life of the country, that their appeal had been weakened almost to the vanishing point.

Then here, in Rocky Springs, where he might reasonably expect to find only the dregs of society, he suddenly discovered a woman obviously belonging to an utterly different and more cultured life. A woman of uncommon beauty and distinction; a woman, who, to his mind, fulfilled some essentially mannish ideal, an ideal that, in idle moments, had stolen in upon a wholly reposeful mind. A woman who —

But the thread of his pleasant reflections was suddenly broken,

and his mechanically watchful eyes warned him that a horseman was riding along the trail ahead of him, and that he was rapidly overtaking this stranger.

In a moment all other interests were forgotten. To the solitary rider of the plains a fellow-creature ever becomes a matter of considerable moment. In Fyles's case he possessed the added interest of a possible giver of information.

As he gently urged his horse to lengthen its stride, his keen eyes took in the details of the man's figure, and the points of the horse he was riding. The man was of unusual stature, so unusual, in fact, that his horse, although a big raking creature, became dwarfed under him. Even from that distance the officer obtained a suggestion of fair hair beneath the brim of the prairie hat, which was tilted forward at an unusual angle. The great square shoulders of the stranger were clad in a tweed jacket, and, from what he could make out, he wore no chapps.

Just for a moment Fyles guessed he might be some farmer, and the tweed jacket suggested he was out to pay a visit to friends. Then, quite abruptly, he changed his mind, and further increased his pace. He had detected the city-fashioned top-boots the man was wearing.

Without further speculation he pressed on to overtake the stranger, whom, presently, he saw turn round and look back. Evidently he had become aware of the approach. Equally evidently he either welcomed or resented the intrusion upon his solitude. For he reined in his horse, and waited for the officer

to come up.

The greeting between the men was widely different. The stranger's face was abeam with smiling good nature. His big blue eyes were wide with frank welcome.

"I've been just bursting with a painful longing for the sight of a living man with two arms and two legs, and anything else that goes to make up a human companion," he said delightedly. "Say, how far do you guess a fellow could ride by himself without needing to be sent into a home to be looked after?"

Fyles's manner was more guarded. The police officer was uppermost in him now, but he smiled a certain cordiality at the other's frankly unconventional greeting.

"That mostly depends on how many things there are chasing around in his brain-box to keep the works busy," he said gently.

The stranger's smile broadened into a laugh.

"That don't offer much hope," he replied dryly. "I've been riding around this eternal grass for nigh a week. God knows where I haven't been during that time. Nobody ever did brag about the ideas I've got in my head, not even my mother, and any I have got have just been chewed right up to death till there isn't a blamed thing left to chew. For the past ten miles I've been reviewing the attractions of every nursing home I've ever heard of, with a view to becoming an inmate. I think I've almost decided on one I know of in Toronto. You see there are a few human beings there."

Fyles's eyes had taken in the stranger from head to foot. Even

the horse did not escape his closest attention. He recognized this man as being a stranger in the country. He was obviously direct from some eastern city, though not aggressively so. Furthermore, the beautiful chestnut horse he was riding was no prairie-bred animal, and suggested, in combination with the man's general get-up, the possession of ample means.

“A week riding about – trying to find yourself?”

Fyles's question was one of amused speculation.

“Sure,” the man nodded, with a buoyant amusement in his eyes. “That, and finding some forgotten hole of a place called Rocky Springs.”

Fyles lifted his reins and his horse moved on.

“We'd best ride together. I'm going to Rocky Springs, and – you've certainly hit the trail at last.”

The fair-haired giant jumped at the suggestion, and even his horse seemed to welcome the companionship, for it ambled on in the friendliest manner by the side of the police horse.

“How did you manage to – lose yourself?” Fyles inquired presently. “Did you start out from Amberley?”

The stranger's look of chagrin was almost comical. He shook his head.

“That's where I ought to've started from,” he said. Then he shrugged his great shoulders. “Here, I'll tell you. I come from down East, and I'm on my way to join a brother of mine at Rocky Springs. He's a rancher. Sort of artist, too. His name's Charlie Bryant. My name's Bill – Bill Bryant. Well, I ought to have got

off at Black Cross, and changed trains for the Amberley branch. Instead of that I was sleeping peacefully in the car and went right on to a place called Moosemin. Well, some torn fool told me if I got off at Moosemin I would get across country to Amberley, and thus get on to the Rocky Springs road. Maybe he was right enough, if the feller getting off had got any horse sense. But I guess they forgot to hand any out my way. Anyhow, I kind of took to the idea. Gussed I'd make a break that way and get used to the country. So I just bought the best horse I could find in the town from the worst thief that ever dodged penitentiary, and since then have spent seven whole days getting on intimate terms with every blade of grass in the country, and trying to convince various settlers that I wasn't a murderer or horse thief, and didn't want to shoot 'em in their beds, but just needed food and sleep, all of which I was ready to pay for at any fancy prices they liked to ask. How I eventually got here I don't know, and haven't a desire to know, and I'll stake my oath you won't find any two people in the country with the same ideas of direction. And I want to say that I hate grass worse than poison, and as for sun it's an abomination. Horse riding's overrated, and tailors don't know a thing about making pants that are comfortable riding. I could write a book on the subject of boils and saddle chafes, and when I get off this blamed saddle I don't intend to sit down for a week. I think a rancher's life is just the dandiest thing to read about I ever knew, and beans – those things the shape of an immature egg and as hard as rocks – are most nourishing; and I don't think

I shall need nourishing ever again. Also the West is the greatest country ever forgotten by God or men, but the remark applies only to its size. The best thing I know of, just now, is a full-sized human being going the same way I am.”

Bill Bryant finished up with a great laugh of the happiest good nature, which quite robbed Fyles of his last shadow of aloofness. No one could have looked into the man’s humorously smiling eyes, or listened to the frank admissions of his own blundering, and felt it necessary to entertain the least question as to his perfect honesty.

Fyles accepted the introduction in the spirit in which it was made.

“My name’s Fyles – Stanley Fyles,” he said cordially. “Glad to meet you, Mr. Bryant.”

“Bill Bryant,” corrected the other, grasping and wringing the policeman’s proffered hand with painful cordiality. “That’s a good name – Fyles,” he went on, releasing the other’s hand. “Suggests all sorts of things – nails, chisels – something in the hardware line. Good name for this country, too.” Then his big blue eyes scanned the officer’s outfit. “Rancher?” he suggested.

Fyles smiled, shaking his head.

“Hardly a – rancher,” he deprecated.

“Ah. I know. Cowpuncher. You’re dressed that way. I’ve read about ’em. Chasing cattle. Rounding ’em up. Branding, and all that sort of thing. Fine. Exciting.”

Fyles shook his head again.

“My job’s not just that, either,” he said, his smile broadening. “You see, I just round up ‘strays,’ and send ’em to their right homes. I’m out after ‘strays’ now.”

Bill nodded with ready understanding.

“I get it,” he cried. “They just break out in spring, and go chasing after fancy grass. Then they get lost, or mussed up with ether cattle, and – and need sorting out. Must be a mighty lonesome job – always hunting ‘strays.’”

Inspector Fyles’s eyes twinkled, but his sunburned face remained serious.

“Yes, I’d say it’s lonesome – at times. You see, it isn’t easy locating their tracks. And when you do locate ’em maybe you’ve got a long piece to travel before you come up with ’em. They get mighty wild running loose that way, and, hate being rounded up. Some of ’em show fight, and things get busy. No, it’s not dead easy – and it doesn’t do making mistakes. Guess a mistake is liable to snuff your light out when you’re up against ‘strays.’”

A sudden enthusiasm lit Bill Bryant’s interested eyes.

“That sounds better than ranching,” he said quickly. “You see, I’ve lived a soft sort of life, and it kind of seems good to get upsides with things. I’ve got a notion that it’s better to hand a feller a nasty bunch of knuckles, square on the most prominent part of his face, than taking dollars out of him to pay legal chin wagers. That’s how I’ve always felt, but living in luxury in a city makes you act otherwise. I’ve quit it though, now, and, in consequence, I’m just busting to hand some fellow that bunch

of knuckles.” He raised one great clenched fist and examined it with a sort of mild enthusiasm. “I’m going to ranch,” he went on simply, while the police officer surveyed him as he might some big, boisterous child. “My brother’s got a ranch at Rocky Springs. He’s done pretty well, I guess – for an artist fellow. He’s making money – oh, yes, he’s making good money, and seems to like the life.

“The fact is,” he went on eagerly, “Charlie was a bit of a bad boy – he’s a dandy good fellow, really he is; but I guess he got gay when he was an art student, and the old man got rattled over it and sent him along out here to raise cattle and wheat. Well, when dad died he left me most of his dollars. There were plenty, and it’s made me feel sick he forgot Charlie’s existence. So I took a big think over things. You see it makes a fellow think, when he finds himself with a lot of dollars that ought to be shared with another fellow.

“Well, I don’t often think hard,” he went on ingenuously. “But I did that time, and it’s queer how easy it is to think right when you really try – hard. Guess you don’t need to think much in your work – but maybe sometimes you’ll have to, and then you’ll find how easy it comes.”

He turned abruptly in the saddle and looked straight into the officer’s interested face. His eyes were alight, and he emitted a deep-throated guffaw.

“Say,” he went on, “it came to me all of a sudden. It was in the middle of the night. I woke up thinking it. I was saying it to

myself. Why not go out West? Join Charlie. Put all your money into his ranch. Turn it into a swell affair, and run it together. That way it'll seem as if you were doing it for yourself. That way Charlie'll never know you're handing him a fortune. Can you beat it?" he finished up triumphantly.

Stanley Fyles had not often met men in the course of his sordid work with whom he really wanted to shake hands. But somehow this great, soft-hearted, simple giant made him feel as he had never felt before. He abruptly thrust out a hand, forgetful of the previous handshakes he had endured, and, in a moment, it was seized in a second vice-like grip.

"It's fine," he said. Then as an afterthought: "No, you can't beat it."

The unconscious Bill beamed his satisfaction.

"That's how I thought," he said enthusiastically. "And I'll be mighty useful to him, myself, too – in a way. Don't guess I know much about wheat or cattle, but I can ride anything with hair on it, and I've never seen the feller I couldn't pound to a mush with the gloves on. That's useful, seeing Charlie's sort of small, and – and mild." Suddenly he pointed out ahead. "What's that standing right up there? See, over there. A tree – or – something."

Fyles abruptly awoke to their whereabouts. Bill Bryant was pointing at the great pine marking Rocky Springs.

"That's the landmark of Rocky Springs," he told him. This stranger had so interested and amused him that he had quite lost reckoning of the distance they had ridden together.

“I don’t see any town,” complained his companion.

“It’s in the valley. You see, that tree is on the shoulder of the valley of Leaping Creek.”

Bill’s eyes widened.

“Oh, that’s a valley, eh? And Charlie’s ranch is down below. I see.”

The man’s eyes became thoughtful, and he relapsed into silence as they drew on toward the aged signpost. He was thinking – perhaps hard – of that brother whom he had not seen for years. Maybe, now that the time had come for the meeting, some feeling of nervousness was growing. Perhaps he was wondering if he would be as welcome as he hoped. Had Charlie changed much? Would his coming be deemed an impertinence? Charlie had not answered his letter. He forgot his brother had not had time to answer his impulsive epistle.

As they drew near the valley his eyes lost their enthusiastic light. His great, honest face was grave, almost to the point of anxiety.

Fyles, watching him furtively, observed every change of expression, and the meaning of each was plain enough to him. He, too, was wondering about that meeting. It would have interested him to have witnessed it. He was thinking about that brother in Rocky Springs. He knew him slightly, and knew his reputation better, and, in consequence, the two words “drunkard” and “crook” drifted through his mind, and left him regretfully wondering. Somehow he felt sorry, inexpressibly sorry, for this

great big babe of a man whom he found himself unusually glad to have met.

CHAPTER X

THE BROTHERS

The valley of Leaping Creek gaped at Bill Bryant's feet and the man's ready delight bubbled over.

"Say," he demanded of his guide, "and this is where my brother's ranch is? Gee," he went on, while Fyles nodded a smiling affirmative, "it surely is the dandiest ditch this side of creation. It makes me want to holler."

As Fyles offered no further comment they rode on down the hill in silence, while Bill Bryant's shining eyes drank in the beauties which opened out in every direction.

The police officer, by virtue of his knowledge of the valley, led the way. Nor was he altogether sorry to do so. He felt that the moment for answering questions had passed. Any form of cross-examination now might lead him into imparting information that might hurt this stranger, and he had no desire to be the one to cast a shadow upon his introduction to the country he intended to make his home.

However, beyond this first expression of delight, Bill Bryant made no further attempt at speech. Once more doubt had settled upon his mind, and he was thinking – hard.

Ten minutes later the village came into view. Then it was that Bill was abruptly aroused from his somewhat troubled thought.

They were just approaching the site of the new church, and sounds of activity broke the sylvan peace of the valley. But these things were of a lesser interest. A pedestrian, evidently leaving the neighborhood of the new building, was coming toward them along the trail. It was a girl – a girl clad in a smart tailored costume, which caught and held the stranger’s most ardent attention.

She came on, and as they drew abreast of her, just for one brief instant the girl’s smiling gray eyes were raised to the face of the stranger. The smile was probably unconscious, but it was nevertheless pronounced. In a moment, off came Bill’s hat in a respectful salute, and only by the greatest effort could he refrain from a verbal greeting. Then, in another moment, as she passed like a ray of April sun, he had drawn up beside his guide.

“Say,” he cried, with a deep breath of enthusiasm, “did you get that pretty girl?” Then with a burst of impetuosity: “Are they all like that in – this place? If so, I’m surely up to my neck in the valley of Leaping Creek. Who is she? How did she get here? I’ll bet a thousand dollars to a bad nickel this place didn’t raise her.”

The officer’s reply to the volley of questions came with characteristic directness.

“That’s Miss Seton, Miss Helen Seton, sister of the one they call – Kate. They’re sort of farmers, in a small way. Been here five years.”

“Farmers?” Bill’s scorn was tremendous. “Why, that girl might have stepped off Broadway, New York, yesterday. Farmers!”

“Nevertheless they *are* farmers,” replied Fyles, “and they’ve been farming here five years.”

“Five years! They’ve been here five years, and that girl – with her pretty face and dandy eyes – not married? Say, the boys of this place need seeing to. They ought to be lynched plumb out of hand.”

Fyles smiled as he drew his horse up at the point where the trail merged into the main road of the village.

“Maybe it’s not – their fault,” he said dryly.

But Bill’s indignation was sweeping him on.

“Then I’d like to know whose it is.”

Fyles laughed aloud.

“Maybe she’s particular. Maybe she knows them. They surely do need lynching – most of ’em – but not for that. When you know ’em better you’ll understand.”

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed down the trail, away from the village.

“That’s your way,” he went on, “along west. Just keep right along the trail for nearly half a mile till you come to a cattle track on the right, going up the hill again.”

Then he shifted the direction of his pointing finger to a distant house on the hillside, which stood in full view.

“The track’ll take you to that shanty there, with the veranda facing this way. That’s Charlie Bryant’s place, and, unless I’m mistaken, that’s your brother standing right there on the veranda looking out this way. For a rancher – he don’t seem busy. Guess

I'm going right on down to the saloon. I'll see you again some time. So long."

The police officer swung his horse round, and set off at a sharp canter before Bill could give expression to any of the dozen questions which leaped to his lips. The truth was Fyles had anticipated them, and wished to avoid them.

Charlie Bryant was standing on the veranda of his little house up on the hillside. He was watching with eyes of anxious longing for the sight of a familiar figure emerging from a house, almost as diminutive as his own, standing across the river on the far side of the valley.

There was never any question as to the longing in his dark eyes when they were turned upon the house of Kate Seton, but the anxiety in them now was less understandable.

It was his almost constant habit to watch for her appearance leaving her home each morning. But to-day she had remained invisible. He wondered why. It was her custom to be abroad early, and here it was long past mid-day, and, so far, there had been no sign of her going.

He wondered was she ill. Helen had long since made her appearance. He knew well enough that the new church building, and the many other small activities of the village, usually claimed Helen's morning. That was the difference, one of the many differences between the sisters. Helen must always be a looker on at life – the village life. Kate – Kate was part of it.

He sighed, and a look of almost desperate worry crossed his

dark, good-looking face. His thoughts seemed to disturb him painfully. Ever since he had heard of Inspector Fyles's coming to the village a sort of depression had settled like a cloud upon him – a depression he could not shake off. Fyles was the last man he wished to see in Rocky Springs – for several reasons.

He was reluctantly about to turn away, and pass on down to his corrals, which were situated on the slope beside the house. There was work to be done there, some repairs, which he had intended to start early that morning. They had been neglected so long, as were many things to do with his ranch.

With this intention he moved toward the end of the veranda, but his progress was abruptly arrested by the sight of two horsemen in the distance making their way down toward the village. For awhile he only caught odd glimpses of them through the trees, but at last they reached the main road of the village, and halted in full, though somewhat distant, view of his house.

In a moment the identity of one of the men became certain in his mind. In spite of the man's civilian clothing he recognized the easy poise in the saddle of Inspector Fyles. He had seen him so many times at comparatively close range that he was sure he could not be mistaken.

The sight of the police officer banished all his interest in the identity of the second horseman. A dark look of bitter, anxious resentment crept into his eyes, and all the mildness, all the gentleness vanished out of his expressive features. They had suddenly grown hard and cold. He knew that trouble was

knocking at the door of Rocky Springs. He knew that his own peace of mind could never be restored so long as the shadow of Stanley Fyles hovered over the village.

Presently he saw the two horsemen part. Fyles rode on down toward the village while the other turned westwards, but the now hot eyes of the watching man followed only the figure of the unwelcome policeman until it was lost to view beyond the intervening bush.

As the officer disappeared the rancher made a gesture of fierce anger.

“Kate, Kate,” he cried, raising his clenched fists as though about to strike the unconscious horseman, “if I lose you through him, I’ll – I’ll kill him.”

Now he hurried away down to the corrals with the air of a man who is endeavoring to escape from himself. He suddenly realized the necessity of a vent for his feelings.

But his work had yet to suffer a further delay. He had scarcely reached the scene of operations when the sound of galloping hoofs caught and held his attention. He had quite forgotten the second horseman in his bitter interest in the policeman. Now he remembered that he had turned westward, which was in the direction of his ranch. The sounds were rapidly approaching up the track toward him. His eyes grew cold and almost vicious as he thought. Was this another of the police force? The force to which Fyles belonged?

He stood waiting at the head of the trail. And the look in his

eyes augured ill for the welcome of the newcomer.

The sounds grew louder. Then he heard a voice, a somewhat familiar voice. It was big, and cheerful, and full of a cordial good humor.

“By Judas! he was a thief, and an outrageous robber, but you can go, my four-footed monument to a blasted rogue’s perfidy. Five hundred good dollars – now, at it for a final spurt.”

Charlie Bryant understood. The man was talking to his horse. Had he needed evidence it came forthwith, for, with a rush, at a headlong gallop, a horseman dashed from amid the bushes and drew up with a jolt almost on top of him.

“Charlie!”

“Bill! Good old – Bill!”

The greetings came simultaneously. The next instant Big Brother Bill flung out of the saddle, and stood wringing his brother’s hand with great force.

“Gee! It’s good to see you, Charlie,” he cried joyously.

“Good? Why, it’s great, and – and I took you for one of the damned p’lice.”

Charlie’s face was wreathed in such a smile of welcome and relief, that all Big Brother Bill’s doubts in that direction were flung pell-mell to the winds.

Charlie caught something of the other’s beaming enthusiasm.

“Why, I’ve been expecting you for days, old boy. Thought maybe you’d changed your mind. Say, where’s your baggage? Coming on behind? You haven’t lost it?” he added anxiously, as

Bill's face suddenly fell.

"I forgot. Say, was there ever such a tom-fool trick?" Bill cried, with a great laugh at his own folly. "Why, I left it checked at Moosemin – without instructions."

Charlie's smiling eyes suddenly widened.

"Moosemin? What in the name of all that's – ?"

"I'll have to tell you about it later," Bill broke in hastily. "I've had one awful journey. If it hadn't been for a feller I met on the road I don't know when I'd have landed here."

Charlie nodded, and the smile died out of his eyes.

"I saw him. You certainly were traveling in good company."

Bill nodded, towering like some good-natured St. Bernard over a mild-eyed water spaniel.

"Good company's a specialty with me. But I didn't come alongside any of it, since I set out to make here 'cross country from Moosemin on the advice of the only bigger fool than myself I've ever met, until I ran into him. Say, Charlie, I s'pose its necessary to have a deal of grass around to run a ranch on?"

Charlie's eyes lit with the warmest amusement. This great brother of his was the brightest landmark in his memory of the world he had said good-bye to years ago.

"You can't graze cattle on bare ground," he replied watchfully. "Why?"

Bill's shoulders went up to the accompaniment of a chuckle.

"Nothing – only I hate grass. I seem to have gone over as much grass in the last week as a boarding-house spring lamb. But for

that feller, I surely guess I'd still be chasing over it, like those 'strays' he spends his life rounding-up."

A quick look of inquiry flashed in the rancher's eyes.

"Strays?" he inquired.

Bill nodded gravely. "Yes, he's something in the ranching line. Rounds up 'strays,' and herds 'em to their right homes. His name's Fyles – Stanley Fyles."

Just for an instant Charlie's face struggled with the more bitter feelings Fyles's name inspired. Then he gave way to the appeal of a sort of desperate humor, and broke into an uncontrolled fit of laughter.

Bill looked on wondering, his great blue eyes widely open. Then he caught the infection, and began to laugh, too, but without knowing why.

After some moments, however, Charlie sobered and choked back a final gurgle.

"Oh, dear!" he exclaimed. "You've done me a heap of good, Bill. That's the best laugh I've had in weeks. That fellow a rancher? Fyles – Stanley Fyles a – rancher? Well, p'raps you're right. That's his job all right – rounding up 'strays,' and herding 'em to their right homes. But the 'strays' are 'crooks,' and their homes the penitentiary. That's Inspector Stanley Fyles, of the Mounted Police, and just about the smartest man in the force. He's come out here to start his ranching operations on Rocky Springs, which has the reputation of being the busiest hive of crooks in Western Canada. You're going to see things hum, Bill

– you’ve just got around in time.”

CHAPTER XI

THE UNREGENERATE

Later in the afternoon the two brothers found themselves seated on the veranda talking together, as only devoted relationship will permit after years of separation.

They had just returned from a brief inspection of the little ranch for Bill's edification. The big man's enthusiasm had demanded immediate satisfaction. His headlong nature impelled him to the earliest possible digestion of the life he was about to enter. So he had insisted on a tour of inspection.

The inspection was of necessity brief. There was so little to be seen in the way of an outward display of the prosperity his elder brother claimed. In consequence, as it proceeded, the newcomer's spirits fell. His radiant dreams of a rancher's life tumbled about his big unfortunate head, and, for the moment, left him staggered.

His first visit was to the barn, where Kid Blaney, his brother's ranchman, was rubbing down two well saddle-marked cowponies, after his morning out on the fences. It was a crazy sort of a shanty, built of sod walls with a still more crazy door frame, and a thatched roof more than a foot thick. It was half a dug-out on the hillside, and suggested as much care as a hog pen. The floor was a mire of accumulations of manure and rotted bedding,

and the low roof gave the place a hovelish suggestion such as Bill could never have imagined in the breezy life of a rancher, as he understood it.

There were one or two other buildings of a similar nature. One was used for a few unhealthy looking fowls; another, by the smell and noise that emanated therefrom, housed a number of pigs. Then there was a small grain storehouse. These were the buildings which comprised the ranch. They were just dotted about in the neighborhood of the house, at points most convenient for their primitive construction.

The corrals, further down the slope, offered more hope. There were three of them, all well enough built and roomy. There was one with a branding "pinch," outside which stood a small hand forge and a number of branding irons. At the sight of these things Bill's spirit improved.

When questioned as to pastures and grazing, Charlie led him along a cattle track, through the bush up the slope, to the prairie level above. Here there were three big pastures running into a hundred acres or more, all well fenced, and the wire in perfect order. Bill's improving spirits received a further fillip. The grazing, Charlie told him, lay behind these limits upon the open plains, over which the newcomer had spent so much time riding.

"You see, Bill," he said, half apologetically, "I'm only a very small rancher. The land I own is this on which the house stands, and these pastures, and another pasture or two further up the

valley. For grazing, I simply rent rights from the Government. It answers well enough, and I only have to keep one regular boy in consequence. Spring and fall I hire extra hands for round-up. It pays me better that way.”

Bill nodded with increasing understanding. His original dreams had received a bad jolt, but he was beginning a readjustment of focus. Besides, his simple mind was already formulating fresh plans, and he began to talk of them with that whole-hearted enthusiasm which seemed to be the foundation of his nature.

“Sure,” he said cordially. “And – and you’ve done a big heap, Charlie. Say, how much did dad start you out with? Five thousand dollars? Yes, I remember, five thousand, and our mother gave you another two thousand five hundred. It was all she had. She’d saved it up in years. It wasn’t much to turn bare land into a money-making proposition, specially when you’d had no experience. But we’re going to alter all that. We’re going to own our grazing, if it can be bought. Yes, sir, we’re going to own a lot more, and I’ve got nearly one hundred thousand dollars to do it with. We’re going to turn these barns into barns, and we’re going to run horses as well as cattle. We’re going to grow wheat, too. That’s the coming game. All the boys say so down East – that is, the real bright boys. We’re just going to get busy, you and me, Charlie. We’re going to have a deed of partnership drawn up all square and legal, and I’m going to blow my stuff in it against what you’ve got already, and what you know. That’s what I’m here for.”

By the aid of his big voice and aggressive bulk Bill strove to conceal his obvious desire to benefit his brother under an exterior of strong business methods. And he felt the result to be all he could desire. He told himself that a man of Charlie's unbusiness-like nature was quite easy to impress. When it came to a proper understanding of business he was much his brother's superior.

Charlie, however, was in no way deceived, but such was his regard for this simple-minded creature that his protest was of the mildest.

"Of course we could do a great deal with your money, Bill, but – but it's all you've got, and –"

His protest was hastily thrust aside.

"See here, Charlie, boy, that's right up to me," Bill cried, with a buoyant laugh. "I'm out here to ranch. That's what I've come for, that's what I've worn my skin to the bone for on the most outrageously uncomfortable saddle I've ever thrown a leg over. That's why I took the trouble to keep on chasing up this place when my brain got plumb addled at the sight of so much grass. That's why I didn't go back to find the feller – and shoot him – for advising me to get off at Moosemin instead of hitting back on my tracks for the right place to change trains. You see, maybe I haven't all the horse sense in some things you have, but I've got my back teeth into the idea of this ranching racket, and my dollars are going to talk all they know. I tell you, when my mind's made up, I can't be budged an inch. It's no use your trying. I know you, Charlie. You're scared to death I'll lose my money –"

well, I'm ready to lose it, if things go that way. Meanwhile, I've a commercial proposition. I'm out to make good, and I'm looking for you to help me."

Charlie looked into the earnest, good-natured face with eyes that read deep down into the open heart beneath. A great regret lay behind them, a regret which made him hate and despise himself in a way he had never felt before. He was thinking whither his own follies had driven him; he was thinking of his own utter failure as a man, a strong, big-principled man. He was wondering, too, what this kindly soul would think and feel when he realized how little he was changed from the contemptible creature his father had turned out of doors, and when he finally learned of the horrors of degradation his life really concealed.

He had no alternative but to acquiesce before the strong determination of his brother, and though his words were cordial, his fears, his qualms of conscience underlying them, were none the less.

So they came back to the house, and finally foregathered on two uncomfortable, rawhide-seated, home-made chairs, while Bill enlarged upon his plans. It was not until these were completely exhausted that their talk drifted to more personal matters. Then it was that Charlie himself opened up the way, with a bitter reference to the reasons that saved him from completely going under when their father shipped him out to this forlorn spot to regenerate.

He talked earnestly, leaning forward in his chair. His delicate

hands were tightly clasped, as his eyes gazed out across the valley at a spot where Kate Seton's house stood beyond the river.

Bill sat listening. He wanted Charlie to talk. He wanted to learn all those little things, sometimes even very big things, which can only be read between the lines when the tongue runs on unguardedly. He knew his brother's many weaknesses, and it was his ardent desire to discover those signs of betterment and strengthening he fondly hoped had taken place in the passing of years.

He lolled back with the luxury of an utterly saddle-weary man. His heavy bent pipe hung loosely from the corner of his mouth. His big blue eyes were steady and earnest.

"Yes," Charlie went on, after a moment's thought, "I'm glad, mighty glad, I came here when I did." He gave a short mirthless laugh. "I doubt if my satisfaction is inspired by any moral scruple," he added hastily, as the other nodded. "Say, can you understand how I feel when I say I believe all moral scruple has somehow decayed, rotted, died in me? I don't mean that I don't want to be decent. I do; but that's because decency appeals to me from some sort of artistic feelings which have survived the wreck I made of life years ago. No, moral scruples were killed stone dead when I was chasing through Europe hunting Art, searching for it with eyes too young to gaze upon anything more beautiful than a harsh life of strict discipline.

"Now I have to follow inclinations that have somehow got the better of all the best qualities in me. That's how I'm fixed now.

And, queer as it may seem, that's been my salvation – if you can call it salvation. When I first came here I was ready to drift any old way. I did drift into every muck-hole that appealed to me. I didn't care. As I said, moral scruples were dead in me. Then this same self-indulgence did me a good turn. The only good turn it's ever done me.”

The eyes gazing across the valley grew very soft.

“Say, Bill,” he began again, after a brief, reflective pause, “I came here, and – and found a woman. The greatest, the best woman God ever created. She was strong, big-spirited, beautiful. She'd come out here to earn a living with her sister. She'd left the East for no better reason than her big spirit of independence, and a desire to live beyond the narrow confines of convention. Say, I think I went crazy about that woman.”

The man was smiling very softly. All Bill's senses were alert. His slow brain was groping for the subtle comprehension which he felt was needed for a full understanding.

“That woman came near to saving me – from myself,” Charlie went on, with a tenderness he was unaware of. “And it was through that very weakness of self-indulgence. I love her that bad it's bigger than anything else in my life. Say, I'd rather have her good opinion, and – and liking – than anything in life. It's more to me than any of those desires that have always claimed me. But there are times when even her influence isn't quite big enough. There are times when even she can't hold me up. There are things back of my head I can't beat – even through her – at times. That's

why I say she's come near saving me. Not quite – but near.

“Bill, guess you can't understand. Guess no one can. I fight, fight, fight. She fights, too. She fights without knowing it, too, because always in my mind is a picture of her handsome face, and eyes of disapproval. That picture wins most times – but not always. Wait till you see Kate, Bill, then you'll understand. I just love her to death – and that's all there is to it. She only likes me. She'll never feel for me same as I do for her. How can she? – I'm – but I guess you know what I am. Everybody who knows me knows that I'm a hopeless drunkard.”

The man's final admission came without any self-pity or bitterness. It is doubtful if there was any shame in him at the acknowledgment. Bill marveled. He could not understand. He tried to picture himself making such an admission, and to estimate his feelings at it. Shame, unutterable shame, was all he could think of, and his good-natured face flushed with shame for his brother, who had somehow so squandered all his better feelings.

Charlie saw the flush, and the tenderness died out of his eyes. He shook his head.

“Don't feel that way about it,” he cried bitterly. “I'm not worth it. Besides, I can't stand it from – you. Only – from Kate. I know what you're thinking. You're bound to think that way. You were born with a man's body – a big, strong man's body. I was born weak and puny. I was born all wrong. I don't say it in excuse. I merely state a fact. Look at me beside you, both children of the

same parents. I'm like a woman, I can't even grow the hair of a man on my face. My mother reveled in what she regarded as the artistic beauty of my features, my hands" – he held out his thin hands with their long tapering fingers – "and my love for all those softer things of life that should only be found in female nature. She gloried in those things and fostered them. She did her best, all unknowingly, bless her, to kill the last vestige of manhood in me. And all the time it was crying out, crying out bitterly. It was growing stronger and stronger, as my physique remained undeveloped. Finally it became too great to withstand. Then, when it turned loose, I was without power to check it. My moral strength was not equal to the tide, and all my passions swayed me whithersoever they chose. Again I say this is no excuse; it is merely fact as I see it. I was powerless to resist temptation. The woman who once loses her hold on her moral nature can never recover herself. That is nature – her nature – and, by the curse of fate, it is also mine."

For the moment Bill had no answer. He sat with his eyes averted. All his affection for his erring brother was uppermost, all his sympathy and pity. But he dared not display them. All that Charlie had said was true. His whole appearance was effeminate. He was a man without the physical support belonging to his sex. As he said, he was left powerless by nature and upbringing to fight a man's battle on the plains of moral integrity. His fall had been drink, with its accompanying vices, and Bill realized now, after five years' absence, how hopeless his brother's reformation

had become. If his love for this woman could not save him, then surely nothing on earth could. For Bill, in his simple fashion, believed that such an appeal was above all in its claims upon any real man.

He groped for something to say, for something that might show Charlie that his affection remained utterly unaltered, but he had no great cleverness, and the right thing refused to come to his aid. As the silence lengthened between them his groping thoughts took their own course, which led him to the name, "Kate," which the other had used. He remembered he had heard it that day once before.

"Kate?" he inquired lamely. "Kate – who?"

"Kate Seton."

In an instant Bill's whole attitude underwent a change. He sat up, and, removing his pipe, dashed the charred ashes from its bowl.

"Why, that's the sister of – Helen Seton."

Charlie nodded, his eyes lighting with a sharp question.

"Sure. But – you don't know – Helen?"

Bill's face beamed.

"Met her on the trail," he cried triumphantly. "No end of a pretty girl. Gray eyes and fair hair. Might have been walking on Broadway, New York – from her style. Fyles told me about her."

"Fyles?"

Charlie's eyes suddenly darkened with resentment. He rose abruptly from his chair, and began to pace the veranda. Then he

halted, and looked coldly down into his brother's eyes.

"What did he say?" he demanded shortly.

Bill's eyes answered him with question for question.

"Just told me who Helen was. Said she had a sister – Kate. Said they were farmers – of a sort. Said they'd been here five years. Why?"

Charlie ignored the question.

"That's all?" he demanded.

"Sure." Bill nodded.

Then the hardness died out of Charlie's eyes to be replaced once more by his usual gentle smile.

"I'm glad. You see, I don't want him – around Kate. Say –" he hesitated. Then he moved toward the door of the house. "Guess I'll get supper. I forgot, you must be starving."

Kate Seton had spent the whole morning at home. The work of her little farm had claimed her. She had been out with her two disreputable boys around the grain, now rapidly turning from its fresh green to that delicate tint of yellow so welcome to the farmer. It was a comparatively anxious time, for the cattle grazing at large upon the prairie loved the sweet flavor of the growing grain, and had no scruples at breaking their way through the carelessly constructed barbed wire fencing, and wrecking all that came within their reach. The fences needed "top railing," and Kate could not trust the work to her two men without supervision. So she spent the morning in their company.

After the mid-day meal, as soon as Helen had left the house

on a journey to Billy Unguin's drapery store, she sat herself down at a small bureau in their kitchen-parlor and drew a couple of books, suspiciously like account books, from one of its locked drawers, and settled herself for an hour's work upon them.

The room, though not large, was comfortable. It was full of odd, feminine knick-knacks contrived by Helen's busy hands. The walls were dotted with a number of unframed water colors, also the work of the younger of the two women. There were three comfortable rockers, so dear to the heart of the women of the country. Besides these, there was a biggish dining table, and, in one corner of the room, beside a china and store cupboard, a square iron cook stove stood out, on which a tin kettle of water was pleasantly simmering.

It was a homely room which had been gradually furnished into its present atmosphere of comfort by two pairs of busy hands, and both Kate and Helen loved it far more, in consequence, than if it had borne the hall-mark of lavish expenditure.

But Kate, as she sat before her bureau, had no thought of these things just now. She was anxious to complete her work before Helen returned. It was always impossible to deal with figures while her sister was in the room. And her figures now needed careful attention.

She opened her books, and soon her busy pen was at work. From a pocket in her underskirt she drew a number of papers, and these she carefully sorted out.

Having arranged them to her satisfaction the task of entering

figures in her book was resumed. Finally she performed the operation of many sums, the accurate working out of which took considerable time and pains. Then, from the same pocket, she drew a bundle of notes which she carefully counted and checked by the figures in the books.

This work completed she sat back idly in her chair with a thoughtful, ironical smile in her dark eyes, and the holder of her pen poised in the grip of her even white teeth.

She was thinking pleasantly, with a half humorous vein running through her thought. She was dreaming, day-dreaming, of many things dear to her woman's heart. Now and again her look changed. Now a quick flash leaped into her slumberous eyes, only to die out almost immediately, hidden under that softer gleam which had so much humor in it. At another time a grave look replaced all other expression; then, again, a quick frown would occasionally mar the fair, smooth brow. But always the dominating note of humorous thoughtfulness would return, as if this were her chief characteristic.

Her day-dreaming did not last long, however. It was abruptly dispelled, as such moods generally are. The sound of hurrying feet brought a quick look that was one almost of anxiety into her usually confident eyes. With one comprehensive movement she scrambled her books and papers together and heaped them into the still open drawer. Then she gathered up the money, and flung it in after the other things.

As the door burst open and Helen ran into the room, her eyes

bright with excitement, and her breathing hurried and short from her run, Kate was in the act of locking the drawer.

Helen halted as she came abreast of the table, and her dancing eyes challenged her sister.

“At your Bluebeard’s chamber again, Kate?” she cried, in mock reproof. Then she raised a warning finger. “One of these days – mind, one of these days, I surely will have a duplicate key made and get a peek into that drawer, which you never open in my presence. I believe you’re carrying on an intrigue with some man. Maybe it’s full of letters from – Dirty O’Brien.”

Kate straightened herself up laughing.

“Dirty O’Brien? Well, he’s all sorts of a sport anyway, and I like ‘sports,’” she said lightly.

Helen took up the challenge.

“‘Sports’? Why, yes, there are plenty of ‘sports’ – of a kind – in this place. I’ll have to see if I can find one who can make skeleton keys. I’d surely say that sort of ‘sport’ should be going round the village all right, all right.”

She nodded her threat at her sister, who was in no way disconcerted. She only laughed.

“What’s brought you back on the run?” she inquired.

“Why, what d’you s’pose?”

Kate shrugged, still smiling.

“I’d say the only thing that could fix you that way was a – man.”

“Right. Right in once. A man, Kate, not a mouse,” Helen

declared, “although I allow they’re both motive forces calculated to set me running. The only thing is, one attracts, and the other repels. This is distinctly a matter of attraction.”

“Who’s the man?” demanded the practical Kate, with a look of real interest in her handsome eyes.

“Why, Big Brother Bill, of course, the man I promised you all I’d marry.”

Helen suddenly dashed at her sister and caught her by the arm in pretended excitement.

“I’ve seen him, Kate, seen him!” she cried. “And – and he raised his hat to me. He’s big – ever so big, and he’s got the loveliest, most foolish blue eyes I’ve ever seen. That’s how I knew him. Say, and when I saw him with Inspector Fyles, I remembered what Charlie said about him having no sense, and I had to laugh, and I think he thought I was grinning at him, and that’s why he raised his hat to me. It seemed so comical – looked just as if he was being brought in charge of a policeman for fear he’d lose himself, and would never find himself again. He’s surely a real live man, and I’ve fallen in love with him right away, and, if you don’t find something to send me up to see Charlie about right away, I’ll – I’ll go crazy – or – or faint, or do something equally foolish.”

Kate’s amusement culminated in a peal of laughter. She knew Helen so well, and was so used to her wild outbursts of enthusiasm, which generally lasted for five minutes, finally dying out in some whimsical admission of her own irresponsibility.

She promptly entered into the spirit of the thing.

“Let’s see,” she cried, gazing thoughtfully about the room, while Helen still clung to her arm. “An excuse – an excuse.”

“No, no,” cried the impetuous Helen. “Not an excuse. I never make any excuse for wanting to be in a man’s company. Besides –”

“Hush, child,” retorted Kate. “How can I think with you chattering? I’ve got to find you an excuse for going across to Charlie’s place. Now what shall it be? I know,” she cried, suddenly darting across the room, followed by the clinging Helen. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” cried the other, with difficulty retaining her hold.

“Why, the excuse, of course,” cried Kate, grabbing up two books from a chair under the window. “Here, I promised to send these to Charlie days ago. That’s it,” she went on. “Take these, and,” she added mischievously, “I’ll write a note telling him to be sure and introduce you to Big Brother Bill, as you’re dying to – to make love to him!”

“Don’t you dare, Kate Seton, don’t you ever dare,” cried Helen threateningly. “I’ll shoot you clean up to death with one of your own big guns if you do. I never heard such a thing, never. How dare you say I want to make love to him? I – I don’t think I even want to see him now – I’m sure I don’t. Still, I’ll take the books up if you – really want Charlie to have them. You see, I sure don’t mind what I do to – to help you out.”

Kate’s eyes opened wide. Then, in a moment, she stood

convulsed.

“Well, of all the sauce,” she cried. “Helen, you’re a perfect – imp. Now for your pains you shan’t take those books till after supper.”

Helen’s merry eyes sobered, and her face fell.

“Kate – I – ”

“No,” returned the other, with pretended severity. “It’s no use apologizing. It’s too late. After supper.”

Helen promptly left her side, and, with a laugh, ran to the wall where a pair of revolvers were hanging suspended from an ammunition belt.

She seized one of the weapons by the butt, and was about to withdraw it from its holster. But, in a flash, Kate was at her side.

“Don’t Helen!” she cried, in real alarm. “Let go of that gun. They’re both loaded.”

Helen withdrew her hand in a panic, her pretty face blanching.

“My, Kate!” she cried horrified. “They’re – loaded?”

The other nodded.

“Whatever do you keep them loaded for? I – I never knew. You – you wouldn’t dare to – use them?”

Kate’s dark eyes were smiling, but the smile was forced.

“Wouldn’t I?” she said, with a curious set to her firm lips. Then she added in a lighter tone: “They’re all that stand between us and – the ruffians of Rocky Springs.”

For a moment Helen looked into her sister’s eyes as though searching for something she had lost.

“I – I thought you’d changed, Kate,” she said at last, almost apologetically. “I thought you’d forgotten all – that. I – thought you’d become a sort of ‘hired girl’ in this village. Guess I’ll have to wait until after supper – seeing you want me to.”

CHAPTER XII

THE DISCOMFITURE OF HELEN

It was well past six o'clock in the evening when the two brothers completed the discussion of their future plans. It had been a great day for Bill. A day such as one may look forward to in long anticipatory moments of dreaming, but the ultimate realization of which often falls so desperately short of the anticipation. In the present instance, however, no such calamity had befallen. He felt that his weary journeyings, with their many discomforts and trials, had not proved vain. Many of his hopes had been fully realized.

The unselfishness of the man was supreme. He wanted nothing for himself, but the delight of sharing in the life of his less fortunate brother, and changing the course of that fortune into the happier channels wherein his own lay. And Charlie seemed to accept the position. He certainly offered no opposition, and, if his manner of acceptance was undemonstrative, even to an excess of reserve, at least it was sufficiently cordial to satisfy the unsuspecting mind of Big Brother Bill.

Had the big man's wide, blue eyes been less ready to accept all they beheld, had his mind been more versed in the study of human nature, and those shadowy, inexpressible feelings

glancing furtively out of eyes intended only to express carefully controlled thoughts, then Bill must have detected reluctance in his brother. There were moments, too, when only a half-heartedness found vent in the man's verbal acceptance of his brother's proposals, which should have been significant, and certainly invited investigation.

But even if he observed these things Bill undoubtedly misread them. He had no reason to doubt that his presence, and all his enthusiastic plans were welcome, and so he was left blinded to any other feelings on the part of his brother than those which he verbally expressed. That Charlie delighted in his presence there could be no doubt, but as to those other things, well, a close observer might well have been forgiven had he felt sorry for the bigger man's single-minded generosity. To the end Bill felt confident, and remained quite undisturbed.

There were still fully two hours of daylight left when Charlie finally rose from his seat upon the veranda.

He smiled down at the big figure of the brother he so affectionately regarded.

"We'll need to set about getting your baggage sent through from Moosemin to-morrow," he said. Then he added with a quizzical gleam in his eyes: "Guess you've got the checks all right?"

Bill nodded with profound gravity, and dived into one of his pockets.

"Sure," he replied, dragging forth a bunch of metal discs on

a strap. "Five pieces."

"Good." Charlie nodded. His brother's unconsciousness amused him. Then, after a moment, his gaze drifted across the valley, and came to rest on the little home of the Setons, and he went on reflectively, "I need to get around a piece before dark," he said. Then with an unmistakable question in his dark eyes: "Maybe you'll fancy a walk around – meantime?"

Bill's eyes lit good humoredly.

"Which means I'm not wanted," he said with a laugh.

Then he, too, rose. He stretched himself like some great contented dog.

"I've a notion to get a peek at the village," he said. "I'll call along down at the saloon and hunt Fyles up. Guess I owe him a drink for – finding me."

At the mention of Fyles's name a curious look changed the expression of his brother's regard. A short laugh that had no mirth in it was the prompt reply.

"You can't buy Fyles a drink in Rocky Springs," Charlie exclaimed. "Maybe you can buy all the drink *you* want. But there's not a saloonkeeper in the Northwest Territories would hand you one for Fyles. This is prohibition territory, and I guess Fyles is hated to death – hereabouts."

For a moment Bill's eyes looked absurdly serious.

"I see," he demurred. "You – hate him – too?"

Charlie nodded.

"For – that?" suggested Bill.

Charlie shrugged. "I certainly have no use for Inspector Fyles," he declared. "Maybe it's for his work, maybe it isn't. It don't matter either way."

The manner of Charlie's reply reminded his brother that his question had been unnecessarily pointed, and he hastened to make amends.

"I'm kind of sorry, Charlie," he said, his face flushing with contrition. "I didn't think. You see, I hadn't –"

But the other waved his regret aside.

"Don't worry," he said quickly. "Guess you can't hurt me that way. I was thinking on other lines. What does matter, and matters pretty badly, is that some day, if you stop around Rocky Springs, you'll find it up to you to take sides between Fyles and –"

"And?" Bill's interest had become suddenly absorbed as his brother paused, his gaze once more drifting away beyond the river. Finally, Charlie turned back to him.

"Me," he said quietly. And the two stood facing each other, eye to eye.

It was some moments before Bill's slow-moving wit came to his aid. He was so startled that it was even slower than usual.

"You and – Fyles?" he said at last, his eyes full of absurd wonder. "I don't understand. You – you are not against the law?"

Bill's wonder had changed to apprehension, and the sight of it distracted his brother's more serious mood.

"Does a fellow always need to be against the law to get up against a police officer?" he inquired, with a smile of amusement.

Then his smile died out, and he went on enigmatically. “Men can scrap about most anything,” he said slowly. “Men who *are* men. I may be a poor example, but – Say, when Fyles takes hold of things in Rocky Springs, I guess he isn’t likely to feel kindly disposed my way. That being so, you’ll surely be fixed one way or the other. Get me, Bill?”

Bill nodded dubiously.

“I get that, but – I don’t understand – ” he began.

But Charlie gave him no time to finish.

“Don’t worry to,” he said quickly. Then he gripped the other’s muscular arm affectionately. “See you later,” he added, smiling whimsically up into the troubled blue eyes as he moved off the veranda.

Bill was left puzzled. He was thinking very hard and very slowly as he looked after the departing man. He watched him till he reached the barn and disappeared within it to get his horse. Then he, too, moved away, but it was in the direction of the trail which led ultimately to the village.

Bill’s nature was too recklessly happy to long remain a prey to disquieting thoughts. Once the avenue of spruce trees swallowed him up he abandoned all further contemplation of his disquietude, and gave himself up to the full enjoyment of his new surroundings.

It was in the gayest possible mood and highest spirits that Helen, with her “two-book” excuse tucked under her arm, set out for Charlie Bryant’s ranch.

When she appeared at supper time Kate's dark eyes shone with admiration and a lurking mischief. At the sight of Helen she clapped her hands delightedly. The younger girl's smart, tailored suit had made way for the daintiest of summer frocks, diaphanous, seductive, and wholly fascinating.

"A vision of fluffy whiteness," cried Kate delightedly, as Helen sat down at the table. "Helen," she went on, mischievously, "as a man hunter you are just too dreadful. Poor Big Brother Bill, why, he hasn't the chance of a rat in a corner. He surely is as good as engaged, married, and – done for."

Helen's eyebrows went up in lofty resentment.

"Katherine Seton, I – don't understand you – thank goodness. If I did I should want to box your ears," she added, in mild scorn. "You're a perfectly ridiculous woman, and of no account at all."

Kate's amusement was good to see.

"Oh, Hel – " she cried.

But her sister cut her short.

"Don't use bad language, please. My name's 'Helen' – unless you've got something pleasant to say."

Kate poured out the coffee, and helped herself to cold meat. The supper was the characteristic evening meal of the village. Cakes, and sweets, and cold meat.

"How could I have anything but something pleasant to say, with you looking such a vision?" Kate went on, quite undisturbed. "Why, I hadn't a notion you had such a pretty frock."

Helen's attitude modified, as she helped herself to home-made

scones and butter.

“I’ve been saving it up,” she deigned to explain. “Do I look all right? How’s my hair?”

She beamed on her sister, waiting for an expected compliment.

“Lovely!” exclaimed Kate. Then with added mischief: “And your hair is simply as fluffy as – as a feather duster.”

Helen laughed. Her eyes were dancing with that merriment she could never long restrain.

“I – I simply hate you, Kate,” she cried. “I’m so upset I can’t eat a thing. Feather duster indeed. Well, it’s better than the mop Pete swabs up the floors with. If you’d said that, I’d sure have gone straight off into a trance, and – and got buried alive. But your appetite’s awful, Kate, and I can’t sit here forever. I’d say food’s mighty important, but it’s nothing beside a *man* waiting for you somewhere, and you don’t know where. Guess I’ll have something to eat before I go to bed. Please, Kate – please may I go?”

The humility of the final request was quite too much for Kate, who laughed immoderately while she gave the required permission.

“Yes, off with you, bless your heart,” she cried joyously. “And don’t you dare come back here without bringing your future husband with you. Remember, I want to see him, too, and – and if you’re not mighty good, and nice to me, I’ll see what I can do cutting you out. Remember, too, I’m not quite on the shelf yet –

in spite of what folks may say. Off with you!”

Helen needed no second bidding. She snatched up her books, took a swift glance at herself in the small mirror on the wall, and hastened out of the house.

“So long, Kitty,” she cried lightly; “my nets are spread for the big fish, my dear. He’s there, slumbering peacefully in the shady pool, waiting to be caught. Do you think he’s ever been fished before? I hope he’s not wily. You see, I’m so out of practice. That’s the worst of living in a place where men have to get drunk before they have the courage to become attentive. And, Kitty, dear – ”

“Off with you, you man hunter,” cried Kate, from her place at the table, “and don’t you dare ever to call me ‘Kitty’ again. I – ”

But the door was closed, and further expostulation was useless. The next moment Kate beheld a waving hand through the window. She responded, and, a moment later, as her sister passed from view, the smile died out of her eyes.

She sat on at the table, although her meal was finished. And somehow all her gaiety had dropped like a mask from her face, leaving her handsome eyes strangely thoughtful and something hard.

Meanwhile Helen crossed the river by the quaint log footbridge which had been one of the first efforts at construction upon which Kate had embarked on arrival at Rocky Springs. It was stout, and, from a distance, picturesque. Close to it was a trap for the unwary. For the two sisters, and their hired men, it

was a simple matter for negotiation. They were used to its pitfalls, which increased with every spring flood.

Beyond this the track wound through the bush on its way to the village main trail, but Helen had no thought of adopting such a circuitous route when the bush offered her a far more direct one. She vanished into the wood like a flitting shadow, nor did she reappear until half the slope up to Charlie Bryant's house had been negotiated.

Her reappearance was in the midst of a small clearing, whence she had an uninterrupted view of Charlie's house, and a less clear view of the winding track leading up to it.

Somehow, by the time she reached this spot, a marked change had come over her. Her pretty, even brows were slightly drawn together in an odd, thoughtful pucker. Her usually merry eyes were watchful and sober. It may have been the gradient of the hills, but somehow her gait had lost something of its buoyancy. Her steps were lagging, even hesitating, and, when she finally halted, it was almost with an air of relief.

There were several fallen tree trunks about, and, though they must have been sufficiently inviting if she were weary with her effort, she quite ignored them. She stood quite still, looking first ahead at her goal, and then back over the valley toward the little house where her sister was probably still watching her. Her eyes slowly became expressive of doubt and indecision. It seemed as though she found it hard to make up her mind about something.

After a moment or two she removed the two books from under

her arm, and idly read their titles. She knew them quite well, and promptly returned them to their place with an impatient sigh.

Again her look had changed. Now her cheeks suddenly flushed a burning, shamefaced crimson. Then they paled, and something like a panic grew in her eyes. But this, too, passed, all but the panic, and, with a little vicious stamp of her foot, she half determinedly faced the ranch house on the hill. Her determination, however, was evidently insufficient, for she did not move on, and, presently, she laughed a short mirthless laugh. It was her belated sense of humor mocking her. Her courage, she knew, had failed her. She could not live up to her boasted claims as a man hunter.

But her laugh died almost at its birth. Something moving down the hill among the trees caught her troubled eyes. Then, too, the sound of a whistle reached her. Some one was approaching from the direction of Charlie's house, whistling a tune which somehow seemed familiar. She promptly warned herself it could not be Charlie. She never remembered to have heard Charlie whistling so blithe an air.

Now she distinctly heard the sound of heavy, rapid footsteps drawing nearer. The panic in her eyes deepened. They were staring intently at the surrounding bush, searching for a definite sight of the intruder. Nor had she to wait long. The path was just beyond the clearing, and she had fixed her gaze upon a narrow gap in the foliage. She felt almost safe in doing so, for the stranger must pass that way if he were on the path, and the gap was so

narrow that it would probably escape his notice.

The whistling came nearer, so, too, the rapid footsteps. Then followed realization. A figure passed the gap. She saw it quite plainly. The big, broad-shouldered figure of a man with fair hair and blue eyes. It was Big Brother Bill. Instinctively she drew back, entirely forgetful of the fallen tree trunks. Then tragedy came upon her.

How it happened she didn't know. She afterward felt she never wanted to know. Something seemed to hit her sharply at the back of the knees. She remembered that they bent under her. Then, in a second, she found herself sitting upon the ground with her feet sticking up in the air in a perfectly ridiculous manner, and, by some horribly mysterious means, with the support of a fallen sapling pine holding them there.

At the moment of impact she was too paralyzed with fear to move, then as a sharp exclamation in a man's deep voice reached her, a wild terror seized upon her, and, with a violent effort she rolled herself clear of the log, scrambled to her feet, her dainty frock stained and torn with her tumble, and fled for dear life down the hill.

Faster and faster she ran, breaking her way through all obstructing foliage utterly regardless of the rents she was making in the soft material of her frock. She felt she dared not pause for anything with that man behind her. She felt that she hated him worse than anybody in the world. To think that he must have witnessed her discomfiture, and worse than all her two absurd

feet sticking up in the air like – like signposts. It was too awful to contemplate.

She did not pause for breath until she reached the footbridge. Then a fresh panic set in. She had left the books behind. They were at the place where she had fallen.

Oh dear, oh dear! He would find them. He would find her name in them. He would take them back to Charlie, and her last hope would be gone. She would undoubtedly be recognized!

She wanted to burst into tears, then and there, but something inside her would not permit her such relief. Instead a whimsical humor came to her aid and she laughed.

At first her laugh was pathetically near to tears, but the moment of doubt passed, and the whole humor of the situation took hold of her. She hurried on home, laughing as she went; and, desperately near hysterics, she at last burst into her sister's presence.

Kate was on her feet in an instant.

“Oh, Kate,” she cried, with a wild sort of laughter. “Behold the man hunter – hunted!” Then she flung herself into a chair, gasping for breath.

Kate's anxious eyes took in something of the situation at a glance.

“Stop that laughing,” she cried severely.

Helen's laugh died out, and she sighed deeply. The next moment she stood up, and began to smooth out her tattered frock.

“I'm – all right now – Kate,” she said almost humbly. “But –”

Again Kate took charge of the situation.

“Go and change your frock before you tell me anything,” she said decidedly.

Helen was about to protest, but the quiet command of her sister had its effect. She moved toward the door, and Kate’s serious tones further composed her.

“Take your time,” she said. “You can tell me later.”

Helen left the room, and Kate remained gazing after her at the closed door.

But it was only for a few moments. The sound of footsteps approaching the house startled her. She remembered the torn condition of her sister’s dress. The poor girl had been on the verge of hysterics. “The man hunter hunted!” she had cried.

Kate glanced at her revolvers hanging on the wall. Then, with a shrug, she flung open the door.

Big Brother Bill was standing outside it. He had removed his hat, and the evening light was shining on his good-looking fair head. His wide blue eyes were smiling their most persuasive smile as he held two books out toward her.

“I’m fearfully sorry to trouble you, but I was just coming along down from up there,” he pointed back across the river, “and saw a – a lady suddenly jump up as though she was scared some, and run on down the hill toward this house. I guessed it must have been a – a rattler or – or maybe a bear, or something had scared her, so I jumped in to – to find it. I was too late, however. Couldn’t find it. Only found these two books instead.

I just followed the lady on down here, and – well, I brought 'em along.”

The man's manner was so frankly ingenuous, and his whole air so hopelessly that of a tenderfoot that Kate recognized him at once. Instantly she held out her hand with a smile.

“Thanks, Mr. Bryant. They're my sister's. She was taking them up to your brother. It's very kind of you to take so much trouble. Won't you come in, and let her thank you herself? You see, we're great friends of your brother's. I am Kate Seton, and – the lady you so gallantly sought to help is my sister – Helen.”

CHAPTER XIII

LIGHT-HEARTED SOULS

A pair of gray eyes were struggling to glare coldly into a pair of amiably smiling blue eyes. It was a battle of one against an opponent who had no idea battle was intended. From the vantage ground of only partial understanding a pair of dark eyes looked on, smiling with the wisdom which is ever the claim of the onlooker.

“This is my sister, Helen, Mr. Bryant,” Kate said, with quiet enjoyment, as her sister, perfectly composed once more, but still angry with the world in general, abruptly entered the room from that part of the house where her bedroom was situated.

As the words fell upon her ears, and she looked into the good-looking, cheerful face of the man, all Helen’s feelings underwent a shock, as though a mighty seismological upheaval were going on inside her.

The man who had witnessed her discomfiture – the man who had dared to be within one hundred miles of her when her daintily shod feet, with a display of diaphanous stocking, had been waving in the air like two wobbly semaphores celebrating Dominion Day or the Fourth of July, or – or something. Those silly looking prying eyes had seen. How dared he? What right had he to be walking down that particular trail at that particular

moment? How dared he whistle, any way? What right had he in Rocky Springs? Why – why was he on earth at all?

At that moment Helen felt that if there was one combination in the world she disliked more than another it was blue eyes and fair hair. Yes, and long noses were hateful, too; they were always poking themselves into other people's business. Big men were always clumsy. If this man hadn't been clumsy he – he – wouldn't have been there to see. Yes, she hated this man, and she hated her sister for standing there looking on, grinning like – like a Cheshire cat. She didn't know what a Cheshire cat was like, but she was certain it resembled Kate at that moment.

“How d'you do?”

The frigidity of Helen's greeting was a source of dismay to the man, who had suddenly become aware that she was again dressed in the tailored suit which had so caught his fancy earlier in the day. His dismay became evident to Kate, the onlooker. Helen, too, noted the effect in his sobering eyes, and was resentfully glad.

“It was a lucky chance my coming along,” Bill blundered. “You see, if the dew had got on these books they'd have got all mussed. Must have been a sort of fate about my being around, and – and finding 'em for you.”

“Fate?” sniffed Helen, with the light of battle in her eyes, while Kate began to laugh.

“Why, sure,” said Bill eagerly. “Don't you believe in fate? I do. Say,” he went on, gaining confidence from the sound of his

own voice, “it was like this. Charlie and I had been talking a piece, and then he had to go off, and didn’t want me. If he had, I should have gone with him. Instead, I set off by myself, making toward the village. Being a sort of feller who never sees much but what’s straight ahead of him, it didn’t occur to me to look around at things. That’s how it was I didn’t see you till I caught sight of your – ”

“You needn’t go into details,” broke in Helen icily. “I just think it was hateful your standing there looking on while I fell over that tree trunk.”

Bill’s eyes took on a sudden blank look of bewilderment, which raised a belated hope in Helen’s broken heart, and set Kate chuckling audibly.

“Tree trunk?” he exclaimed. “Did you fall? Say, I’m real sorry, Miss Helen. I surely am. You see, I just caught sight of” – again came Helen’s warning glance, but the man went on without understanding – “somebody in white, disappearing through the bushes, on the run. I guessed a rattler, or a bear, or – or something had got busy scaring you to death. So I jumped right in to fix him. That’s how I found these books,” he finished up rather regretfully. “And I was just feeling good enough to scrap a – a house.”

A thaw had abruptly set in in Helen’s frozen feelings. The memory of those unfortunate feet of hers no longer waved before her mind’s eye. It was fading – fading rapidly. *He had not seen – them.* And as the frozen particles melted, she could not help

noticing what splendidly cut features the man really had. His nose was really beautifully shaped. She was glad, too, that his eyes were blue; it was her favorite color, and went so well with fair hair, especially when it was slightly wavy.

She smiled.

“Won’t you sit down awhile?” she inquired, with a sudden access of graciousness. “You see, we’re very unconventional here, and your brother’s a great friend of ours.” Then, out of the corners of her eyes she detected Kate’s satirically smiling eyes. She promptly resolved to get even with her. “Especially Kate’s, and – I’ll let you into a secret. A great secret, mind. We knew you were coming to-day – had arrived, in fact – and Kate’s been dying to see you all day. Said she really couldn’t rest till she’d seen Charlie’s brother. Truth.”

Bill lumbered heavily into an ample rocker, and Helen propped herself upon the table, while Kate, upon whom had descended an avalanche of displeasure, suddenly bestirred herself.

“How dare you, Helen?” she cried, in an outraged tone. “You – mustn’t take any notice of her, Mr. Bryant. You see, she isn’t altogether – responsible. She has a naturally truth-loving nature, but she has somehow become corrupted by contamination with this – this dreadful village. I – I feel very sorry for her at times,” she added, laughing. “But really it can’t be helped. She keeps awful company.”

“Well, I like that,” protested Helen, now thoroughly restored

to good humor by the conviction that Big Brother Bill had not witnessed her shameful trouble. “Mr. Bryant will soon know which of us to believe, after a statement like that.”

“I always believe everybody.” The man laughed heartily. “It saves an awful lot of trouble.”

“Does it?” inquired Kate, as she slipped quietly into the other rocker.

Helen shook her head decidedly.

“Not when you’re living in this ‘dump’ of a village. Say, Mr. Bryant, you’ve heard of Mr. Ananias in the Bible? If you haven’t you ought to have. Well, the people who wrote about him never guessed there was such a place as Rocky Springs, or they’d sure have choked rather than have written about such a milk-and-water sort of liar as Mr. Ananias. Truth, he’s not a – circumstance. All you need to believe in Rocky Springs is what you come up against, and then you don’t need to be too sure you haven’t got – visions.”

“Yes, and generally mighty unpleasant – visions,” chimed in Kate, with a laugh.

Bill’s smiling eyes refused to become serious under the portent of these warnings.

“Guess I’ve been around Rocky Springs about five hours, and the visions I’ve had, so far, don’t seem to worry me a thing,” he said.

Helen smiled. She remembered her first meeting with this man.

“What were you doing with Fyles to-day?” she inquired unguardedly.

Bill suddenly brought his fist down on the arm of his rocker.

“There,” he cried, as though he had suddenly made a great discovery. “I knew it was you I saw on the trail. Why,” he added, with guileful simplicity, “you were wearing that very suit you have on now. Say, was there ever such a fool, not recognizing you before?”

Helen was deceived – and so easily.

“I didn’t think you really saw me,” she said, without the least shame. “You were so busy with the – sights.” Bill nodded.

“Yes, we’d just come along down past that mighty big pine. Fyles had told me it was the landmark. I – I was just thinking about things.”

“Thinking about the old pine?” inquired Helen.

“Well, not exactly,” replied Bill. “Though it’s worth it. I mean thinking about – . You see, a fellow like me don’t need to waste many big thinks. Guess I haven’t got ’em to waste,” he added deprecatingly.

Helen shook her head, but her laughing eyes belied the seriousness of her denial.

“That’s not a bit fair to – yourself,” she said. “I just don’t believe you haven’t got any big ‘thinks.’”

Bill’s manner warmed.

“Say, that makes me feel sort of glad, Miss Helen. You see, I’m not such a duffer really. I think an awful lot, and it don’t come

hard either. But folks have always told me I'm such a fool, that I've kind of got into the way of believing it. Now, when I saw that pine and the valley I felt sort of queer. It struck me then it was sort of mysterious. Just as though the hand of Fate was groping around and trying to grab me."

He reached out one big hand to illustrate his words, and significantly pawed the air.

Helen's face wreathed itself in smiles.

"I know," she declared. "You felt your fate was somehow linked with it all."

Kate was gently rocking herself, listening to the light-hearted inconsequent talk of these two. Now she checked the movement of the rocker and leaned forward.

Her eyes were smiling, but her manner was half serious.

"It's not at all strange to me that that old pine inspired you with – superstitious feelings," she said. "It has the same effect on most folks – right back to the old Indian days. You know, there's a legend attached to it. I don't know where it comes from. Maybe it's really Indian. Maybe it belongs to the time when King Fisher used to live in the old Meeting House, before it was a – saloon. I don't know."

Helen suddenly raised herself to a seat upon the table. Her eyes lit, and Big Brother Bill, watching her, reveled in the picture she made. Now he knew her, his first feelings at sight of her on the trail had received ample confirmation. She surely was one of the most delightful creatures he had ever met.

“Oh, Kate, a legend,” cried the girl, as she settled herself on the table. “However did you know about it? You – you never told me.”

Kate shook her head indulgently.

“I don’t tell you everything,” she said with mock severity. “You’re too imaginative, too young – too altogether irresponsible. Besides, you might have nightmare. Anyway most folk know it in the village.”

“Oh, Kate!”

“Say, tell us, Miss Seton,” cried Bill, his big eyes alight with interest. “If there’s one thing I’m crazy on it is legends. I just love ’em to death.”

“I don’t think I ought to tell it in front of Helen,” Kate said mischievously. “She’s – ”

Helen sprang from her seat and stood threateningly before her sister.

“Kate Seton,” she cried, “I demand your story.” Then she went on melodramatically, “You’ve said too much or too little. You’ve got to tell it right here and now, or – or I’ll never speak to you again – never,” she finished up feebly.

Kate smiled.

“What a dreadful threat!” Then she turned to Bill. “Mr. Bryant, I s’pose I’ll have to tell her. You don’t know what an awful tempered woman it is. I really believe it would actually carry out its threat for – five minutes.”

Bill’s good-natured guffaw came readily.

“I’ll back Miss Helen up,” he declared promptly. “If you don’t tell us we’ll both refrain from speech for – five minutes.”

Kate sighed.

“Oh, dear. Then I’ll have to tell. It’s bullying. That’s what it is. But – here goes.”

Helen beamed upon Bill, and the man’s blue eyes beamed back again. While he settled himself in his chair Helen returned to her less dignified seat upon the table.

“Let’s see,” began Kate thoughtfully. “Now, just where does it begin? Oh, I know. There’s a longish rhyme about it, but I can’t remember that. The story of it goes like this.

“Somewhere away back, a young chief broke away from his tribe with a number of braves. The young chief had fallen in love with the squaw of the chief of the tribe, and she with him. Well, they decided to elope together, and the young chief’s followers decided to go with them, taking their squaws with them, too. It was decided at their council that they would break away from the old chief and form themselves into a sort of nomadic tribe, and wander over the plains, fighting their way through, until they conquered enough territory on which to settle, and found a new great race.

“Well, I guess the young chief was a great warrior, and so were his braves, and, for awhile, wherever they went they were victorious, devastating the country by massacre too terrible to think of. But the chief of the tribe, from which these warriors had broken away, was also a great and

savage warrior, and when he discovered that his wife was faithless and had eloped with another, stealing all his best war paint and fancy bead work, he rose up and used dreadful language, and gathered his braves together. They set out in pursuit of the absconders, determined to kill both the wife and her paramour.

“To follow the young chief’s trail was an easy matter, for it was a trail of blood and fire, and, after long days of desperate riding, the pursuers came within striking distance. Then came the first pitched battle. Both sides lost heavily, but the fight was indecisive. The result of it, however, showed the pursuers that they had no light task before them. The chief harangued his braves, and prepared to follow up the attack next day. The fugitives, though their losses had been only proportionate with those of their pursuers, were not in such good case. Their original numbers were less than half of their opponents.

“However, they were great fighters, and took no heed, but got ready at once for more battle. The young chief, however, had a streak of caution in him. Maybe he saw what the braves all missed. If in a fight he lost as many men as his opponents, and the opponents persisted, why, by the process of elimination, he would be quietly but surely wiped out.

“Now, it so happened, he had long since made up his mind to make his permanent home in the valley of Leaping Creek. He knew it by repute, and where it lay, and he felt that once in the dense bush of the valley he would have a great advantage over the attacks of all pursuers.

“Therefore, all that night, leaving his dead and wounded

upon the plains, he and his men rode hard for the valley. At daybreak he saw the great pine that stood up on the horizon, and he knew that he was within sight of his goal, and, in consequence, he and his men felt good.

“But daybreak showed him something else, not so pleasant. He had by no means stolen a march upon his pursuers. They, too, had traveled all night, and the second battle began at sunrise.

“Again was the fight indecisive, and the young chief was buoyant, and full of hope. He told himself that that night should see him and his squaw and his braves safely housed in the sheltering bush of the valley. But when he came to count up his survivors he was not so pleased. He had lost nearly three-quarters of his original numbers, and still there seemed to be hordes of the pursuers.

“However, with the remnant of his followers, he set out for the final ride to the valley that night. Hard on his heels came the pursuers. Then came the tragedy. Daylight showed them the elusive pine still far away on the horizon, and his men and horses were exhausted. He was too great a warrior not to realize what this meant. There were his pursuers making ready for the attack, seemingly hundreds of them. Disaster was hard upon him.

“So, before the battle began, he took his paramour, and, before all eyes, he slew her so that his enemy should not wholly triumph, and incidentally torture her. Then he rose up, and, in a loud voice, cursed the pine and the valley of the pine. He called down his gods and spirits to witness that never, so long as the pine stood, should there be peace in

the valley. Forever it should be the emblem of crime and disaster beneath its shadow. There should be no happiness, no prosperity, no peace. So, too, with its final fall should go the lives of many of those who lived beneath its shadow, and only with their blood should the valley be purified and its people washed clean.

“By the time his curse was finished his enemies had performed a great enveloping movement. When the circle was duly completed, then, like vultures swooping down upon their prey, the attacking Indians fell upon their victims and completed the massacre.

“There!” Kate exclaimed. “That’s about as I remember it. And a pretty parlor story it is, isn’t it?”

“I like that feller,” declared Bill, with wholesome appreciation. “He was good grit. A bit of a mean cuss – but good grit.”

But Helen promptly crushed him.

“I don’t think he was at all nice,” she cried scornfully. “He deserved all he got, and – and the woman, too. And anyway, I don’t think his curse amounts to small peas. A man like that – not even his heathen gods would take any notice of.”

Kate rose from her chair laughing.

“Tell the boys of this village that. Ask them what they think of the pine.”

“I’ve heard Dirty O’Brien say he loves it,” protested Helen obstinately. “Doesn’t know how he could get on without it.”

“There, Mr. Bryant, didn’t I tell you she kept bad company?”

Dirty O'Brien! What a name." Kate looked at the clock. "Good gracious, it's nearly eight o'clock, and I have – to go out."

Bill was on his feet in a moment.

"And all the time I'm supposed to be investigating the village and making the acquaintance of this very Dirty O'Brien," he said. "You see, Charlie had to go out, as I told you. He didn't say when he'd get back. So – ." He held out his hand to the elder sister.

"Did Charlie say – where he was going?" she inquired quickly, as she shook hands.

Bill laughed, and shook his head.

"No," he replied. "And somehow he didn't invite me to ask – either."

Helen had slid herself off the table.

"That's what I never can understand about men. If Kate were going out – and told me she was going, why – I should just demand to know where, when, how, and why, and every other old thing a curious feminine mind could think of in the way of cross-examination. But there, men surely are queer folks."

"Good-bye, Mr. Bryant," said Kate. She had suddenly lost something of her lightness. Her dark eyes had become very thoughtful.

Helen, on the contrary, was bubbling over with high spirits, and was loath to part from their new acquaintance.

"I hated your coming, Mr. Bryant," she explained radiantly. "I tell you so frankly. Some day, when I know you a heap better, I'll tell you why," she added mysteriously. "But I'm glad now you

came. And thank you for bringing the books. You'll like Dirty O'Brien. He's an awful scallywag, but he's – well, he's so quaint. I like him – and his language is simply awful. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Bill held the girl's hand a moment or two longer than was necessary. It was such a little brown hand, and seemed almost swamped in his great palm. He released it at last, however, and smiled into her sunny gray eyes.

“I'm glad you feel that way. You know I have a sort of sneaking regard for the feller who can forget good talk, and – and explode a bit. I – I can do it myself – at times.”

Helen stood at the door as the man took his departure. The evening was still quite light, and Bill, looking back to wave a farewell, fell further as a victim to the picture she made in the framing of the doorway.

Helen turned back as he passed from view.

“You going out, Kate, dear?” she asked quickly.

Kate nodded.

“Where?”

“Out.”

And somehow Helen forgot all the other inquiries she might have made.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE OF DIRTY O'BRIEN

It was late at night. The yellow lamplight left hard faces almost repulsive under the fantastic shadows it so fitfully impressed upon them. The low-ceiled room, too, gained in its sordid aspect. An atmosphere of moral degradation looked out from every shadowy corner, claiming the features of everybody who came within the dull radiance of the two cheap oil lamps swinging from the rafters.

Dirty O'Brien's saloon was a fitting setting for a proprietor with such a name. Crime of every sort was suggested in its atmosphere at all time; but at night, when the two oil lamps, with their smoky chimneys, were burning, when drink was flowing, when the room was full of rough bechapped men belonging to the valley, with their long hair, their unwashed skins, their frowsy garments, and the firearms adorning their persons, when strident voices kept up an almost continual babel of coarse oaths, interlarded with rough laughter, or deadly quarrelings, when the permeation of alcohol had done its work and left its victims in a condition when self-control, at all times weak enough in these untamed citizens, was at its lowest ebb, then indeed the stranger, unaccustomed to such sights and sounds, might well feel that at last a cesspool of civilization had been reached.

The room was large in floor space, but the bark-covered rafters, frowsy with cobwebs, were scarcely more than two feet above the head of a six-foot man. The roof was on a gradual, flat slope from the bar to the front door, which was flanked by windows on either side of it. So low were the latter set, and so small were they, that a well-grown man must have stooped low to peer through the befouled glass panes. The walls of the building were of heavy lateral logs bare as the day they were set up, except for a coating of whitewash which must have stood the wear of at least ten years.

The evening had been a long and noisy one; longer and noisier than usual. For a note of alarm had swept through the town – an alarm which, in natures as savage and unscrupulous as those of the citizens of the valley, promptly aroused the desperate fighting spirit always pretty near the surface.

The gathering was pretty well representative of the place. The bar had been crowded all night. Some of the men were plain townsmen belonging to the purely commercial side of the place, and these were clad as became citizens of any little western township. But they were the very small minority, and had no particularly elevating effect upon the aspect of the gathering. Far and away the majority were of the prairie, men from outlying farms and ranches, whose hard, bronzed features and toil-stained kits, marked them out as legitimate workers who found their recreation in the foul purlieus of this drinking booth merely from lack of anything more enticing. Then, too, a few dusky-visaged,

lank-haired creatures wearing the semi-barbaric costume of the prairie half-breed found a place in the gathering.

But none of these were the loud-voiced, hard-swearing complainants. That was left to a section of the citizens of the town who had everything in the world to lose by the coming of the police. As the evening wore on these gradually drew everybody's interest in the matter, until the stirring of passions raised the babel of tongues to an almost intolerable clamor.

Dirty O'Brien, sinister and cynical, stood behind his bar serving every customer with a rapidity and nonchalance which the presence of the police in the place could never disturb. But the situation was well within his grasp. On this particular night his mandate had gone forth, and, in his own bar, he was an absolute autocrat. Each drink served must be devoured at once, and the empty glass promptly passed back across the counter. These were hastily borne off by an assistant to an adjoining room, where, in secret cupboards let into the sod partition wall, the kegs of smuggled spirit were secreted. All drinks were poured out in this room, and, on the first alarm, the secret cupboards could be hidden up, and all sign of the traffic concealed. Then there was nothing left to be seen but the musty display of temperance drinks on the shelves behind the bar, and a barrel of four per cent. beer, for the dispensing of which the existence of these prohibition saloons was tolerated and licensed by the Government.

Dirty O'Brien knew the law to the last word. He only came

up against it when caught in the act of selling spirits. This was scarcely likely to happen. He was far too astute. His only danger was a trap customer, and the difficulties and dangers of attempting such a course, even the most foolhardy would scarcely dare to risk in a place as untamed as Rocky Springs.

Even the wildest spirits, however, were bound to reach their limit of protest against this new move of the authorities, and by midnight the majority of the customers had taken their departure from Dirty O'Brien's booth. Thus, when the small hours crept on, only a trifling gathering of his regular patrons still remained behind.

The air of the place was utterly foul. The stench of tobacco smoke blending with the fumes of liquor left it nauseating. In the farthest corner of the room, just beside one of the windows, a group of four men were playing draw poker, and with these were Kate's two hired men, Nick Devereux, with his vulture head and long lean neck, and Pete Clancy, the half-breed, whose cadaverous cheeks and furtive eye marked him out as a man of desperate purpose.

At another table Kid Blaney was amusing himself with a pack of cards, betting on the turn-up with the well-known badman, Stormy Longton. For the rest there was a group of citizens lounging against the bar, still discussing with the proprietor the possibilities of the newly created situation. These were the postmaster, Allan Dy, and Billy Unguin, the dry-goods man, and the patriarch church robber known as Holy Dick. The only other

occupant of the bar was Charlie Bryant.

He had come there earlier in the evening for no other purpose than to hear how the town was taking the arrival of the police, and to glean, if possible, any news of the contemplated movements of Stanley Fyles. This had been his purpose, and for some time he had resisted all other temptation. Nor, apart from his weakness, was he without considerable added temptation. Dirty O'Brien displayed a marked geniality toward him the moment he came in, and, by every consummate art of which he was master, sought to break through the man's resolve.

Charlie fell. Of course he fell, as in the end O'Brien knew he would. And, once having fallen, he lingered on and on, drinking all that came his way with that insatiable craving, which, once indulged, never left him a moment's peace.

Now, silent, resentful, but only partially under the influence of liquor, he was sitting upon the edge of the wooden coal box which stood against the wall at the end of the counter. His legs were outspread along the top of its side, and his back was resting against the counter itself. His eyes were bright with that peculiar luster inspired by a brain artificially stimulated. They were slightly puffed, but otherwise his boyish features bore no sign of his libations. One peculiarity, however, suggested a change in him. The womanish delicacy of his lips had somehow gone, and now they protruded sensually as he sucked at a cheap cigarette.

Although these were only slight changes in Charlie's

appearance, they nevertheless possessed a strangely brutalizing effect upon the refinement of his handsome face. And, added to them was an air of moroseness, of cold reserve, that suggested nothing so much as impotent resentment at the conditions under which he found himself.

Without any appearance of interest he was listening to the talk of those at the bar. And somehow, though his back was turned toward him, O'Brien, judging by the frequency with which his quick-moving eyes flashed in his direction, was aware of his real interest, and was looking for some sign whereby he might draw him into the talk. But the sign did not come, and the saloonkeeper was left without the least encouragement.

Finally, however, O'Brien made a direct attempt. He was standing a round of drinks and included in his invitation the man on the coal box. He passed him a glass of whisky.

"Have another," he said, in his short way. Then he added: "On me."

Charlie thanked him curtly, and took the drink. He drank it at a gulp and passed the glass back. But his general attitude underwent no change. His eyes remained morosely fixed upon the poker players.

Billy Unguin winked significantly at O'Brien and glanced at Charlie.

"Queer cuss," he said, under his breath. Then he turned to Allen Dy, as though imparting news: "Drinks alone – always alone."

Dy nodded comprehendingly.

“Sure sign of a drunkard,” he returned wisely, in a similar undertone.

O’Brien smiled. He was about to give vent to one of his coldest cynicisms, when Nick Devereux looked over from the card table and claimed him.

“Say, Dirty,” he drawled, in his rather musical southern accent, “wher’ in hell is Fyles located anyhow? There’s been a mighty piece of big talk goin’ on, but none of us ain’t seen him. Big talk makes me sick.” He spat on the floor as though to emphasize his disgust.

“He’s around anyways,” O’Brien returned coldly. “I’ve seen him right here. After that he rode east. One of the boys see him pick up Sergeant McBain an’ two troopers. Will that do you?” he inquired sarcastically.

Nick picked up a fresh hand of cards.

“Have to – till I see him,” he said savagely.

“Oh, you’ll see him all right – all right,” O’Brien returned with a laugh, while the men at the bar grinned over at the card players. “Guess you boys’ll see him later – all you need.” Then his eyes flashed in Charlie’s direction, and he winked at those near him. “Maybe some folks around here’ll hate the sight of him before long.”

Pete looked up, turning his cruel eyes with a malicious grin on O’Brien.

“Guess there’s more than us boys goin’ to see him if there’s

trouble busy. Say, I don't guess there's a heap of folk 'ud fancy Fyles sittin' around their winter stoves in this city."

"Or summer stoves either," chuckled Holy Dick, craning round so that his gray hair revealed the dirty collar on his soft shirt.

Stormy Longton glanced over quickly, while the kid shuffled the cards.

"Who cares a curse for red-coats?" he snorted fiercely, his keen, scarred face flushing violently, his steel-gray eyes shining like silver tinsel. "If Fyles and his boys butt in there'll be a dandy bunch of lead flying around Rocky Springs. Maybe it won't drop from the sky neither. There's fools who reckon when it comes to shooting that fair play's a jewel. Wal, when I'm up against police butters-in, or any vermin like that, I leave my jewelry right home."

O'Brien chuckled voicelessly.

"Gas," he cried, in his cutting way. "Hot air, an' – gas. I tell you right here, Fyles and his crowd have got crooks beat to death in this country. I'll tell you more, it's only because this country's so mighty wide and big, crooks have got any chance of dodging the penitentiary at all. I tell you, you folks ain't got an eye open at all, if you can't see how things are. If I was handing advice, I'd say to crooks, quit your ways an' run straight awhile, if you don't fancy a striped suit. The red-coats are jest runnin' this country through a sieve, and when they're done they'll grab the odd rock, which are the crooks, and hide 'em away a few years. You can't

beat 'em, and Fyles is the daddy of the outfit. No, sir, crooks are beat – beat to death.”

Then his eyes shot a furtive look in Charlie's direction.

“The sharps ain't in such bad case,” he went on. “I'd say it's the sharps are worrying the p'lice about now. The prohibition law has got 'em plumb on edge. The other things are dead easy to 'em. You see, a feller shoots up another and they're after him, red hot on his trail. They'll get him sure – in the end, because he's wanted at any time or place. It's different running whisky. They got to get the fellow in the act o' running it. They can't touch him five minutes after he's cached it safe – not if they know he's run it. If they find his cache they can spill the liquor, but still they can't touch him. That's where the sharps ha' got Fyles beat.”

He chuckled sardonically.

“Guess I'd sooner be a whisky-running sharp than be a crook with Fyles on my trail,” he added as an afterthought.

“An' he's after the sharps most now,” suggested Holy Dick, with a contemplative eye on Charlie.

A laugh came from the poker table. Holy Dick glanced round as a harsh voice commented —

“Feelin' glad, ain't you, Holy?” it said.

Holy Dick spat.

“I'd feel gladder, Pete Clancy, if I could put him wise to some o' the whisky sharps,” said the old man vindictively. “Maybe it would sheer him off Rocky Springs.”

The man's eyes were snapping for all the mildness of his

words.

O'Brien replied before Pete could summon his angry retort.

"There's a good many sharps in the game in this town, and I don't guess it would be a gay day for the feller that put any of 'em away. Not that I think anybody could, by reason of the feller that runs the gang. Look at that train 'hold-up' at White Point. Was there ever such a bright play? I tell you, whoever runs that gang is a wise guy. He's ten points flyer than Master Stanley Fyles. Say, Fyles was waiting for that cargo at Amberley, and here are you boys, drinking some of it right here, and with him around the town, too. Say, the boss of that gang is a bright boy."

He sighed as though regretful that so much cleverness should have passed him by in favor of another, and again his gaze wandered in Charlie's direction.

"Well, I'm glad I'm not a – sharp," said Billy Unguin, preparing to depart. "Come on, Allan," he went on to the postmaster. "It's past midnight and –"

O'Brien chuckled.

"There's the old woman waiting."

Billy nodded good-naturedly, and the two passed out with a brief "good night."

When they had gone Holy Dick leaned across the bar confidentially.

"Who'd *you* guess is the boss of the gang?" he inquired.

O'Brien shook his head.

"Can't say," he said, with a knowing wink. "All I know is I

can lay hands on all the liquor I need right here in this town, and I'm dealing direct with the boss. When the money's up right, the liquor's laid any place you select. He don't give himself away to any customer. He's the smartest guy this side of hell. He's right here all the time, jest one of the boys, and we don't know who he is."

"No one's ever seen him – except his gang," murmured Holy, with a smile. "Guess they wouldn't give him away neither."

Stormy Longton and the Kid arose from their table and demanded a final drink. O'Brien served them and they took their departure.

"I sort of fancy I saw him once," said O'Brien, in answer to Holy Dick's remark.

He spoke loudly, and his eyes again took in the silent Charlie in their roving glance. At that instant the poker game broke up, and the men gathered at the bar.

"What's he like?" demanded Nick derisively.

"Guess he's a hell of a man," laughed Pete sarcastically.

O'Brien eyed his interlocutors coldly. He had no liking for men with color in them. They always roused the worst side of his none too easy nature.

"Wal," he said frigidly, "I ain't sure. But, if I'm right, he ain't such a hell of a feller. He ain't a giant. Kind o' small. All his smartness wrapped in a little bundle. Sort o' refined-looking. Make a dandy fine angel – to look at. Bit of a swell sharp. Got education bad. But he ain't got swells around him. Not by a sight.

His gang are the lowest down bums I ever heard tell of. Say, they're that low I'd hate to drink out of the same glass as any one of them." He picked up Pete's glass and dipped it in water, and began to wipe it. "It 'ud need to be mighty well cleaned first – like I'm doing this one."

His manner and action were a studied insult, which neither Pete nor Nick attempted to take up. But Holy Dick's grin drew threatening glances. Somehow, however, even in his direction neither made any more aggressive movement. Toughs as they were, these two men fully appreciated the company they were in. Holy Dick was one of the most desperate men in Rocky Springs, and, as for O'Brien, well, no one had ever been known to get "gay" with Dirty O'Brien and come off best.

Pete strove to grin the insult aside.

"Wal," he said, with a yawn, "I guess Fyles has 'some' feller to handle, if your yarn's right, Dirty. Blankets fer mine and – right now. Comin', Nick? An' you boys? Nick an' me are hayin' bright an' early to-morrer mornin'," he added with a laugh, as he moved toward the door.

The others slouched after him and with them went the cold voice of O'Brien.

"You an' Nick hayin' is good – mighty good," he said, with a sneer. "Nigh as good as Satin poppin' corn at a Sunday School tea."

"Or Dirty O'Brien handin' out scripture readin's in the same layout," retorted Pete, as he followed his companions out of the

door.

Holy Dick ordered a “night-cap.”

“Them two fellers make me hot as hell,” cried O’Brien fiercely, as he dashed the whisky into Holy’s glass from a bottle under the counter.

“Ther’, Holy, drink up, and git. I’m quittin’ right now,” he added. “Say, I’m just sick to death handin’ out drinks this day.”

Holy Dick grinned, his bloodshot eyes twinkling with an evil leer, which was never far from their expression.

“With things sportin’ busy as they done to-day, guess you won’t need to keep at it long. Say, Fyles has brought you dollars an’ dollars.”

The old rascal gulped down his drink and slouched out of the bar chuckling. He was always an amiable villain – until roused.

As the door closed behind him O’Brien leaned on his bar, and looked over at the back view of the still recumbent figure of Charlie Bryant.

“I was thinkin’ of closin’ down, Charlie,” he said quietly.

Charlie looked around. Then, when he became aware that the room was entirely empty, he sprang up with a sudden start.

He looked dazed. But, after a moment, his confusion slowly faded out, and he looked into the grinning eyes of probably the shrewdest man in the valley.

“Feelin’ good?” suggested the saloonkeeper. “Have a ‘night-cap’?”

Charlie raised one delicate hand and passed it wearily across

his forehead. As it passed once more that eager craving lit his eyes. His reply came almost roughly.

“Hell – yes,” he cried. Then he laughed idiotically.

O’Brien poured out a double drink and passed it across to him. He took a drink himself. He watched the other as he greedily swallowed the spirit. Then he drank his more slowly. It was only the second drink he had taken that day.

“Say, I’m runnin’ out of rye and brandy,” he said, setting his glass in the bucket under the counter, and picking up Charlie’s. “Guess I need 10 brandy and 20 rye – right away.”

He was wiping the glasses deliberately, and paused as though in some doubt before he went on. But Charlie made no effort to encourage him. Only in his eyes was a faint, growing smile, the meaning of which was not quite apparent.

“I left the order – with the dollars – same place,” O’Brien went on presently. “Same old spot,” he added with a grin.

Charlie’s smile had broadened. A whimsical humor was peeping out of his half-drunken eyes.

“Sure,” he nodded. “Same old spot.”

O’Brien set his glasses aside.

“I need it right away. I’d like it laid in my barn, ’stead of the – usual spot. I wrote that on my order. Makes it easier – with Fyles around.”

Again Charlie nodded.

“Sure,” he agreed briefly.

O’Brien found himself responding to the other’s smile.

These whisky-runners meant everything to him, and he felt it incumbent upon him to display his most amiable side.

“Say,” he chuckled, “the bark of the old tree’s held some dollars of mine in its time. It’s a hell of a good thing that tree has a yarn to it. The folks ’ud sure fetch it down for the new church if it hadn’t. I’d say it would be awkward. We’d need a new cache for our orders and – dollars.”

Charlie shook his head.

“Guess they won’t cut it down,” he said easily. “They’re scared of the superstition.”

O’Brien abandoned his smile and became confidential.

“Ain’t you – worried some, Fyles gettin’ around?”

For a moment Charlie made no answer. The smile abruptly died out of his eyes, and a marked change came over his whole expression. He suddenly seemed to be making an effort to throw off the effects of the whisky he had consumed. He straightened himself up, and his mouth hardened. The cigarette lolling between his lips became firmly gripped. O’Brien, watching the change in him, suddenly saw his hands clench at his sides, and understood the sudden access of resentment which the mention of Fyles’s name stirred in the man. He read into what he beheld something of the real character of the “sharp,” as he understood it.

Charlie’s reply came at last. It came briefly and coldly, and O’Brien felt the sting of the rebuff.

“Guess I can look after myself,” he said.

Then, without another word, he turned away, and walked out of the saloon.

CHAPTER XV

ADVENTURES IN THE NIGHT

Big Brother Bill changed his mind after all. He did not go to O'Brien's saloon. At least not when he left the Seton's house. Truth to tell, his unanticipated visit to Helen Seton's home had inspired him with a distaste for exploring the less savory corners of this beautiful valley. For the time, at least, it had become a sort of Garden of Eden, in which he had discovered his Eve, and he had no desire to dispel the illusion by unnecessary contact with a grade of creatures whose existence therein could only mar the beauties and delights of his dream.

So, instead of carrying out his original intention, full of pleasant dreaming, he made his way back toward his brother's home, hoping to find him returned so that he could pour out his enthusiastic feelings for the benefit of ears he felt would be sympathetic.

As he came to the clearing where he had first discovered Helen, however, his purpose underwent a further modification. His sentimental feelings getting the better of him, he sat down upon the very log over which the girl had fallen, and turned his face toward where the little home of the girls, with its single twinkling light, was rapidly losing itself in the deep of the gathering twilight.

He had no thought for the elder girl as he sat there. Her bolder beauty had no attraction for him, her big, dark eyes, so full of reliant spirit were scarcely the type he admired. She might be everything a woman should be, strong, sympathetic, generous, big in spirit, and of unusual courage; she might be all these and more, but, even so, she was incomparable to the fair delight of Helen's bright, inconsequent prettiness. No, serious-minded people did not appeal to him, and, in his blundering way, he told himself that life itself was far too serious to be taken seriously.

Now Helen was full to the brim of a flippant, girlish humor that appealed to him monstrously. He felt that it was a man's place to think seriously, if serious thought were needed. And he intended when he married to do the thinking. His wife must be wholly delightful and feminine, in fact, just as Helen was. Pretty, laughing, smartly dressed, and always preferring to lean on his decisions rather than indulge in the manufacture of wrinkles on her pretty forehead striving to find them for herself.

He felt sure that Helen would make a perfect wife for a man like himself. Particularly now, as she was used to the life of the valley. And, furthermore, he felt that a wife such as she would be essential to him, since he had definitely come to live as a rancher.

She certainly would be an ideal rancher's wife. He could picture her quite well mounted upon a high-spirited prairie-bred horse, riding over the plains, or round the fences, since that seemed necessary, at his side. He would listen to her merry chatter as he inspected the work that was going forward, while

she, simply bubbling with the joy of living, looked on with a perfect sense of humor for those things which her more sober-minded sister would have regarded as matters only for serious consideration.

Thus he went on dreaming, his eyes fixed upon the distant, lamp-lit window, all utterly regardless of the fall of night, and the passing of the hours. Nor was it until he suddenly awoke to the chill of the falling dew that he remembered that he was on his way home to tell Charlie of all his pleasant adventures.

Stirring with that swift impulse which always seemed to actuate him, he rose from his seat on the log and stumbled across the clearing, floundering among the fallen logs with a desperate energy that cost him many more bruises than were necessary, even in the profound darkness of the, as yet, moonless night.

Finally, however, he reached the track which led up to the house and hurried on.

A few minutes later he was wandering through the house searching in the darkened rooms for his brother. It was characteristic of him that he did not confine his search to the house, but sought the missing man in every unlikely spot his vigorous and errant imagination could suggest. He visited the corrals, he visited the barn, he visited the hog pens and the chicken roosts. Then he brought up to a final halt upon the veranda and sought to solve the problem by thought.

There was, of course, an obvious solution which did not occur to him. He might reasonably have sought his bed, and waited

until morning – since Charlie had survived five years of life in the valley. That was not his way, however. Instead, a great inspiration came to him. It was an inspiration which he viewed with profound admiration. Of course, he ought to have gone at once to the village, as he had intended, and have visited O'Brien's saloon.

Forthwith he once more set out, and this time, his purpose being really definite, after much unnecessary wandering he finally achieved it.

He reached the saloon as O'Brien was in the act of turning out the two swing lamps. Already one of them was turned low, and the saloonkeeper, with distended cheeks, was in the act of putting an end to its flickering life when Bill flung open the door.

O'Brien turned abruptly. He turned with that air which is never far from his class, living on the fringe of civilization. His whole look, his attitude, was a truculent demand, and had it found its equivalent in words he would have asked sharply: "What in hell d'you want here?"

But the significance of his attitude quite passed Big Brother Bill by. Had he understood it, it would have made no difference to him whatever. But that was his way. He never saw much more than a single purpose ahead of him, and possessed an indestructible conviction of his ability to carry it out, even in the face of superlative or even overwhelming odds.

He walked into the meanly lighted saloon, while O'Brien reluctantly turned up the light again. For a moment the

saloonkeeper's shrewd eyes surveyed the newcomer, and, as they did so, a quiet, derisive contempt slowly curled his thin lips.

"Wal?" he inquired, in the harsh drawl Bill was beginning to get accustomed to since he had traveled so far from his eastern home.

Bill laughed. He always seemed ready to laugh.

"Guess I don't seem to have come along at the best time," he said, glancing at the lamp above O'Brien. "Say, I'm sorry to have troubled you. I thought maybe my brother was down here. I'm Bill Bryant, and I'm looking for Charlie – my brother. Has – has he been along here to-night?"

The man's big blue eyes glanced swiftly around the squalid, empty interior. It was the first time he had been inside a western saloon of this class, and he was interested.

Meanwhile O'Brien had taken him in from head to foot, and the growing smile in his eyes expressed his opinion of what he beheld.

"You're Charlie Bryant's brother, eh?" he said contemplatively. "Guess I sure heard you was around. Wal, since you're lookin' fer Charlie, you'd better go lookin' a bit farther. He was around, but he's quit half an hour since. I'd surely say ef you ain't built in the natur' of a cat, or you ain't a walkin' microscope, you best wait till daylight to find Charlie. There's more folks than you'd like to find Charlie at night, but most of 'em ain't gifted with second sight. Say, seein' you're his brother, an' ain't one of them other folk, I'll admit you're more likely to find him

somewhere around the old pine just now than anywhere else. And, likewise, seein' you're his brother, you'd better not open your face wider than Providence makes necessary – till you've found him.”

O'Brien's manner rather pleased the simple easterner, for his unspoken contempt was beyond the reach of the latter's understanding. He smiled his perfect amiability.

“Thanks,” he cried readily. “I've got to go that way back, so I'll chase around there.” He half turned away, as though about to depart, but turned again immediately. “It's that pine up on the side of the valley, isn't it?” he questioned doubtfully.

“There's only one pine in this valley – yes.”

O'Brien's hand was again raised toward the lamp.

“I see.” Bill nodded. Then, “What's he doing there?” he asked sharply. A thought had occurred to him. It was one which contained a faint suspicion.

The other looked him squarely in the eyes. Then a sort of voiceless chuckle shook his broad shoulders.

“Doin'”? Wal, I guess he ain't sparkin' any lady friend, and I don't calc'late he's holdin' any conversazione with Fyles and his crew.” O'Brien's amusement had spread to his features, and Bill found himself wondering as to what internal trouble he was suffering from. “Charlie Bryant, bein' a rancher, guess he's roundin' up a bunch of 'strays.' Y'see, he's got a few greenback stock he's mighty pertickler about. They was last seen around that pine.”

Bill stared.

“Greenbacked – cattle?” he exclaimed incredulously.

O’Brien laughed outright, and Bill was no longer left in doubt as to his malady.

“They’re a fancy breed,” the saloonkeeper declared, “and kind of rare hereabouts. They come from Ottawa way. The States breed ’em, too. Guess I’ll say good night.”

Bill was left with no alternative but to take his departure, for O’Brien, with scant courtesy, extinguished the light overhead and crossed to the second lamp. His visitor made for the door, and, as he reached it, a flash of inspiration came to him. This man was making fun of him, of his inexperience. Of course. He was half inclined to get angry, but changed his mind, and, instead, turned with a good-natured laugh as he reached the door.

“I see,” he cried. “You mean dollars, eh? Charlie’s collecting some dollars – some one owes him? For the moment I thought you were talking of cattle – greenbacked cattle. Guess you surely have the laugh on me.”

O’Brien nodded.

“That’s so,” he admitted, and Bill closed the door behind him as the saloonkeeper extinguished the second lamp.

Big Brother Bill hurried away in the darkness. He swung along with long, powerful strides that roused dull echoes as he moved down the wide, wood-lined trail. It seemed to him that he had been wandering around the village for hours, the place was growing so ridiculously familiar.

Nor was it until he reached the spot where the trail divided that he realized what a perfect fool the saloonkeeper had made of him. It always took a long time for such things to filter through his good-natured brain. Now, however, he grew angry – really very angry, and, for a moment, even considered the advisability of turning back to tell the man what he thought of him.

After a few moments' consideration better counsel prevailed, and he continued on his way, his thoughts filled with a great pity for a mind so small as to delight in such a cheap sort of humor. No doubt it was his own fault. Somehow or other he generally managed to impress people with the conviction that he was a fool. But he wasn't a fool by any means. No, not by any means. What was more, before he had done with Rocky Springs he would show some of them. He would show Mr. O'Brien. Greenbacked cattle! The thought thoroughly annoyed him.

But, as he clambered up the hill toward the pine, his heat moderated, and his thoughts turned upon Charlie again. He remembered that he was collecting money, and quite suddenly it occurred to him as strange that he should be doing so as this time of night, and in the neighborhood of the pine. In the light of greenbacked cattle, that, too, seemed like perfect nonsense, unless, of course, some one were living in the neighborhood of the tree. He could not remember to have seen a house there. Wait a minute. Yes, there was. A smallish log building, not far from the new church.

Of course. That was it. Why hadn't that fool O'Brien said so

right out instead of leaving him guessing? Yes, he would call at that house on — . Hallo, what was that?

A great dull yellow light was gleaming through the foliage ahead. A beautiful golden light. Bill laughed abruptly. It was the full moon just appearing on the horizon. For the moment he had not recognized it.

Now it held his attention completely. What a beautiful scene it made, lighting up the shadowy foliage. His mind went back to the Biblical story of the burning bush. He found himself wondering if it were like that. Much brighter, of course. But how green it looked, and how intensely it threw the thinner foliage into relief. What a pity Helen Seton wasn't there to see it! It would appeal to her, he was sure. Pretty name, Helen Seton.

From this point, as he toiled up the hill, his thoughts became engrossed with the girl who had been so angry with him at first. He wished he could find some excuse for seeing her again that night. But, of course, that was —

He suddenly stopped dead, and his train of thought ended. There was the great pine ahead of him right in the back of the moonlight. There, too, was the figure of a man standing silhouetted against the great ball of golden light as it rose slowly above the horizon.

Charlie! Yes, of course it was Charlie. There could be no doubt. The slight figure was unmistakable. Even at that distance he was certain he could make out his dark hair.

In a moment he was hailing the distant figure.

“Ho, Charlie!” he cried.

But his greeting met with an unexpected result. The figure vanished as if by magic, and he was left at a loss to understand.

Then further astonishment came to him. There was a sharp rustling of bush, and breaking of twigs close by, and the sound of heavy, plodding hoofs. The next moment two horsemen broke from the dense cover about him, and flung out of the saddle.

“Darnation take it, what in blazes are you shouting around for at this hour of the night?”

Inspector Fyles stood confronting the astounded man. Beside him stood another man in uniform, with three gold stripes on his arm. It was Sergeant McBain.

In spite of his recognition of the Inspector, Bill’s anger rose swiftly, and his great muscles were set tingling at the man’s words and tone.

“Struth!” he cried in exasperation. “This is a free country, isn’t it? If I need to shout it’s none of your damn business. What in the name of all that’s holy has it got to do with you? I saw my brother ahead, and was hailing him. Well?”

Bill’s eyes were fiercely alight. He and Fyles stood eye to eye for a moment. Then the latter’s resentment seemed to suddenly die out.

“Say, I’m sorry, Mr. Bryant,” he apologized. “I just didn’t recognize you in the darkness. Guess I thought you were some tough from the saloon. That was your brother – ahead?”

Fyles’s calm, clean-cut features were in strong contrast to his

subordinate's. He was smiling slightly, too. Sergeant McBain was wholly grim.

Bill glanced from one to the other.

"Of course it was my brother," he said, promptly, mollified by the officer's expression of regret. "I've been chasing him half the night. You see, O'Brien told me he was up this way, and when I sighted him yonder by the pine, I –"

He broke off. He had suddenly remembered O'Brien's warning. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he had opened his mouth very wide. Far wider than Providence had made necessary.

"You – ?"

Fyles was distinctly smiling as he urged him.

But Bill had no intention of blundering further. He laughed, but without his usual buoyancy.

"Say, what are *you* doing up here?" he demanded, seeking to turn the tables on the officer. "Rounding up 'strays'?"

At that moment a black cloud swept swiftly across the face of the moon. And though Fyles's smile had broadened at the other's clumsy attempt at subterfuge, it was quite lost upon Bill in the darkness.

Fyles glanced quickly at the sky.

"Storm," he said. Then he turned back to his questioner. "Why, I guess I'm always chasing 'strays.' They're toughs mostly – pretty bad 'uns, too." Then he laughed audibly. "Makes me laugh," he went on. "I've been tracking the fellow for quite a

piece. And all the time he's your brother. You're sure?"

Bill nodded. He was still feeling uncomfortable.

"I'm glad you saw him," Fyles went on at once. "It's put us wise. We don't need to waste any more time. It's lucky, with a storm coming on. Guess we'll get right back, McBain," he added, turning to his companion.

Fyles had no more difficulty in fooling the guileless Bill than O'Brien had.

"Going home?" Bill inquired of the officer as the latter turned to his horse.

"Sure."

"Me, too."

Fyles leaped into the saddle. McBain, too, had mounted.

"Best hurry," said Fyles, with another quick glance at the sky. "We get sharpish storms hereabouts in summer. You'll be drowned else. So long."

Bill moved away.

"So long," he cried, relieved at the parting. "I haven't far to go, but since you reckon a storm's getting busy I'll take a cut through the bush. It'll be quicker that way."

As he thrust his way into the bush he glanced back at the two policemen. They were both in the saddle watching him. Neither made any attempt at the hasty departure the Inspector had suggested.

However, their attitudes gave him no uneasiness. Truth to tell, he did not realize any significance. The one thing that did concern

him and trouble him was that he somehow felt convinced that he had committed the very indiscretion O'Brien had warned him against.

The whole thing was very disquieting. An air of mystery seemed to have suddenly surrounded him, and he hated mystery. Why should there be any mystery? If there was one thing he delighted in more than another, it was the thought that his life was all in the open. The broad daylight could search the innermost corners of his every action. He had nothing in the world to hide. Why then should he suddenly find himself actively concerned with this atmosphere of mystery which had suddenly closed about him?

But Bill had not done with the mistakes of the evening. He made another one now – in leaving the trail.

Within five minutes of leaving the two police officers he found himself blindly floundering his way through an inky forest. The sky was jet black. The moon had long since switched off her light. The last star had concealed its twinkle behind the banking clouds of the summer storm. Now great warm splashes of rain had begun to fall.

CHAPTER XVI

FURTHER ADVENTURES

Half an hour later tragedy befell.

Drenched to the skin, blinded by the deluge of torrential rain, thoroughly confused beyond all recognition of his whereabouts in the tangle of bush through which he was thrusting his way, all his senses dazed by the fierce overhead detonations, and the streams of blazing fire splitting the black vault above, Big Brother Bill beat his way along the path of least resistance by sheer physical might.

All idea of direction had left him. Up hill or down hill had become one and the same to him. He felt he must keep moving, must press on, and, in the end, he would reach his destination.

At last, almost wearied out by his efforts, he came to a definite halt in a bush that seemed to afford no outlet whatsoever. Even the way he had entered it was lost, for the heavy foliated boughs had closed in behind him in the darkness, utterly cutting off his retreat.

For a moment he stood like an infuriated steer at bay, caught in the narrow branding "pinch." He waited for a revealing flash of lightning in the hope that it would show him a way out. He should have realized the futility of his hope, but, if he were soaked by the downpour, his spirit of optimism was as yet by no means

drowned.

The flash he awaited came. The whole valley seemed to be lit from end to end. Then it was gone as swiftly as it had come, leaving a pitchy blackness behind it. But in that brief flash Bill told himself he had seen the trail just beyond the clump of bush in the midst of which he stood. Summoning all his strength he hurled himself to thrust his way toward it. He fought the resisting boughs with all his great strength, backed by every ounce of his buoyant spirits. Then, in a moment, Fate stepped in, and – released him.

His sensations were brief but tumultuous. He had a feeling that an earthquake had opened the ground at his feet. With all his might he sought to save himself from the yawning chasm. But the sudden jolt of his great weight was more than his muscles could withstand. His hands relaxed their grip upon the foliage and he fell with a great splash – into the river.

He had driven his way through the overhanging foliage of the river.

Big Brother Bill was not easily disconcerted by any physical catastrophe to himself. Nor did his sudden immersion now add one single pulse beat. The obvious thing, being a strong swimmer, was to strike out and get clear of the dripping trees, which he promptly proceeded to do, and, reaching the middle of the stream, and discovering that the rain had ceased, he philosophically consoled himself with the thought that, at least, he knew where he was.

Five minutes later he climbed up the opposite bank out of the water. His first object at once became the ascertaining of his bearings. With a serious effort of argument he finally concluded he was on the wrong side of the river, which meant, of course, that the matter must be put right without delay. Seeing that the water was cold, in spite of the warmth of the summer evening, he was reminded of the footbridge opposite the Setons' house. Consequently, the further problem became the whereabouts of that bridge.

Glancing up at the sky, possibilities presented themselves. The clouds were breaking almost as rapidly as they had gathered, and, with great decision, he concluded that the best thing to do would be to await the return of the moonlight, and occupy the interim by wringing some of the uncomfortable moisture out of his clothes.

Ten minutes later his patience was rewarded. The moon shone out upon the stream at his feet, and there, less than one hundred yards to the west of him, the ghostly outline of the bridge loomed up. He really felt that Fate, at last, was doing her best.

He set off at once at as swinging a gait as his damp condition would permit, and he even found it possible to whistle an air as he moved along, to the accompanying squelch of his water-logged boots.

But, as the footbridge was approached, his purpose received a setback. The home of the Setons loomed up in the moonlight and promptly absorbed his attention. The moon was at its full once more, and the last clouds of the summer storm had passed

away, leaving the wonderful, velvety night sky a-shimmer with twinkling diamonds.

The front of the house was in full light, so pale, so distinct, that no detail of it escaped his interested eyes. There was the door with its rain-water barrel, there was the shingle roof. The lateral logs of its walls were most picturesque. The only thing that struck him as ordinary was, perhaps, the window – . Hallo! What was that at the window?

He paused abruptly, and stared hard.

He started. It was a woman! A woman sitting on the sill of the open window! Of all the – . Well, if that wasn't luck he felt he would like to know what was. He wondered which of the sisters it was – Kate or Helen. He was confident it was one of them. He would soon find out.

With a tumultuously beating heart he promptly diverged from his course, and set off straight for the house. It was always his way to act on impulse. Rarely did he give things a second thought where his inclinations were concerned.

As he drew near, Kate Seton's deep voice greeted him. Its tone was velvety in its richness, nor was there the least inflection of astonishment in its tone.

“That you, Mr. Bryant?” she said, without stirring from her attitude of luxurious enjoyment.

Bill came up hurriedly.

“I s'pose it is,” he said with a laugh. “All that the river hasn't washed away. Say,” he went on, with amiable inconsequence,

“there’s just two things puzzling my fool head, Miss Seton: Why Fate takes a particular delight in handing me so many pleasant moments with so many unpleasant kicks? And what wild streak of good luck finds you sitting in the moonlight this hour of the night? It surely was a scurvy trick of Fate dumping me in the creek, when there’s a bridge to walk over, just to land me right here, where you’re handing up fancy dreams to a very chilly but beautiful moon. Guess I’m kind of spoiling the picture for you though. I may be some picture to look at, but I wouldn’t say it’s worth framing – would you?”

Kate smiled up at him. His dripping condition was obvious enough. Nor could she help her amusement. Knowing something of the man, he became doubly grotesque in her eyes.

“It needs courage to put things nicely under such adverse conditions,” she said, with a laugh. “And I like courage.” Then she went on in her easy, pleasant way: “It was the storm fetched me out of bed. I never can resist a storm. So I just had to dress and come right out here to watch it. Why are you around, anyway? Tell me about – about the river, and how you got into it.”

Bill laughed joyously.

“Guess that’s an easy one,” he said lightly. “I was on my way home when I met that policeman, Fyles. He put me wise to the storm coming up – which I guessed was bright and friendly of him. You see, I hadn’t located it. It was up to me to make Charlie’s place quick, so I got busy on a short cut. Say, did you ever take a short cut – in a hurry? Don’t ever do it. ’Tisn’t worth

it – if you're in a hurry. Of course, I lost myself in the storm, and Fate began handing me one or two. Fate's always tricky. She likes to wait till she gets you by the back of the neck, so you can't do a thing, and then passes you all that's coming to you. Guess she's had me by the neck quite awhile now, what with one thing and another. However, I mustn't blame her too much. You see, I lost myself, and it was she who found me, though I don't think anything of the way she did it. I was boosting through what I thought was a reasonable sort of bush, and found it wasn't. It was the overhang of the river, and when I dropped through I found myself in the water. Still, I knew that water was the river, and I knew where the river was. I'm grateful, in a way, but I can't help feeling Fate's got a dirty side to her nature, and bridges are fool things anyway, for always being where they aren't wanted."

Kate's laugh was one of whole-hearted amusement. Big Brother Bill's whimsical manner appealed to her.

"Maybe Fate thought you were out later than you ought to be," she said. "You – a stranger."

But the girl's remark had a different effect upon Bill than might have been expected. His smile died out, and all his lightness vanished. Once more he was feeling that atmosphere of mystery closing about him. It had oppressed him before, and now again it was oppressing him.

For a moment he made no answer. He was debating with himself in his blundering way. Finally, with a quick, reckless plunge, he made up his mind.

“I – was looking for Charlie,” he said. “I’ve been trying to find him ever since I left here.”

The girl’s smile had passed, too. A growing trouble was in her eyes.

“Charlie – is still out?” she demanded sharply. “And Fyles – where did you meet Inspector Fyles?”

The dark eyes were full of anxiety now. Kate’s voice had lost its softness. Nor could Bill help noticing the wonderful strength that seemed to lie behind it.

“I can’t say where Charlie is now,” the man went on, a little helplessly. “I saw Fyles close by that big pine tree.”

“Close by the pine tree?” Kate repeated the words after him, and her repetition of them suddenly endowed them with a strange significance for Bill.

With an air of having suddenly abandoned all prudence, all caution, Bill flung out his arms.

“Say, Miss Seton,” he said, in a sort of desperation, “I’m troubled – troubled to death. I can’t tell the top-side from the bottom-side of anything, it seems to me. There’s things I can’t understand hereabouts, a sort of mystery that gets me by the neck and nearly chokes me. Maybe you can help me. It seems different, too, talking to you. I don’t seem to be opening my mouth too wide – as I’ve been warned not to.”

“Who warned you?”

The question came sharp and direct.

“Why, O’Brien. You see, I went down to the saloon after I’d

searched the ranch for Charlie, and asked if he had been there. O'Brien was shutting up. He said he had been there, but had gone. Then he told me where I'd be likely to find him, but warned me not to open my mouth wide – till I'd found him. Said I'd likely find him somewhere around that pine. Said he'd likely be collecting some money around there.

“Well, I set out to make the pine, and I didn't wonder at things for awhile. It wasn't till I got near it, and I saw the moon get up, and, in its light, saw Charlie in the distance near the pine, that this mystery thing got hold of me. It came on me when I hollered to him, and, as a result of it, saw him vanish like a ghost. But – ”

“You called to him?”

The girl's question again came sharply, but this time with an air of deep contemplation.

“Yes. But I didn't get time to think about it. Just as I'd shouted two horsemen scrambled out of the bush beside me. One of 'em was Fyles. The other I didn't know. He'd got three stripes on his arm.”

“Sergeant McBain,” put in the woman quietly.

“You know him?”

Kate shrugged.

“We all know him about here.”

Bill nodded.

“Fyles cursed me for a fool for hollering out. Said he'd been watching that 'tough,' and didn't want to lose sight of him. I got riled. I told him a few things, and said I'd a right to hail my

brother any old time. Then he changed around and said he was sorry, and asked me if I was sure it was my brother. When I told him ‘yes,’ he thanked me for putting him wise, and said I’d saved him a deal of unnecessary trouble. Said there was no more need to watch him – seeing he was my brother. That’s when he told me about the storm, and I hit my short cut, and, finally, reached – the river. Now, what was he watching for, and who did he mistake Charlie for? What’s the meaning of the whole thing? Why did O’Brien warn me? These are the things that get me puzzled to death. Maybe you can tell me – can help me out?”

He waited, confidently expecting an explanation that would clear up all the mystery, but none was forthcoming. Instead, when Kate finally replied, there was an almost peevish complaint in her tone.

“I wish you had taken O’Brien’s warning more to heart,” she said. “Maybe you’ve done a lot of harm to-night. I can’t tell – not yet.”

“Harm?” Bill stood aghast.

“Yes – harm, man, harm.” Kate’s whole manner had suddenly undergone a change. She seemed to be laboring under an apprehension that almost unnerved her. “Don’t you know who Fyles is after? He’s after whisky-runners. Don’t you know why O’Brien warned you? Because he believes, as pretty nearly everybody believes – Fyles, too – that your brother Charlie is the head of a big gang of them. Mystery? Mystery? There is no mystery at all – only danger, danger for your brother, Charlie,

while Fyles is on his track. You don't know Fyles. We, in this valley, do. It is his whole career to bring whisky-runners under the hammer of the law. If he can fix this thing on Charlie he will do it."

The girl sprang from her seat in her agitation, and began to pace the wet ground.

"Charlie? Though he's your brother, I tell you Charlie's the most impossible creature alive. Everything he does, or is, somehow fosters the conviction that he is against the law. He drinks. Oh, how he drinks! And at night he's always on the prowl. His associates are known whisky-runners, men whom the police, everybody, knows have not the wit to inspire the schemes that are carried out under the very noses of the authorities. What is the result? The police look for the brain behind them. Charlie is clever, unusually clever; he drinks, his movements are suspicious. He's asking for trouble, and God knows he's going to find it."

A sudden panic was swiftly overwhelming Big Brother Bill. Though he knew no fear for himself it was altogether a different matter where his brother was concerned. He ran the great fingers of one hand through his wet, fair hair, an action that expressed to the full his utter helplessness.

"Say," he cried desperately, "Charlie's no crook. By God, I'll swear it! He's just a weak, helpless babe, with a heart as big as a house. Charlie a crook? Say, Miss Seton, you don't believe it, do you?"

Kate shook her head.

“I know he’s not,” she said gently. Then in a moment all her fierce agitation returned. “But what’s the use? Tell the folks in the valley he isn’t, and they’ll laugh at you. Tell that to Fyles.” She laughed wildly. “Man, man, there’s only one thing can save Charlie from this stigma, from Fyles. Let him leave the valley. It’s the only way.” She sighed and then went on, her manner becoming suddenly subdued and rather hopeless. “But nothing on earth could move him from here, unless it were a police escort taking him to the penitentiary.”

She returned to her seat in the window, and when she spoke again her whole manner had undergone a further change. It was full of that womanly gentleness which fitted her so well.

“Mr. Bryant,” she said, with a pathetic smile lighting her handsome features, and softening them to an almost maternal tenderness, “I’m fonder of Charlie than any creature in the world – except Helen. Don’t make any mistake. I’m not in love with him. He’s just a dear, dear, erring, ailing brother to me. He can’t, or won’t help himself. What can we do to save him? Oh, I’m glad you’ve come here. It’s taken a load from my heart. What – what can we do?”

Again the big fingers raked through the man’s wet hair.

“I – wish I knew,” Bill lamented helplessly. But a moment later a quick, bright look lit his big blue eyes. “I know,” he almost shouted. “Let’s hunt this gang down – ourselves.”

Kate’s gaze had been steadily fixed upon the far side of the valley, where Charlie Bryant’s house stood. Now, in response to

the man's wild suggestion, it came slowly back to his face.

"I hadn't thought of – that," she said, after a pause.

In a wild burst of enthusiasm Bill warmed to his inspiration.

"No," he cried. "Of course not. That's because you aren't used to scrapping." He laughed. "But why not? I'll do the scrapping, and you – you just do the thinking. See? We'll share up. It's dead easy."

"Yes – it would be dead easy," Kate demurred.

"Easy? Of course it's easy. I'm pretty hot when it comes to a scrap," Bill ran on with added confidence. "And a bunch of whisky-runners don't amount to a heap anyway."

Suddenly Kate rose from her seat. She moved a step toward him and laid one brown hand gently on his arm. She was smiling as she had smiled at the thought of her regard for this man's brother. There was something almost motherly now in her whole attitude.

"You're a big, brave soul, and like all brave souls you're ready at all times to act – act first and think afterwards," she said very gently. "You said I was to think. Let me think now. You see, I know this place. I know this class of man. It's the life of the police to deal with these whisky-runners, and they – they can do nothing against them. Then what are we, you, with your brave inexperience, I, with my woman's helplessness, going to do against them? Believe me, the men who carry on this traffic are absolutely desperate creatures who would give their lives at any moment rather than go to the penitentiary. Life to them, their

own and their enemy's, means nothing. They set no value on it whatsoever. The trade is profitable, and" – she sighed – "against the law. Those engaged in it live for the excitement of fighting the law. That's one of the reasons which makes it impossible that Charlie could be one of them. No, Mr. Bryant, I guess it's not for us to do this thing. We just couldn't do a thing. But we must think of Charlie, and, when we've thought, and the time comes, why, then – we'll act. Fyles is a brave man, and a just man," she went on, with a slight warmth. "He's a man of unusual capacity, and worth admiration. But he is a police officer," she added regretfully. "In saving Charlie from him we shall prevent one good man wronging another, and I guess that should be good service. Let's content ourselves with that. Will you help?"

Big Brother Bill had no hesitation at any time. He was carried away by the enthusiasm Kate's words inspired. He thrust out one great hand and crushed the woman's in its palm.

"Sure I'll help. I've just got two hands and a straight eye, and when fight's around I don't care if it snows. My head's the weak spot. But, anyway, what you say goes. We'll save Charlie, or – or – Say, a real bright woman's just about the grandest thing God ever made."

Kate winced under the crushing force of his handshake, but she smiled bravely and thankfully up into his face as she bade him "good night."

CHAPTER XVII

BILL PEEPS UNDER THE SURFACE

The surprises of the night were not yet over for Big Brother Bill. It almost seemed as if a lifetime of surprises were to be crowded into his first night in the valley of Leaping Creek.

Still thoroughly moist, he finally reached home to find his brother there, waiting for him.

Of course, the big man promptly blundered.

Charlie was in the living room, sitting in a dilapidated rocking chair. An unopen book was in his lap, and his dark, clever face was turned toward the single window the room possessed, as the heavy tread of Bill sounded on the veranda.

It was obvious he was still laboring under the influence of the drink; it was also obvious, though less apparent, that he was laboring under an emotion, which unusually disturbed him. His eyes were shining with a gleaming light which might have expressed anger, excitement, or even simply the effect of his libations. Whatever it was, Bill recognized, without appreciating its meaning, a definite change from the man he had so cordially greeted earlier in the day; a recognition which made his blundering now, more hopelessly than ever, an expression of his utter lack of discretion.

“Say, Charlie, boy,” he cried, as he entered the little room, filling it almost to overflowing with his robust personality, “I’ve chased half over the valley looking for you. Then I saw you at the old pine and shouted, and you sort of faded away. I thought I’d ‘got’ ’em. What with that, and then falling into the river, and one or two minor, but more or less unpleasant accidents, I’ve had one awful time. Say, this valley’s got me beat to death.”

The simplicity of the man was monumental. No one else could have looked upon that slight figure, huddled down in the big old rocker, without having experienced a feeling of restraint; no one could have observed the drawn, frowning brows, and the hard lines about the still somewhat sensual mouth, without using an added caution in approaching him. There were fires stirring behind Charlie’s dark eyes which were certainly ominous.

Now, as he listened to his brother’s greeting, swift anger leaped into them. His words came sharply, and almost without restraint. Big Brother Bill was confronted by another side of his nature, a side of which he had no knowledge whatever.

“You always were a damned fool,” Charlie cried, starting heatedly forward in his chair. “I told you I was going out. If you had any sort of horse sense you’d have understood I wasn’t in need of a wet-nurse. What the devil do you want smelling out my trail as if you were one of the police?” Then he suddenly broke into an unpleasant laugh. “You came here in Fyles’s company. Maybe you caught the police infection from him.”

Bill stared in wide-eyed astonishment at the harsh injustice of

the attack. For one second his blood ran hot, and a wild desire to retaliate leaped. But the moment passed. Though he was not fully aware of Charlie's condition, something of it now forced itself upon him, and his big-hearted regret saved him from his more rampant feelings.

He sat himself on the edge of the table.

"Easy, Charlie," he said quietly, "you're kind of talking recklessly. I'm no wet-nurse to anybody. Certainly it's not my wish to interfere with you. I'm – sorry if I've hurt you. I just looked around to tell you my adventures, I'm no – spy."

Charlie rose from his seat. He stood swaying slightly. The sight of this outward sign of his drunken condition smote the good-natured Bill to the heart. It was nothing new to him in his erring brother. He had seen it all before, years ago, so many, many times. But through all these years apart he had hoped for that belated reforming which meant so much. He had hoped and believed it had set in. Now he knew, and his last hopes were dashed. Kate Seton had warned him, but her warning had not touched him as the exhibition he now beheld did. Why, why had Charlie done this thing, and done it to-night – their first night together in the new world? He could have cried out in his bitterness of disappointment.

As he looked upon the man's unsteady poise he felt as though he could have picked him up in his two strong hands and shaken sober senses into him.

But Charlie's mood had changed at the sound of the big man's

regrets. They had penetrated the mists of alcohol, and stirred a belated contrition.

“I don’t want any apologies from you, Bill,” he said thickly. “Guess I’m not worth it. You couldn’t spy on a soul. It’s not that – .” He broke off, and it became evident to the other that he was making a supreme effort at concentration. “You saw me at the pine?” he suddenly inquired.

Bill nodded. He had no desire to say anything more now. He felt sick with himself, with everything. He almost regretted his own coming to the valley at all. For a moment his optimism was utterly obscured. Added to what he now beheld, all that Kate Seton had said was revolving in his brain, an oppressive cloud depriving him of every joy the reunion with his brother had inspired. The two thoughts paramount, and all pervading, were suggested by the words “drunkard” and “crook.” Nor, in that moment of terrible disappointment, would they be denied.

Charlie sat down in his chair again, and, to the onlooker, his movement was almost involuntary.

“I was there,” he said, a moment later, passing one hand across his frowning brows as though to clear away the cobwebs impeding the machinery of his thought. “Why – why didn’t you come and speak to me? I was just – around.”

Again Bill’s eyes opened to their fullest extent.

“I hollered to you,” he said. “When you heard me you just – vanished.”

Again Charlie smoothed his brow.

“Yes – I’d forgotten. It was you hollered, eh! You see, I didn’t know it was you.”

Bill sat swinging one leg thoughtfully. A sort of bewilderment was getting hold of him.

“You didn’t recognize my voice?” he asked. Then he added thoughtfully, “No – and it might have been Fyles, or the other policemen. They were there.”

Charlie suddenly sat up. His hands were grasping the arms of the rocker.

“The police were there – with you?” he demanded. “What – what were they doing there – with you?”

The sharp questions, flung at him so quickly, so soberly, suddenly lifted Bill out of his vain and moody regrets.

In spite of all Kate had told him, in spite of her assurance that Fyles, and all the valley, believed Charlie to be the head of the smuggling gang, the full significance of Fyles’s presence in the neighborhood of the pine had not penetrated to his slow understanding before. Now an added light was thrown upon the matter in a flash of greater understanding. Fyles was not watching any chance crook. He was watching Charlie, and he knew it was Charlie, and the assurance of Charlie’s identity extracted from him, Bill, had been a simple blind. What a fool he had made of himself. Kate was right. The harm he had done now became appalling.

He promptly became absorbed in a strongly restrained excitement. He leaned forward and talked rapidly. He had

forgotten Charlie's condition, he had forgotten everything but the danger threatening.

"Here, Charlie," he cried, "I'll tell you just all that happened after I left here, when you went out. Guess it's a long yarn, but I think you need to know it for your own safety."

Charlie leaned back in his chair and nodded.

"Go ahead," he said. Then he closed his eyes as Bill rushed into his narrative.

The big man told it all as far as it concerned his first meeting with the Setons, his subsequent visit to the saloon, and, afterwards, his meeting with Fyles. The only thing he kept to himself was his final meeting with Kate Seton.

At the end of this story Charlie reopened his eyes, and, to any one more observant than Big Brother Bill, it was plain that his condition had improved. A keen light was shining in them, a light of interest and perfectly clear understanding.

"Thanks, Bill," he said, "I'm glad you've told me all that." Then he rose from his chair, and his movements had become more certain, more definite. "Guess I'll get off to bed. It's no use discussing all this. It can lead nowhere. Still, there is one thing I'd like to say before we quit. I'm glad, I'm so mighty glad you've come along out here to join me I can't just say it all to you. I'm ready to tumble headlong into any schemes you've got in your head. But there's things in my life I've got to work out in my own way. Things I can't and don't want to talk about. Maybe I'll often be doing things that seem queer to you. But I want to do 'em,

and intend to do 'em. Drink is not one of 'em. You'll find I'm a night bird, too. But, again, my night wanderings are my own. You'll hear folks say all sorts of things about me. You'll see Fyles very busy. Well, it's up to you to listen or not. All I say is don't fight my battles. I can fight them in my own way. Two of us are liable to mess them all up. Get me? I live my life, and you can share as much in it as you like, except in that – well, that part of it I need to keep to myself. There's just one thing I promise you, Fyles'll never get me inside any penitentiary. I promise you that, sure, because I know from your manner that's the trouble in the back of your silly old head. Good night.”

He passed out of the room without giving the astonished Bill any opportunity to do more than respond to his “good night.” Anyway, the latter had nothing else to say. He was too taken aback, too painfully startled at the tacit admission to all the charges he had been warned the people and police of Leaping Creek were making against his brother. What could he say? What could he do? Nothing – simply nothing.

He remained where he was against the table. He had forgotten his wet clothes. He had forgotten everything in the overwhelming nature of his painful feelings. His own beliefs, Kate's loyally expressed convictions, had been utterly negated. It was all true. All painfully, dreadfully true. Charlie was not only a drunkard still, but the “crook” he was supposed to be. He was a whisky-runner. He was against the law. His ultimate goal was the penitentiary. Good God, the thought was appalling! This was

where drink had led him. This was the end of his spoiled and wayward brother's career. What a cruel waste of a promising life. His good-natured, gentle-hearted brother. The boy he had always admired and loved in those early days. It was cruel, terrible. By his own admission he was against the law, a "crook," and – the penitentiary was looming.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARM OUTREACHING

The morning was gloriously fine. It was aglow with the fulness of summer. Far as the eye could see the valley was bathed in a golden light which the myriad shades of green made intoxicating to senses drinking in this glory of nature's splendor. Leaping Creek gamboled its tortuous way through the heart of a perfect garden.

A veritable Eden thought Stanley Fyles – complete to the last detail.

But his thought was without cynicism. He had no time for cynicism. Besides, the goal of his career lay yet before him.

His thought drifted further. His whole fate had suddenly become bound up in that valley. Nor was the fact without a certain irony. For him it was the valley of destiny. Within its spacious confines lay the two great factors of life – his life – love and duty. They were confronting him. They were standing there waiting for him to possess himself of his victorious hold.

Stanley Fyles felt rather like a ticket-of-leave criminal, instead of a law officer, as he gazed out from the doorway of the frame hut, which formed the temporary quarters of the police, far out on the western reaches of the valley, five miles above the village of Rocky Springs. He knew he was there to prove himself. His

mistakes, or his bad luck, of the past must be remedied before he could return to his superiors with a clean sheet. His hands were free, he knew. But in that freedom he was more surely a prisoner on parole than any man on his given word. He was pitting himself like the gambler against the final throw. It was all, or – ruin. To leave the valley with the work undone, with another mistake to his credit, and his present career must terminate.

Then there was that other side. That wonderful – other side. The human nature in him made the valley more surely his destiny than any charges of his superior officer. The woman was there. The Eve in his Eden. More than all else the thought of her inspired him to the big effort of his life.

He was thinking of Kate Seton now as his gaze roamed at will over the ravishing summer tints. He was thinking wholly of her when his mind might well have been contemplating the terms of the despatches he had just written, the orders he had sent to his troopers, even the events and clues he had obtained on the previous night, pointing the work he had in hand.

A door opened and closed behind him. He was aware of it, but did not turn. A voice addressed him. It was the cold voice of Sergeant McBain.

“The men are saddled up, sir.”

Fyles glanced around without changing his position.

“The despatches are on the table,” he replied, with a sharp inclination of the head in the direction.

“Any other instructions, sir?”

Fyles thought a moment.

“Yes,” he said at last. “When they return here it must be after dark. The patrol and horses they bring with ’em are to be camped over at Winter’s Crossing, five miles higher up the valley. This before they come in to report. That’s all.”

“Very good, sir.”

Sergeant McBain departed, and presently the clatter of hoofs told the officer that the two troopers had ridden away. As they went he drew out a pipe and began to fill it.

When McBain re-entered the room Fyles bestirred himself. He turned back and flung himself into an uncomfortable, rawhide-seated, home-made chair, and lit his pipe. McBain took up a position at the small table which served the purpose of a desk.

McBain and his men had taken up their quarters here several weeks ago. It was a mere shed, possibly an implement shed on an abandoned farm. It was a frame, weather-boarded shanty with a dilapidated shingle roof. Quite a reasonable shelter till it chanced to rain. The handiness of the troopers had made it comparatively habitable with oddments of furnishing, and a partition, which left an inner room for sleeping quarters. There was a partial wooden lining covering the timbers supporting the roof, which was an open pitch, without any ceiling. There were several wooden brackets projecting from the walls, which had probably, at one time, been used to support harness. Now they served the purpose of carrying police saddles and uniform overcoats.

There was obviously no attempt at establishing a permanent station there. These men were, as was their custom, merely utilizing the chance finding as an added comfort in their strenuous lives.

Fyles lit his pipe, and, for some moments, smoked thoughtfully, while McBain's pen scratched a series of entries in his diary.

Fyles watched him through a cloud of smoke, and when his subordinate returned his pen to the home-made rack on the table, he began to talk.

"There's two things puzzling me about that tree, McBain," he said, following out his train of thought. "Your reckoning has justification all right. We saw enough last night for that. Besides, you have seen the same sort of thing several times before. It surely has a big play in the affairs of these 'runners.' But I can't get a focus of that play. Suppose that the tree is in some mysterious way a sort of means of communication, why is it necessary? And, why in thunder, when everybody knows who the boss of the gang is, don't they deal direct with him?"

Fyles smiled into the grim face of McBain, and sat back waiting to hear the Scot's reply. His keen face was alight with expectancy. He wanted this shrewd man's ideas as well as his facts obtained by observation.

The sergeant's face was obstinately set. He had already asserted certain convictions about the old pine, and now he detected skepticism in his superior.

“Three times in the last two weeks I have seen the same figure in the shadow of that tree late at night. It hasn’t needed any guessing to locate his identity. Very well, starting with the supposition that the village folk are right, and Charlie Bryant is our man, then his movements about that tree at that hour of the night become more than suspicious. Especially since we know he’s run a big cargo in lately. But while I figger on that tree there’s something else, as I’ve told you. I’ve tracked him into the neighborhood of the old Meeting House and back again to the tree. Now, I’ve seen this play three times, and would have seen the whole of it again last night if that damned coyote of a tenderfoot hadn’t butted in. That’s that, sir.”

Fyles nodded. The older man’s earnestness was not without its weight. But to a man like Fyles, definite proof, or reasonable probabilities, were necessary. Clearing his throat, McBain went on.

“Let’s come to another argument, sir,” he said, setting himself with his arms on the table. “Every man or woman in the place reckons this tough, Charlie Bryant, runs the gang. They can lay their tongues to the names of the men who form the gang. Guess this is the list, and a certain one sure, knowing the men. There’s Pete Clancy, Nick Devereux, both hired men to Miss Seton. There’s Kid Blaney, hired to Bryant himself. There’s Stormy Longton, the gambler and – murderer. Then there’s another I believe to be Macaddo, the train hold-up, and the fellow they call “Holy” Dick. That’s the gang with Bryant at their head, but

there may be more of them. I've got the names indirectly from the village folk. But this is my point. Never a soul in the village has seen them at work. Never a soul has seen them buy, or sell, or handle, one drop of drink, except what they buy in the saloon to consume. The gang don't do one single thing to give itself away, and there's not a man or woman could give them away in the village, except from their talk when they're drunk."

The man was making his point, and Fyles remained interested.

"Now, this is the argument, an' you'll admit, sir, experience carries a lot of it out. Crooks are scared to death of each other, you know that, sir, better than I do. It's the basis of their methods. They've got to make safe. To do this they have to resort to schemes which hide their identity. They'll trust each other engaged in the crime because all are involved. But they daren't trust those who're under no penalty. What do they do? They've got to blind the outside world, the police, and they do it by making a mystery. Now, in this case, the pine is the heart of their mystery. It must give the key to the cache. It must lead us to getting the lot red-handed – running a cargo. That's what I know and feel, and it's up to you, sir, to show us the way. I've worked on the lines you gave me, sir, and I've done all a man can do. I've had the whole village watched, and worked inquiry by a farmer outlying the valley. But now we're plumb at a deadlock till they run another cargo, which I'm calculating, at the rate liquor's consumed, they'll soon have to do. Maybe that'll give us a week or so for fixing our plans. I've watched each member of the gang,

and we've got their movements written down here, from the time we missed that cargo on the trail. Maybe you'll read my notes on them."

Fyles took the diary the man held out.

"It's a tough proposition, McBain," he said with a sigh, which had no weakening in it. "But I think we'll make good this time, if only we can get the news of the shipment when it comes along well ahead. Superintendent Jason is in communication with every local police force east, and should get it all right. If we get that, the rest should be easy. Rocky Springs only has three roads, and it's a small place. I've got a pretty wide scheme ready for them when we get word. In the meantime our present work must be to endeavor to locate their cache. That discovered, and left alone, our work will be simple pie. I'll read these notes now. Then I'm going into the village. Later on I've a notion to see just how busy Master Bryant is on his – ranch."

Kate gave a final glance round at the walls of green logs, and noted with appreciation the picturesque dovetailing of every angle.

"Well," she declared, after a moment's thought, "all I can say is that the design's working out in truly elegant fashion. Charlie's done his work well – and so have the boys." She beamed pleasantly upon her audience, two men balancing themselves upon the open floor joists of the new church. "It's a real work of art. It's going to be swell, and the folks should be just proud of it."

Billy Unguin smiled confidently.

“Oh, the folks’ll be proud of it all right, all right,” he said. “They’ll yap about this place, and how they built it, till you’ll wish it was swallowed up by that kingdom they guess they’re going to get boosted into by means of it. They’ll have one hell of a burst at the saloon when the work’s done, and every feller’ll be guessin’ he could have done the other feller’s job better than he could have done it himself, and the women folk’ll just say what elegant critturs their men are, till they get home sossled. Then they’ll beat hell out of ’em. They’ll sure be proud of it, but I don’t guess the church’ll be proud of them. It’ll have hard work helpin’ most of ’em into the kingdom. Ain’t that so, Allan?”

Billy asked for confirmation of his opinions merely as a matter of form. But Allan Dy displayed little interest in them. He had some of his own.

“Guess so,” he murmured indifferently.

“Course it’s so,” said Billy sharply.

“Dessay you’re right,” replied Dy, with still less interest. “But I ain’t got time thinking conundrums. I get too many, running the mail. Still, I’d like to say right here this doggone church ain’t architecture. Maybe it’s art, as Miss Kate says. But it ain’t architecture. That’s what it ain’t,” he finished up, with decided emphasis.

Kate smiled upon him. She was interested in what lay behind the remark.

“How – how do you make that out, Allan?” she inquired.

The postmaster felt sorry for her and showed it.

“It’s easy,” he declared. Then he gathered his opinions in a bunch, and metaphorically hurled them at her. “Where’s the steel girders an’ stone masonry?” he demanded. “It’s just wood – pine. Wher’s the figures an’ measurements? Who knows the breakin’ strain o’ them green logs? Maybe it’s art, but it ain’t architecture. I ain’t so sure about the art, neither. It’s to be lined with red pine. Ther’ ain’t no art to red pine. Now maple – bird’s-eye maple, an’ we got forests of it. Ther’s art in bird’s-eye maple. It’s mighty pleasing to the eye. It ’ud make the folks feel good. Red pine? Red?” He shook his head ominously. “Not in this city. You see, red’s a shoutin’ color. Sets folk gropin’ fer trouble. But white’s different. It – it sort o’ sets folks thinking o’ them days when their little souls was white enough, even if their bodies wasn’t rid of a month’s dirt. I tell you, Rocky Springs ’ud get pious right away under the influence of bird’s-eye maple. Maybe they’d be fighting drunk later, but that don’t cut no ice. You see, it’s sort o’ natural to ’em. Still, the church would have done ’em some good if only it kept ’em a few seconds from doing somebody or something a personal injury.”

Billy was chafing at his friend’s monopoly of the talk and promptly seized the opportunity of belittling his opinions.

“What’s the use,” he cried. “I’m with Miss Kate. Charlie’s done right in fixing on red pine lining. Art’s art, an’ if you’re goin’ to be artistic, why, you just got to match things same as you’d match a team of horses, same as a woman does her fixings. ’Tain’t good to mix anything. Not even drinks. Red pine goes with

raw logs. Say, there's art in everything. Beans goes with pork; cabbage with corned beef. But you don't never eat ice cream with sowbelly. Everybody hates winter. Why for do folks fix 'emselves like funeral mutes in winter? It's just the artistic mind in 'em. They'd hate flying in the face of Providence by cheerin' themselves up with a bit of color. Art is art, Dy, my boy; maybe art ain't in your line, seein' you're a Government servant. Ther' ain't nothin' but red pine for the inside of that church, or all art's bust to hell. Start the folks in this city off on notions inspired by anemic woodwork, an' the sight o' so much purity would set 'em off sniveling on their women-folk's bosoms, and give 'emselves internal chills shoutin' fer ice water at O'Brien's bar. You'd set the boys so all-fired good-natured they'd give 'emselves up fer the crimes they never committed, or they'd be startin' up a weekly funeral club so as to be sure of a Christian burial anyway. You'd upset the harmony o' Rocky Springs something terrible. Bird's-eye maple – nothin'. Ain't that so, Miss Kate?"

Kate laughed outright.

"I can't quite follow all the arguments," she said, cautiously. "But – but – it sounds all right."

"Sure," agreed Billy, complacently.

But Dy was not yet defeated.

"I'm arguin' architecture," he said doggedly. "Here," he indicated the length of the main building, "I don't care a cuss about your art. What about this? Where's the tree grown hereabouts tall enough to give us a ridge pole for this roof? It

means a join in the ridge pole. That's what it means. And that ain't architecture, Master Billy – smarty – Unguin."

Kate ran her eye over the offending length. The man's point seemed obvious.

"It certainly looks like a join," she admitted unwillingly.

For a moment Billy was disconcerted. But his inventive faculties quickly supplied him with a way out. Anyway, he could break up the other's argument.

"Isn't nothin'!" he cried, with fine scorn. "That don't need to worry you. Ain't we got the tallest pine in creation right here on the spot?"

The postmaster's eyes widened. Even Kate was startled at the suggestion.

"You'd cut down the old tree?" she inquired.

"Wher's your sense?" demanded Dy roughly. "Cut down the old pine? Who's goin to do it? Who's got the grit?"

"It don't need grit to saw that tree – only a saw," smiled Billy, provokingly.

But Dy had no sense of humor at the moment.

"Pshaw! What about the Indian cuss on it?" he demanded. "Ther' ain't a boy in this valley 'ud drive a saw into that tree. You're talking foolish."

Billy grew very red.

"Am I?" he cried, angrily. "Well, I ain't no sawyer, but I'll say right here if the church needs that pine I'll fetch it down if it's only to show you that Charlie Bryant's notions are better than

yours. I'll do it if the work kills me."

"Which it surely will," said Dy significantly.

But Kate had no liking for the turn the conversation had taken, and attempted to divert it.

"No, no," she cried, with a laugh that was a trifle forced. "That's the worst of you men when you begin to argue. You generally get spiteful. Just like women. Art or architecture, it doesn't matter a bit. We're all proud of this lovely little church. But I must be off. I've a committee meeting to attend. Then there's a church sewing bee. See you again."

She turned away and began to pick her way from joist to joist toward the doorway in the wall. Her progress occupied all her attention and careful balance. Thus she was left wholly unaware of the man who was standing framed in the opening watching her. Her first realization came with the sound of his voice. And so startling was its effect that she lost her balance, and must have taken an undignified fall between the joists, had not a pair of strong hands been thrust out to save her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kate," cried Fyles earnestly, as, aided by his supporting arms, she regained her balance. "I thought you knew I was here – had seen me."

Kate freed herself as quickly as she could. Her action was almost a rebuff, and suggested small enough thanks. Probably none of the villagers would have met with similar treatment.

She felt angry. She did not know why, and her words of thanks had no thanks in their tone.

“Thank you,” she said coldly. Then she looked up into the keen face before her and beheld its easy confident smile. “It was real stupid of me. But – you see, I didn’t guess anybody was there.”

“No.”

Kate stepped down through the doorway, and stood beside the officer, whose horse was grazing a few yards away upon a trifling patch of weedy grass. Her annoyance was passing.

“I’d heard you’d come into Rocky Springs,” she said. “Everybody is – is excited about it.”

Inspector Fyles was still smiling as he returned her glance. He was thinking, at that moment, that the passing of time only added to Kate Seton’s attractiveness. His quick eyes took in the simplicity of her costume, while he realized its comparative costliness for a village like Rocky Springs.

“I don’t guess there’s much to be excited about – yet,” he said. “Maybe that’ll come later, for – some of them. I’m going to be around for quite a while.”

Kate was looking ahead down the trail. She was half-heartedly seeking an excuse for leaving him. Perhaps the man read something of her thought, for he abruptly nodded in the direction of the village.

“You’re going on down?” he inquired casually.

“Yes. I’ve a church committee to attend. I am rather late.”

“Then maybe I may walk with you?”

The man’s manner was perfectly deferential, and something about it pleased his companion more than she would have

admitted. Somehow she resented him and liked him at the same time. She was half afraid of him, too. But her fear was wholly sub-conscious, and would certainly have been promptly denied had she been made aware of it.

“Your horse?” she protested. “You – you are riding.”

But Fyles only shook his head.

“We needn’t bother about him,” he declared easily. “You see, he’ll just walk right on.”

They moved on toward the mouth of the trail at the edge of the clearing, and Kate, watching the horse, saw it suddenly throw up its head and begin to follow in that indifferent manner so truly equine, picking at the blades of grass as it came.

“What a dear creature,” she exclaimed impulsively. “Did – did you train him that way?”

Fyles smilingly shook his head.

“Taught himself,” he said. “Poor Peter’s a first-class baby. He hates to be left alone. Guess if I went on walking miles he’d never be more than ten yards behind me.”

They walked on. Kate for the most part seemed interested only in the horse following so close behind, while Fyles made small secret of his interest in her. But for awhile talk seemed difficult.

Finally it was Kate who was forced to take the initiative with this big, loose-limbed man of the plains. She searched her brains for an appropriate subject, and, finally, blundered into the very matter she had intended to avoid.

“I suppose there’s going to be a very busy time about here,

now you've come around?" she said. "I suppose the lawlessness of this place will receive a check that's liable to make some folks pretty uncomfortable?"

She smiled up at her companion with just a suspicion of irony in her dark eyes, and the man who had to rely on his wits so much in his life's work found it necessary to think hard before replying.

The result of his thought was less than he could have hoped, for he had already learned, with some misgiving, of her friendliness with Charlie Bryant. However, the opportunity seemed a suitable one, so he added a gravity of tone to his reply.

"There are people in this valley to whom my presence will make no difference. There are others – well, others whose company is worth avoiding. Say, Miss Kate, maybe you haven't a notion of a policeman's work – and penalties. Maybe you know nothing of the meaning of crime, as we understand it. Maybe you think us just paid machines, without feelings, without sentiment, cold, ruthless creatures who are here to run down criminals, as the old-time Indians ran down the buffalo, in a wanton love of destroying life. Believe me, it isn't so. We're particularly humane, and would far rather see folks well within the law and prospering, the same as we want to prosper ourselves. We don't fancy the work of shutting up our fellow creatures from all enjoyment of the life about us, or curtailing that life for them by so much as a second. Still, if folks obstinately refuse to come within the law of their own free will, then, for the sake of all other law-abiding folk, they must be forced to do so, or be made to suffer. Yes,

I am here to do certain work, and what's more, I don't quit till it's done. It may cost me nothing but a deal of work, and some regret, it may cost me my life, it may cost other lives. But the work will go on till it is finished, and though I may not see that finish, there will be others to take my place. That is the work of the police in this country. It has always been so, and, finally, we always achieve our purpose. In the end a criminal hasn't a dog's chance of escape."

The man's calmly spoken words were not without their effect. The irony in Kate's glance had merged into a gravity of expression that was not without admiration for the speaker. Furtively she took in the clean-cut profile, the square jaw, the strongly marked brows of the man under his prairie hat, then his powerful active frame. He was strikingly powerful in his suggestion of manhood.

"It seems all different when you put it that way," she said thoughtfully. "Yes, I guess you're right, we folks sort of get other ideas of the police. Maybe it's living among a people who are notoriously – well, human. You don't hear nice things about the police in this valley, and I s'pose one gets in the same way of thinking. But –"

Kate broke off, and her dark eyes gazed half wistfully out over the valley.

"But?"

Fyles urged her. Nor did his manner suggest any of his official capacity. He was interested. He simply wanted her to go on

talking. It was pleasant to listen to her rich thrilling voice, it was more pleasant than he could have believed possible.

Kate laughed quietly.

“Maybe what I was going to say will – will hurt you,” she said. “And I don’t want to hurt you.”

Fyles shook his head.

“We police don’t consider our official feelings. They, and any damage done to them, are simply part of our work.”

They had reached the main village trail. The girl deliberately halted and stood facing him.

“I was thinking it a pity you came here in – time of peace,” she said quickly. “I was thinking how much better it would have been to wait until a cargo of liquor was being run, and then get the culprits red-handed. You see,” she went on naively, “you’ve got time to look around you now, and – and listen to the gossip of the village, and form opinions which – which may put you on a false scent. Believe me,” she cried, with sudden warmth, “I’d be glad to see you measure your wits against the real culprits. Maybe you’d be successful. Who can say? Anyway, you’d get a sound idea of whom you were after, and would not be chasing a phantom, as you are likely to be now, if you listen to the talk of this place. Believe me, I hold no brief for wrongdoers. They must take their chances. If they are discovered and captured they must pay the penalty. But I know how deceptive appearances may be in this valley, and – and it would break my heart if – a great wrong were done, however inadvertently.”

The wide reaches of the valley were spread out before them. Kate was gazing away out westward, where, high up on the hillside, Charlie Bryant's house was perched like an eagle's eyrie. Even at that distance two figures could be seen standing on the veranda, and neither she nor Fyles, who was following the direction of her gaze, needed a second thought as to their identity.

"You're thinking of Charlie Bryant," the man said after a pause. "You're warning me – off him."

"Maybe I am."

Kate's eyes challenged the officer fearlessly.

"Why?"

The man's searching eyes were not seeking those secrets which might help his official capacity. Other feelings were stirring.

"Why? Because Charlie is a weak, sick creature, deserving all the pity and help the strong can give him. Because he is a gentle, ailing man who has only contrived to earn the contempt of most, for his weakness, and the blame of those who are strong enough to help. Because he is, for all his weaknesses, an – honest man."

Fyles gazed up at the house on the hillside again, and Kate's anxious eyes watched him.

"Is that all?" he inquired presently. Nor could there be any mistake as to the thought behind the question.

A dash of recklessness, that recklessness which her sister had deplored the absence of, now drove Kate headlong.

"No. It is not all," she cried. "For five years I have been

striving to help him to escape from the demon which possesses him. Oh, and I know how hopeless it has all been. I love Charlie, Mr. Fyles. I love him as though he were my brother, or even my own son. I would do anything in the world to save him, and I tell you frankly, openly, if the police seek to fix any crime this valley is accused of upon him, I will strive, by every possible means, whether right or wrong, to defeat their ends.”

The woman’s face was aglow with reckless courage. Her eyes were shining with an enthusiasm which the man before her delighted in. All her defiance of him, of the law, only made her appeal the more surely. But he was not thinking of her words. He was thinking of her beauty, her courage, while he repeated her words mechanically.

“Your brother – or even your own son?”

“Yes, yes,” Kate cried. Then she caught a sharp breath, and a deep flush suffused her cheeks and brow. The significance of the man’s thoughtful words and tone had come home to her. She knew he was not thinking of anything else she had said. Only of her regard for that other man.

She abruptly held out her hand and Stanley Fyles took it. Her good-bye came with a curtness that might well have inspired consternation. But the policeman replied to it without any such feeling, and passed on with his faithful Peter trailing leisurely behind him.

CHAPTER XIX

BILL MAKES THREE DISCOVERIES

It was Big Brother Bill's third morning in the valley of Leaping Creek, and in that brief time his optimism and enthusiasm for the affairs of life in general had suffered shocks from which, at the moment, recovery seemed altogether doubtful.

Like all simple natures, once mental disquiet set in it was not easily shaken off. So, about nine o'clock in the morning, he found himself sitting on the sill of the barn doorway, his broad back propped against the casing, hugging his troubles to himself, and, incidentally, smoking like a miniature smoke-stack.

The place was quite still under the blazing morning sun; a collar-chain rattled inside the barn where a few horses stood impatiently swishing off the attacks of troublesome flies with their long tails; a hen, somewhere nearby, clucked to her brood of wandering chicks; an occasional grunt, and curious snuffing, came from the regions of the dilapidated hog pen. These were the only signs of life about the place. For Charlie, after displaying an unusual taciturnity, had taken himself off for the day, upon work which he had declared to be imperative, and Kid Blaney, after feeding and watering his horses, had done the same thing, on a similar excuse.

Now, Bill felt he must do one of those very big "thinks," which, on occasion, he had been known to achieve. He felt that the time had come when something must really be done to ease the pressure upon his mental endurance.

The previous night had furnished the climax, a painful climax, to all he had learned of his brother's doings, of his brother's guilt. Yes, he no longer shrank from using that hideous word. All suspected Charlie, the police, everybody, except Kate Seton, and Charlie had practically admitted his guilt to him personally, without any apparent shame or regret. But since then, since Bill had listened to the loyal defense of Kate, he had seen for himself the smugglers and their chief at work upon their nefarious trade, and thus further proof was no longer necessary.

All mystery was banished. The whole thing, in spite of Kate's denial, was as plain as daylight. Charlie was a whisky-runner. The head of the gang. His little "one-eyed" ranch was the merest blind. His prosperity, if prosperity he possessed at all, was the prosperity of successful defiance of the law. To the simple brother this realization was a terrible one. Charlie, the brother to whom he had always been so devoted, was a crook, a mere common crook.

His discovery of the previous evening had come as a far greater shock than might have been expected, considering all Bill had heard and witnessed of his brother's doings. But then it is the way of things to make the witnessing of a disaster far more terrible than listening to the story told in language however

lurid. Last night he had watched his brother supplying contraband liquor to the saloonkeeper.

It had happened in this way. After his first experiences on the night of his arrival he had been determined to avoid so unpleasant a sequence of occurrences on the second. Charlie had ridden off directly after supper, and Bill took the opportunity of paying an evening call upon Kate and Helen Seton. The chance he had deemed too good to miss. At least there was nothing of mystery and suspicion there, and he desired more than anything to breathe a wholesome air of frank honesty. These girls, particularly Helen, were the one bright spot in this crime-shadowed valley. To his mind Helen was a perfect ray of sunshine, which made the shadows in the place something more than possible of endurance.

His call was welcomed in a manner that was obvious, even to his simple mind. And never in his life had he spent an evening of more whole-hearted enjoyment than he did with Helen, while her less volatile sister considerably kept herself more or less out of the way.

Had his evening ended there his peace of mind might have suffered no further shock, but, as it was, the comparatively natural desire to celebrate his successful evening with a drink at O'Brien's sent him off in the direction of the village.

Proceeding rapidly along the trail, full of happy thoughts of Helen, with her ready wit and gaiety, he was dreaming pleasantly all those delightful dreams, which every man at some time in his life, finds running through his head. Then suddenly he was

aroused to the scene about him by the yellow light of a back window of O'Brien's saloon, just ahead of him.

He was approaching the saloon from the rear! How had this happened? Then he discovered that, by some strange chance, he had left the main trail, and was proceeding up a wagon track, which evidently led to the barn behind the saloon.

He turned off to seek a way round to the front of the building, and soon became so involved that he finally drew up at a low wire fence, enclosing the rear buildings, with the lamp-lit window still directly ahead of him. He was about to step over the wire when a movement, and the sound of hushed voices, caught and held his attention.

He stood quite still. It was still fairly early, and the moon had not yet risen. The outbuildings rose up in shadowy outline against the starlit sky, and only the lamplight in the window made anything clear at all. It was this window, and the shaft of light it threw across the intervening space that held his attention, for it was somewhere in the shadow, to the right of it, he heard the movement and the voices.

The movement continued, and then, quite suddenly, a figure stepped into the light. Bill drew back farther into the shadow. It was a man's figure, tall and lean. He was carrying something on his shoulder, which the watcher had no difficulty in recognizing as a small barrel. Close behind him followed a second man. He, too, was tall and spare, and he, too, was burdened with a keg upon his shoulder. In a moment Bill knew he was witnessing a

transaction in contraband liquor between the whisky-runners and the saloonkeeper.

His interest became absorbed. He had recognized neither of the men, and a wild hope stirred within him that perhaps he was to gain definite proof that Kate Seton's belief was right, and that Charlie had nothing to do with these people. His excitement and hope became intense.

For the moment the men had vanished through the darkened doorway of the barn. Their voices were still hoarsely whispering, and though he could not catch a word of what was said, he felt that they were merely discussing their work. He waited for them to reappear. It was his anxious desire to finally assure himself that Charlie was not with them.

He had not long to wait. The voices drew nearer. First one man emerged from the barn. It was one of the two he had seen go in. Then the other followed. They crossed the light once more. He was absolutely certain now, and a great thankfulness swept over him.

But his relief was short-lived. A third man now appeared from the barn. He was smaller, much smaller, and very slight. His face and hair were undistinguishable beneath his prairie hat, but his dark jacket, and loose riding breeches were plain enough to the onlooker. In a moment Bill's heart sank. Even in that dim light he knew he was gazing upon the figure he had seen the night before at the old pine. There could be no mistake. Though he could not see the man's face, his figure was sufficient. He felt convinced

that it was his brother. Kate was wrong, and everybody else was right. Charlie was indeed the whisky-runner whom the police were after.

Any purpose he had had before was promptly abandoned. He hurried away, sick at heart, and hastily returned to the ranch to find Charlie – still out.

After what he had witnessed he had no desire to meet Charlie that night, so he went straight to bed, but not to sleep. For a long time he lay awake thinking, thinking of his discovery. Then at last, thoroughly weary with thinking, he fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed that Inspector Fyles and his men were pursuing him over a plain, upon which there was no cover, and over which he made no progress whatsoever.

Now, as he sat at the door of the barn, brooding over all he had seen and discovered, he felt that there were but two courses open to him. He must either, in his own phraseology, “get out or go on.” And by that he meant he must either renounce all his affection for his erring brother, and leave him to his fate, or, like Kate, he must stand by to help him in the time of trouble, and do all in his power to save him from himself. There was not much doubt as to which direction his inclinations took, but he felt it was no time for permitting his feelings to rule him. He must think a big “think,” and adopt its verdict.

But the “think” would not come. Only would his inclinations obtrude. There was nothing mean or petty in this big creature. He loved his brother frankly and freely, and his absurd heart would

not permit him to thrust those feelings aside.

Groping and struggling, and undecided, yet convinced, he finally rose from his seat and stretched and shook himself like some great dog. Then he looked about rather helplessly. At that moment his eyes came to rest on the distant house of the Setons', and, as he beheld a woman emerge from its door, a great inspiration came to him.

In a moment his dilemma disentangled itself. He laughed in very triumph as the idea swept through his brain. It permeated his whole being with a sense of delight. He only wondered he had not thought of it before. It was the very thing. How the devil had he managed to miss it? Helen was as full of plain wisdom and sense, as her pretty gray eyes were full of laughter. She was tremendously clever. She was always reading books. Hadn't he picked them up? Why, of course. He would go and catch her up, and – do a big powwow and “think” with her.

His enthusiasm once more at high pressure, Big Brother Bill set off hot foot to intercept the girl he had seen just leaving her home. She would have to cross the bridge, that was certain – then – Ah, yes, the church. The new church. She generally took that in on her way to the village. She had told him that. Well, that was quite easy. He would cut across to the old pine, he couldn't lose himself doing that, then the trail would run right on down by the church.

For once he made no mistake in taking a short cut. He reached the old pine safely, and felt like congratulating himself. Then a

disconcerting thought occurred to him as he contemplated the trail down which he must proceed. The girl had a long way to go, and he had hurried desperately. She wouldn't be up at the church for some time yet. He felt annoyed with himself for always doing things in such a hurry. It was quite absurd. Now he would have either to remain where he was, kicking his heels about, or go on down to the church, and make it look as though he were purposely lying in wait for her.

He felt that would be a mistake. She might resent it. She might regard it as an impertinence. He couldn't afford to offend her, he was much too anxious for her approval. He remembered her resentment at their first meeting, and – laughed. But he told himself she was quite right. She thought he had been spying on her. If he had been it would have been a low-down trick. Anyway he would take no chance now. He would wait right there, and —

A sudden commotion in the scrub beside him abruptly changed the trend of his thought. He was startled. The commotion went on. Then with a rush and whirr of wings, and a hoarse-throated squawk, a large bird flew up, clutching the ruffled body of a lesser one in its fierce claws, its great flapping wings brushing his sleeve as it swept on past him.

His wondering blue eyes followed the bird's flight until it passed beyond the tree tops, and became hidden by the trunk of the old pine. Then he looked down into the bush, searching for the nest of fledglings he felt sure the hawk had robbed of a mother.

He was absurdly grieved that his gun was still with his missing baggage. It would have delighted him to have brought the lawless pirate to book, and restored the mother to her panic stricken chicks.

He peered into the bush searching for the nest, but the foliage was dense, and though he groped the boughs aside he could discover no signs of it. Still, the thought of those motherless chicks had stirred him, and he persisted.

Breaking his way in among the boughs he searched more carefully. But at last, after wasting nearly a quarter of an hour upon his tender-hearted sympathy, he finally decided that he must be wrong. There was no nest of fledglings. He really felt quite disappointed. Just as he was about to abandon his search something fluttered at the very roots of the bush. It was of a grayish blue. With a lunge he made a grab, caught it, and stood up. It was a ball of paper, loosely crumpled.

With an exclamation of disgust he made his way out of the bush and found himself confronted by the laughing gray eyes of Helen Seton.

“For goodness’ sake, Mr. Bryant!” the girl exclaimed, “whatever are you playing at? Is it Injuns, or – or are you busy on one of your short cuts? I’m nearly scared to death. I surely am.”

Bill looked into that laughing face, and slowly one great hand went up to his perspiring brow. It was the action of a man at a loss.

“Guess you aren’t half as scared as I am,” he blurted out. “I’ve

just had the life scared right out of me. It was a pirate hawk. A big one flapped up out of that bush, with a small bird in its claws. I – I was looking for the little feller's fledglings, and the nest. Sort of birds' nesting. You see, I guessed they'd need feeding – with their mother gone."

Helen looked into the eyes of this absurd creature, and – wondered. Was there – was there ever a man quite so simple and – soft hearted? Her eyes became very gentle.

"And did you – find them?" she asked quietly.

Bill shook his head, and looked ruefully down at the paper in his hand.

"Only this," he said, almost dejectedly.

His air was too much for the girl's sense of humor. She laughed as she shifted the folded easel, and japanned tin box she was carrying, from one hand to the other.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," she cried, stifling her mirth. "And – and I do so hate hawks. They're such villains, and – and the valley's full of them. But there, the valley is full of everything bad – isn't it?"

Bill was smoothing out the paper absent mindedly. Helen's reference had reminded him of his purpose. Her presence somehow made it difficult.

But Helen went on without apparently noticing his awkwardness.

"Tell me, Mr. Bryant, what was it brought you out this way, when you ought to be worrying around getting wise to – to the ranching business?" she demanded.

Bill flung back his broad shoulders, and, with the movement, seemed to fling off every care. He laughed cordially.

“Say, you make me laugh,” he cried. “Now if I was to tell you what had brought me this way, you’d sure get mad.” Then he discovered the things she was carrying for the first time. “Say, can’t I carry those things?” he cried, reaching out and possessing himself of them without ceremony. “Why, it’s a paint box, and – and easel,” he cried in awe-struck tones. “I didn’t guess you – painted.”

Helen was frankly delighted with him, but she promptly denied the charge.

“Paint? ‘Daub,’ you mean. Guess Charlie tried to knock painting into my – my thick head. But he had to quit it after I reached the daubing stage. I don’t think he guesses I’ll ever win prizes at it,” she went on, moving up toward the pine. “Still, I might sell some of my daubs among the worst drinking cases in the village.”

But Bill felt the outrage of such possibilities.

“I’ll buy ’em all,” he cried. “Just name your price, I’d – I’d like to collect works of art,” he added enthusiastically.

Helen turned abruptly and glared.

“How dare you laugh at me?” she cried, in mock anger. “I – I might have paid you to take one away, but I just won’t – now. So there. Works of art! How dare you? And what are you hugging that old piece of paper to death for? Give it to me. Perhaps it’s somebody’s love letter. Though folks don’t generally write love

letters on blue paper. It suggests something too legal.”

Bill yielded up the paper with a good-natured smile.

“It’s all mussed and dirty,” he said, in a sort of apology.

“That’s up to me,” cried Helen. “Anyway a woman’s curiosity don’t mind dirt.”

She smoothed the paper carefully as she paused at the foot of the pine. Bill looked around.

“Is this where you paint?” he asked.

Helen nodded. She was busy with the paper. Bill occupied himself by thoroughly entangling the legs of the folded easel, in an endeavor to set it up for her. He tried it every way without success, and finally desisted with a regretful sigh.

“Was there ever – ?” he began.

But Helen broke in with a sharp exclamation, which promptly drew him to her side.

“This – this isn’t a love letter at all,” she cried amazedly. “It’s – it’s – listen! ‘Please have ten gallons of Brandy and twenty Rye laid in the manger in my barn. Money enclosed. O’B!’”

Helen looked up at the man beside her. All her laughter had gone. There was something like tragedy in her serious eyes.

Bill was staring at the paper.

“Why that’s – that’s an order for – liquor from O’Brien,” he said, with the air of having made a discovery.

His brilliancy passed the girl by. She merely nodded.

“How – how did it get there?” she ejaculated.

“Why, some one must have thrown it there,” Bill declared

deliberately.

Again the man's shrewdness lacked an appreciative audience. The girl made no answer. She was thinking. She moved aside and leaned against the rough trunk of the mighty pine. She was still staring at the paper.

But her movement caught the man's attention, and the sudden realization of the proximity of the pine recalled many things to his mind. The pine. That was where he had seen Charlie, his first night in the valley. That was where the police were watching him. That was where he vanished. It was at the pine that O'Brien had warned him Charlie had gone to collect "greenbacks" – dollars. That was O'Brien's order, money enclosed. Charlie had found the order and money. Then, when he was interrupted by his, Bill's, shout he had thrown the order away.

The realization was like a douche of cold water, in spite of all he had seen and knew. Then he did a thing he hardly understood the reason of. It was the result of impulse – a sort of subconscious impulse. He reached out and took the weather-stained paper from the girl's yielding hands and deliberately tore it up.

"Why – why are you doing that?" Helen asked sharply.

Bill forced himself to a smile, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. Then, after a pause: "I guess that order has been filled." A bitterness found expression in the quality of his smile. "I saw the liquor delivered at O'Brien's last night. I saw the 'runners' at work. Charlie was with them. Say, where d'you paint from? Right here?"

Helen looked up into the man's face. The last vestige of levity had passed from her. Her cheeks had paled, and she was striving desperately to read behind the ill-fitting smile she beheld. Bill knew. Bill knew all that everybody believed in the valley. He had done what nobody else had done. He had seen Charlie at his work. A desperate feeling of tragedy was tugging at her heart. This great big soul had received the full force of the blow, and somehow she felt that it had been a staggering blow.

All her sympathy went out to him. Now she utterly ignored his question. She sat down at the foot of the tree and signed to him.

"Sit here," she said soberly. "Sit here, and – talk to me. You came out here this morning because – because you wanted to find some one to talk to. Well?"

Bill obeyed her. There was no question in his mind. She had fathomed his purpose, and he was glad. He replied to her challenge without hesitation, and strove to speak lightly. But as he went on all lightness passed out of his manner, and the girl was left with a full view of those stirring feelings which he had not the wit nor inclination to secrete for long.

"Say," he began, "you asked what I was doing here, and guessed right – first time. Only, maybe you didn't guess it was you I came out to find. I saw you leave your house, and figured you'd make the new church. I was going right on down to the new church. Yes, I wanted to talk – to you. You see, I came here full of a – a sort of hope, and – and in two days I find the arm of the law reaching out to grab up my brother. I've given up everything

to come and – join. Now I’m up against it, and I can’t just think right. I sort of need some one to help me think – right. You see, I guessed you could do it.”

The man was sitting with his arms clasped about his knees. His big blue eyes were staring out over the valley. But he saw nothing of it.

Helen, watching him, remained quite unconscious of the tribute to herself. She was touched. She was filled with a tender feeling she had never known before. She found herself longing to reach out and take hold of one of those big, strong hands, and clasp it tightly and protectingly in her own. She longed to tell him that she understood his grief, and was yearning to share it with him, that she might lighten the burden which had fallen upon him. But she did neither of these things. She just waited for him to continue.

“You see,” he went on, slowly, with almost painful deliberation, “I kind of feel we can think two ways. One with our heads, and the other with our hearts. That’s how I seem to be thinking now. And between the two I’m all mussed up.”

The girl nodded.

“I – I think I know,” she said quietly.

The man’s face lit for a moment.

“I knew you would,” he cried, in a burst of enthusiasm. Then the light died out of his eyes again, and he shook his head. “But you can’t,” he said hopelessly. “Nobody can, but – me. I love old Charlie.”

“What does your head say?” asked Helen abruptly.

“My head?” The man released his knees and pushed back his hat, as though for her to read for herself. “Guess my head says I best get aboard a train quick, and get right back East where I came from, and – stop there.”

“And leave Charlie to his – fate?” suggested the girl.

The man nodded.

“That’s what my head says.”

“And your heart?”

Helen’s gray eyes were very tender as they looked into the troubled face beside her.

Bill’s broad shoulders lifted, with the essence of nonchalance.

“Oh, that says get right up, and shut off the life of every feller at the main who tries to do Charlie any hurt.”

A sudden emotion stirred the girl at his side, and she turned her head away lest he should see that which her eyes betrayed.

“The head is the wisest,” she said without conviction.

But she was wholly unprepared for the explosion her words invoked.

“Then the head can be – damned!” Bill cried fiercely. And in a moment the shadows seemed to fall from about him. He suddenly sprang up and stood towering before her. “I knew if I talked to you about things you’d fix me right,” he cried, with passionate enthusiasm. “I tell you my head’s just a fool thing that generally butts in all wrong. You’ve just made me see right. You’re that wise and clever. And – and when I get fixed like I’ve been, I’ll

always need to come to you. Say, there isn't another girl in all the world as bright as you. I'm going to stop right here, and I'll smash every blamed policeman to a pulp if he lays hands on Charlie. Charlie may be what he is. I don't care. If he needs help I'm here to give it. I tell you if Charlie goes to the penitentiary I go with him. If they hang him, they'll hang me, too. That's how your sister feels. That's how I feel. That's how – ”

“I feel, too,” put in Helen quickly. “Oh, you great Big Brother Bill,” she went on, in her sudden joy and enthusiasm. “You're the loyalest and best thing I ever knew. And – and if you aren't careful I'll – I'll give you one of my daubs after all. Come along. Let's go and look at the new church. Let's go and see how all the pious, whited sepulchers of this valley are getting on with their soul-saving business. I – I couldn't paint a thing to-day.”

CHAPTER XX

IN THE FAR REACHES

Charlie Bryant's horse was a good one, far better than a rancher of his class might have been expected to ride. It was a big, compact animal with the long sloping pasterns of a horse bred for speed. It possessed those wonderful rounded ribs, which seemed to run right up to quarters let down like those of a racehorse. It was a beautiful creature, and as it chafed under the gentle, restraining hand of its rider its full veins stood out like ropes, and its shoulders and flanks were a-lather of sweat.

They were traveling over a broken country a few miles up the valley. There was no road of any sort, only cattle tracks, which, amid the wild tangle of bush, made progress difficult and slow.

The man's eyes were brooding, and his effeminate face was overcast as he rode. The wild scene about him went for nothing, even to his artist eyes. His thoughts were full to the brim with things that held them concentrated to the exclusion of all else. And, for all he thought, or saw, or felt, of his surroundings, he might have been footing the superheated plains of a tropical desert.

He was thinking of a woman. She was never really out of his thoughts, and his heart was torn with the hopelessness of the passion consuming him. No overshadowing threat could give him

the least disquiet, no physical fear ever seemed to touch him. But every thought of the one woman whose image was forever before him could sear and lacerate his heart almost beyond endurance.

He had no blame for her at any time. He had no protest to offer that her love, the love of a wife for a husband, was utterly beyond his reach. How could it be otherwise? He knew himself so well for what he was, he had so subtle an appreciation of all he must lack in the eyes of a big spirited, human woman, that, to his troubled mind, the situation as it was had almost become inevitable.

Now as he rode, he thought, too, of his newly arrived brother, and the hatefulness of personal comparison made him almost cringe beneath their flagellations. Bill, so big of heart and body, so lacking in the many abilities which go to make up the man in men's eyes, but which count for so little in a woman's, so strong in the buoyancy and fearlessness that was his. He felt he could almost hate him for these things. Bill had not one ugly thought or feeling in the whole of his nature. Temptation? He barely understood the word, because he was so naturally wholesome.

But more than these things it was the memory of that which, since his earliest youth, had looked back at him out of the mirror, that robbed Charlie Bryant of so much peace now. That, and the weakness which seemed to fit the vision so well. Whereas Bill, this child of the same parents, was all that might be, his own form and manner made him shudder as he thought of them. Then there was that devil haunting him, and from whom there seemed

to be no escape.

How could he ever hope that Kate Seton would do more than lend her strong, pitying affection for his support? How could she ever look to him for support and guidance? His sense of proportion was far too acute to permit so grievous an error.

In some perverse way his mentality was abnormally acute. He saw with eyes which were inspired by a brain capable of vast achievement, but which possessed none of that equipoise so necessary for a well-balanced manhood. And it told him all that, and forced conviction upon him. It told him so much of that which no man should believe until it be thrust upon him overwhelmingly by the bitter experiences of life. His whole brain was permeated by a pessimism forced upon him by a morbid introspection, resulting from an undue appreciation of his own physical and moral shortcomings.

Yet with it all he bore no resentment except against the perversity of such a lot as his. And in this lay the germ of a self-pity, which is a specter to be dreaded more than anything else in life. While deploring the conditions under which he must live, robbed, as he believed he was robbed, of the possibility of winning for himself all those things which belong to the manhood really existing beneath his exterior of denial, he yet felt he would rather have his bread divided than be denied that trifling food which made it possible for him to go on living.

Kate's tender pity, Kate's warmth of affection, an affection she might even bestow upon some pet animal, was preferable to

that she should shut him entirely out of her life. It left him free to drink in the dregs of happiness, although the nectar itself was denied him.

He could accept such conditions. Yes, he could almost be satisfied with them, since he believed no others to be forthcoming. But, and a dark fury of jealousy flooded his heart as he thought, he could not witness another drinking the nectar while he was condemned to the dregs. He felt that that way lay madness. That way was more than could be endured. He could endure all else, whatever life had in store for him, but the thought that he must stand by while Kate be given to another was more than his fate, for all its perversity, could expect of him.

From his veranda that morning, as on the morning before, Charlie had seen Kate and Stanley Fyles walking together. More than that he had heard from Kate herself of her admiration of the police officer. And, in these things, so trifling perhaps, so commonplace, he had read the forecast of a mind naturally dreading, and eaten up by suspicion. He would have been ready to suspect his own brother, had not a merciful providence made it plain to him that Bill possessed interest solely in the laughing gray eyes of Kate's sister.

Now, as he rode along, he saw dull visions of a future in which Kate no longer played a part. A demon of jealousy was driving him. He longed impotently for the power to rob the man of the possibility of winning that which was dearest to him. In the momentary madness which his jealousy invoked he felt that

the death of this man, his life crushed out between his own lean hands, would be something approaching a joy worth living for.

But such murderous thoughts were merely passing. They fled again before the pessimism so long his habit. It would not help him one iota. It would rob Kate of a happiness which he felt was her due, which he desired for her; it would rob him of the last vestige of even her pitying regard.

Then he laughed to himself, a laugh full of a hatefulness that somehow did not seem to fit him. It was inspired by the thought of how easy it would be to shoot the heart out of the man he deemed his rival. Others had done such things, he told himself. Then, with a world of bitterness, he added, far better men than himself.

But he knew that no such intention was really his. He knew that beneath all his bitterness of feeling, and before all things, he desired Kate's happiness and security. A strange magnanimity, in a nature so morally weak, so lacking in all that the world regards as the signs of true manhood, was his. Even his life, he felt, would be small enough price to pay for the happiness and security of the only woman who had ever held out the strong arm of support and affection for him to lean upon, the only woman he had ever truly loved.

So a nightmare of thought teemed through his brain as he rode. Now he would fall into a sweat of panic as fantastic specters of hideous possibilities arose and confronted him, now only a world of grief would overwhelm him. Again a passion of

jealousy would drive him to the verge of madness, only to be followed swiftly by that lurking self-pity which robbed him of the wholesome human instincts inspired by the spirit of battle in affairs of life. Then would come that overwhelming depression, bred of the long sapping of his moral strength, while through it all, a natural gentleness strove to soar above the ashes of baser fires.

It was with a sigh of relief, as his horse finally cleared a close growing bush, he emerged upon a small clearing. In the midst of this stood a corral. But, for the moment, he passed this by, and rode toward a log hut of ancient construction and design.

He drew the restive creature up and dismounted. Then he flung the reins over one of the posts of the old corral. The place was beyond the boundary of his homestead and belonged to a time when the valley knew few inhabitants beyond half-breeds and Indians. He had discovered it, and had turned it into the service of a storage for those things which were required only rarely upon his ranch, and at the more remote parts of it.

Inside the corral stood a wagon. It was an ordinary box wagon, but nearby stood a hay-rack, which signified its uses. Then there was a mower, and horse rake. There were other odds and ends, too, but it appeared obvious that haying operations were carried on in this direction, and this old corral so found its uses.

After glancing casually in the direction of these things Charlie passed round to the door of the hut. And herein his purpose became more obscure.

The place was heavily thatched and suggested long disuse. Its air was less of dilapidation than desertion, and lichen and fungus played a large part in such an aspect. The walls were low, and the heavy roof was flat and sloping. As the man drew near a flight of birds streamed from its eaves, screaming their resentment at such intrusion.

Charlie appeared not to notice them, so intent was he upon his purpose. He walked hurriedly, and finally paused at the doorway. For a moment he almost seemed in doubt. Then, with a thrust, he pushed the door, the hinges of which creaked protestingly as it opened inwards.

Another fluttering of wings, another chorus of harsh screams, and a further flight of birds poured from within and rushed headlong into the brilliant sunshine.

The place was certainly very old. A dreadful mustiness pervaded the atmosphere. The dirt, too, the heavy deposit of guano upon the floor, made it almost revolting. There was no furniture of any sort, while yet it conveyed the suggestion that, at some remote period, it had been the habitation of man.

A rough boarding lined the walls of logs very nearly up to the sloping roof. Rusty nails protruded here and there, suggesting hangers for utensils. A circular aperture in the roof denoted the presence, at one time, of a stove, possibly a cooking stove. And these things might well have raised in the mind a picture of a lean, black-haired, cadaverous man of low type, living a secret life amid the wilderness of this valley, with crime, crime against

the laws of both God and Man as his object. Just such a man as is the notorious half-breed cattle thief.

Stepping over to the far end of the room, where the light shone down through the stovepipe hole in the roof, Charlie halted before the rough boarding at the angle of the wall. Then he reached out and caught the upper edge of the wooden lining, which, here, was much lower than at any other point, and exerted some strength. Four of the upright plankings slid upward together in a sort of rough panel, and revealed a shallow cupboard hewn out of the old logs behind them.

Within this opening a number of garments were hanging. There were several pairs of riding breeches, and an odd coat or two, besides other articles of man's outer attire. Added to these were two ammunition belts with holsters and revolvers.

Charlie stood gazing at the contents of the cupboard for some moments. Then he examined them, pulling each article aside as though to assure himself that nothing was missing. Each revolver, too, he withdrew from its holster and examined closely. The chambers were fully loaded. And having satisfied himself of these things he slid the boards back into their place. As they dropped back his expression was one of appreciation. No one could possibly have guessed, even from a narrow examination, what lay behind those rough, time-worn boards. Their fit was in perfect keeping with the rest of the wall lining.

He stood back and gave a final glance about him. Then he turned toward the door.

As he did so the sound of a soft whinny reached him. It came from his horse outside. A quick, startled light leaped into his dark eyes, and the next moment his movements became almost electrical. He reached the door on the run and looked out. His horse was standing with head held high and ears pricked. The creature was gazing fixedly in the direction from which it had approached the clearing.

Charlie needed nothing more. Something was approaching. Probably another horse. If so there was equally the probability of a rider upon its back.

He closed the door quickly and carefully behind him, and hurried toward the corral. He threw down the poles that barred it, and made his way to the side of the wagon. Then his movements became more leisurely.

Opening the wagon box he drew out a jack and a tin of grease. Then, still with an easy, leisurely air he jacked up one wheel and removed an axle cap.

He was intent upon his work now – curiously intent. He removed the wheel and smeared the inside of the hub with the filthy looking grease. His horse beyond the fence gave another whinny, which ended in a welcoming neigh. The man did not even look up. He replaced the wheel and spun it round. Then he examined the felloes which had shrunk in the summer heat. An answering neigh, and a final equine duet still failed to draw his attention. Nor, until a voice beyond the fence greeted him, did he look up.

“Getting ready for a journey?” said the voice casually.

Charlie looked round into the keen face of Stanley Fyles. He smiled pleasantly.

“Not exactly a journey,” he said. Then he glanced quickly at the hay-rack standing on its side. “Say, doing anything?” he cried, and his smile was not without derision.

“Nothing particular,” replied the police officer, “unless you reckon getting familiar with the geography of the valley particular.”

Charlie nodded.

“I’d say that’s particular for – a police officer.” His rich voice was at curious variance with his appearance. It was not unlike a terrier with the bay of a bloodhound.

The phenomenon was not lost upon Fyles. He was studying this meager specimen of a prairie “crook.” He had never before met one quite like him. He felt that here was a case of brain rather than physical outlawry. It might be harder to deal with than the savage, illiterate toughs he was used to.

“Yes,” returned Fyles, “we need to learn things.”

“Sure.”

Charlie pointed at the hay-rack.

“Guess you don’t feel like giving us a hand tipping that on to the wagon? I’m going haying to-morrow.”

“Sure,” cried Fyles, with an easy smile, as he leaped out of the saddle. He passed into the old corral and his quick eyes took in every detail at a glance. They came to rest on the slight

figure of the man and noted his costume. Charlie Bryant was clad in loose riding breeches, but was coatless. Nor did he display any firearms. “Two-man job, isn’t it?” he said lightly. “And you guessed to do it – single?”

Charlie’s smile was blandly disarming.

“No. I hadn’t thought to get it on to-day. The Kid’ll be with me to-morrow, or maybe my brother, Bill.”

“Ah. Brother Bill could about eat that rack on his own,” Fyles declared, as the two men set about the task.

It was a far lighter affair than it looked, and, in less than five minutes was resting perfectly balanced in its place on the wagon. Fyles looked on while Charlie went round and bolted the rack securely in its place.

“Your wagon?” the officer observed casually, while his sharp eyes took in its last details.

Charlie nodded.

“Yes. Folks borrow it some. You see, I don’t need it a heap, except at hay time.”

“No, I don’t guess you need it a heap. Say, this is a queer place tucked away up here. Old cattle station, I guess.”

Fyles’s remarks had no question in them. But he intended them to elicit a response. Charlie appeared to have nothing to conceal.

“Well, of a sort, I’d say,” he replied. “You see, this was King Fisher’s corral. There’s others around the valley, though I don’t know just where. King Fisher reigned nearly twenty years ago.

He lived in the building the folks in Rocky Springs use as a Meeting House. He was pretty tough. One of the worst badmen ever hit this part. Had a signboard set up on the trail down from the prairie. He wrote it. 'This is King Fisher's trail, take any other old trail.' I believe most folks used to take 'any other old trail.' There was one feller didn't though. And that was the end of King Fisher's reign. These secret corrals have always been used by toughs."

Fyles was smiling.

"Yes."

Charlie laughed and pointed at the hut beyond the corral.

"I'd awfully like to know some of the games that went on in there. Birds and things nest in its roof now. I guess they didn't come within a mile of it one time. They say King Fisher was mad – blood mad. If that's so, I daresay this place could tell a few yarns."

Again came Fyles's monosyllabic agreement.

Charlie turned to his wagon and went on with his greasing. And while he worked and listened to the other's talk, the memory of having seen him with Kate gathered stormily in his mind. But he still smiled when he looked up. He still replied in the light-hearted fashion in which he had accepted the police officer's coming. He was perfectly aware of the reason of the man's presence there. And, equally, he was indifferent to it.

"Where are you haying now?" Fyles inquired presently.

Charlie answered without turning from his work.

“Half a mile down stream. Guess we all hay that way. There’s no other sloughs handy on the west side of the village.”

“That’s why the wagon’s kept here?”

“Sure. Saves the horses. They’ll come out here to-morrow, and stop right here till we quit.”

Charlie spun the last wheel round after replacing the cap.

“Where are you stopping with your men?” he demanded abruptly, as he let the jack down.

“Just around,” said Fyles evasively.

“I see. On the prowl.” Charlie smiled up into the man’s shrewd, good-looking face. “You need to do some prowling around this valley if you’re going to clean things up. Yes, and I’d say you need a mighty big broom.”

“We’ve got the broom, and I guess we’ll do the work,” replied Fyles nodding. “We generally do – in the end.”

Charlie’s eyes had become thoughtful.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I s’pose you do. Guess I’ll have to be moving.”

He returned the grease and jack to the wagon box, and moved toward the gate of the corral.

“Coming my way?” he asked casually.

“Not just now. I’m looking around – some.”

Charlie laughed.

“Ah. I’d forgotten that broom.”

“Most folks do,” replied Fyles, “– until they fall over it.”

Charlie had reached his horse’s side. He unhooked the reins

from the fence, and flung them over its head. Then, with an agility quite remarkable, he vaulted into the saddle.

“Well, I hope that broom won’t come my way,” he laughed. “I’d hate falling around.”

“I hope it won’t,” said Fyles, in the same light manner, as he followed out of the corral. “That’s a dandy plug of yours,” he said with admiration, as his appreciative eyes noted the chestnut’s points.

“He surely is,” returned Charlie. “He can go some, too. I’ll give you a run one day – if you fancy yours.”

Fyles was hooking his reins over the post Charlie had vacated. “Mine?” he said. “Peter’s the quickest thing west of Winnipeg. He’ll sure give you a run when – the time comes.”

Charlie laughed. The drift of the talk, its hidden meaning, amused him.

“We’ll have to make a time, eh?”

“Sure,” said Fyles, looking him squarely in the eyes.

Charlie moved his horse away.

“Well, so long, for the present. Guess I’ll remember that challenge. Thanks for helping me with the rack. You’re stopping?”

Fyles nodded.

“Yes – for awhile.”

Charlie rode away with the air of a man with not a care in the world. But he was thinking swiftly, and his thoughts were of that hidden cupboard, and what it contained. Hope and fear

struggled for paramount place in his heart. Was the secret of that hiding place sufficiently simple to defy Stanley Fyles, or was it not? Was he the man he was reputed to be, or was he merely a clever man backed by a big authority? In the end he abandoned the troublesome point. Time alone would give him his answer.

CHAPTER XXI

WORD FROM HEADQUARTERS

Two horses ambled complacently, side by side, down the village trail. Each was ridden by the man it knew best, and was most willing to serve. Peter's affection for Stanley Fyles was probably little less than his master's affection for him. The same thing applied to Sergeant McBain, whose hard face suggested little enough of the tenderer emotions. But both men belonged to the prairie, and the long prairie trail inspires a wonderful sympathy between man and beast.

The men were talking earnestly in low voices, but their outward seeming had no suggestion of anything beyond ordinary interest.

"He's surely leaving a trail all over the valley," said Sergeant McBain, after listening to his superior's talk for some moments. "It's a clear trail, too – but it don't ever seem to lead anywhere – definite. You've made nothing of that corral place, sir?"

Fyles's eyes roamed over the scene about him in the quick, uneasy fashion of a groping mind.

"I don't know yet," he said slowly, "I've got to windward of that haying business. The fellow's haying all right. He's got a permit for cutting, and he generally puts up fifty tons. Maybe he keeps that wagon out there all the time for convenience. I can't say. But

even if he doesn't I can't see where it points."

"We can watch the place," said McBain quickly.

"That's better than speculation, but – it's clumsy."

"How, sir?"

"Why, man alive," replied Fyles sharply. "Do you think we're going to fool a crook like him by just watching? Besides –"

"Yes, sir?"

Fyles had broken off. A woman was moving down the trail ahead of them. She was a good distance away, but he had recognized the easy gait and trim figure of Kate Seton. After a moment's pause he withdrew his gaze and went on.

"I've got all I need out of that place – for the present. You've seen the wagon and – recognized it. It's the wagon they ran that last cargo in. The man who drove it was Pete Clancy. Clancy is one of Charlie Bryant's gang. I don't think we need any more – yet. We've centralized the running of that last cargo. The rest of the work is for the future. My plans are all ready. The patrol comes in from Amberley to-night. It will be ample reinforcement. We're just one move ahead of these boys, here, and we've got to keep that way. You can get right back to quarters, and wait for my return. I'm going in to the mail office to run my eye over local mail. The envelopes of a local mail make good reading – when a man's used to it."

McBain grinned in a manner that seemed to give his hard face pain.

"You get more out of the ad-dress on an envelope than any

one I ever see, sir,” he observed shrewdly.

Fyles shrugged, not ill pleased at the compliment.

“It’s practice, and – imagination. Those things, and – a good memory for handwriting, also postmarks. Say, who’s that coming down the southern trail? Looks like – ”

He broke off, shading his eyes from the burning sunlight of the valley.

McBain needed no such protection. His mahogany face screwed itself up until his eyes were mere slits.

“It ain’t part of the patrol?” he said questioningly. “Yet it’s one of our fellers. Maybe it’s a – despatch.”

Fyles’s brows drew sharply together in a frown of annoyance.

“If the chief’s sent me the word I’m waiting for that way he’s – a damn fool. I asked him for cipher mail.”

“Mr. Jason don’t ever reckon on what those who do the work want. If that feller’s riding despatch, the whole valley will know it.”

McBain’s disgust was no less than that of Fyles. His hard face was coldly set, and the despatch rider, if he were one, seemed likely to get a rough reception.

“He’ll make for the mail office,” said Fyles shortly. “We’ll go and meet him.”

He lifted Peter’s reins, and the horse responded at a jump. In a moment the two men were galloping down to Dy’s office. Fyles was the first out of the saddle, and the two stood waiting in silence for the arrival of the horseman.

There was not much doubt as to the publicity of the man's arrival. As if by magic a number of men, and as many women, appeared in the vicinity of the saloon, farther down the trail. They, too, had seen the newcomer, and they, too, were consumed with interest, though it was based on quite a different point of view from that of Stanley Fyles and Sergeant McBain.

To them a despatch rider meant important news, and probable action on the part of the authorities. Important action meant, to their minds, something detrimental to the shady side of their village life. Every man was searching his brain for an explanation, a reason for the man's coming, and every woman, sparing herself mental effort, was asking pointed questions of those who should think for her.

The man rode into the village at full gallop, and, seeing the two police horses outside the mail office, came straight on toward them.

He flung out of the saddle and saluted the inspector. Then he began fumbling in an inner pocket. Fyles understood his intention and sharply warned him.

"Not here. Now, in one word. Is it news from down East?"

The man nodded.

"Yes, sir. I believe so."

"You believe so?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Jason told me I'd to make here to-day – mid-day. Said you were waiting for this letter to act. He also said I was to avoid speaking to any one in the place till I'd delivered

the despatch into your hands. He also said I was to remain here under your orders.”

“Damnation! And we’ve had letters through the mail every day.”

“Beg pardon, sir – ”

McBain made a sign for silence, and the man broke off. But Fyles bade him go on.

“Mr. Jason warned me to be very careful, as it was a despatch he could not trust to the mail.”

Fyles gave a short laugh.

“That’ll do. Now, get mounted, and ride back the way you came into the valley. When you get out of it keep along the edge of it westwards. You’ll come to our camp five miles out. It’s in a bluff. It’s a shack on an abandoned farm. I can’t direct you better, except it’s just under the shoulder in the valley, and is approached by a cattle track. You’ll have to ride around till you locate it. McBain will be coming back soon. Maybe he’ll pick you up. Avoid questions, and still more – answers. Keep the letter till McBain gets in.”

“Very good, sir.”

The man remounted and rode away. His coming had been so sudden, his stay so brief, and his departure so rapid, that Fyles had achieved something of his purpose in repairing any damage Superintendent Jason had done to his plans in acting contrary to his subordinate’s wishes.

The sharp-eyed villagers had witnessed the interview with

suspicious lulled. There had been no despatch delivered, and the man was off again the way he had come. Surely nothing very significant had taken place. Possibly, after all, the man was merely a patrol from some outlying station.

Fyles turned to his lieutenant.

“We’re going to get busy,” he said, with a shadowy smile.

The older man could not conceal his appreciation.

“Looks that way, sir.”

“I’ll look over the mail myself,” Fyles went on. “You best get back to camp, and see to that letter. Guess you’ll wait for me to take action. You can get out across the valley south. Ride on west and ford the river up at the crossing – Winter’s Crossing. See if the patrol’s in. Then make camp – and keep an eye skinned for that boy. I’ll get along later.”

The sergeant saluted and sprang into the saddle. Fyles passed into the mail office as the man rode off.

Allan Dy was used to these visits of the inspector. There were very few country postmasters who were not used to such visits. It was a process of espionage which was never acknowledged, yet one that was carried on extensively in suspected districts. There was never any verbal demand, or acquiescence, in the manner in which it was carried out. When the police officer appeared the day’s mail was usually in the process of being sorted, and was generally to be found spread out lying in full view of the searching eyes.

Fyles walked in. Passed the time of day. Collected his own

mail and that of the men under him. Chatted pleasantly with the subservient official, and started to pass out again. In those brief moments he had seen all he wanted to see, which on this occasion was little enough.

There were only four letters from the East, The rest were all of local origin. One of the eastern letters was for O'Brien, and it carried an insurance firm's superscription. There were two letters for Kate Seton, both from New York, and both carrying the firm styles of well-known retail traders in women's clothing. The fourth was addressed to Charlie Bryant, and bore no trader's imprint.

As he neared the door of the little office he had to stand aside as Kate Seton made her way in.

Fyles felt that his luck was certainly in. The news he had awaited with so much impatience had been received at last, and now – well, his quick appreciative eyes took in the delightfully fresh, wholesome appearance of this woman, who had made such inroads upon his usually unemotional heart. There was not a detail escaped him. The rounded figure suggesting virility and physical well-being. Her delightful, purposeful face full of a wide intelligence and strength. Those wonderful dark eyes of such passionate, tender depth, which yet held possibilities for every emotion which finds its place in the depth of a strong heart.

She was clad, too, so differently from the general run of the villagers. Like her sister, though in a lesser degree, she breathed the air of a city – a city far from these western regions, a

city where refinement and culture inspires a careful regard for outward appearance.

She smiled upon him as he stood aside. Somehow the shyness which her sister had accused her of seemed to have gone. Her whole atmosphere was that of a cordial welcome.

“You’re early down for your mail, Mr. Fyles,” she said, after greeting him. “I’m generally right on the spot before Allan Dy is through. Still, I dare say your mail is more important, and stands for no delay.”

“It’s the red tape of our business, Miss Seton,” Fyles replied, with a light shrug. “We’re always getting orders that should rightly be executed before they can possibly reach us. It’s up to us to get them the moment they arrive.”

Kate’s smile was good to see. There was just that dash of ironical challenge in her eyes which Fyles was beginning to associate with her.

“Still working out impossible problems which don’t really – exist?”

The man returned her smile.

“Still working out problems,” he said. Then he added slyly, “Problems which must be solved, in spite of assurances of their non-existence.”

“You mean – what I said to you the other day?”

Fyles nodded.

Kate’s eyes sobered, and the change in their expression came near to melting the officer’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply. Then she sighed. “But I s’pose you must see things your own way.” She glanced at the mail counter. “You had a despatch rider in this morning. I saw him coming down the trail. Everybody saw him.”

Just for a moment Fyles’s strong brows drew together. He was reluctant to deliberately lie to this woman. He felt that to do so was not worthy. He felt that a lie to her was a thing to be despised.

“We had a patrol in,” he said guardedly.

Kate smiled.

“A patrol from – Amberley?”

Again was that ironical challenge in Kate’s eyes. Fyles’s responsive smile was that of the fencer.

“You are too well informed.”

But the woman shook her head.

“Not so well informed as I could wish,” she said. Then she laughed as her merry sister might have laughed, and the policeman wanted to join in it by reason of its very infection. “There’s a whole heap of things I’d like to know. I’d like to know why a government of the people makes a law nobody wants, and spends the public’s money in enforcing it. Also I’d like to know why they take a vicious delight in striving to make criminals of honest enough people in the process. Also I’d like to know how your people intend to trip up certain people for a crime which they have never committed, and don’t intend to commit, and, anyway, before they can be punished must be caught red-handed. You’ve got your problems sure enough, and – and these are some

of the simplest of mine. Oh, dear – it almost makes my head whirl when I think of them. But I must do so, because,” her smile died out, and the man watched the sudden determined setting of her lips, “I’m against you as long as you are – against him. Good-bye. I must get my mail.”

It was a long circuitous route which took Stanley Fyles back to his camp. But it seemed short enough on the back of the faithful, fleet-footed Peter. Then, too, the man’s thoughts were more than merely pleasant. Satisfaction that his news was awaiting him at the camp left him free to indulge in the happy memory of his brief passage of arms with Kate Seton.

What a staunch creature she was! He wondered if the day would ever come when she would exercise the same loyalty and staunchness on his behalf. To him it seemed an extraordinary, womanish perversity that made her cling to a poor creature so obviously a wrongdoer. Was she truly blind to his doings, or was she merely blinding herself to them? She was not in love with Charlie Bryant, he felt sure. Her avowal of regard had been too open and sincere to have been of any other nature than the one she had claimed for it. Yes, he could understand that attitude in her. Anything he had ever seen of her pointed the big woman nature in her. She felt herself strong, and, like other strong people, it was a passion with her to help the weak and erring.

Fyles’s knowledge of women was slight enough, but he had that keen observation which told him many things instinctively.

And all the best and truest that was in him had been turned upon this woman from the very first time he had seen her.

He told himself warmly, now, that she was the most lovable creature on earth, and nothing but marriage with her could ever bring him the necessary peace of mind that would permit him to continue his work with that zeal and hope of achievement with which he had set about a career.

He saw so many things now, through the eyes of a great passion, that seemed utterly different, rendered transcendently attractive through the glamor of a strong, deep love. They were things which, before, had always been viewed dispassionately, almost coldly, yet not without satisfaction. They had always been part of his scheme, but had no greater attraction than the mere fact that they were integral parts of one great whole. Now they became oases, restful shades in the sunlight of his effort.

He had always contemplated marriage as an ultimately necessary adjunct to the main purpose. No man, he felt, could succeed adequately, after a certain measure had been achieved, without a woman at his side, a woman's influence to keep the social side of a career in balance with the side which depended upon his direct effort. Now he saw there was more in it than that. Something more human. Something which made success a thousand times more pleasing to contemplate. He felt that with Kate at his side giant's work would become all too easy. Her ravishing smile of encouragement would be a gentle spur to the most jaded energies. The delight of bearing her upon his broad

shoulders in his upward career, would be bliss beyond words, and, in the interim of his great efforts, the care and happiness of her loyally courageous heart would be a delight almost too good to be true.

His keen mind and straining energies were bathed in the wonderful fount of love. He was looking for the first time into the magic mirror which every human creature must, at some time, gaze into. He was discovering all those pictures which had been discovered countless millions of times before, and which other coming countless millions had yet to discover for themselves.

So he rode on dreaming to the rhythmic beat of Peter's willing hoofs. So he came at last to the distant camp of his subordinate comrades.

He was greeted by the harsh voice and hard, weather-stained features of McBain wreathed in a smile which was a mere distortion, yet which augured well.

"I haven't opened the letters, sir," he said, "but I've questioned Jones close. I guess it's right, all right."

Fyles was once more the man of business. He nodded as he flung off his horse and handed it over to a waiting trooper.

"Where's the despatch?" he demanded sharply.

McBain produced a long, official envelope. The other tore it open hastily. He ran his eyes over its contents, and passed it back to the sergeant.

"Good," he exclaimed. "There's a cargo left Fort Allerton, on the American side, bound for Rocky Springs by trail. It's a big

cargo of rye whisky. We'll have to get busy.”

CHAPTER XXII

MOVES IN THE GAME OF LOVE

Stanley Fyles's extreme satisfaction was less enduring than might have been expected. Success, and the prospect of success, were matters calculated to affect him more nearly than anything else in his life. That was the man, as he always had been; that was the man, who, in so brief a time, had raised himself to the commissioned ranks of his profession. But, somehow, just now a slight undercurrent of thought and feeling had set in. It was scarcely perceptible at first, but growing rapidly, it quickly robbed the tide of his satisfaction of quite half its strength, and came near to reducing it to the condition of slack water.

McBain was in the quarters attending to the detail which fell to his lot. A messenger from Winter's Crossing had come in announcing the arrival, at that camp, of the reinforcing patrol. This was the culminating point of Fyles's satisfaction. From that moment the undercurrent set in.

The inspector had moved out of the bluff, which screened the temporary quarters from chance observation, and had taken up a position on the shoulder of the valley, where he sat himself upon a fallen fence post to consider the many details of the work he had in mind.

The sun was setting in a ruddy cauldron of summer cloud,

and, already, the evening mists were rising from the heart of the superheated valley. The wonderful peace of the scene might well have been a sedative to the stream of rapid thought pouring through his busy brain.

But its soothing powers seemed to have lost virtue, and, as his almost unconscious gaze took in the beauties spread out before it, a curious look of unrest replaced the satisfaction in his keen eyes. His brows drew together in a peevish frown. A discontent set the corners of his tightly compressed lips drooping, and once or twice he stirred impatiently, as though his irritation of mind had communicated itself to his physical nerves.

Once more the image of Kate Seton had risen up before his mind's eye, and, for the first time it brought him no satisfaction. For the first time he had associated the probable object of his plans with her. Charlie Bryant was no longer a mere offender against the law in his mind. In concentrating his official efforts against him he realized the jeopardy in which his own regard for Kate Seton placed him. He saw that his success now in ridding the district of the whisky-runner would, at the same time, rob him of all possible chance of ever obtaining the regard of this woman he loved. It meant an ostracism based upon the strongest antipathy – the antipathy of a woman wounded in her tenderest emotions, that wonderful natural instinct which is perhaps beyond everything else in her life.

The more than pity of it. Kate's interest in Charlie Bryant had assumed proportions which threatened to overwhelm his

whole purpose. It became almost a tragedy. Pondering upon this ominous realization a sort of panic came near to taking hold of him. Apart from his own position, the pain and suffering he knew he must inflict upon her set him flinching.

Her protestations of Charlie's innocence were very nearly absurd. To a mind trained like his there was little enough doubt of the man's offense. He was a rank "waster," but, as in the case of all such creatures, there was a woman ready to believe in him with all the might of feminine faith. It was a bitter thought that in this case Kate Seton should be the woman. She did believe. He was convinced of her honesty in her declaration. She believed from the bottom of her heart, she, a woman of such keen sense and intelligence. It was – yes, it was maddening. Through it all he saw his duty lying plainly before him. His whole career was at stake, that career for which only he had hitherto lived, and which, eventually, he had hoped to lay at Kate's feet.

What could he do? There was no other way. He – must – go – on. His dream was wrecking. It was being demolished before his eyes. It was not being sent crushing at one mighty stroke, but was being torn to shreds and destroyed piecemeal.

He strove to stiffen himself before the blow, and his very attitude expressed something of his effort. He told himself a dozen times that he must accept the verdict, and carry his duty through, his duty to himself as well as to his superiors. But conviction was lacking. The human nature in him was rebelling. For all his discipline it would not be denied. And with each

passing moment it was gaining in its power to make itself felt and heard.

Its promptings came swiftly, and in a direction hardly conceivable in a man of his balance of mind. But the more sure the strength of the man, the more sure the strength of the old savage lurking beneath the sanest thought. The savage rose up in him now in a reckless challenge to all that was best and most noble in him. A cruel suspicion swept through his mind and quickly permeated his whole outlook. What if he had read Kate's regard for the man Bryant wrong? What if he had read it as she intended him to read it, seeking to blind him to the true facts? He knew her for a clever woman, a shrewd woman, even a daring woman. What if she had read through his evident regard for her, and had determined to turn it to account in saving her lover from disaster, by posing with a maternal, or sisterly regard for his welfare? Such things he felt had been done. He was to be a tool, a mere tool in her hands, the poor dupe whose love had betrayed him.

He sprang from his seat.

No, a thousand times no, he told himself. His memory of her beautiful, dark, fearless eyes was too plainly in his mind for that. The honesty of her concern and regard for the man was too simply plain to hold any trace of the perfidy which his thought suggested. He told himself these things. He told himself again and again, and – remained unconvinced. The savage in him, the human nature was gaining an ascendancy that would not be

denied, and from the astute, disciplined man he really was, at a leap, he became the veriest doubting lover.

He threw his powerful arms out, and stretched himself. His movements were the movements of unconcern, but there was no unconcern within him. A teeming, harassing thought was urging him, driving him to the only possible course whereby he could hope to obtain a resumption of his broken peace of mind.

He must see Kate. He must see her again, without delay.

Kate Seton was sitting in the northern shadow of her little house the following morning when Stanley Fyles rode down the southern slope of the valley toward the old footbridge. She had just dispatched Big Brother Bill on an errand to the village, and, with feminine tact, had requested him to discover Helen's whereabouts, and send her, or bring her home. She had no particular desire that Helen should return home. In fact, she would rather she didn't until mid-day dinner. But she felt she was giving the man the excuse he evidently needed.

As a matter of fact, she had a good deal of work to do. And the first hour after Bill had taken his departure she was fully occupied with her two villainous hired men. After that she returned to the house, and wrote several letters, and, finally, took up her position in the shade, and devoted herself to a basket of long-neglected sewing.

At the sound of the approaching horseman she looked up with a start. She had no expectation of a visitor, she had no desire for one just now. Nevertheless, when she discovered the officer's

identity, she displayed no surprise, and more interest, than might have been expected.

She did not disguise from herself the feelings this man inspired. On the contrary she rather reveled in them, especially as, in a way, just now, all her actions must be in direct antagonism to his efforts.

She felt that a battle, a big battle, must be fought and won between them. It was a battle to be fought out openly and frankly. It was her determination that this man should not wrong himself by committing a great wrong upon Charlie Bryant.

Kate was very busy at the moment Fyles rode up. She was intent upon fitting a piece of lace, obviously too small, upon a delicate white garment of her sister's, which was obviously too big.

For a moment, as she did not look up, Fyles sat leaning forward in the saddle with his arms resting upon its horn. He was watching her with a smiling interest which was not without anxiety.

“There's surely not a dandier picture in the world than a girl sitting in the shade sewing – white things,” he said at last, by way of greeting.

Kate glanced up for the briefest of smiling glances. Then her dark head bent over her sewing again.

“And there's surely nothing calculated to upset things more than a man butting in, where the same girl's fragment of brain is worrying to fit something that doesn't fit anyway.”

“Meaning me?”

Fyles smiled in his confident way.

“Seeing there’s no one else around, I must have meant some other fellow.”

Kate laid the lace aside, and looked up with a sigh. A gentle amusement shone in her fine dark eyes.

“Have you ever tried to make things fit that – just won’t?” she demanded.

Fyles shook his head.

“Maybe I can help, though,” he hazarded.

“Help?” Kate’s amusement merged into a laugh. “Say, when it comes to fitting things that don’t fit, two heads generally muss things right up. All my life I’ve been trying to fit things that don’t fit, and I find, if you’re to succeed, you’ve got to do it to yourself, and by yourself. It always takes a big lot of thinking which nobody else can follow. Maybe your way of thinking is different from other folks, and so they can’t understand, and that’s why they can’t follow it. Now here’s a bit of lace, and there’s a sleeve. The lace is short by an inch. Still there’s ways and ways of fixing it, but only one right way. If I make the sleeve smaller the lace will fit, but poor Helen won’t get her arm through it. If I tack on a bit more lace it’ll muss the job, and make it look bad. Then there’s other ways, too, but – there’s only one right way.” She dropped the lace in her basket and began to fold the garment. “I’ll get some new lace that does fit,” she declared emphatically.

Fyles nodded, but the amusement died out of his eyes.

“All of which is sound sense,” he said seriously, “and is leading us toward controversial – er – subjects. Eh?”

Kate raised a pair of shoulders with pretended indifference. But her eyes were smiling that challenge which Stanley Fyles always associated with her.

“Not a bad thing when the police are getting so very busy, and – you are their chief in the district,” she said.

“I must once more remark, you are well informed,” smiled Fyles.

“And I must once more remark not as well informed as I could wish,” retorted Kate quickly.

Fyles had permitted his gaze to wander down the wooded course of the river. Kate was watching him closely, speculatively. And curious enough she was thinking more of the man than his work at that moment.

The man’s eyes came back abruptly to her face, and her expression was instantly changed to one of smiling irony.

“Well?” she demanded.

Fyles shook his head.

“It isn’t,” he said. “May I ask how you know we are – so very busy?”

“Sure,” cried Kate, with a frank laugh. “You see, I have two of the worst scamps in the valley working for me, and they seem to think it more than necessary that they keep themselves posted as to – your movements.”

“I see.” Fyles’s lighter mood had entirely passed, and with

its going Kate's became more marked. "I s'pose they spy out everything for the benefit of their – chief."

Kate clapped her hands.

"What reasoning. I s'pose they have a chief?" she added slyly. A frown of irritation crossed the policeman's brow.

"Must we open up that old sore, Miss Kate?" he, asked almost sharply. "They are known to be – when not occupied with the work of your farm – assisting Charlie Bryant in his whisky-running schemes. They are two of his lieutenants."

"And so, because they are so known among the village people here, you are prosecuting this campaign against a man whom you hope to catch red-handed."

"I have sufficient personal evidence to – prosecute my campaign," said Fyles quickly. "As you said just now, we are not idle."

"Yes, I know," Kate sighed, and her gaze was turned upon the western reaches of the valley. "Your camp out there is full of activity. So is Winter's Crossing. And the care with which you mask your coming and going is known to everybody. It is a case of the hunter being hunted. Yes, I say it without resentment, I am glad of these things, because I – must know."

"If we are against each other – it is only natural you should wish to know."

Kate's eyes opened wider.

"Of course we are against each other, as long as you are against Charlie. But only in our – official capacities." A whimsical smile

stole into the woman's eyes. "Oh, you are so – so obstinate," she cried in mock despair. "In this valley it is no trouble for me to watch your every move, and, in Charlie's interests, to endeavor to frustrate them. But the worst of it is I'd – I'd like to see you win out. Instead of that I know you won't. You've had some news. You had it yesterday, I suppose, by that patrol. Maybe it's news of another cargo coming in, and you are getting ready to capture it, and – Charlie. I'm not here to give any one away, I'm not here to tell you all I know, must know, living in the valley, but you are doomed, utterly doomed to failure, if you count the capture of Charlie success."

In spite of the lightness of Kate's manner her words were not without their effect upon Fyles. There was a ring of sincerity in them that would not be denied. But its effect upon him was not that which she could have wished. His face set almost sternly. The challenge of the woman had stirred him out of his calm assurance, but it was in a direction which she could scarcely have expected. He thrust his sunburned face forward more aggressively, and challenged her in return.

"What is this man to you?" he demanded, his square jaws seeming to clip his question the more shortly.

In a moment Kate's face was flushing her resentment. Her dark eyes were sparkling with a sudden leaping anger.

"You have no right to – ask me that," she cried. But Fyles had committed himself. Nor would he draw back.

"Haven't I?" he laughed harshly. "All's fair in love and – war.

We are at war – officially.”

The woman’s flushing cheeks remained, but the sparkle of her eyes had changed again to an ironical light.

“War – yes. Perhaps you’re right. The only courtesies recognized in war are observed in the prize ring, and in international warfare. Our warfare must be less exalted, and permits hitting – below the belt. I’ve told you what Charlie is to me, and I have told you truly. I am trying to defend an innocent man, who is no more to me than a brother, or – or son. I am doing so because of his peculiar ailments which make him well-nigh incapable of helping himself. You see, he does not care. His own safety, his own welfare, are nothing to him. It is for that reason, for the way he acts in consequence of these things, that all men believe him a rogue, and a – a waster. I tell you he is neither.”

She finished up a little breathlessly. She had permitted her loyalty and anxiety to carry her beyond the calm fencing she had intended.

But Fyles remained unmoved, except that the harshness had gone out of his manner.

“It is not I who am obstinate,” he said soberly. “It is you, Miss Kate. What if I told you I had irrefutable circumstantial evidence against him? Would that turn you from your faith in him?”

The woman shook her head.

“It would be merely circumstantial evidence,” she said. “God knows how circumstance has filled our penitentiaries wrongfully,” she added bitterly.

“And but for circumstance our population of wrongdoers at large would be greater by a thousand per cent.,” retorted the officer.

“That is supposition,” smiled Kate.

“Which does not rob it of its possibility in fact.”

The two sat looking at each other, silently defiant. Kate was smiling. A great excitement was thrilling her, and she liked this man all the better for his blunt readiness for combat, even with her.

Fyles was wondering at this woman, half angry, half pleased. Her strength and readiness appealed to him as a wonderful display.

He was the first to speak, and, in doing so, he felt he was acknowledging his worsting in the encounter.

“It’s – it’s impossible to fight like this,” he said lamely. “I am not accustomed to fight with women.”

“Does it matter, so long as a woman can fight?” Kate cried quickly. “Chivalry?” she went on contemptuously. “That’s surely a survival of ages when the old curfew rang, and a lot of other stupid notions filled folks’ minds. I – I just love to fight.”

Her smile was so frankly infectious that Fyles found himself responding. He heaved a sigh.

“It’s no good,” he said almost hopelessly. “You must stick to your belief, and I to mine. All I hope, Miss Kate, is that when I’ve done with this matter the pain I’ve inflicted on you will not be unforgivable.”

The woman's eyes were turned away. They had become very soft as she gazed over at the distant view of Charlie's house.

"I don't think it will be," she said gently. Then with a quick return to her earlier manner: "You see, you will never get the chance of hurting Charlie." A moment later she inquired naively. "When is the cargo coming in?"

But Fyles's exasperation was complete.

"When?" he cried. "Why, when this scamp is ready for it. It's – it's no use, Miss Kate. I can't stop, or – or I'll be forgetting you are a woman, and say 'Damn!' I admit you have bested me, but – young Bryant hasn't. I – " he broke off, laughing in spite of his annoyance, and Kate cordially joined in.

"But he will," she cried, as Peter began to move away. "Good-bye, Mr. Fyles," she added, in her ironical fashion as she picked up her sewing. "I can get on with these important matters – now."

The man's farewell was no less cordial, and his better sense told him that in accepting his defeat at her hands he had won a good deal in another direction where he hoped to finally achieve her capitulation.

While the skirmish between Stanley Fyles and Kate Seton was going on, the object of it was discussing the doings of the police and the prospect of the coming struggle with Big Brother Bill on the veranda of his house.

He was leaning against one of its posts while Bill reposed on the hard seat of a Windsor chair, seeking what comfort he could find in the tremendous heat by abandoning all superfluous outer

garments.

Charlie's face was darkly troubled. His air was peevishly irritable.

"Bill," he said, with a deep thrill of earnestness in his voice, as he thrust his brown, delicate hands into the tops of his trousers. "All the trouble in the world's just about to start, if I'm a judge of the signs of things. There's a whole crowd of the police in the valley now. They're camped higher up. They think we don't know, but we do – all of us. I wonder what they think they're going to do?"

His manner became more excited, and his voice grew deeper and deeper.

"They think they're going to get a big haul of liquor. They think they're going to get me. I tell you, Bill, that for men trained to smelling things out, they're blunderers. Their methods are clumsy as hell. I could almost laugh, if – if I didn't feel sick at their coming around."

Bill stirred uneasily.

"If there were no whisky-running here they wouldn't be around," he said pointedly.

Charlie eyed him curiously.

"No," he said. Then he added, "And if there were no whisky-running there'd be no village here. If there were no village here we shouldn't be here. Kate and her sister wouldn't be here. Nothing would be here, but the old pine – that goes on forever. This village lives on the prohibition law. Fyles may have a

reputation, but he's clumsy – damned clumsy. I'd like to see ahead – the next few days.”

“He's smelling a cargo – coming in, isn't he?” Bill's tact was holding him tight.

Again Charlie looked at him curiously before he replied.

“That's how they reckon,” he said guardedly, at last.

Bill had turned away, vainly searching his unready wit for the best means of carrying on the discussion. Suddenly his eyes lit, and he pointed across at the Seton's house.

“Say, who's that – on that horse? Isn't it Fyles? He's talking to some one. Looks like – ”

He broke off. Charlie was staring out in the direction indicated, and, in a moment, his excitement passed, swallowed up in a frowning, brooding light that had suddenly taken possession of his dark eyes.

Bill finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

“It's – Fyles?” he said.

“Yes, it's Fyles,” said Charlie, with a sudden suppressed fury. “It's Fyles – curse him, and he's talking to – Kate.”

At the sound of his brother's tone, even Bill realized his blundering. He knew he had fired a train of passion that was to be deplored, even dreaded in his brother. He blamed himself bitterly for his lack of forethought, his absurd want of discretion.

But the mischief was done. Charlie had forgotten everything else.

Bill stirred again in his chair.

“What does he want down there?” he demanded, for lack of something better to say.

“What does he want?” Charlie laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh, a savage laugh. It was a laugh that spoke of sore heart, and feelings crowding with bitterness. “I guess he wants something he’ll never get – while I’m alive.”

He relapsed into moody silence, and a new expression grew in his eyes till it even dominated that which had shone in them before. Bill thought he recognized it. The word “funk” flashed through his mind, and left him wondering. What could Charlie have to fear from Fyles talking to Kate? Did he believe that Kate would let the officer pump her with regard to his, Charlie’s, movements!

Yes, that must be it.

“He won’t get more than five cents for his dollar out of her,” he said, in an effort to console.

Charlie was round on him in a flash.

“Five cents for a dollar? No,” he cried, “nor one cent, nor a fraction of a cent. Fyles is dealing with the cleverest, keenest woman I’ve ever met in all my life. I’m not thinking that way. I’m thinking how almighty easy it is for a man walking a broken trail to trip and smash himself right up. The more sure he is the worse is his fall, because – he takes big chances, and big chances mean big falls. You’ve hit it, Bill, I’m scared – scared to death just now. If I know Fyles there’s going to be one hell of a time around here, and, if you value your future, get clear while you can. I’m scared,

Bill, scared and mad. I can't stand to watch that man talking to Kate. I'm not scared of man or devil, but I'm scared – scared to death when I see that. I must get out of this. I must get away, or – ”

He moved off the veranda in a frantic state of nervous passion.

Bill sprang from his seat and was at his brother's side in two great strides, and his big hand fell with no little force upon the latter's arm and held it.

“What do you mean?” he cried apprehensively. “Where – where are you going?”

With surprising strength Charlie flung him off. He turned, facing him with angry eyes and flushed face.

“Don't you dare lay hand on me like that again, Bill,” he cried dangerously. “I don't stand for that from – anybody. I'm going down the village, since you want to know. I'm going down to O'Brien's. And you can get it right now that I wouldn't stand the devil himself butting in to stop me.”

CHAPTER XXIII

STORM CLOUDS

A dispirited creature made its way down to the Setons' house that same evening. Big Brother Bill felt there was not one single clear thought in his troubled head, at least, not one worth thinking. He was weighted down by a hazy conception of the position of things, in a manner that came near to destroying the very root of his optimism.

One or two things settled upon his mind much in the manner of mental vampires. He knew that Charlie was threatened, and he knew that Charlie knew it, and made no attempt to protect himself. He knew that Charlie was also scared – frightened out of all control of himself in a manner that was absurdly contradictory. He knew that he was now at the saloon for the purpose of drowning his hopeless feelings in the maddening spirit O'Brien dispensed. He knew that his own baggage had at last arrived from Heaven only knew where, and he wished it hadn't, for it left him feeling even more burdened than ever with the responsibilities of the pestilential valley. He knew that he was beginning to hate the police, and Fyles, almost as much as Charlie did. He knew that if prevailing conditions weren't careful he would lose his temper with them, and make things hot for somebody or something. But, more than all else, he knew that

Helen Seton was more than worth all the worry and anxiety he was enduring.

In consequence of all this he arrayed himself in a light tweed suit, a clean, boiled shirt and collar, a tie, that might well have startled the natives of his home city, and a panama hat which he felt was necessary to improve the tropical appearance of his burnt and perspiring features, and hastened to Helen's presence for comfort and support.

The girl had been waiting for him. She looked the picture of diaphanous coolness in the shade of the house, lounging in an old wicker chair, with its fellow, empty, drawn up beside her. There were no feminine eyes to witness her little schemes, and Bill? – why, Bill was delighted beyond words that she was there, also the empty chair, also, that, as he believed, while she was wholly unconscious of the fact, the girl's attitude and costume were the most innocently pleasing things he had ever beheld with his two big, blue, appreciative eyes.

He promptly told her so.

“Say, Hel,” he cried, “you don't mind me calling you ‘Hel,’ do you? – you see, everything delightful seems to be associated with ‘Hell’ nowadays. If you could see yourself and the dandy picture you make you'd kind of understand how I feel just about now.”

The girl smiled her delight.

“Maybe I do understand,” she said. “You see, I don't always sit around in this sort of fancy frock. Then, no girl of sense musses herself into an awkward pose when six foot odd of manhood's

getting around her way. No, no Big Brother Bill. That chair didn't get there by itself. Two carefully manicured hands put it there, after their owner had satisfied herself that her mirror hadn't made a mistake, and that she was looking quite her most attractive. You see, you'd promised to come to see me this evening, and – well, I'm woman enough to be very pleased. That's all."

Bill's sun-scorched face deepened its ruddy hue with youthful delight.

"Say, you did all this for – for me?"

Helen laughed.

"Why, yes, and told you the various details to be appreciated, because I was scared to death you wouldn't get them right."

Bill sat himself down, and set the chair creaking as he turned it about facing her. He held out his hands.

"I haven't seen the manicuring racket right, yet," he laughed.

Helen stretched out her two hands toward him for inspection. He promptly seized them in his, and pretended to examine them.

"The prettiest, softest, jolliest – "

But the girl snatched them away.

"That's not inspection. That's – "

"Sure it's not," retorted Bill easily. "It's true."

"And absurd."

"What – the truth?"

Bill's blue eyes were widely inquiring.

"Sometimes."

The smile died out of the man's eyes, and his big face became

doleful.

“Yes, I s’pose it is.”

Helen set up.

“What’s gone wrong – now? What truth is – absurd?” she demanded.

The man shrugged.

“Oh, everything. Say, have you ever heard of a disease of the – the brain called ‘partly hatched’?”

The girl’s eyes twinkled.

“I don’t kind of remember it.”

“No, I don’t s’pose you do. I don’t think anybody ever has it but me. I’ve got it bad. This valley’s given it me, and – and if it isn’t careful it’s going to get fatal.”

Helen looked around at him in pretended sympathy.

“What’s the symptoms? Nothing outward? I mean that tie – that’s not a symptom, is it?”

Bill shook his head. He was smiling, but beneath his smile there was a certain seriousness.

“No. There’s no outward signs – yet. I got it through thinking too – too young. You see, I’ve done so much thinking in the last week. If it had been spread over, say six months, the hatching might have got fixed right. But it’s been too quick, and things have got addled. You see, if a hen turned on too much pressure of heat her eggs would get fried – or addled. That’s how my brain is. It’s addled.”

Helen nodded with a great show of seriousness which the

twitching corners of her pretty mouth belied.

“I always thought you’d got a trouble back of your – head. But you’d best tell me. You see, I don’t get enough pressure of thinking to hatch anything. Maybe between us we can fix your mental eggs right.”

Bill’s big eyes lit with relief and hope.

“That’s bright of you. You surely are the cutest girl ever. You must have got a heap of brain to spare.”

Helen could no longer restrain her laughter.

“It’s mostly all – spare. Now, then, tell me all your troubles.”

The great creature at her side looked doubtful and puzzled.

“I don’t know just where to begin. There’s such a heap, and I’ve worried thinking about it, till – till – ”

Helen sat up and propped her chin in her hands with her elbows on her knees.

“When you don’t know where to begin just start with the first thought in your head, and – and – ramble.”

Bill brightened up.

“Sure that’s best?”

“Sure.”

The man sighed in relief.

“That’s made a heap of difference,” he cried. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket, removed his panama and mopped his forehead. He gave a big gulp in the midst of the process, and spoke as though he were defying an enemy. “Will you marry me?” he demanded, and sat up glaring at her, with his hat and

handkerchief poised in either hand.

The girl gave him a quick look. Then she flung herself back in her chair and laughed.

“We – we are talking of troubles,” she protested.

Bill replaced his hat, and restored his handkerchief to its pocket.

“Troubles? Troubles? Isn’t that trouble enough to start with? It’s – it’s the root of it all,” he declared. “I’m – I’m just crazy about you. And every time I try to think about Charlie and the police, and – and the scallywags of the valley, I – I find you mixed up with it all, and get so tangled up that I don’t know where I am, or – or why. Say, have you ever been crazy about anybody? Some feller, for instance? It’s the worst worrying muddle ever happened. First you’re pleased – then you cuss them. Then you sort of sit dreaming all sorts of fool things that haven’t any sense at all. Then you want to make rhymes and things about eyes, and flowers, and moons, and feet, and laces and bits. You feel all over that everything else has got no sense to it, and is just so much waste of time thinking about it. You sort of feel that all men are fools but yourself, and other females aren’t women, but just images. You sort of get the notion the world’s on a pivot, and that pivot’s just yourself, and if you weren’t there there’d be a bust up, and most everything would get chasing glory, and you don’t care a darn, anyway, if they did. Say, when you get clean crazy about anybody, same as I am about you, you find yourself hating everybody that comes near them. You get notions

that every man is conspiring to tell the girl what a perfect fool you are, that they're worrying to boost you right out with her. You hate her, because you think she thinks you are a simpleton, and can't see your good points, which are so obvious to yourself. You hate yourself, you hate life, you hate the sunlight and the trees, and your food, and – and everything. And you wouldn't have things different, or stop making such a fool of yourself, no – not if hell froze over. Will – will you marry me?"

Helen's humor suddenly burst the bonds of all restraint. She sat there laughing until she nearly choked.

Bill waited with a patience that seemed inexhaustible. Then, as the girl's mirth began to lessen, he put his question again with dogged persistence.

"Will you marry me?"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Of all the – "

"Will you marry me?" the man persisted, his great face flushing.

Helen abruptly sobered. The masterful tone somehow sent a delighted thrill through her nerves.

She nodded.

"Of course I will. I – intended to from the first moment I saw your big, funny face with Stanley – "

"You mean that, Hel? You really – meant to marry me? You did?"

The man's happy excitement was something not easily to be forgotten. He sprang from his chair, reached out his powerful

hands, caught the girl about the waist, and picked her up in his arms as he might have picked up a child. His great bear-like hug was a monstrous thing to endure, but Helen was more than willing to endure it, as also his kisses, which he rained upon her happy, laughing face.

But the girl's sense of the fitness of things soon came to her rescue. The ridiculousness, the undignified figure she must appear, held in her great lover's arms, set her struggling to free herself, and, in a few moments, he set her once more upon her feet, and stood laughing down into her blushing face.

"Say," he cried, with a great laugh, "I don't care a cuss if my brains never hatch out. You're going to be my wife. You, the girl I'm crazy to death about. Fyles and all the rest can go hang. Gee!"

Helen looked up at him. Then she smoothed out her ruffled frock, and patted her hair into its place.

"Well," she cried, with a happy laugh, "I've heard some queer proposals from the boys of this valley when they were drunk, but for a sober, educated man, I think you've made the funniest proposal that any one ever listened to. Oh, Bill, Bill, you've done a foolish thing. I'm a shameless man-hunter. I came out west to find a husband, and I've found one. I wanted to marry you all along. I meant to marry you."

Bill's laugh rang out in a great guffaw.

"Bully!" he cried. "What's the use of marrying a girl who doesn't want to marry you?"

"But she ought to pretend – at first."

“Not on your life. No pretense for me, Hel. Give me the girl who’s honest enough to love me, and let me know it.”

“Bill! How – dare you? How dare you say I loved you and told you so? I’ve – I’ve a good mind not to marry – Say, Bill, you are a – joke. Now, sit right down, and tell me all about those – those other things worrying you.”

In a moment a shadow crossed the man’s cheerful face. But he obediently resumed his seat, and somehow, when Helen sat down, their chairs were as close together as their manufacturer had made possible.

“It’s Charlie – Charlie, and the police,” said Bill, in a despondent tone. “And Kate, too. I don’t know. Say, Hel, what’s – what’s going to happen? Fyles is hot after Charlie. Charlie don’t care a curse. But there’s something scaring him that bad he’s nearly crazy. Then there’s Kate. He saw Kate talking to Fyles, and he got madder than – hell. And now he’s gone off to O’Brien’s, and it don’t even take any thinking to guess what for. I tell you he’s so queer I can’t do a thing with him. I’m not smart enough. I could just break him in my two hands if I took hold of him to keep him home and out of trouble, but what’s the use? He’s crazy about Kate, he’s crazy about drink, he’s crazy about everything, but keeping clear of the law. That’s what I came to tell you about – that, and to fix up about getting married.”

The man’s words left a momentary dilemma in the girl’s mind. For a moment she was at a loss how to answer him. It seemed impossible to accept seriously his tale of anxiety and

worry, and yet – . The same tale from any other would have seemed different. But coming from Bill, and just when she was so full of an almost childish happiness at the thought that this great creature loved her, and wanted to marry her, it took her some moments to reduce herself to a condition of judicial calm, sufficient to obtain the full significance of his anxious complaint.

When at last she spoke her eyes were serious, so serious that Bill wondered at it. He had never seen them like that before.

“It’s dreadful,” she said in a low tone. “Dreadful.”

Bill jumped at the word.

“Dreadful? My God, it’s awful when you think he’s my brother, and – and Kate’s your sister. I can’t see ahead. I can’t see where things are – are drifting. That’s the devil of it. I wish to goodness they’d given me less beef and more brain,” he finished up helplessly.

Helen displayed no inclination to laugh. Somehow now that this simple man was here, now that the responsibility of him had devolved upon her, a delightful feeling of gentle motherliness toward him rose up in her heart, and made her yearn to help him. It was becoming quite easy to take him seriously.

“P’r’aps it’s a good thing you’ve got all that – beef. P’r’aps it’s for the best, you’re so – so strong, and so ready to help. You can’t see ahead. Neither can I. Maybe no one can, but – Fyles. Suppose you and I were standing at the foot of a cliff – a big, high cliff, very dangerous, very dreadful, and some one we both loved was climbing its face, and we saw them reach a point where

it looked impossible to go on, or turn back. What could we do? I'll tell you. We could remain standing there looking on, praying to Providence that they might get through, and holding ourselves ready to bear a hand when opportunity offered, and, failing that, do our utmost to *break their fall*."

Bill's appreciation suddenly illuminated his ingenuous face.

"Say," he cried admiringly. "You've hit it. Sure, we can't climb up and help. It would mean disaster to both, with no one left to help. Say, I'm glad I'm big and strong. That's it, we'll stand – by. You'll think, and I'll do what you tell me. By Jing! That's made everything different. We'll stand by, and break their fall. I could never have thought of that – I couldn't, sure."

It was Helen's turn to display enthusiasm. It was an enthusiasm inspired by her lover's acceptance of her suggestion.

"But we're not going to just watch and watch and do nothing. We must keep on Fyles's trail. We must keep close behind Charlie, and when we see the fall coming on we must be ready to thrust out a hand. You never know, we may beat the whole game in spite of Charlie. We may be able to save him in spite of himself. No harm must come to Kate through him. I can't see where it can come, except – that he is mad about her, and she is mad about – some one else."

"Fyles?" Bill hazarded.

Helen looked around at him in amused admiration. She nodded.

"You're getting too clever for me. You will be thinking for us

both soon.”

Bill denied the accusation enthusiastically.

“Never,” he exclaimed. And after that he drifted into a lover’s rhapsody of his own inferiority and unworthiness.

Thus, for a while, the more serious cares were set aside for that brief lover’s paradise when two people find their focus filled to overflowing with that precious Self, which we are told always to deny. Fortunately human nature does not readily yield to such behests, and so life is not robbed of its mainspring, and the whole machinery of human nature is not reduced to a chaotic bundle of useless wheels.

For all Helen’s boasted scheming, for all Bill’s lack of brilliancy, these two were just a pair of simple creatures, loyal and honest, and deeply in love. So they dallied as all true lovers must dally with those first precious moments which a Divine Providence permits to flow in full tide but once in a lifetime.

Charlie Bryant was standing at the bar of O’Brien’s saloon. One hand rested on the edge of the counter as though to steady himself. His eyes were bloodshot, a strange pallor left his features ghastly, and the combination imparted a subtle appearance of terror which the shrewd saloonkeeper interpreted in his own fashion as he unfolded his information, and its deductions.

The bar was quite empty otherwise, and the opportunity had been too good for O’Brien to miss.

“Say, I was mighty glad to get them kegs the other night safely. But I’m takin’ no more chances. It’ll see me through for awhile,”

he said, as he refilled Charlie's glass at his own expense. "There's a big play coming right now, and, if you'll take advice, you'll lie low – desprit low."

"You mean Fyles – as usual," said Charlie thickly. Then he added as an afterthought: "To hell with Fyles, and all his damned red-coats."

O'Brien's quick eyes surveyed his half-drunken customer with a shrewd, contemptuous speculation.

"That sounds like bluff. Hot air never yet beat the p'lice. It needs a darnation clear head, and big acts, to best Fyles. A half-soused bluff ain't worth hell room."

Charlie appeared to take no umbrage. His bloodshot eyes were still fixed upon O'Brien's hard face as he raised his glass with a shaking hand and drained it.

"I don't need to bluff with no one around worth bluffing," he said, setting the empty glass down on the counter.

O'Brien's response was to fold his arms aggressively, and lean forward upon the counter, peering into the delicate, pale face before him.

"See here," he cried, "a fellow mostly bluffs when he's scared, or he's in a corner – like a rat. See? Now it's to my interest to see Fyles beat clean out of Rocky Springs. It's that set me gassin'. Get me? So just keep easy, and take what I got to hand out. I'm wise to the game. It's my business to keep wise. Those two crooks of yours, Pete and Nick, were in this morning, and I heard 'em talkin'. Then I got 'em yarnin' to me. They've got every move

Fyles is making dead right. They're smartish guys, and I feel they're too smart for you by a sight. If things go their way you're safe. If there's a chance of trouble for them you're up against it."

Charlie licked his dry lips as the saloonkeeper paused. Then he replaced the sodden end of his cigarette between them. But he remained silent.

"I've warned you of them boys before," O'Brien went on. "But that's by the way. Now, see here, Fyles has got your play. The boys know that, and in turn have got his play. Fyles knows that to-morrow night you're running in a big cargo of liquor. The only thing he don't know is where you cache it. Anyways, he's got a big force of boys around, and Rocky Springs'll have a complete chain of patrols around it, to-morrow night. Each man's got a signal, and when that signal's given it means he's located the cargo. Then the others'll crowd in, and your gang's to be overwhelmed. Get it? You'll all be taken – red-handed. I'm guessin' you know all this all right, all right, and I'm only telling it so you can get the rest clear. How you and your boys get these things I'm not guessing. It's smart. But here's the bad stuff. It's my way to watch folks and draw 'em when I want to get wise. I drew them boys. They're reckonin' things are getting hot for 'emselves. They're scared. They're reckonin' the game's played out, and ain't worth hell room, with Fyles smelling around. Those boys'll put you away to Fyles, if they see the pinch coming. And that's where my interests come in. They'll put you away sure as death."

If O'Brien were looking for the effect of his solemn warning

he was disappointed. Charlie's expression remained unchanged. The ghastly white of his features suggested fear, but it was not added to by so much as a flicker of an eyelid.

"That all?" he asked, with a deliberate pause between the words to obtain clear diction.

O'Brien shrugged, but his eyes snapped angrily at this lack of appreciation.

"Ain't it enough? Say," his manner had become almost threatening, "I'm not doing things for hoss-play. The folks around can build any old church to ease their souls and make a show. Rocky Springs ain't the end of all things for me. I'm out after the stuff. I'll soothe my soul with dollars. That's why I'm around telling you, because your game's the thing that's to give 'em to me. When your game's played I hit the trail, but as long as you make good Rocky Springs is for me. If you can't handle your proposition right then I quit you."

Charlie suddenly shifted his position, and leaned his body against the counter. The saloonkeeper looked for that sign which was to re-establish his confidence. It was not forthcoming. For a moment the half-drunken man leaned his head upon one hand, and his face was turned from the other behind the bar.

O'Brien became impatient.

"Wal?" he demanded.

His persistence was rewarded at last. But it was rewarded with a shock which left him startled beyond retort.

Charlie suddenly brought a clenched fist down upon the

counter with a force that set the glasses ringing.

“Fyles!” he cried fiercely, “Fyles! It’s always Fyles! God’s truth, am I never to hear, or see, the last of him? Say, you know. You think you know. But you don’t. Damn you, you don’t!”

Before the astonished saloonkeeper could recover himself and formulate the angry retort which rose to his lips, Charlie staggered out of the place.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SOUL OF A MAN

It was growing dark. Away in the west a pale stream of light was fading smoothly out, absorbed by the velvet softness of the summer night. There was no moon, but the starlit vault shone dazzlingly upon the shadowed valley. Already among the trees the yellow oil lamps were shining within the half-hidden houses.

From within a dense clump of trees, high up the northern slope of the valley, a man's slight figure made its way. His movements were slow, deliberate, even furtive. For some moments he stood peering out at a point below where a woman's figure was rapidly making its way up the steep trail toward the old Meeting House.

The man's eyes were straining in the darkness for the outline of the woman's figure was indistinct, only just discernible in the starlight. She came on, and he could distinctly hear her voice humming an old, familiar air. She evidently had no thought of the possibility that her movements could be of any interest to anybody but herself.

She reached the Meeting House and paused. Then the watching man heard the rattle of a key in the lock. The humming had ceased. The next moment there was the sound of a turning handle, and a tight-fitting door being thrust open. The woman's figure had disappeared within the building.

The man left the sheltering bush and moved out on to the trail. He passed one thin hand across his brow, as though to clear the thoughts behind of their last murkiness after a drunken slumber. He stretched himself wearily as though stiff from his unyielding bed of sun-baked earth. Then he moved down the trail toward the Meeting House, selecting the scorched grass at the side of it to muffle the sound of his footsteps.

His weariness seemed to have entirely passed now, and all his attention was fixed upon the rough exterior of the old building, which had passed through such strange vicissitudes to finally become the house of worship it now was. With its old, heavy-plastered walls, and its long, reed-thatched roof, so heavy and vastly thick, it was a curiosity; the survival of days when men and beasts met upon a common arena and played out the game of life and death, each as it suited him, with none but the victor in the game to say him nay.

The man felt something of the influence of the place now as he drew near. Nor could he help feeling that the game that went on about it now had changed little enough in its purpose. The rules may have received modification, but the spirit was still the same. Men were still struggling for victory over some one else, and beneath the veneer of a growing civilization, passions, just as untamed, raged and worked their will upon their ill-starred possessors.

Reaching the building, he moved cautiously around the walls till he came to a window. It was closed, and a curtain was drawn

across it. He passed on till he came to another window. It was partially open, and, though the curtain was drawn across it, the opening had disarranged the curtain, and a beam of light shone through.

He pressed his face toward the opening so that his mouth was at its level. Then he spoke softly, in a voice that was little more than a whisper —

“Kate!” he called. “Kate! It is I — Charlie. I’ve — I’ve been waiting for you, and want to speak to you.”

For answer there was a sound of hurrying footsteps across the floor of the room. The next moment the curtain was pulled aside. Kate stood at the other side of the window in the dim lamplight. Her handsome eyes were startled and full of inquiry, and her rounded bosom rose and fell quickly. When she saw the pale face peering in at her a gentle smile crept into her eyes.

“You scared the life out of me,” she said calmly. Then, with a quick look into his bloodshot eyes, she went on: “Why did you wait for me — here?”

Charlie lowered his eyes. “I — guessed you’d be along some time this evening. I wanted to speak to you — alone.”

Kate studied him for a moment. His averted, almost shifty, eyes seemed to hold her attention. She was thinking rapidly.

Presently his eyes came back to her face; a deep passion was shining in them.

“Can I come around to the door?”

There was just the smallest hesitation before Kate replied.

“Yes, if you must see me here.”

Charlie waited for no more. The door was on the other side of the building, overlooking the village below. He hurried thither, and when he thrust it open the place was in darkness.

Kate’s voice greeted him promptly. “The draught has blown the lamp out. Have you a match?”

Charlie closed the door behind him, and produced and struck a match. The lamp flared up and Kate replaced the glass chimney. Then she moved over to the wall and placed the lamp in its bracket.

It was a curious interior. In their unevenness the white kalsomined walls displayed their primitive workmanship. The windows were small, framed, and set deep in the ponderous walls. They looked almost like the arrow slits in a mediæval fortress. The long, pitched roof was supported, and collared, by heavy, untrimmed logs, which, at some time, had formed the floor-supports of a sort of loft. This had been done away with since, for the purpose of giving air to the suppliants at a prayer meeting below.

At the far end of the room were two reading desks and a sort of communion table. While in one corner, behind one of the reading desks, was a cheap-looking harmonium. Here and there, upon the rough walls, were nailed cardboard streamers, conveying, amid a wealth of illumination, sundry appropriate texts of a non-committal religious flavor, and down the narrow body of the building were stretched rows of hard-seated, hard-

backed benches for the accommodation of the congregation.

One swift glance sufficed for Charlie, and his eyes came back to the woman's smiling face. Her good looks were undoubted, but to him they were of an almost celestial order. There was no creature in the whole wide world to compare with her.

His eyes devoured every detail of her expression, of her personality, with the hungry greed of a soul-starved man. It was almost an impossibility for him to seize upon and hold the thoughts that so swiftly poured through his brain. So the moments passed and Kate found her patience ebbing.

"Well?" she demanded, her smile slowly fading.

The man breathed a sigh, and swallowed as with a dry throat. The spell of her charm had been broken.

"I had to come," he cried, with a nervous rush. "I had to find you. I had to speak to you – to tell you."

The woman's eyes, so steadily fixed upon his face, were wearing an almost hard look.

"Was it necessary to stimulate your nerve to come, and – speak to me? Charlie, Charlie," Kate went on more gently, her fine eyes softening, "when is this all to cease? Why must you drink? It seems so hopeless. Oh, man, where is your backbone, your grit. You tell me you long to be free of your curse, yet you plunge headlong the moment you are disturbed."

Her moment of passionate remonstrance passed and a subtle coolness superseded it, as the scarlet flushed into the man's pale cheeks.

“Tell it me all,” she went on, “tell me what it is you had to see me about. Remember, to-morrow is Sunday, and this place must be put in order for meeting. As it is, I am late. I was kept.”

The flush of shame died out of the man’s face, and his eyes became questioning. But his manner was almost humble.

“I know,” he said. “I knew I had no right to disturb you – now. I knew you would resent it. But I had to see you – while I had the chance. To-morrow it might be too late.”

“Too late?”

The woman’s question came with a sharp, rising inflection.

“Oh, Kate, Kate, won’t you understand what has brought me? Can’t you understand all that I feel now that the shadow of the law is so threatening here in this valley? All the time I’m thinking of you; thinking of all you mean in my life; thinking of the love which would make it a happiness to lay down my life for you, the love which to me is the whole, whole world.”

He ceased speaking with a curious abruptness. It was as though there were much more to be said, but he feared to give it expression.

Kate seized upon his pause to remonstrate.

“Hush, Charlie,” she cried almost vehemently, “you mustn’t tell me all this. You mustn’t. I am not worthy of such a love from any man. Besides,” she went on, with a sigh, “it is all so useless. I have no love to return you. You know that. You have known it so long. Our friendship has been precious to me. It will always be precious. I feel, somehow, that you belong to me, are part of me,

but not in the way you would have it. Oh, Charlie, the one thought in my mind, the one desire in my heart, is for your welfare. I desire that more than I could ever desire the love of any man. You love me, and yet by every act of yours that jeopardizes that welfare you stab me to the heart as surely as you add another nail to the coffin of your moral and physical well-being. You come here to tell me of these things, straight from one of your mad debauches, the signs of which are even now in your eyes, and in your shaking, nervous hands. Oh, Charlie, why must it all be? What madness is it with which you are possessed?"

The man looked into her big eyes, so full of strength and courage. The yellow lamplight left them shining darkly. He sought in them something that always seemed to baffle. Something he knew was there, but which ever eluded him. And the while he cried out in bitterness at her challenge.

"What does it matter – these things?" he said hoarsely. "What does it matter what I am if – I can't be anything to you?"

Then his bitterness was redoubled, and an almost savage light shone in his usually gentle eyes.

"Oh, God, I know I can never be anything to you but a sort of pining weakling, who must be nursed, and petted, and cared for. I know," he went on, his words coming with a rush in the height of his protesting passion, "if your thoughts, your secret thoughts and feelings, were put into words, I know what they would say of me, must say of me. Do I need to tell you? No, I think not. Look at me. It is sufficient."

He paused, his great dark eyes alight as Kate had never seen them before. Then he went on, and his tone had become subdued, and its rich note thrilled with the depths of passion stirring him.

“But for all that I am a man, Kate. For all my weakness I have strength to feel, to love, to fight. I have all that, besides, which goes to make a man, just as surely as has the man, Fyles, whom you love. I know, Kate. Denial would be useless, and in denying, you would be untrue to yourself. Fyles is the man for you, and no one knows it better than I. Fyles! The irony of it. The man who represents the law is the man who stands between me and all I desire on earth. I have seen it. I have watched. Nothing that concerns your life escapes me. How could it, when my whole thought is for you – you? But the agony of mind I suffer is no less. I cannot help it, Kate. The knowledge and sight of things drives me nearly crazy, and I suffer the tortures of hell. But even so, if your happiness lies at Fyles’s side, then – I would have it so. If I were sure – sure that this happiness were awaiting you. Is it, Kate? Think. Think of it in – every aspect. Is it? Happiness with this – Fyles?”

It was some moments before Kate made any reply. Her eyes were fixed upon the old Communion Table, so shadowy in the single lamplight. She was asking herself many questions; almost as many as he could have asked her. She had permitted herself to drift on the tide of her feelings. Whither? She knew she was beyond her depth. Her life was in the hands of a Providence which would inevitably work its will. All she knew was that she

loved. She had known it from the first. She loved, and rejoiced that it was so. Again, there were moments when she feared as cordially. She knew the work that lay before this lover of hers. She knew in what direction it pointed. And in obedience to her thoughts her eyes came back to the drunkard's eager face.

"You – you came to tell me – all this?" she said, in a low tone. "You came to assure yourself of my – happiness?" Then she shook her head. "Tell me the rest."

It was Charlie's turn to hesitate now. The demand had robbed him of the small enough confidence he possessed.

But Kate was waiting and he had no power to deny her anything.

"I came to tell you of – things, while I still have the chance. To-morrow? Who knows what to-morrow may bring forth?"

A keen, hard light suddenly flashed into the woman's eyes.

"What of – to-morrow?" she demanded sharply, while she studied the man's pale features, with their boyish good looks.

For answer Charlie reached out and caught one of her hands in both of his. She strove to release it, but he clung to it despairingly.

"No, no, Kate. Don't take it away," he cried passionately. "It is for the last – the very last time. Tell me, dear, is – is there no hope for me? None? Kate, I love you so. I do – dear. I will give up everything for you, dear, everything. I can do it. I will do it. I swear it, if – only you'll love me. Tell me. Is there – ?"

Kate shook her head, and the man dropped her hand with a gesture of utter hopelessness.

“My love is given, Charlie. Believe me, I have not given it. It – it is simply gone from me.”

Kate sighed. Then her mood changed again. That sharp alert look came into her eyes once more.

“Tell me – of to-morrow,” she urged him.

The second demand had a pronounced effect upon Charlie. The air of the suppliant fell from him, even the signs of his recent debauch seemed to give way before a startling alertness of mentality. In his curious way he seemed suddenly to have become the man of action, full of a keenness of perception and shrewdness which might well have carried an added conviction to Stanley Fyles, had he witnessed the display.

“Listen,” he said, with a thrill of excitement. “Maybe it’s not necessary to tell you. Maybe it’s stale news. Anyway, to-morrow is to be the day of Fyles’s coup.” He paused, watching for the effect of his words.

Just for an instant the woman’s eyes flashed, but whether in fear, or merely excited interest, it would have been impossible to say.

“Go on,” she said.

“To-morrow the village is to be surrounded by a chain of police patrols. Every entry will be closely watched for the incoming cargo of whisky. Fyles reckons to get me red-handed.”

“You?”

Kate’s eyes flashed again.

“Sure. That’s how he reckons.”

They looked into each other's eyes steadily. Charlie's were lit by a curious baffling irony.

It was finally Charlie who spoke.

"Fyles's plans are not likely to disconcert – anybody. There is no fear of legitimate capture. It is treachery – that is to be feared."

Kate started.

"Treachery?"

The man nodded. And the woman gave a sharp exclamation of disgust.

"Treachery! I hate it. I despise it. I – I could kill a traitor. You – fear treachery?"

"I have been warned of it. That's all," he said, in a hard biting voice. "It is because of this I've come to you to-night. Who can tell the outcome of to-morrow if there's treachery? So I came to you to make my – last appeal." In a moment his passion was blazing forth again. "Say the word, dear. Forget this man. Give me one little grain of hope. We can leave this place, and all the treachery in the world doesn't matter. We can leave that, and everything else, behind us – forever."

Kate shook her head. It almost seemed as though his pleading had passed her by.

"It can't be," she said, almost coldly. "It's too late."

"Too late?"

The woman nodded, but her thoughts seemed far away.

"Tell me," she said, after a pause, while she avoided the man's despairing eyes, "where does the treachery – lie?"

The man turned away. His slim shoulders lifted with seeming indifference.

“Pete Clancy and Nick Devereux – your two boys. But I don’t know yet. I’m not sure.”

Suddenly Kate moved toward him. The coldness had passed out of her manner. Her eyes had softened, and a smile, a tender smile, shone in their depths. She held out her two hands.

“Charlie, boy,” she said, “you needn’t fear for treachery for to-morrow. Leave Pete and Nick to me. I can deal with them. I promise you Fyles will gain nothing in the game he’s playing, through them. Now, you must go. Give up all thought of me. We cannot help things. We can never be anything to each other, more than we are now, so why endure the pain and misery of a hope than can never be fulfilled. As long as I live I shall pray for your welfare. So long as I can I shall strive for it. It is for you to be strong. You must set your heart upon living down this old past, and – forgetting me. I am not worth the love you give me. Indeed – indeed I am not.”

But her outstretched hands were ignored. Charlie made a slight, impatient movement, and turned toward the door. Finally he looked back, and, for a moment, his gaze encountered the appeal in Kate’s eyes. Then he passed on swiftly as though he could not endure the sight of all that which he knew to be slipping from beyond his reach.

One hand reached the door handle, then he hunched his shoulders obstinately.

“I give up nothing, Kate. Nothing,” he said doggedly. “I love you, and I shall go on loving you to – the end.”

It was late when Kate returned to her home. The house was in darkness, and the moon brought it out in silvery, frigid relief. Thrusting the front door open, she paused for a moment upon the threshold. She might have been listening; she might merely have been thinking. Finally she sat down and removed her shoes and gently tip-toed to her sister’s room.

Helen’s door was ajar, and she pushed it open and looked in. The moonlight was shining across her sister’s fair features, and the mass of loose fair hair which framed them. She was sound asleep in that wonderful dreamless land of rest, far from the turbulent little world in which her waking hours were spent.

Kate as softly withdrew. Now she made her way back to the familiar kitchen parlor, and, in the dark, took up her position at the open window. Her whole attention was centered upon the ranch house of Charlie Bryant across the valley, which stood out in the moonlight almost as clearly as in daylight. A light was shining in one of its windows.

She sat there waiting with infinite patience, and at last the light was extinguished. Then she rose, and, going to her bureau, picked up a pair of night glasses. She leveled these at the distant house and continued her watch.

Her vigil, however, did not last long. In a few minutes she distinctly beheld a figure move out on to the veranda. Its identity, at that distance, she was left to conjecture. But she saw it leave

the veranda and make its way round to the barn. A few minutes later, again, it reappeared, this time mounted upon a horse.

She sighed. It was a sigh of impatience, it was also a sigh of resignation. Then she rose from her seat, and returned her night glasses to the bureau. Again she looked out of the window, but this time she remained standing. Nor were her eyes turned upon the distant ranch house. Her whole attitude was one of deep pensiveness.

At last, however, she stirred, and, quite suddenly, her movements became quick and decided. It almost seemed as though she had finally reached a definite resolve.

She passed out of the room, and then out of the house through the back way. The little barn was within a hundred yards of the house. She was still in the shadow of the house when she became aware of figures moving just outside the barn. In a moment she recognized them. They were her two hired men in the act of riding away on their horses.

She let them get well away. Then she drew the door close after her and crossed over to the barn.

The door was open and she went in. Passing the two empty stalls where the men's horses were kept, she went on to another, where her own horse, hearing her approach, set its collar chains rattling and greeted her with a suppressed whinny.

It was the work of but a few minutes to saddle him and bring him out into the moonlight. Then she mounted him and rode off in the wake of those who had gone on before.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BROKEN CHAIN

The peace of Sunday evening merged into the calm of night. Service was long since over in the old Meeting House. The traveling parson had come and gone. He had done his duty. He had read the service to the lounging, unkempt congregation, he had prayed over them, he had preached at them. He had done all these things because it was his duty to do so, but he had done them without the least hope of improving the morals of his unworthy flock, or of penetrating one single fraction through their crime-stained armor of self-satisfaction. Rocky Springs was one of the shadowed corners upon his tour, into which, he felt, it was beyond his power to impart light.

There were those in the valley who viewed the Sabbath calm with a derisive smile. There were those who sat upon their little verandas and smoked, and talked in hushed voices, lest listening ears might catch the ominous purport of their words. There were others who went to their beds with a shrug of pretended indifference, feeling glad that for once, at least, their homes were a haven of safety for themselves.

Rocky Springs as a whole knew that something was afoot – some play in which some one was to be worsted, in which, maybe, a life or two would be lost. Anyway, the players were

Law *versus* Outlaw, and those who were not actually concerned with the game felt glad that they still had another night under their own roofs.

It was truly extraordinary how unspoken news spread. It was extraordinary the scent of battle, the scent of a struggle against the law, that was possessed by this people. Everybody seemed to know that to-night something like history was to be made in the annals of the crime of the valley.

So the peace of the valley was almost remarkable. An undoubted air of studied indifference prevailed, but surely it was carefully studied.

Neither Fyles nor any of his police had been seen the whole day. None of them had attended divine service. It was almost as if they had entirely vanished from the precincts of the valley.

So the sun sank, and the ruddy clouds rose up from the west like the fiery splash of the molten contents of the cauldron into which the great ball of fire had plunged. They rose up, and then dispersed, vanishing into thin air, and making way for the soft sheen of a myriad stars, and leaving clear a perfect night for the great summer moon to illuminate.

Two by two a large number of horsemen rode out of the valley of Leaping Creek. Once away from the starting point, their movements, their figures became elusive and shadowy. They passed out from among the trees, on to the wide plains above, and each couple split up, taking their individual ways with a certainty which displayed their perfect prairie craft.

Far out into the night they rode, each with clear instructions filling his mind, each with the certainty that one or more of their number must be brought face to face with a crisis before morning, which would need all their nerve and wit to bring to a successful issue.

The moon rose up, a great golden globe, slowly changing to a cold silvery light as it mounted the starlit vault. Then came a change. Instead of leaving a starry track behind it, a bank of cloud followed hard upon its heels, threatening to overtake it and hide its splendor behind a pall of summer storm.

Stanley Fyles watched with satisfaction the signs of the night.

A solitary horseman sat leaning forward upon the horn of his saddle, his eyes searching, searching, with aching intensity, that dim, shadowed skyline now almost lost against its backing of cloud. He was half-hidden in the shadow of a small bluff of spruce, with the depths of the valley hard behind him.

Not only were his eyes searching with an almost unblinking watchfulness, but his ears, too, were busy with that intense, nerve-racking straining which leaves them ever ready to carry the phantom sounds of imagination to the impatient brain above.

It was a long, intense vigil, and a hundred times the waiting man saw movements and heard sounds which set him ready to give the final signal which was to complete the carefully laid plans of his chief. But, in each case, he was spared the false alarm to which tricks of imagination so nearly drove him.

Midnight came and passed. The sky grew more threatening.

The man's eyes were upon that distant, southern upland which marked the skyline. Something seemed to be moving in the hazy distance, but as yet there was no sound accompanying the movement.

Was there not? Hark, what was that?

The man sighed. It was the rustle of the trees about him, stirred by a gentle rising breeze. But was it? Hark! That sounded like a footfall. But a footfall was not wanted. It was the sound of wheels for which his ears were straining. Ah, that was surely the wind. And – yes – listen. A rumble. It might be the wheels at last, or was it thunder? He sat up. The strain was hard to bear. It was thunder. And his eyes, for a moment, left the horizon for the clouds above. He regretted the absence of the moon. It left his work doubly difficult. He wondered —

But his wonder ceased, and he fell like a stone out of the saddle. He struggled fiercely, but his arms were held to his sides immovable. He had a vague recollection of a swift whirring sound, but that was all. Then he found himself struggling furiously on the ground with his horse vanished.

Inspector Fyles was thinking of many things. His post was at a point overlooking the Fort Alberton trail, which wound its way in the wide trough of two great, still waves of prairieland directly in front of him. Nothing could pass that way and remain unobserved, excepting under cover of the storm which seemed to be gathering.

He patted Peter's arched neck, and the well-mannered,

amiable creature responded by champing its bit impatiently. Fyles smiled. He knew that Peter loved to be traveling far and fast.

He turned his eyes skywards. Perhaps it was not a storm. There were breaks here and there, and occasionally a star peeped out and twinkled mockingly at him. Still, he must hope for the best. A storm would favor his quarry, besides being – . Hark!

A shot rang out in the distance, away to the east. One – two! Wait. A third! There it was. To the east. They were coming on over the southern trail, and that was in McBain's section!

He lifted his reins, and Peter promptly laid his swift heels to the ground. Three shots. Fyles hoped the fourth would not be fired until he was within striking distance of the spot.

Four horsemen were converging upon the bluff whence the shots had proceeded. Each of the four had heard the three shots fired, each was executing the tactical arrangement agreed upon, and each was waiting as he rode, laboring under a high nervous tension, for the fourth shot, which was to confirm the alarm and notify the definite discovery of the contraband.

It was withheld.

Fyles was the first to reach the bluff, but, almost at the same moment, McBain's great horse drew up with a jolt. The inspector saw the approach of his subordinate while his eyes were still searching the skirts of the bluff for the patrol who had given the signal.

“He should be on the southeast side,” said McBain, and rode

off in that direction. Fyles followed hard upon his heels.

They had gone less than two hundred yards when the officer saw the shadowy form of the Scot throw itself back in the saddle, and pull his great horse back upon its haunches. Fyles swept up on the swift-footed Peter. He, too, reined up with a jolt and leaped out of the saddle.

McBain was on his knees beside the prostrate form of the sentry. The man was bound hand and foot, and a heavy gag was secured in his widely forced open mouth.

At that moment two troopers dashed up. And the sounds of others foregathering could be plainly heard.

As Fyles regarded the prostrate man he realized that once more he had been defeated. He did not require to wait for the gag to be removed. He understood.

He leaped into the saddle, as McBain cut the gag from the man's mouth. A sharp inquiry broke the silence.

"Say, did you fire that – alarm?" Fyles cried almost fiercely.

The man had struggled to a sitting posture, and began to explain.

"No, sir. I was dragged –"

"Never mind what happened. You didn't give the alarm?"

"No, sir."

"Quick, McBain!" Fyles almost shouted. "They've done us. Cut him loose, and follow me. They're on the Fort Allerton trail – or my name's not Fyles."

Peter led the race for the Fort Allerton trail. The dark night

clouds were breaking when they reached the spot where the inspector had originally stationed himself. They passed on, and a glimmer of moonlight peeped out at them as they reached the trail side.

Fyles and McBain leaped from their saddles and examined the sandy surface of it. Two of the troopers joined them.

At length the officer spoke, and his voice had lost something of its sharp tone of authority.

“They’ve beaten us, McBain,” he cried. “God’s curse on them, they’ve played us at our own game, and – beaten us. A wagon and team’s passed here less than five minutes ago. Look at the dust track they’ve left.”

Fyles stood up. Then he started, and an angry glitter shone in his gray eyes. A horseman was silently looking on at the group of dismounted men, deliberately watching their movements. In the heat of the hunt no one had heard his approach. He sat there looking on in absolute silence.

Fyles moved clear of his men and strode up to the horseman. He halted within a yard of him, while the rest of the party looked on in amazement. McBain was the only one to make any move. He followed hard on his chief’s heels.

Fyles looked up into the horseman’s face. The sky had cleared and the moon was shining once more. A sudden fury leaped to the officer’s brain, and, for a moment, all discretion was very nearly flung to the winds. By a great effort, however, he checked his mad impulse.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Bryant?” he demanded sharply.

Charlie Bryant leaned forward upon the horn of his saddle. His dark eyes were smiling, but it was not a pleasant smile.

“Why, wondering what you fellows are doing here,” he said calmly.

Fyles stared, and again his fury nearly got the better of him.

“That’s no answer to my question,” he snapped.

“Isn’t it?” A subtle change was in Charlie Bryant’s manner. His smile remained, but it was full of a burning dislike, and even insolence. “Guess it’s all you’ll get from a free citizen. I’ve as much right here looking on at the escapades of the police, as they have to – indulge in ’em. Guess I’ve had a mighty long day and need to get home. Say, I’m tired. So long.”

He urged his horse forward and passed on down the trail. And as he went a trooper followed him, with orders to track him till daylight.

CHAPTER XXVI

ROCKY SPRINGS

HEARS THE NEWS

The news which greeted early morning ears in Rocky Springs was of a quality calculated to upset the entire affairs of the day, and bring a perfect surfeit of grist to O'Brien's insatiable mill. It even jeopardized the all-important church affairs. No one was inclined to work at all, let alone voluntarily work.

Then, too, there were the difficulties of gathering together a quorum of the Church Construction Committee, and Mrs. John Day, full of righteous indignation and outraged pride, as president, felt and declared that it was a scandal that the degraded doings of a parcel of low-down whisky-runners should be allowed to interfere with the noble cause which the hearts of the valley were set upon. But, being a woman of considerable energy, she by no means yielded to circumstances.

However, her difficulties were considerable. The percolation of the news of the police failure had reduced the male population to the condition of a joyful desire to celebrate in contraband drink. The female population became obsessed with a love of their own doorsteps, whence they could greet each other and exchange loud-voiced opinions with their neighbors, while their household "chores" awaited their later convenience. The

children, too, were robbed of their delight in more familiar mischief, and turned their inventive faculties toward something newer and more in keeping with prevailing conditions and sentiments. Thus, a new game was swiftly arranged, and some brighter soul among them christened it the D. I. F. game. The initials were popularly believed to represent "Done is Fyles," but the enlightened among the boys understood that they stood for "Damn Idjut Fyles," an interpretation quite in keeping with the general opinion of the people of the valley.

Certainly the atmosphere of the village that morning must have been intolerable to Inspector Fyles, had he permitted himself to dwell upon the indications, the derisive glances, the quiet laugh of men as he chanced to pass. But public opinion and feeling were things he had long since schooled himself to ignore. He was concerned with his superiors, and his superiors only. At all times they were more than sufficient to trouble with, and his whole anxiety was turned in their direction now, in view of his terrible failure of the night before.

Thus he was forced to witness the signs about him, and content himself with the knowledge that he had been bluffed, while he cast about in his troubled mind for a means of appeasing his superior's official wrath.

The church committee was to assemble at Mrs. John Day's house at ten o'clock, and the hour passed without a shadow of a quorum being formed. Kate Seton, the honorary secretary, was the only member, besides the president, who put in an appearance

at the appointed hour.

So Mrs. Day thrust on her bonnet, and, with every artificial flower in its crown shaking with indignation, set out to “round-up” the members.

O’Brien was impossible. His trade was too overwhelming to be left in the hands of a mere bartender, but there was less excuse for Billy Unguin and Allan Dy, who were merely drinkers in the place. She possessed herself of their persons and marched them off, and gathered up two or three women friends of hers on the way home. Thus, by eleven o’clock, she had the door of her parlor closed upon a more or less efficient quorum.

Then she sat her bulk down with a sigh of enforced content. Her florid face was beaded with perspiration as a result of her efforts.

She turned autocratically to her secretary.

“We’ll dispense with the reading of the minutes of the last meeting,” she declared half-defiantly. “We’ll take ’em as read and passed. This liquor business is driving us all to perdition, as well as wasting our time, which is more important in Rocky Springs. I’ve never seen the like of this place.” She glared directly at the two men. “And the men – well, say, I s’pose they are men, these fellows who stand around decorating that villain O’Brien’s saloon. If it was a christening, they’d drink; if it was a wedding, they’d drink; if it was a funeral, they’d drink; if they were going to stand before their Maker right away, they’d call for rye first.”

After which few opening remarks, given with all the scornful

dignity of one who knows she holds the leading position among her sex in the village, she proceeded with the work in hand with a capacity for detail that quite worried the absent minds of the only two male members of the committee present.

Such was the general yearning for a termination of the meeting, so that its members might once more return to the gossip outside, that Mrs. John Day was permitted to carry all her plans in her scheme of salvation before her, with little or no discussion. And, in consequence, her good nature quickly reasserted itself, and she became more and more inclined to look leniently upon the defects of the majority of her committee.

The president disposed of several lesser complaints against the construction of the church to her own satisfaction. The list of them was an accumulation of opinions sent in by people who felt that it was due to the community, and themselves, particularly, that the elected committee were sufficiently harrassed by pin pricks, lest it became too high-handed and autocratic.

Mrs. Day's methods of dealing with these was characteristic of her social rule in the village. She rose with a look of contemptuous defiance upon her fiery features. It was Helen who had once declared that Mrs. John always reminded her of one of those very red-combed old hens who never failed to cluck themselves very nearly into an apoplectic fit over a helpless worm, and demanded that all eyes should watch her marvelous display of prowess in its slaughter. A slip of paper had been thrust into her hands by the undisturbed honorary secretary.

“I guess I’m not going to worry you folks with debating these fool complaints sent in by some of the glory-seekers in this village,” she began with enthusiastic heat. “I’ve settled them all myself. I’ll read you the complaints and what I’ve done in each case. First, there’s a kick from Mrs. Morgan, upon the hill. She’s no account anyway, and hasn’t given a bean toward the church – yet. Guess I’ll have to see to that later. She says she saw two of the boys working on log hauling, sitting around in the shade of the church wall, after doing their work, swilling whisky out of the neck of a bottle, and guessed it wasn’t decent. I’ve written her asking her to send two boys to do the work in their place. Guess she hasn’t replied. Katherine L. Sherman, who guesses she’s related to the real Shermans, and has had twins twice in three years, writes: ‘When are we goin’ to arrange for a christening font?’ I handed her this. ‘When folks needing it see their way clear to unrolling their bank wads.’ Then there’s Mrs. Andy Carlton, who’s felt high-toned ever since she bought that second-hand top buggy from Mary Porson. She guesses we need a bell. I told her that if the people of Rocky Springs tried ringing their way to glory, it would be liable to alarm folks there. Best way would be to try and sneak in, and not shout they were coming. Then I heard from Mary Porson, herself. She wants to know who’s to keep the boys who’re drunk out of service, and wouldn’t it be better to hold Meeting on Monday, so’s the boys could get over the Saturday night souse in comfort. I told her she seemed to have a wrong idea of the folks of this village. I

guessed if any feller got around to Meeting with liquor under his belt, there was liable to be a lynching right away. The boys wouldn't stand for any ungentlemanly conduct at Meeting. Then there's Mrs. Annerly-Jones. Having a hyphen to her name, she's all for white surplices and organized singing. She figures to start up a full choir, and sing the solos herself. I hinted that the choir racket wasn't to be despised, but solo work was liable to cause ill-feeling in the village by making folks think the singer was getting the start of them in the chase for glory. And, anyway, the old harmonium wasn't a match for her voice. Then there's a suggestion for cuspidors for each bench, and I must say, right here, I'm in favor of them. I'm not one to interfere with the disgusting ways of men. Men are just men, and can't help it, anyway, and if they contract filthy habits, it's not for woman to put 'em right. But she's got the right to refuse having her skirts turned into floor swabs. I've fixed all these things right, so we don't need to vote on 'em. But there's one little matter that needs discussing right here and now, seeing that the folks are present who've brought it up."

The president paused and glared at the two men through her big, steel-rimmed glasses, and Billy Unguin and Allan Dy found themselves uncomfortably interested in various parts of well-varnished appointments of the lady's parlor.

Kate Seton eyed the two men with some amusement. She felt that the recent discussion, which took place in the new church itself, was liable to assume a different complexion here.

Besides, she knew these two men, and felt it was best to have the suggestion of felling the old pine, as a ridge pole for the church, definitely negated by the present meeting.

Mrs. John Day was always a difficult woman, of very strong opinions. Therefore it was not policy to suggest her course of action. So Kate had merely warned her that the suggestion had been made.

“It’s been said,” Mrs. Day went on, with an aggressive look in her hot eyes, “that the design of the building is all wrong. That the main body is too long, and that the ridge pole of the roof will have to be joined in several places. This means a great weakness that’ll have to be supported by central columns, which will obstruct the central gangway and the general view. I’d like Mr. Unguin and Mr. Dy to discuss the matter before the meeting.”

Thus challenged, Allan Dy sprang to his feet.

“It’s just as you say, ma’m,” he cried. “And I say right here that ridge pole should be in one piece. It’s bad. In a few years’ time we’ll surely have to rebuild that roof.”

He sat down with a jolt, and glared fiercely at his friend beside him.

Billy Unguin was on his feet in a moment.

“I want to say right here that my friend’s been sorting mail so long he’s got nervous. Furthermore, I’d add he don’t need to worry a thing. It’s my opinion the new church is an elegant proposition which reflects credit upon Rocky Springs, and our charming president more than anybody. And, if there’s any

liberties taken with the science of architecture, the matter can be got over dead easy. If joining the ridge pole means weakening the structure, then don't join it. That don't beat us a little bit. With such a head as our president has for the management of big affairs I'm sure she'll see a way out of the trouble, 'specially when I draw her attention to the old pine, which is tall enough to cut two ridge poles out of it for our church."

Like his friend, he sat down with a jolt. But he was smiling with anticipated triumph. He felt that his long experience as a salesman of dry goods had taught him how to reach the most vulnerable point in feminine armor. When it came to winning over Mrs. John Day to his side Allan Dy hadn't an earthly chance with him.

But his smile slowly disappeared when the honorary secretary promptly rose to her feet.

Kate Seton turned and addressed herself to the president.

"I should like to put in a word of protest," she began, while Allan Dy smiled and breathed his thankfulness that he was not to remain unsupported.

Instantly Billy Unguin broke in.

"Miss Seton, as secretary, is only ex-officio," he cried.

Mrs. Day shot a withering glance at him.

"Miss Seton is *honorary* secretary."

Allan Dy smiled more broadly as the president promptly nodded for Kate to proceed.

"I wish to protest against the old pine being felled," she said,

with some warmth. "It means disaster to Rocky Springs. There is the old legend. There is a curse on the felling of that tree."

Her announcement was greeted by a murmur of approval from the women present, all except Mrs. Day. Dy beamed. But Kate was less pleased. She knew her president. She would always listen to the men, but when her own sex ventured on thinking for themselves she was liable to become restive.

The president glanced round the room with a swift challenge shining through her glasses, and her hard mouth closed tightly. Then she turned sharply to the woman at her side.

"I'm – I'm – astonished, Kate," she cried, with difficulty suppressing her inclination to domineer. "The matter is most simple. It is said the best interests of the church are being jeopardized. There is the obvious necessity of altering the design of the roof of our beautiful building. You – whom I have always regarded as the essence of sanity, and my chief support in the arduous work which has been flung upon my shoulders, and which Mr. Unguin has been pleased to say I'm not incapable of carrying out – you would sacrifice those interests for a lot of old Indian fool talk. I never would have believed it. Never! Say," she turned to the others, and her eyes challenged the rest of the women, "This surely is a more serious matter than I thought. It must be looked into. I'll look into it myself. If things are as Mr. Dy says, and it's necessary, as Mr. Unguin points out, to cut down that tree to fix our church right – why, it's going to be cut down. That's all."

She paused dramatically, but not long enough for anybody to interrupt her. Then, with a wave of her fat arm, which, to the women, became a threat, and to the men appeared to be something like the gesticulation of an animated sausage, she proceeded to terminate the debate.

“Those in favor of *my* proposition will signify the same in the usual manner,” she cried, with an air that brooked no sort of denial.

Up went every right hand in the room except those of Kate and Allan Dy. Then the “no’s” were taken. After which the result was announced with all the triumph of Mrs. Day’s domineering personality.

“Carried,” she cried.

Then she turned upon her secretary without the least sympathy or kindness in her manner.

“You’ll enter that resolution in the minutes of the meeting,” she snapped.

Some half-hour later the quorum dissolved itself and trickled out of the oppressive precincts of Mrs. John Day’s highly polished parlor. The trickling process only lasted until the front door was gained. Then came a rush which had neither dignity nor politeness in it.

The two men set off for the saloon without attempting to disguise their purpose. The women hastily tripped off in the various directions whither they knew their favorite gossips would be found. Even Kate Seton failed to wait to exchange her usual

few final words with the president. Truth to tell, she was both disgusted and depressed, and felt that somehow she had made a mess of things. She felt that she had contrived to turn an unimportant matter into something of the first magnitude. The question of felling the old pine had merely been one of those subjects for bickering between Billy and Allan Dy, who had never been known to agree on any subject, and now, through bringing their dispute before the committee, she knew that she had changed it into a question upon which the whole village would take sides. She only trusted that superstition would prevail, and the aged landmark would be left standing. She somehow felt doubtful, however, now that Mrs. Day had taken sides against her, and she hurried off to avoid further discussion.

Billy Unguin arrived at the saloon alone. Allan Dy's course was diverted when he came within sight of his post office. As he reached the main trail of the village, he saw Inspector Fyles and Sergeant McBain riding down from the west, and the sight of them reminded him of his mail. So, leaving his friend to continue his way to the saloon alone, he went on to his little office, arriving in time to take down a telegraphic message from Amberley, and hand it, with his mail, to the police officer.

He rubbed his hands delightedly as he read the message over to himself a second time before placing it in its envelope. It was from the police headquarters, and its wording was full of significance in the light of last night's events. Allan Dy was glad he had not gone on to the saloon.

The message was desperately curt.

“Wagon returned to Fort Allerton empty. Report. Jason.”

The postmaster had just placed the message with the officers’ mail when the two policemen entered. Fyles’s expression was morose, and his manner repellent. McBain was grim and silent.

“There’s a goodish mail, Mr. Fyles,” said Dy, without a trace of his real feelings, as he held out the bulky packet of letters. “That message has just come along over the wire.” He pointed at the tinted envelope enclosing the telegram.

While Fyles took his mail, McBain’s keen eyes were at work upon the letters spread out on the counter.

Fyles’s silent manner induced the curious official to go a step further.

“It’s from headquarters – Superintendent Jason,” he said, covertly watching the policeman’s face.

But the effect was not quite as satisfactory as he hoped. Fyles smiled.

“Thanks. I was expecting it.”

Then he turned away, and, followed by McBain, passed out of the building.

Once outside, however, it was quite another matter. The officer tore open the message and glanced at its contents. Then he passed it on to McBain with a brief comment.

“They’re wise,” he said. “Guess the band’s going to start playing – right away.”

McBain read the message. “We’re up against it, sir,” was his

dry comment.

“Up against it, man?” Fyles cried, with sudden heat. “I tell you that’s very nearly our sentence. We’ve failed – failed, do you understand? And it’s not our first failure. Do you need me to tell you anything? We may just as well stand right here and cut off the badges of our various ranks. That’s what we may as well do,” he added bitterly. “There’s no mercy in Jason, and devilish little reason.”

But the Scot seemed to have very little sympathy for the other’s feelings. He seemed to care less for his rank than something else, and, in his next words, the real man shone out.

“I don’t care a curse for my rank, sir,” he exclaimed. “We’ve been bluffed and beaten like two babes in the game our lives are spent in playing. That’s what hurts me. Have you seen ’em, sir? All the way along as we came down here just now. We passed five or six women at the doors of their miserable shacks, and they smiled as they saw us. We passed four men, and their greeting was maddening in its jeer. Even the damned kids looked up and grinned like the apes they are. They’ve bluffed and beaten us, and I – hate ’em all.”

For some moments Stanley Fyles made no answer. He was gazing out down the village trail, and his eyes were on a small group of people standing some way off talking together. He had recognized them. They were Kate and Helen Seton, and with them was young Bryant, the ingenuous brother of Charlie. He guessed, as well he might, the subject of their talk. His failure.

Was not everybody talking of it? And were not most of them, probably all of them, rejoicing? His bitterness grew, and at last he turned on his subordinate.

“Bluffed, but not beaten,” he said, with a fierce oath which did the Scot’s heart good. “We’re not beaten,” he reiterated, “if only Jason will leave us alone, and trust us further. I’ve got to convince him. I’ve got to tell him all that’s happened, and I’ve got to persuade him to leave us here. We’ve got to go on. He can recommend my resignation, he can do what he damn well pleases, so long as he leaves me here to finish this work. I tell you, I’ve got to break up this gang of hoodlums.”

McBain’s eyes glittered.

“That’s how I feel, sir.”

“Feel? We’ve just got to do it – or clear out of the country. Man, I’d give a thousand dollars to know how they got possession of our signals. Those shots, that bluffed us, were fired by some of the gang. How did they learn it? It’s been done by spying, but – say, get on back to camp, and prepare the report of last night. Hold it up for me, and I’ll enclose a private letter to Mr. Jason. I’ll be along later.”

McBain nodded.

“You fix it, sir, so we don’t get transferred back. We need another chance badly. Maybe they won’t bluff us next time.”

He swung himself into the saddle and rode away, while Fyles, linking his arm through the faithful Peter’s reins, strolled leisurely on down the track toward the group which included Kate Seton.

As he drew near they ceased talking, and watched his approach. Their attitude was such that Fyles could not refrain from a half-bitter, half-laughing comment as he came up.

“It doesn’t take much guessing to locate the subject of your talk, Miss Kate,” he cried.

Kate’s dark eyes had no smile in them as she replied to his challenge.

“How’s that?” she inquired, while Bill and Helen watched his face.

Fyles shrugged.

“You stopped talking when you saw I was coming your way.” He laughed. “However, I guess it’s only to be expected. The boys bluffed us all right last night. It was a smartish trick. Still,” he added thoughtfully, “it’s given us an elegant lever – when the time comes.”

Kate made no answer. She was studying the man’s face, and there was a certain regret and even pity in the depths of her regard. Bill and Helen had no such feelings for him. They were frankly rejoiced at his failure.

Helen replied. “That’s so, Mr. Fyles,” she said, almost tartly, “but I guess that lever needs to help them into your traps to do any real good.”

The officer’s smile was quite good-humored, in spite of the sharpness of the girl’s reminder. What he really felt he was not likely to display here.

“Sure,” he said. “The spider weaves his web and it’s not worth

a cent if the flies aren't foolish enough to make mistakes. The spider is a student of winged insect nature, and he lays his plans accordingly. The flies always come to him – in the end.”

Bill laughed good-humoredly.

“That’s dandy,” he cried. “There’s always fool flies around. But sometimes that spider’s web gets all mussed up and broken. I’ve broke ’em myself – rather than see the fool things caught.”

Kate’s eyes were turned on the great bulk of Charlie’s brother. Even Helen looked up with bright admiration for her lover.

Fyles’s gaze was leveled directly into the innocent looking blue eyes laughing into his.

“Yes, I dare say you and other folks have broken those things up, often – but the spiders thrive and multiply. You see, when one net is busted they – make another. They don’t seem to starve ever, do they? Ever seen a spider dead of starvation?”

“Can’t say I have.” Bill shook his great head. “But maybe they’d get a bad time if they set their traps for any special flies – or fly.”

Fyles raised his powerful shoulders coldly.

“Guess the spider business doesn’t go far enough,” he said, talking directly at Big Brother Bill. “When I spoke of that lever just now, maybe you didn’t get my meaning quite clearly. That gang, who ran the liquor in last night, put themselves further up against the law than maybe they think. It was an armed attack on the police, which is quite a different thing to just simple whisky-running. Get me? The police are always glad when crooks do

that. It pays them better – when the time comes.”

Bill had no reply. He suddenly experienced the chill of the cold steel of police methods. A series of painful pictures rose up before his mind’s eye, which held his tongue silent. Helen quickly came to his rescue.

“But who’s to say who did it?” she demanded.

Fyles smiled down into her pretty face.

“Those who want to save their skins – when the time comes.”

It was Helen’s turn to realize something of the irresistible nature of the work of the police. Somehow she felt that the defeat of the police last night was but a shadowy success after all, for those concerned in the whisky-running. Her thought flew at once to Charlie, and she shuddered at the suggested possibilities in Fyles’s words.

She turned away.

“Well, all I can say is, I – I hate it all, and wish it was all over and done with. Everybody’s talking, everybody’s gloating, and – and it just makes me feel scared to death.” Then she turned again to Bill. “Let’s go on,” she cried, a little desperately. “We’ll finish our shopping, and – and get away from it all. It just makes me real ill.”

She waved a farewell to Kate and moved away, and Bill, like some faithful watchdog, followed at her heels. Fyles looked after them both with serious, earnest eyes. Kate watched them smiling.

Presently Fyles turned back to her.

“Well?” he demanded.

Kate's eyes were slowly raised to his.

"Well?" she echoed. "So – "

She broke off. Her generous nature checked her in time. She had been about to twit him with his defeat. She sympathized with his feelings at the thought of his broken hopes.

"Better say it," said Fyles, with a smile, in which chagrin and tenderness struggled for place. "You were going to say I have been defeated, as you told me I should be defeated."

"I s'pose I was." Kate glanced quickly up into his face, but the feeling she beheld there made her turn her eyes away so that they followed Bill and Helen moving down the trail. "Women are usually ungenerous to – an adversary." Then her whole manner changed to one of kindly frankness. "Do you know my feelings are sort of mixed about your – defeat – "

"Not defeat," put in Fyles. "Check."

Kate smiled.

"Well, then, 'check.' I am glad – delighted – since you direct all your suspicions against Charlie. Then I am full of regret for you, because – because I know the rigor of police discipline. In the eyes of the authorities you have failed – twice. Oh, if you would only attack this thing with an open mind, and not start prejudiced against Charlie. I wish you had never listened to local gossip. If that were so I could be on your side, and – and with true sportsmanship, wish you well. Besides that, I might be able to tell you things. You see, I learn many things in the village that others do not – hear."

Fyles was studying the woman's face closely as she spoke. And something he beheld there robbed his defeat of a good deal of its sting. Her words were the words of partisanship, and her partisanship was for another as well as himself. Had this not been so, had her partisanship been for him alone, he could well have abandoned himself to an open mind, as she desired. As it was, she drove him to a dogged pursuit of the man he was convinced was the real culprit.

“Don't let us reopen the old subject,” he said, with a shade of irritability. “I have evidence you know nothing of, and I should be mad indeed if I changed my objective at your desire, for the sake of the unsupported belief and regard you have for this man. Let us be content to be adversaries, each working out our little campaign as we think best. Don't waste regrets at my failures. I know the price I have to pay for them – only too well. I know, and I tell you frankly, but only you, that my career in the police may terminate in consequence. That's all right. The prestige of the force cannot be maintained by – failures. The prestige of the force is very dear to me. If you have anything to tell me that may lead me in the direction of the real culprit, then tell me. If not – why let us be friends until – until my work has made that impossible. I – I want your friendship very much.”

Kate's eyes were turned from him. The deep light in them was very soft.

“Do you?” she smiled. “Well – perhaps you have it, in spite of our temporary antagonism. Oh, dear – it's all so absurd.”

Fyles laughed.

“Isn’t it? But, then, anything out of the ordinary is generally absurd, until we get used to it. Somehow, it doesn’t seem absurd that I want your – friendship. At least, not to me.”

Kate smiled up into his face.

“And yet it is – absurd.”

The man’s eyes suddenly became serious.

“Why?”

Kate shrugged.

“That’s surely explained. We are – antagonists.”

Again that look of impatience crossed the man’s keen features. As he offered no reply, Kate went on.

“About the armed attack on the police. You said it made all the difference. What is the difference?”

“Anything between twelve months in the penitentiary and twenty years – when the gang is landed.”

“Twenty years!” The woman gave a slight gasp.

The man nodded.

“And do you know the logical consequence of it all?” he inquired.

“No.” Kate’s eyes were horrified.

“Why, when next we come into conflict there will be shooting if these people are pressed. They will have to shoot to save themselves. Then there may be murder added to their list of – delinquencies. These things follow in sequence. It is the normal progress of those who put themselves on the side of crime.”

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE HIDDEN CORRAL

Charlie Bryant urged his horse at a dangerous pace along the narrow, winding cattle tracks which threaded the upper reaches of the valley. He gave no heed to anything – the lacerating thorns, the great, knotty roots, with which the paths were studded, the overhanging boughs. His sole object seemed to be a desperate desire to reach his destination.

His horse often floundered and tripped, the man's own clothes were frequently ripped by the thorns, and the bleeding flesh beneath laid bare, while it seemed a miracle that he successfully dodged the threatening boughs overhead.

There was a hunted look in his dark eyes, too. It was a look of concern, almost of terror. His gaze was alert and roving. Now, he was looking ahead, straining with anxiety, now he was turning this way and that in response to the mysterious woodland sounds which greeted his ears. Again, with a nervous jerk, he would rein in his horse and sit listening, with eyes staring back over the way he had come, as though fearing pursuit.

Once he thrust a hand into an inside pocket as though to reassure himself that something was there which he valued and feared to lose, and with every movement, every look of his eyes, every turn of the head, he displayed an unusual nervousness and

apprehension.

At last his horse swept into the clearing of the hidden corral, and he reined it up with a jerk, and leaped from the saddle. Then he stood listening, and the apprehension in his eyes deepened. But presently it lessened, and he moved forward, and flung his reins over one of the corral fence posts. Every woodland sound, every discordant note from the heart of the valley was accounted for in his mind, so he hurried toward the flat-roofed hut, that mysterious relic of a bygone age.

He thrust the creaking door open and waited while the flight of birds swarmed past him. Then he made his way within. Once inside he paused again with that painful look of expectancy and fear in his eyes. Again this passed, and he went on quickly to the far corner of the room, and laid his hands upon the wooden lining of the wall. Then he abruptly seemed to change his mind. He removed his hands, and withdrew a largish, morocco pocketbook from an inner pocket.

It was a rather fine case, bound in embossed silver, and ornamented with a silver monogram. For some moments he looked at it as though in doubt. He seemed to be definitely making up his mind, and his whole attitude suggested his desire for its safety.

While he was still gazing at it a startled look leaped into his eyes, and his head turned as though at some suspicious sound. A moment later he reached out and slid the wooden lining of the wall up, revealing the cavity behind it, which still contained

its odd assortment of garments. Without hesitation he reached up to a dark jacket and thrust the pocketbook into an inner pocket. Then, with a swift movement, he replaced the paneling and turned about.

It was the work of a moment, and as he turned about his right hand was gripping the butt of a revolver, ready and pointing at the door.

“Charlie!”

The revolver was slipped back into the man’s pocket, and Charlie Bryant’s furious face was turned toward the window opening, which now framed the features of his great blundering brother.

“You, Bill?” he cried angrily. “What in hell are you doing here?”

But Bill ignored the challenge, he ignored the tone of it. His big eyes were full of excitement.

“Come out of there – quick!” he cried sharply.

Charlie’s dark eyes had lost some of their anger in the inquiry now replacing it.

“Why?” But he moved toward the doorway.

“Why? Because Fyles is behind me. I’ve seen him in the distance.”

Charlie came around the corner of the building with the door firmly closed behind him. Bill left the window and moved across to his horse, which was standing beside that of his brother. Charlie followed him.

Neither spoke again until the horses were reached, and Bill had unhitched his reins from the corral fence. Then he turned his great blue eyes, so full of trouble, upon the small figure beside him, and he answered the other's half-angry, half-curious challenge with a question.

"What's this place?" he demanded. Then he added, "And what's that cupboard in there?" He jerked his head in the direction of the hut, "I saw you close it."

Charlie seemed to have recovered from the apprehension which had caused him to obey his brother unquestioningly. There was an angry sparkle in his eyes as he gazed steadily into Bill's face.

"That's none of your damn business," he said, in a low tone of surly truculence. "I'm not here to answer any questions till you tell me the reason why you've had the impertinence to hunt me down. How did you know where to find me?"

Just for one moment a hot retort leaped to the other's lips. But he checked his rising temper. His journey in pursuit of his brother had been taken after deep reflection and consultation with Helen. But the mystery of that hut, that cupboard, did more to keep him calm than anything else. His curiosity was aroused. Not mere idle curiosity, but these things, this place, were a big link in the chain of evidence that had been forged about his brother, and he felt he was on the verge of a discovery. Then there was Fyles somewhere nearby in the neighborhood. This last thought, and all it portended, destroyed his feelings of

resentment.

“I s’pose you think I followed you for sheer curiosity. Guess I might well enough do so, seeing we bear the same name, and that name’s liable to stink – through you. But I didn’t, anyway. I came out here to tell you something I heard this morning, and it’s about – last night. Fyles says that the result of last night is that the gang, their leader, is now wanted for an armed attack on the police, and that the penalty is – anything up to twenty years in the penitentiary.”

Charlie’s intense regard never wavered for one moment.

“Who told you I was here?” he demanded angrily.

“No one.”

There was a sting in the sharpness of Bill’s reply. The big blue eyes were growing hot again.

“Then how did you know where to find me?” Charlie’s deep voice was full of suppressed fury.

“I didn’t know just where to find you,” Bill protested, with rising heat. “The kid told me you’d gone up the valley, but didn’t say where. I set out blindly and stumbled on your horse’s tracks. I chanced those tracks, and they led me here. Will that satisfy you?”

Charlie’s eyes were still glittering.

“Not quite. I’ll ask you to get out of my ranch. And remember this, you’ve seen me at this shack, and you’ve seen that cupboard. If you’d been anybody but my brother I’d have shot you down in your tracks. Fyles – anybody. That cupboard is my secret, and

if anyone learns of it through you – well, I'll forget you're my brother and treat you as though you were – Fyles.”

A sudden blaze of wrath flared up in the bigger man's eyes. But, almost as it kindled, it died out and he laughed. However, when he spoke there was no mirth in his voice.

“My God, Charlie,” he cried, holding out his big hands, “I could almost take you in these two hands and – and wring your foolish, obstinate, wicked neck. You stand there talking blasted melodrama like a born actor on the one-night stands. Your fool talk don't scare me a little. What in the name of all that's sacred do you think I want to send you to the penitentiary for? Haven't I come here to warn you? Man, the rye whisky's turned you crazy. I'm here to help, help, do you understand? Just four letters, 'help,' a verb which means 'support,' not 'destroy.’”

Charlie's cold regard never wavered.

“When will you clear out of – my ranch?”

Bill started. The brothers' eyes met in a long and desperate exchange of regard. Then the big man brought his fist down upon the high cantle of his saddle with startling force.

“When I choose, not before,” he cried fiercely. “Do you understand? Here, you foolish man. I know what I'm up against. I know what you're up against, and I tell you right here that if Fyles is going to hunt you into the penitentiary he can hunt me, too. I'm not smart, like you, on these crook games, but I'm determined that the man who lags you will get it good and plenty. I sort of hate you, you foolish man. I hate you and like you. You've got

grit, and, by God, I like you for it, and I don't stand to see you go down for any twenty years – alone. If Fyles gets you that way, you're the last man he ever will get. Damn you!"

Charlie drew a deep breath. It was a sigh of pent feeling. He averted his gaze, and it wandered over the old corral inside which the wagon with its hay-rack was still standing, though its position was changed slightly. His eyes rested upon it, and passed on to the hut, about which the birds were once more gathering. They paused for some silent moments in this direction. Then they came back to the angry, waiting brother.

"I wish you weren't such a blunderer, Bill," he said, and his manner had become peevishly gentle. "Can't you see I've got to play my own game in my own way? You don't know all that's back of my head. You don't know a thing. All you know is that Fyles wants to send me down, by way of cleaning up this valley. I want him to – if he can. But he can't. Not as long as the grass grows. He's beaten – beaten before he starts. I don't want help. I don't want help from anybody. Now, for God's sake, can't you leave me alone?"

The tension between the two was relaxed. Bill gave an exclamation of impatience.

"You want him to – send you down?"

The warp of this man was too much for his common sense.

"If he can."

Charlie smiled now. It was a smile of perfect confidence. Bill threw up his hands.

“Well, you’ve got me beat to a rag. I – ”

“The same as I have Fyles. But say – ”

Charlie broke off, and his smile vanished.

“Maybe I’m a crook. Maybe I’m anything you, or anybody else likes to call me. There’s one thing I’m not. I’m no bluff. You know of that cupboard in that shack. The thought’s poison to me. If any other man had found it, he wouldn’t be alive now to listen to me. Do you understand me? Forget it. Forget you ever saw it. If you dream of it, fancy it’s a nightmare and – turn over. Bill, I solemnly swear that I’ll shoot the man dead, on sight, who gives that away, or dares to look inside it. Now, we’ll get away from here.”

He sprang into the saddle and waited while his brother mounted. Then he held out his hand.

“Do you get me?” he asked.

Bill nodded, and took the outstretched hand in solemn compact.

“What you say goes,” he said easily. “But your threat of shooting doesn’t worry me a little bit.”

He gathered up his reins and the two men rode out of the clearing.

The last sound of speeding hoofs died away, and the clearing settled once more to its mysterious quiet. Only the twittering of the swarming birds on the thatched roof of the hut disturbed the silence, but, somehow, even their chattering voices seemed really to intensify it.

Thus a few minutes passed.

Then a breaking of bush and rustling of leaves gave warning of a fresh approach. A man's head and shoulders were thrust forward, out from amid the boughs of a wild cherry bush.

His dark face peered cautiously around, and his keen eyes took in a comprehensive survey of both corral and hut. A moment later he stood clear of the bush altogether.

Stanley Fyles swiftly crossed the intervening space and entered the corral. He strode up to the wagon and examined it closely, studying its position and the wheel tracks, with a minuteness that left him in possession of every available fact. Having satisfied himself in this direction, he passed out of the corral and went over to the hut.

The screaming birds promptly protested, and flew once more from their nesting quarters in panicky dudgeon. Fyles watched them go with thoughtful eyes. Then he passed around to the door of the building and thrust it open. Another rush of birds swept past him, and he passed within. Again his searching eyes were brought into play. Not a detail of that interior escaped him. But ten minutes later he left the half-lit room for the broad light of day outside – disappointed.

For a long time he moved around the building, examining the walls, their bases and foundations. His disappointment remained, however, and, finally, with strong discontent in his expression, and an unmistakable shrug of his shoulders, he moved away.

Finally, he paused and gave a long, low whistle. He repeated

it at intervals, three times, and, after awhile, for answer, the wise face of Peter appeared from among the bushes. The creature solemnly contemplated the scene. It was almost as if he were assuring himself of the safety of revealing himself. Then, with measured gait, he made his way slowly toward his master.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A WAGER

The wild outbreak of excitement in Rocky Springs died out swiftly. After all, whisky-running was a mere traffic. It was a general traffic throughout the country. The successful "running" of a cargo of alcohol was by no means an epoch-making event. But just now, in Rocky Springs, it was a matter of more than usual interest, in that the police had expressed their intention of "cleaning" the little township up. So the excitement at their outwitting. So, more than ever, the excited rejoicing became a cordial expression of delight at the fooling of the purpose of a generally hated act.

This sentiment was expressed by O'Brien before his bar full of men, among whom were many of those responsible for the defeat of the police. He addressed himself personally to Stormy Longton with the certainty of absolute sympathy.

"Guess when the boys here have done with the p'lice they'll have the prohibition law wiped out of the statute book, Stormy," he said, with a knowing wink. "Ther's fellers o' grit around this valley, eh? Good boys and gritty. Guess it ain't fer us to open our mouths wide, 'cep' to swallow prohibition liquor, but there'll be some tales to tell of these days later, eh, Stormy? An'," he added slyly, "guess you'll be able to tell some of 'em."

The badman displayed no enthusiasm at the personality. He considered carefully before replying. When he did reply, however, he set the saloonkeeper re-sorting some of his convictions, mixing them with a doubt which had never occurred to him before.

“Sure,” said Stormy, with a contemptuous shrug, “and I guess you, with the rest, will do some of the listenin’. You’re all wise guys hereabouts – mostly as wise as the p’lice. Best hand the company a round of drinks. I’ve got money to burn.”

He laughed, but no amount of questioning could elicit anything more of interest to the curious minds about him.

It was on the second day after the whisky-running that Kate Seton was returning home after an arduous morning in the village. She was feeling unusually depressed, and her handsome face was pathetically lacking in the high spirits and delight of living usual to it. It was not her way to indulge in the self-pitying joys of depression. On the contrary, her buoyancy, her spirit, were such as to attract the weaker at all times to lean on her for support.

She was tired, too, physically tired. The day had been one of sweltering heat, one of those sultry, oppressive days, which are fortunately few enough in the brilliant Canadian summer.

As she reached the wooden bridge across the river she paused and leaned herself against the handrail, and, propping her elbow upon it, leaned her chin upon the palm of her hand and abandoned herself to a long train of troubled thought. It may

have been chance; it may have been that her thought inspired the direction of her gaze. It may have been that her attitude had nothing whatsoever to do with her thought. Certain it is, however, that her brooding eyes were turned, as they were so often turned, upon that little ranch house perched so high up on the valley slope.

She remained thus for a while, her eyes almost unseeing in their far-away gaze, but, later, without shifting her attitude, they glanced off to the right in the direction of the old pine, rearing its vagabond head high above the surrounding wealth of by no means insignificant foliage.

It was a splendid sight, and, to her imagination, it looked the personification of the rascality of the village she had so come to love. Look at it. Its trunk, naked as the supports of a scarecrow, suggesting mighty strength, indolence and poverty. There, above, its ragged garments – unwholesome, dirty, like the garments of some tramping, villainous, degraded loafer. And yet, with it all, the old tree looked so mighty, so wise.

To her it seemed like some ages-old creature looking down from its immense height, and out of its experience of centuries, upon a world of struggling beings, with the pitying contempt of a wisdom beyond the understanding of man. It seemed to her the embodiment of evil, yet withal of wisdom, too. And somehow she loved it. Its evil meant nothing to her, nothing more than the evil of the life amid which she lived. It was no mere passing sentiment with her. Her nature was too strong for the softer,

womanish sentiments, stirred in a moment and as easily set aside. For her to yield her affections to any creature or object, was to yield herself to a bondage more certain than any life of slavery. To think of this valley without —

Her thoughts were abruptly cut short as the sound of a cry reached her from the direction of her house.

She turned, and, for a moment, stared hard and alertly in the direction whence it came. Her ears were straining, too. In a moment she became aware of a faint confusion of sounds which she had no power of interpreting. But somehow they conveyed an ominous suggestion to her keen mind.

She bestirred herself. She set off at a run for her home. The distance was less than a hundred yards, and she covered it quickly. As she came nearer the sounds grew, and became even more ominous. They proceeded from somewhere in the direction of the barn behind the house.

She darted into the house, and, after one comprehensive glance around the sitting room, where she found the rocker upset, and a china ornament fallen from its place on the table, and smashed in fragments upon the floor, as though someone had knocked it down in a hasty departure, she snatched a revolver from its holster upon the wall, and rushed out of the house through the back door.

She was not mistaken. Her hearing had accurately conveyed to her the meaning of those sounds.

Nevertheless she was wholly unprepared for the sight which

actually greeted her as she turned the angle of the barn where the building faced away from the house.

She stood stock still, her big eyes wide with wonder and swift rising anger. Twisting, struggling, writhing, cursing, two men lay upon the ground held in a fierce embrace, much in the manner of two wildcats. Beyond them, huddled upon the ground, her face covered with her hands, a picture of abject terror, crouched her younger sister, Helen.

All this she beheld at the first glance. Then, keeping clear of the fighters she darted around to the terrified girl. With a cry Helen scrambled to her feet and clung to her sister's arm, and began to pour out a stream of hysterical thankfulness.

"Oh, stop them," she cried. "Oh, thank God, thank God! Stop them, or they'll kill each other. Pete will kill him. He –"

But Kate had no time for such feminine weakness. She dragged the girl away out of sight, and left her while she returned to the affray.

Once in full view of it she made no effort to stop it. She stood looking on with the critical eye of an interested spectator, but her hand was grasping her revolver, nor was her forefinger far from the trigger of it.

The men rolled this way and that, while deep-throated curses came up from their midst with a breathless, muttered force. But through the tangle of sprawling bodies and waving limbs Kate's quick eyes discovered all she required to satisfy herself. She saw no real life and death struggle here. Maybe, had the

circumstances been changed, it would have been so, but one of the combatants was far too experienced a rough and tumble fighter for those circumstances to mature.

The man on top at the moment had the other in a vice-like grip by the right wrist, keeping the heavy revolver, which the underman had in his hand, from becoming a serious danger. With the other hand he was dealing his adversary careful, well-timed smashes upon his bruised and battered face, with the object of warding off a fierce attack of strong, yellow teeth.

The man on top had his adversary's measure to a fraction. He was dealing with him almost as he chose, and the onlooker knew that it could only be moments before the other finally "squealed," and dropped the murderous weapon from his hand.

Down came the fist, a great, white fist, with a soggy sound upon the man's pulpy features, its force increased a hundred per cent. by the resistance of the hard ground on which his adversary lay. A fierce curse was the response, and a wild upward slash at the big face above. Then the big fist went up again.

"Drop it, you son-of-a-moose," Kate heard, in Big Brother Bill's fiercest tones. "Drop it, or I'll kill you!"

Down came his fist with a fearful smash on the other's gaping mouth.

A splutter of oaths was his reply, and an even greater effort to throw the white man off.

But the effort was unavailing. Then Kate saw something happen. The big white man changed his tactics. He desisted quite

suddenly from belaboring his victim. He made no attempt to defend himself. He reached out his disengaged hand and added a second grip upon the man's revolver arm. Then, with a terrific jolt, he flung himself backwards, so that he was left in a kneeling position upon the other's middle. Then, in a second, with an agility absolutely staggering, he was on his feet. The next moment the other was jerked to his feet with his revolver arm twisted behind his back and nearly dislocated.

With a frantic yell of agony the half-breed's hand relaxed its grip upon his revolver, and the weapon fell to the ground. The fight was over. With a mighty throw Pete Clancy was hurled headlong, and fell sprawling upon the ground at the foot of the barn wall, and his impact was like the result of a shot from a catapult.

"Lie there, you dirty dog!" cried Big Brother Bill, in a fury of breathless indignation. "That'll maybe learn you a lesson not to get drinking rot gut, and, if you do, not to insult a white girl. You damnation nigger, for two beans I'd kick the life out of you where you lay."

The man was scrambling to his feet, glaring an eternity of hatred at his white victor.

"Did he insult – Helen?"

Bill swung around with almost ludicrous abruptness. He had been utterly unaware of Kate's presence.

He stared. Then, with a rush of passionate anger —

"Yes; but by God, he'll think some before he does it again."

Kate's eyes were coldly commanding.

"Go around to Helen, and – take that gun," she said authoritatively. "Leave Pete to me."

"Leave him – ?" Bill's protest remained uncompleted.

"Do as I tell you – please."

"But he'll – "

Again Kate cut him short.

"Please!" She pointed in the direction of the house.

Bill was left with no alternative but to obey. He moved away, but his movements were grudging, and he looked back as he went, ready to hurl himself to Kate's succor at the slightest sign.

Ten minutes later Kate entered the sitting room. Her handsome face was pale, and her eyes were shining. The spirit of the woman was stirred. There was no fear in her – only a sort of hard resentment that left her expression one of cold determination.

Helen ran to her at once. But, for perhaps the first time in her life, she encountered something in the nature of a rebuff. Kate looked straight into her sister's eyes as she flung herself into a chair, and laid her loaded revolver upon the table.

"Tell me about it. Just the plain facts," she said, and waited.

Bill started up from his place in the rocker, but Kate signed him to be silent.

"Helen can tell me," she said coldly.

Helen, leaning against the table, glanced across at Bill. Her sister's attitude troubled her. She felt the resentment underlying

it. She was at a loss to understand it. After a moment's hesitation she began to explain. Nor could she quite keep the sharp edge of feeling out of her tone.

"It was my fault," she began. "At least, I s'pose it was. I s'pose I was doing a fool thing interfering, but I didn't just think you'd mind, seeing you'd ordered him to do work he hadn't done. You see, he hadn't touched those potatoes you'd told him to dig. He's been drinking instead."

Suddenly her sense of humor got the better of her resentful feelings, and she began to laugh.

"Well, I had to go and be severe with him. I tried to bully him, and stamped my foot at him, and – and called him a drunken brute. I took a chance. Being drunk, he might have proposed to me. Well, he didn't this time. It was far worse. He told me to go – to hell, first of all. But, as I didn't show signs of obeying him, he got sort of funny and tried to kiss me."

"The swine!" muttered Bill, but was silenced by a look from Helen's humorous eyes.

"That's what I thought – first," she said. Then, her eyes widening: "But he meant doing it, and I got scared to death. Oh, dear, I was frightened. Being a coward, I shouted for help. And Bill responded like – like a great angry steer. Then I got worse scared, for, directly Pete saw Bill coming, he pulled a gun, and there surely was murder in his eye."

She breathed a deep sigh, and her eyes had changed their expression to one of delight and pride.

“But he hadn’t a dog’s chance of putting Bill’s lights out. He hadn’t, true. Say, Kate, Bill was just like – like a whirlwind. Same as Charlie said. He was so quick I hardly know how it happened. Bill dropped Pete like a – a sack of wheat. He – he was on him like a tiger. Then I was just worse scared than ever, and – and began to cry.”

The girl’s mouth drooped, but her eyes were laughing. Then, as Kate still remained quiet, she inquired:

“Wasn’t I a fool?”

Kate suddenly looked up from the brown study into which she had fallen. Her big eyes looked straight across at Bill, and she ignored Helen’s final remark.

“Thanks, Bill,” she said quietly. And her last suggestion of displeasure seemed to pass with her expression of gratitude. “I’m glad you were here, and” – she smiled – “you can fight. You nearly killed him.” Then, after a pause: “It’s been a lesson to me. I – shan’t forget it.”

“What have you – done to him?” cried Helen suddenly.

But Kate shook her head.

“Let’s talk of something else. There’s things far more important than – him. Anyway, he won’t do *that* again.”

She rose from her seat and moved to the window, where she stood looking out. But she had no interest in what she beheld. She was thinking moodily of other things.

Bill stirred in his chair. He was glad enough to put the episode behind him.

“Yes,” he said, taking up Kate’s remark at once. “There certainly are troubles enough to go around.” He was thinking of his scene of the previous day with his brother. “But – but what’s gone wrong with you, Kate? What are the more important things?”

“You haven’t fallen out with Mrs. Day?” Helen put in quickly. Kate shook her head.

“No one falls out with Mrs. Day,” she said quietly. “Mrs. Day does the falling out. It isn’t only Mrs. Day, it’s – it’s everybody. I think the whole village is – is mad.” She turned back from the window and returned to her seat. But she did not sit down. She stood resting her folded arms on its back and leaned upon it. “They’re all mad. Everybody. I’m mad.” She glanced from one to the other, smiling in the sanest fashion, but behind her smile was obvious anxiety and trouble. “They’ve practically decided to cut down the old pine.”

Bill sat up. He laughed at the tone of her announcement.

But Helen gasped.

“The old pine?” She had caught some of her sister’s alarm.

Kate nodded.

“You can laugh, Bill,” she cried. “That’s what they’re all doing. They’re laughing at – the old superstition. But – it’s not a laughing matter to folks who think right along the lines of the essence of our human natures, which is superstition. The worst of it is I’ve brought it about. I told the meeting about a stupid argument about the building of the church which Billy and Dy had. Billy wants

the tree for a ridge pole, because the church is disproportionately long. Well, I told the folks because I thought they wouldn't hear of the tree being cut. But Mrs. Day rounded on me, and the meeting followed her like a flock of sheep. Still, I wasn't done by that. I've been canvassing the village since, and, would you believe it, they all say it's a good job to cut the tree down. Maybe it'll rid the place of its evil influence, and so rid us of the attentions of the police. I tell you, Billy and Dy are perfect fools, and the folks are all mad. And I'm the greatest idiot ever escaped a home for imbeciles. There! That's how I feel. It's – it's scandalous."

Bill laughed good-naturedly.

"Say, cheer up, Kate," he cried. "You surely don't need to worry any. It can't hurt you. Besides – ." He broke off abruptly, and, sitting up, looked out of the window. "Say, here comes Fyles." He almost leaped out of his seat.

"What's the matter?" demanded Kate sharply. Then she looked around at her sister, who had moved away from the table.

Bill laughed again in his inconsequent fashion.

"Matter?" he cried. "Nothin's the matter, only – only – . Say, did you ever have folks get on your nerves?"

"Plenty in Rocky Springs," said Kate bitterly.

Bill nodded.

"That's it. Say, I've just remembered I've got an appointment that was never made with somebody who don't exist. I'm going to keep it."

Helen laughed, and clapped her hands.

“Say, that’s really funny. And I’ve just remembered something I’d never forgotten, that’s too late to do anyway. Come on, Bill, let’s go and see about these things, and,” she added slyly, “leave Kate to settle Fyles – by herself.”

“Helen!”

But Kate’s remonstrance fell upon empty air. The lovers had fled through the open doorway, and out the back way. Nor had she time to call them back, for, at that moment, Fyles’s horse drew up at the front door, and she heard the officer leap out of the saddle.

“Have you made your peace with – headquarters?”

Kate and Stanley Fyles were standing out in the warm shade of the house. The woman’s hand was gently caressing the velvety muzzle of Peter’s long, fiddle face. It was a different woman talking to the police officer from the bitter, discontented creature of a few minutes ago. For the time, at least, all regrets, all thoughts of an unpleasant nature seemed to have been lost in the delight of a woman wholesomely in love.

As she put her question her big eyes looked up into the man’s keen face with just the faintest suspicion of raillery in their glowing depths. But her rich tones were full of a genuine eagerness that belied the look.

The man was good to look upon. The strength of his face appealed to her, as did the big, loose shoulders and limbs, as strength must always appeal to a real woman. Her love inspired

a subtle tenderness, even anxiety.

“I hope so, but – I don’t know yet.”

Fyles made no attempt to conceal his doubts. Somehow the official side of the man was becoming less and less sustained before this woman, who had come to occupy such a big portion of his life.

“You mean you’ve sent in your report, and are now awaiting the – verdict?”

Fyles nodded.

“Like so many of the criminals I have brought before the courts,” he said, bitterly.

“And the chances?”

“About equal to those of a convicted felon.”

The smile died out of Kate’s eyes. They were full of regretful sympathy.

“It’s pretty tough,” she said, turning from him. “It isn’t as if you had made a mistake, or neglected your duty.”

“No, I was beaten.”

The man turned away coldly. But his coldness was not for her.

“Is there no hope?” Kate asked presently, in a low tone.

Fyles shrugged.

“There might be if I had something definite to promise for the future. I mean a chance of – redeeming myself.”

Kate made no answer. The whole thing to her mind seemed impossible if it depended upon that. The thought of this strong man being broken through the police system, for no particular

fault of his own, seemed very hard. Harder now than ever. She strove desperately to find a gleam of light in the darkness of his future. She would have given worlds to discover some light, and show him the way. But one thing seemed impossible, and he – well, he only made it harder. His very decision and obstinacy, she considered, were his chief undoing.

“If you could reasonably hold out a prospect to them,” she said, her dark eyes full of thought – strong and earnest thought. “Can’t you?”

She watched him closely. She saw him suddenly straighten himself up, throwing back his powerful shoulders as though to rid himself of the burden which had been oppressing him so long.

He drew a step nearer. Kate’s heart beat fast. Then her eyes drooped before the passion shining in his.

“Maybe you don’t realize why I am here, Kate,” he said, in a low thrilling voice, while a warm smile grew in his eyes. “You see, weeks ago I made a mistake, a bad mistake – just such as I have made here. The liquor was run under my nose, while I – well, I just stood around looking on like some fool babe. That liquor was – for this place. After that I asked the chief to give me a free hand, and to allow me to come right along, and round this place up. My object was twofold. I knew I had to make good, and – I knew you were here. Guess you don’t remember our first meeting? I do. It was up on the hillside, near the old pine. I’ve always wanted to get back here – ever since then. Well, I’ve had my wish. I’m here, sure. But I’ve not made good. The folks, here,

have beaten me, and you – why, I’ve just contrived to make you my sworn adversary. Failure, eh? Failure in my work, and in my – love.”

For an instant the woman’s eyes were raised to his face. She was trembling as no physical fear could have made her tremble. Peter nuzzled the palm of her hand with his velvety nose, and she quickly lowered her gaze, and appeared to watch his efforts.

After a moment’s pause the man went on in a voice full of a great passionate love. All the official side of him had gone utterly. He stood before the woman he loved baring his soul. For the moment he had put his other failures behind him. He wanted only her.

“I came here because I loved you, Kate. I came here dreaming all those dreams which we smile at in others. I dreamed of a life at your side, with you ever before me to spur me on to the greater heights which I have thought about, dreamed about. And all my work, all my striving, was to be for you. I saw visions of the days, when, together, we might fill high office in our country’s affairs, with an ambition ever growing, as, together, we mounted the ladder of success. Vain enough thought, eh? Guess it was not long before I brought the roof of my castle crashing about my ears. I have failed in my work a second time, and only succeeded in making you my enemy.”

Kate’s eyes were shining. A great light of happiness was in them. But she kept them turned from him.

“Not enemy – only adversary,” she said, in a low voice.

The man shook his head.

“It is such a small distinction,” he said bitterly. “Antagonists. How can I ever hope that you can care for me? Kate, Kate,” he burst out passionately, “if you would marry me, none of the rest would matter. I love you so, dear. If you would marry me I should not care what the answer from headquarters might be. Why should I? I should then have all I cared for in the world, and the world itself would still be before us. I have money saved. All we should need to start us. My God, the very thought of it fills me with the lust of conquest. There would be nothing too great to aspire to. Kate, Kate!” He held his arms out toward her in supplication.

The woman shook her head, but offered no verbal refusal. The man’s arms dropped once more to his sides, and, for a moment, the silence was only broken by the champing of Peter’s bit. Then once more the man’s eyes lit.

“Tell me,” he cried, almost fiercely. “Tell me, had we not come into conflict over this man, Bryant, would – would it – could it have been different?” Then his voice grew soft and persuasive. “I know you don’t dislike me, Kate.” He smiled. “I know it, and you must forgive my – vanity. I have watched, and studied you, and – convinced myself. I felt I had the right to hope. The right of every decently honest man. Our one disagreement has been this man, Bryant. I had thought maybe you loved him, but that you have denied. You do not? There is no one else?”

Again Kate silently shook her head. The man was pressing her

hard. All her woman's soul was crying out for her to fling every consideration to the winds, and yield to the impulse of the love stirring within her. But something held her back, something so strong as to be quite irresistible.

The man went on. He was fighting that last forlorn hope amid what, to him, seemed to be a sea of disaster.

"No. You have told me that before," he said, almost to himself. "Then why," he went on, his voice rising with the intensity of his feelings. "Why – why – ? But no, it's absurd. You tell me you don't – you can't love me."

For one brief instant Kate's eyes were shyly raised to his. They dropped again at once to the brown head of the horse beside her.

"I have told you nothing – yet," she said, in a low voice.

The man snatched a brief hope.

"You mean – ?"

Kate looked up again, fearlessly now.

"I mean just what I say."

"You have told me nothing – yet," the man repeated. "Then you have something – to tell me?"

Kate nodded and pushed Peter's head aside almost roughly.

"The man I can care for, the man I marry must have no thought of hurt for Charlie Bryant in his mind."

"Then you –"

Kate made a movement of impatience.

"Again, I mean just what I say – no more, no less."

But it was Fyles's turn to become impatient.

“Bryant – Charlie Bryant? It is always Charlie Bryant – before all things!”

Kate’s eyes looked steadily into his.

“Yes – before even myself.”

The man returned her look.

“Yet you do not love him as – I would have you love me?”

“Yet I do not love him, as you would have me love you.”

The man thrust out his arms.

“Then, for God’s sake, tell me some more.”

The insistent Peter claimed Kate once more. His long face was once more thrust against her arm, and his soft lips began to nibble at the wrist frill of her sleeve. She turned to him with a laugh, and placed an arm about his crested neck.

“Oh, Peter, Peter,” she said smiling, and gently caressing the friendly creature. “He wants me to tell him some more. Shall I? Shall I tell him something of the many things I manage to learn in this valley? Shall I try and explain that I contrive to get hold of secrets that the police, with all their cleverness, can never hope to get hold of? Shall I tell him, that, if only he will put Charlie out of his mind, and leave him alone, and not try to fix this – this crime on him, I can put him on the track of the real criminal? Shall I point out to him the absurdity of fixing on this one man when there are such men as O’Brien, and Stormy Longton, and my two boys, and Holy Dick, and Kid Blaney in the place? Shall I? Shall I tell him of the things I’ve found out? Yes, Peter, I will, if he’ll promise me to put Charlie out of his mind. But not unless.

Eh? Not unless.”

The man shook his head.

“You make the condition impossible,” he cried. “You have faith in that man. Good. I have overwhelming evidence that he is the man we are after. Until he is caught the whisky-running in this place will never cease.”

Kate refused to display impatience. She went on talking to the horse.

“Isn’t he obstinate? Isn’t he? And here am I offering to show him how he can get the real criminals.”

Fyles suddenly broke into a laugh. It was not a joyous laugh. It was cynical, almost bitter.

“You are seeking to defend Bryant, and yet you can, and will, put me on the track of the whisky-runners. It’s farcical. You would be closing the door of the penitentiary upon your – friend.”

Kate’s eyes flashed.

“Should I? I don’t think so. The others I don’t care that for.” She flicked her fingers. “They must look to themselves. I promise you I shall not be risking Charlie’s liberty.”

“I’ll wager if you show me how I can get these people, and I succeed – you will.”

The angry sparkle in the woman’s eyes died out, to be replaced with a sudden light of inspiration.

“You’ll wager?” she cried, with an excited laugh. “You will?”

The policeman nodded.

“Yes – anything you like.”

Kate's laugh died out, and she stood considering.

"But you said my conditions were – impossible. You will leave Charlie alone until you capture him running the whisky? You will call your men off his track – until you catch him red-handed? You will accept that condition, if I show you how you can – make good with your – headquarters?"

The man suddenly found himself caught in the spirit of Kate's mood.

"But the conditions must not be all with you," he cried, with a short laugh. "You are too generous to make it that way. If I accept your conditions, against my better judgment, will you allow me to make one?"

"But I am conferring the benefit," Kate protested.

"All of it? What about your desire to protect Bryant?"

Kate nodded.

"What is your condition?"

Fyles drew a deep breath.

"Will you marry me after I have caught the leader of the gang, if he be this man, Bryant? That must be your payment – for being wrong."

In a moment all Kate's lightness vanished. She stared at him for some wide-eyed moments. Then, again, all in a moment, she began to laugh.

"Done!" she cried. "I accept, and you accept! It's a wager!"

But her ready acceptance of his offer for the first time made the police officer doubt his own convictions as to the identity of

the head of the gang.

“You are accepting my condition because you believe Bryant is not the man, and so you hope to escape marrying me,” he said almost roughly.

“I accept your condition,” cried Kate staunchly.

Slowly a deep flush mounted to the man’s cheeks and spread over his brow. His eyes lit, and his strong mouth set firmly.

“But you will marry me,” he cried, with sudden force. “Whatever lies behind your condition, Kate, you’ll marry me, as a result of this. The conditions are agreed. I take your wager. I shall get the man Bryant, and he’ll get no mercy from me. He’s stood in my way long enough. I’m going to win out, Kate,” he cried; “I know it, I feel it. Because I want you. I’d go through hell itself to do that. Quick. Tell me. Show me how I can get these people, and I promise you they shan’t escape me this time.”

But Kate displayed no haste. Now that the wager was made she seemed less delighted. After a moment’s thought, however, she gave him the information he required.

“I’ve learned definitely that on Monday next, that’s nearly a week to-day, there’s a cargo coming in along the river trail, from the east. The gang will set out to meet it at midnight, and will bring it into the village about two o’clock in the morning. How, I can’t say.”

Fyles’s desperate eyes seemed literally to bore their way through her.

“That’s – the truth?”

“True as – death.”

CHAPTER XXIX

BILL'S FRESH BLUNDERING

The change in the man that rode away from Kate Seton's home as compared with the man who had arrived there less than an hour earlier was so remarkable as to be almost absurd in a man of Stanley Fyles's reputation for stern discipline and uncompromising methods. There was an almost boyish light of excited anticipation and hope in the usually cold eyes that looked out down the valley as he rode away. There was no doubt, no question. His look suggested the confidence of the victor. And so Charlie Bryant read it as he passed him on the trail.

Charlie was in a discontented mood. He had seen Fyles approach Kate's home from his eyrie on the valley slope, and that hopeless impulse belonging to a weakly nature, that self-pitying desire to further lacerate his own feelings, had sent him seeking to intercept the man whom he felt in his inmost heart was his successful rival for all that which he most desired on earth.

So he walked past Fyles, who was on the back of his faithful Peter, and hungrily read the expression of his face, that he might further assure himself of the truth of his convictions.

The men passed each other without the exchange of a word. Fyles eyed the slight figure with contempt and dislike. Nor could he help such feelings for one whom he knew possessed

so much of Kate's warmest sympathy and liking. Besides, was he not a man whose doings placed him against the law, in the administration of which it was his duty to share?

Charlie's eyes were full of an undisguised hatred. His interpretation of the officer's expression left him no room for doubting. Delight, victory, were hall-marked all over it. And victory for Fyles could only mean defeat for him.

He passed on. His way took him along the main village trail, and, presently, he encountered two people whom he would willingly have avoided. Helen and his brother were returning toward the house across the river.

Helen's quick eyes saw him at once, and she pointed him out to the big man at her side.

"It's Charlie," she cried, "let's hurry, or he'll give us the slip. I must tell him."

"Tell him what?"

But Helen deigned no answer. She hurried on, and called to the dejected figure, which, to her imagination, seemed to shuffle rather than walk along the trail.

Charlie Bryant had no alternative. He came up. He felt a desperate desire to curse their evident happiness in each other's society. Why should these two know nothing but the joys of life, while he – he was forbidden even a shadow of the happiness for which he yearned?

But Helen gave him little enough chance to further castigate himself with self-pity. She was full of her desire to impart her

news, and her desire promptly set her tongue rattling out her story.

“Oh, Charlie,” she cried, “I’ve had such a shock. Say, did you ever have a cyclone strike you when – when there wasn’t a cyclone within a hundred miles of you?” Then she laughed. “That surely don’t sound right, does it? It’s – it’s kind of mixed metaphor. Anyway, you know what I mean. I had that to-day. Bill’s nearly killed one of our boys – Pete Clancy. Say, I once saw a dog fight. It was a terrier, and one of those heavy, slow British bulldogs. Well, I guess when he starts the bully is greased lightning. Bill’s that bully. That’s all. Pete tried to kiss me. He was drunk. They’re always drunk when they get gay like that. Bill guessed he wasn’t going to succeed, and now I sort of fancy he’s sitting back there by our barn trying to sort out his face. My, Bill nearly killed him!”

But the girl’s dancing-eyed enjoyment found no reflection in Bill’s brother. In a moment Charlie’s whole manner underwent a change, and his dark eyes stared incredulously up into Bill’s face, which, surely enough, still bore the marks of his encounter.

“You – thrashed Pete?” he inquired slowly, in the manner of a man painfully digesting unpleasant facts.

But Bill was in no mood to accept any sort of chiding on the point.

“I wish I’d – killed him,” he retorted fiercely.

Charlie’s eyes turned slowly from the contemplation of his brother’s war-scarred features.

“I guess he deserved it – all right,” he said thoughtfully.

Helen protested indignantly.

“Deserved it? My word, he deserved – anything,” she cried. Then her indignation merged again into her usual laughter. “Say,” she went on. “I – I don’t believe you’re a bit glad, a bit thankful to Bill. I – I don’t believe you mind that – that I was insulted. Oh, but if you’d only seen it you’d have been proud of Big Brother Bill. He – he was just greased lightning. I don’t think I’d be scared of anything with him around.”

But her praise was too much for the modest Bill. He flushed as he clumsily endeavored to change the subject.

“Where are you going, Charlie?” he inquired. “We’re going on over the river. Kate’s there. You coming?”

Just for a moment a look of hesitation crept into his brother’s eyes. He glanced across the river as though he were yearning to accept the invitation. But, a moment later, his eyes came back to his brother with a look of almost cold decision.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” he said. Then he added, “I’ve got something to see to – in the village.”

Bill made no attempt to question him further, and Helen had no desire to. She felt that she had somehow blundered, and her busy mind was speculating as to how.

They parted. And as Charlie moved on he called back to Bill. “I’ll be back soon. Will you be home?”

“I can be. In an hour?”

Charlie nodded and went on.

The moment they were out of earshot Helen turned to her

lover.

“Say, Bill,” she exclaimed. “What have I done wrong?”

The laughter had gone out of her eyes and left them full of anxiety.

Bill shrugged gloomily.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s me – again.” Then he added, still more gloomily, “Pete’s one of the whisky gang, and – I’m Charlie’s brother. Say,” he finished up with a ponderous sigh. “I’ve mused things – surely.”

“I’m sorry for that scrap, Bill.”

Charlie Bryant was leaning against a veranda post with his hands in his pockets, and his gaze, as usual, fixed on the far side of the valley. Bill completely filled a chair, where he basked in the evening sunlight.

“So am I – now, Charlie.”

The big man’s agreement brought the other’s eyes to his battered face.

“Why?” he demanded quickly.

Bill looked up into the dark eyes above him, and his own were full of concern.

“Why? Is there need to ask that?”

A shadowy smile spread slowly over the other’s face.

“No, I don’t guess *you* need to ask why.”

There was just the slightest emphasis on the pronoun.

“You’ve remembered he’s one of the gang – my gang. You sort of feel there’s danger ahead – in consequence. Yes, there is

danger. That's why I'm sorry. But – somehow I wouldn't have had you act different – even though there's danger. I'm glad it was you, and not me, though. You could hammer him with your two big fists. I couldn't. I should have shot him – dead.”

Bill stared incredulously at the other's boyish face. His brother's tone had carried such cold conviction.

“Charlie,” he cried, “you get me beat every time. I wouldn't have guessed you felt that way.”

The other smiled bitterly.

“No,” he said. Then he shifted his position. “I'm afraid there's going to be trouble. I've thought a heap since Helen told me.”

“Trouble – through me?” said Bill, sharply. “Say, there's been nothing but blundering through me ever since I came here. I'd best pull up stakes and get out. I'm too big and foolish. I'm the worst blundering idiot out. I wish I'd shot him up. But,” he added plaintively, “I hadn't got a gun. Say, I'm too foolishly civilized for this country. I sure best get back to the parlors of the East where I came from.”

Charlie shook his head, and his smile was affectionate.

“Best stop around, Bill,” he said. “You haven't blundered. You've acted as – honesty demanded. If there's trouble comes through it, it's no blame to you. There's no blame to you anyway. You're honest. Maybe I've cursed you some, but it's me who's wrong – always. Do you get me? It don't make any difference to my real feelings. You just stop around all you need, and don't you act different from what you are doing.”

Bill stirred his bulk uneasily.

“But this trouble? Say, Charlie, boy,” he cried, his big face flushing painfully, “it don’t matter to me a curse what you are. You’re my brother. See? I wouldn’t do you a hurt intentionally. I’d – I’d chop my own fool head off first. Can’t anything be done? Can’t I do anything to fix things right?”

The other had turned away. A grave anxiety was written all over his youthful face.

“Maybe,” he said.

“How? Just tell me right now,” cried Bill eagerly.

“Why – ” Charlie broke off. His pause was one of deep consideration.

“It don’t matter what it is, Charlie,” cried Bill, suddenly stirred to a big pitch of enthusiasm. “Just count me on your side, and – and if you need to have Fyles shot up, why – I’m your man.”

Charlie shook his head.

“Don’t worry that way,” he cried. “Just stop around. You needn’t ask a whole heap of questions. Just stop around, and maybe you can bear a hand – some day. I shan’t ask you to do any dirty work. But if there’s anything an honest man may do – why, I’ll ask you – sure.”

CHAPTER XXX

THE COMMITTEE DECIDE

The earlier days of summer were passing rapidly. And with their passage Kate Seton's variations of mood became remarkable. There were times when her excited cheerfulness astounded her sister, and there were times when her depression caused her the greatest anxiety. Kate was displaying a variableness and uncertainty to which Helen was quite unaccustomed, and it left the girl laboring under a great strain of worry.

She strove very hard to, as she termed it, localize her sister's changes of mood, and in this she was not without a measure of success. Whenever the doings of the church committee were discussed Kate's mood dropped to zero, and sometimes below that point. It was obvious that the decision to demolish the old landmark in the service of the church was causing her an alarm and anxiety which would far better have fitted one of the old village wives, eaten up with superstition, than a woman of Kate's high-spirited courage. Then, too, the work of her little farm seemed to worry her. Her attention to it in these days became almost feverish. Whereas, until recently, all her available time was given to church affairs, now these were almost entirely neglected in favor of the farm. Kate was almost always to be

found in company of her two hired men, working with a zest that ill suited the methods of her male helpers.

On one occasion Helen ventured to remark upon it in her inconsequent fashion, a fashion often used to disguise her real feelings, her real interest.

Kate had just returned from a long morning out on the wheat land. She was weary, and dusty, and thirsty. And she had just thirstily drained a huge glass of barley water.

“For the Lord’s sake, Kate!” Helen cried in pretended dismay. “When I see you drink like that I kind of feel I’m growing fins all over me.”

Kate smiled, but without lightness.

“Get right out in this July sun and try to shame your hired men into doing a man’s work, and see how you feel then,” she retorted. “Fins? – why, you’d give right up walking, and grow a full-sized tail, and an uncomfortable crop of scales.”

Helen shook her head.

“I wouldn’t work that way. Say, you’re always chasing the boys up. Are they slacking worse than usual? Are they on the ‘buck’?”

Kate shot a swift glance into the gray eyes fixed on her so shrewdly.

“No,” she said quite soberly. “Only – only work’s good for folks, sometimes. The boys are all right. It just does me good to work. Besides, I like to know what Pete’s doing.”

“You mean – ?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter what I mean,” Kate retorted, with a

sudden impatience. "Where's dinner?"

This was something of her sister's mood more or less all the time, and Helen found it very trying. But she made every allowance for it, also the more readily as she watched the affairs of the church, and understood how surely they were upsetting to her sister through her belief in the old Indian legend of the fateful pine.

But Kate's occasional outbursts of delirious excitement were far more difficult of understanding. Helen read them in the only way she understood. Her observation warned her that they generally followed talk of the doings of Inspector Fyles, or a distant view of him.

As the days went by Kate seemed more and more wrapped up in the work of the police. Every little item of news of them she hungrily devoured. And frequently she went out on long solitary rides, which Helen concluded were for the purpose of interested observation of their doings.

But all this display of interest was somewhat nullified by another curious phase in her sister. It quickly became obvious that she was endeavoring by every artifice to avoid coming into actual contact with Stanley Fyles. Somehow this did not seem to fit in with Helen's idea of love, and again she found herself at a loss.

Thus poor Helen found herself passing many troubled hours. Things seemed to be going peculiarly awry, and, for the life of her, she could not follow their trend with any certainty of whither

it was leading. Even Bill was worse than of no assistance to her. Whenever she poured out her long list of anxieties to him, he assumed a perfectly absurd air of caution and denial that left her laboring under the belief that he really was "one big fool," or else he knew something, and had the audacity to keep it from her. In Bill's case, however, the truth was he felt he had blundered so much already in his brother's interests that he was not prepared to take any more chances, even with Helen.

Then came one memorable and painful day for Helen. It was a Saturday morning. She had just returned from a church committee meeting. Kate had deliberately absented herself from her post as honorary secretary ever since the decision to fell the old pine had been arrived at. It was her method of protest against the outrage. But Mrs. John Day, quite undisturbed, had appointed a fresh secretary, and Kate's defection had been allowed to pass as a matter of no great importance.

The noon meal was on the table when Helen came in. Kate was at her little bureau writing. The moment her sister entered the room she closed the desk and locked it. Helen saw the action and almost listlessly remarked upon it.

"It's all right, Kate," she said. "Bluebeard's chamber doesn't interest me – to-day."

Kate started up at the other's depressed tone. She looked sharply into the gray eyes, in which there was no longer any sign of their usual laughter.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked, with affectionate

concern. "Mrs. John?"

Helen nodded. Then at once she shook her head.

"Yes – no. Oh, I don't know. No, I don't think it's Mrs. John. It's – it's everybody."

Kate had moved to the head of the table, and stood with her hands gripping the back of her chair.

"Everybody?" she said, with a quiet look of understanding in her big eyes. "You mean – the tree?"

Helen nodded. She was very near tears.

But Kate rose to the occasion. She knew. She pointed at Helen's chair.

"Sit down, dear. We'll have food," she said, quietly. "I'm as hungry as any coyote."

Helen obeyed. She was feeling so miserable for her sister, that she had lost all inclination to eat. But Kate seemed to have entirely risen above any of the feelings she had so lately displayed. She laughed, and, with gentle insistence, forced the other to eat her dinner. Strangely enough her manner had become that which Helen seemed to have lost sight of for so long. All her actions, all her words, were full of confident assurance, and quiet command.

Gradually, under this new influence, the anxiety began to die out of Helen's eyes, and the watchful Kate beheld the change with satisfaction. Then, when the girl had done full justice to the simple meal, she pushed her own plate aside, planted her elbows upon the table, and sat with her strong brown hands clasped.

“Now tell me,” she commanded gently.

In a moment Helen’s anxiety returned, and her lips trembled. The next she was telling her story – in a confused sort of rush.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she cried. “It’s – it’s too bad. You see, Kate, I didn’t sort of think about it, or trouble anything, until you let me know how you felt over that – that old story. It didn’t seem to me that old tree mattered at all. It didn’t seem to me it could hurt cutting it down, any more than any other. And now – now it just seems as if – as if the world’ll come to an end when they cut it down. I believe I’m more frightened than you are.”

“Frightened?”

Kate smiled. But the smile scarcely disguised her true feelings.

“Yes, I’m scared – to death – now,” Helen went on, “because they’re going to cut it down. They’ve fixed the time and – day.”

“They’ve fixed the time – and day,” repeated Kate dully. “When?”

Her smile had completely gone now. Her dark eyes were fixed on her sister’s face with a curious straining.

“Tuesday morning at – daybreak.”

“Tuesday – daybreak? Go on. Tell me some more.”

“There’s no more to tell, only – only there’s to be a ceremony. The whole village is going to turn out and assist. Mrs. Day is going to make an ad-dress. She said if she’d known there was a legend and curse to that pine she’s have had it down at the start of building the church. She’d have had it down ‘in the name of religion, honesty and righteousness’ – those were her words – ‘as a

fitting tribute at the laying of the foundations of the new church.' Again, in her own words, she said, 'It's presence in the valley is a cloud obscuring the sun of our civilization, a stumbling block to the progress of righteousness.' And – and they all agreed that she was right – all of them."

Kate was no longer looking at her sister. She was gazing out straight ahead of her. It is doubtful even if she had listened to the pronouncements of Mrs. John Day, with her self-satisfied dictatorship of the village social and religious affairs. She was thinking – thinking. And something almost like panic seemed suddenly to have taken hold of her.

"Tuesday – at daybreak," she muttered. Then, in a moment, her eyes flashed, and she sprang from her chair. "Daybreak? Why, that – that's practically Monday night! Do you hear? Monday night!"

Helen was on her feet in a moment.

"I – I don't understand," she stammered.

"Understand? No, of course you don't. Nobody understands but me," Kate cried fiercely. "I understand, and I tell you they're all mad. Hopelessly mad." She laughed wildly. "Disaster? Oh, blind, blind, fools. There'll be disaster, sure enough. The old Indian curse will be fulfilled. Oh, Helen, I could weep for the purblind skepticism of this wretched people, this consequential old fool, Mrs. Day. And I – I am the idiot who has brought it all about."

CHAPTER XXXI

ANTAGONISTS

Fyles endured perhaps the most anxious time that had ever fallen to his lot, during the few days following his momentous interview with Kate. An infinitesimal beam of daylight had lit up the black horizon of his threatened future. It was a question, a painfully doubtful question, as to whether it would mature and develop into a glorious sunlight, or whether the threatening clouds would overwhelm it, and thrust it back into the obscurity whence it had sprung.

He dared not attempt to answer the question himself. Everything hung upon that insecure thread of official amenability. Such was his own experience that he was beset by the gravest doubts. His only hope lay in the long record of exceptional work he possessed to his credit in the books of the police. This, and the story he had to tell them of future possibilities in the valley of Leaping Creek.

Would Jason listen? Would he turn up the records, and count the excellence of Inspector Fyles's past work? Or would he, with that callous severity of police regulations, only regard the failures, and turn a deaf official ear to the promise of the future? Supersession was so simple in the force, it was the usual routine. Would the superintendent in charge interest himself sufficiently

to get away from it?

These were some of the doubts with which the police officer was assailed. These were some of the endless pros and cons he debated with his lieutenant, Sergeant McBain, when they sat together planning their next campaign, while awaiting Amberley's reply to both the report of failure, and plea for the future.

But Fyles's anxieties were far deeper than McBain's, who was equally involved in the failure. He had far more at stake. For one thing he belonged to the commissioned ranks, and his fall, in conjunction with his greater and wider reputation, would be far more disastrous. For McBain, reduction in rank was of lesser magnitude. His rank could be regained. For Fyles there was no such redemption. Resignation from the force was his alternative to being dismissed, and from resignation there was no recovery of rank.

At one time this would have been his paramount, almost sole anxiety. It would have meant the loss of all he had achieved in the past. Now, curiously enough, it took a second place in his thoughts. A greater factor than ambition had entered into his life, a factor to which he had promptly become enslaved. Far above all thoughts of ambition, of place, of power, of all sense of duty, the figure of a handsome dark-eyed woman rose before his mind's eye. Kate Seton had become his whole world, the idol of all his thoughts and ambitions, and longings, which left every other consideration lost in the remotest shadows far below.

His earlier love for her had suddenly burst into a passionate flame that seemed to be devouring his very soul. And he had a chance of winning her. A chance. It seemed absurd – a mere chance. It was not his way in life to wait for chances. It was for him to set out on a purpose, and achieve or fail. Here – here, where his love was concerned, he was committing himself to accepting chances, the slightest chances, when the winning of Kate for his wife had become the essence of all his hopes and ambitions.

Chance? Yes, it was all chance. The decision of Superintendent Jason. The leadership of this gang. His success in capturing the man, when the time came. In a moment his whole life seemed to have become a plaything to be tossed about at the whim of chance.

So the days passed, swallowed up by feverish work and preparation. It was work that might well be all thrown away should his recall be insisted upon at Amberley, or, at best, might only pave the way to his successor's more fortunate endeavors. It was all very trying, very unsatisfactory, yet he dared not relax his efforts, with the knowledge which he now possessed, and the thought of Kate always before him.

Several times, during those anxious days, he sought to salve his troubled feelings by stealing precious moments of delight in the presence of this woman he loved. But somehow Fate seemed to have assumed a further perverseness, and appeared bent on robbing him of even this slight satisfaction.

At such times Kate was never to be found. Small as was that little world in the valley, it seemed to Fyles that she had a knack of vanishing from his sight as though she had been literally spirited away. Nor for some time could he bring himself to realize that she was deliberately avoiding him.

She was never at home when he rode up to the house on the back of his faithful Peter. And, furthermore, at such times as he found Helen there, she never by any chance knew where her sister was. Even when he chanced to discover Kate in the distance, on his rare visits to the village, she was never to be found by the time he reached the spot at which he had seen her. She was as elusive as a will-o'-th'-wisp.

But this could not go on forever, and, after one memorable visit to the postoffice, where he found a letter awaiting him from headquarters, Fyles determined to be denied no longer.

His task was less easy than he supposed, and it was not until evening that he finally achieved his purpose.

It was nearly eight o'clock in the evening. Up to that time his search had been utterly unavailing, and he found himself riding down the village trail at a loss, and in a fiercely impatient mood.

He had just reached the point where the trail split in two. The one way traveling due west, and the other up to the new church, and on, beyond, to the Meeting House.

The inspiration came to him as Peter, of his own accord, turned off up the hill in the direction of the church. Then he remembered that the day was Saturday, and on Saturday evening

it was Kate's custom to put the Meeting House in order for the next day's service.

In a moment he bustled his faithful horse, and, taking the grassy side of the trail for it, to muffle his approach, hurried on toward the quaint old building.

To his utmost delight he realized that, for once, Fate had decided to be kind to him. There was a light in one of the windows, and he knew that nobody but Kate had access to the place at times other than the hours of service.

In that moment of pleasant anticipation he was suddenly seized by an almost childish desire to take her unawares. The thought appealed to him strongly after his long and futile search, and, with this object, he steadied his horse's gait lest the sound of its plodding hoofs should betray his approach. Twenty yards from the building he drew up and dismounted.

Once on foot he made his way across the intervening space and reached the window. A thin curtain, however, was drawn across it, and, though the light shone through, the interior remained hidden. So he pressed on toward the door.

Here he paused. And as he did so the sound of something heavy falling reached him from within. Kate was evidently moving the heavy benches. He hesitated only for an instant, then he placed his hand cautiously on the latch and raised it. In spite of his precautions the heavy old iron rattled noisily, and again he hesitated. Then, with a thrust, he pushed the aged door open and passed within.

He stood still, his eyes smiling. Kate was at the far end of the room on her knees. She was looking round at him with a curious, startled look in her eyes, which had somehow caught the reflection of the light from the oil bracket lamp on the floor beside her, and set them glowing a dull, golden copper. The long strip of coco-matting was rolled back from the floor, and she seemed to be in the act of resetting it in its place.

Just for a moment they remained staring at each other. Then Kate turned back to her work, and finished rolling out the matting.

“I’ll be glad, mighty glad, when – when we discontinue service in this place,” she said. “The dirt’s just – fierce.”

Fyles moved up toward her. The matting was in its place.

“Is it?” he said. Then, as he came to a halt, “Say, I’ve been chasing the village through half the day to find you, Kate. Then Peter led me here, and I remembered it was Saturday. I guessed I’d have a surprise on you, and I thought I’d succeeded. But you don’t ‘surprise’ worth a cent. Say, I’m to remain here till – after Monday.”

Kate slowly rose to her feet. She was clad in a white shirtwaist and old tailored skirt. She made a perfect figure of robust health and vigorous purpose. Her eyes, too, were shining, and full of those subtle depths of fire which held the man enthralled.

“Monday?” she said. Then in a curiously reflective way she repeated the word, “Monday.”

Fyles waited, and, in a moment, Kate’s thought seemed to

pass. She looked fearlessly up into the man's eyes, but there was no smile in response to his.

"I'm – going away until after – Monday," she said.

"Going away?"

The man's disappointment was too evident to be mistaken.

"Why?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

Quite suddenly the woman flung her arms out in a gesture of helplessness, which somehow did not seem to fit her.

"I can't – bear the strain of waiting here," she said, with an impatient shrug. "It's – it's on my nerves."

The man began to smile again. "A wager like ours takes nerve to make, but a bigger nerve to carry through. Still, say, I can't see how running from it's going to help any. You'll still be thinking. Thoughts take a heap of getting clear of. Best stop around. It'll be exciting – some. I'm going to win out," he went on, with confidence, "and I guess it'll be a game worth watching, even if you – lose."

Kate stooped and picked up the lamp. As she straightened up she sighed and shook her head. It seemed to the man that a grave trouble was in her handsome eyes.

"It's not that," she cried, suddenly. "Lose my wager? I'm not going to lose, but even if I were – I would pay up like a sportsman. No, it's not that. It's these foolish folk here. It's these stupid creatures who're just ready to fly at the throat of Providence and defy all – all superstition. Oh, yes, I know," she hurried on, as the man raised his strongly marked brows in astonishment. "You'll

maybe think me a fool, a silly, credulous fool. But I know – I feel it here.” She placed her hands upon her bosom with a world of dramatic sincerity.

“What – what’s troubling you, Kate? I don’t seem to get your meaning.”

It was the woman’s turn to express surprise.

“Why, you know what they’re going to do here, practically on Monday night. You’ve heard? Why, the whole village is talking of it. It’s the tree. The old pine. They’re going to cut it down.” Then she laughed mirthlessly. “They’ll use it as a ridge pole for the new church. That wicked old, cursed pine.”

“Wicked – cursed? I don’t understand,” Fyles said perplexed. “I heard about the felling of it all right – but, the other I don’t understand.”

Kate set the lamp down on one of the benches.

“Listen. I’ll tell you,” she cried. “Then maybe you’ll understand my feelings – since making my wager with you. Oh, the old story wouldn’t matter so much to me, only – only for that wager. Listen.”

Then she hurriedly told him the outline of the curse upon the tree, and further added an analysis of the situation in conjunction with the matter which stood between themselves. At the finish she pointed her argument.

“Need I say any more? Need I tell you that no logic or reason of any kind can put the conviction out of my mind that here, and now, we are to be faced with some dreadful tragedy as the price

we must pay for the – the felling of that tree? I can't help it – I know calamity will befall us.”

Fyles shook his head. The woman's obvious convictions left him quite untouched. Had it been any other who spoke of it he would have derided the whole idea. But since it was Kate's distress, Kate's belief in the old legend, he refrained.

“The only calamity that can affect you, Kate, is a calamity for young Bryant,” he said seriously. “And yet you refuse to believe him concerned with the affairs of – Monday night. Surely you can have no misgivings on that score?”

Kate shook her head.

“Then what do you fear?” Fyles went on patiently.

Quite slowly the woman raised her big eyes to her companion's face. For some moments they steadily looked into his. Then slowly into her gaze there crept an inscrutable expression that was not wholly without a shadow of a smile.

“It is your reason against my – superstition,” she said slowly. “On Monday night you will capture, or fail to capture, the gang you are after. Maybe it will be within an hour of the cutting down of that tree. Disaster will occur. Blood will flow. Death! Any, or all of these things. For whom? I cannot – will not – wait to see. I shall leave to-morrow morning after service – for Myrtle.”

Kate locked the door of the Meeting House behind them. Then she held out her hand. Fyles took it and pressed it tenderly.

“Why,” he asked gently, almost humbly, “have you so deliberately avoided me lately?”

The woman stroked Peter's brown head as it was pushed forward beside the man's shoulder.

"Why?" she echoed. Then she smiled up into the man's face. "Because we are – antagonists – until after Monday. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXXII

TREACHERY

On his westward journey to camp Stanley Fyles did a good deal of thinking. Generally speaking he was of that practical turn which has no time for indulgence in the luxury of visions, and signs. Long experience had made him almost severe in his practice.

But, as he rode along pondering upon the few pleasant moments spent in Kate's presence, his imagination slowly began to stir, and he found himself wondering; wondering, at first, at her credulity, and, presently, wondering if it were really possible that an old curse, uttered in the height of impotent human passion, could, by any occult process, possess a real effect.

He definitely and promptly denied it. He told himself more. He believed that only women, highly emotional women, or creatures of weaker intellect, could possibly put faith in such things. Kate belonged to neither of these sections of her sex. Then how did this strange belief come in a woman so keenly sensible, so full of practical courage?

Maybe it was the result of living so closely in touch with the soil. Maybe the narrow life of such a village as Rocky Springs had had its effect.

However, her belief, so strong, so passionate, had left an

uncomfortable effect upon him. It was absurd, of course, but somehow he wished he had not heard the story of the old pine. At least not till after Monday. Kate had said they were to fell that tree at dawn. It was certainly a curious coincidence that they should have selected, as Kate had said, practically Monday night. The night of the whisky-running.

He smiled. However, the omen was surely in favor of his success. According to the legend the felling of the tree meant the end of crime in the valley, and the end of crime meant his – But blood would flow. Death. Whose blood? Whose – death?

His smile died out.

In these contingencies it meant a – hand to hand conflict. It meant – Who's death did she dread? Surely she was not thinking of the police? They always carried their lives in their hands. It was part of their profession. She denied Charlie Bryant's leadership, so – But in her own secret mind did she deny it? He wondered.

So he rode on probing the problem. Later he smiled again. She was thinking of himself. The vanity of the thought amused him, and he found himself shaking his head. Not likely. It was not her regard for him. He was certain in his mind that her wager was made in the full conviction that he would not win, and, consequently, she would not have to marry him. She certainly was a strange creature, and – charming.

However, she was concerned that somebody was to meet death, and she dreaded it. Furthermore, now he came to think of it, a similar belief, without the accompanying dread, was growing

in him. He pulled himself together. The old superstition must not get hold of him. That would indeed be the height of folly.

But once the seed had been sown in his imagination the roots quickly strove to possess themselves of all the fertility such a rich soil afforded. He could not shake clear of their tendrils. Maybe it was the effect of his sympathy and regard for the woman. Maybe he was discovering that he, too, deep down beneath the veneer in which his work armored him, was possessed of that strange superstition which seems to possess all human life. He hated the thought, and still more hated the feeling the thought inspired.

He touched Peter's flank with his heels, and the unaccustomed spur sent the highly strung beast plunging into a headlong gallop.

He was far beyond the village now, and more than half way to the camp, and presently he slowed down to that steady canter which eats up distance so rapidly without undue exertion for either man or beast. He strove to turn the course of his thoughts. He pondered upon the ungracious official letter of his superior, begrudging, but yielding to his persuasions. Things certainly were "coming his way." At last he was to be given his final chance, and it was something to obtain such clemency in a force which existed simply by reason of its unfailing success. He had much to be thankful for. McBain would have fresh heart put into him. It would be something like a taste of hell for McBain to find himself reduced to the rank of trooper again, after all his years of successful service. Yes, he was glad for McBain's —

Suddenly he checked the willing Peter, and drew him down to

a walk. There was a horseman on the trail, some thirty or forty yards ahead. He had just caught sight of his dim outline against the starlit sky line. It was only for a moment. But it was sufficient for his trained eyes. He had detected the upper part of the man's body, and the shadowy outline of a wide-brimmed prairie hat.

Now, as Peter moved at that shuffling, restful amble which all prairie horses acquire, he leaned down over the horn of his saddle and peered ahead. The man was sitting stock still upon his horse.

Instinctively Fyles's hand went to his revolver, and remained there. When a man waits upon a western trail at night, it is as well that the traveler take no undue chances, particularly when he be one of the none too well loved red coats.

The policeman kept on. He displayed no hesitation. Finally he drew his horse to a standstill with its nose almost touching the shoulder of the stranger's horse.

Fyles was peering forward in the darkness, and his revolver was in that position which, all unseen, kept its muzzle directly leveled at the horseman's middle.

"Kind of lonesome sitting around here at night," he said, with a keenly satirical inflection.

"You can put up your darn gun, inspector," came the startling response. "Guess I had you covered from way back there, if I'd had a notion to shoot. Guess I ain't in the 'hold-up' bizness. But I've been waiting for you – anyway."

The man's assurance had no effect upon the policeman. The latter pressed his horse up closer, and peered into the other's face.

The face he beheld startled him, although he gave no outward sign.

“Ah, Pete – Pete Clancy,” he said quietly. “Guess my gun’s always pretty handy. It won’t hurt where it is, unless I want it to. It’s liable to be more effective than your’s would have been – way back there.”

The man seemed to resign himself.

“Guess it don’t pay shootin’ up red coats,” he said, with a rough laugh.

“No.” Then in a moment Fyles put a sharp question. “You are waiting for – me? Why?”

Pete laughed, but his laugh was uneasy.

“Because I’m sick to death being agin the law.”

“Ah. Been taking a hand building the church back there?” The sarcasm was unmistakable, but it passed the other by.

“Ben takin’ a hand in most things – back there.”

“Sure. Find some of ’em don’t pay?”

The man shook his head.

“Guess they pay – mostly. ’Tain’t that.”

“What then?”

“Sort o’ feel it’s time to quit – bizness.”

“Oh. So you waited around for – me?”

Fyles understood the type of man he was dealing with. The half-breed was a life study of his. In the great West he was always of more interest to the police than any white man.

“We mostly wait around for the p’lice when we want to get out

of business,” the man replied with meaning.

“Yes, some folks find it difficult getting out of business without the help of the police.”

“Sure,” returned Pete easily. “They need to do it right. They need to make things square.”

“For themselves?”

“Jest so – for ’emselves.”

The half-breed leaned over his horse’s shoulder and spat. Then he ostentatiously returned the gun he was holding to its holster.

“Maybe I’ll need him no more,” he said, with an obviously insincere sigh.

Fyles was quite undeceived.

“Surely – if you’re going out of business. What’s your – business?”

The man laughed.

“I used to be runnin’ whisky.” Then he chuckled softly. “Y’see, that chu’ch has got a hold on me. I’m feelin’ that pious I can’t bear the thought of runnin’ whisky – an’ I can’t bear the thought of – other folk runnin’ it. No, I’m quittin’ that bizness. I’m jest goin’ in fer straight buyin’ and sellin’ – inside the law.”

Fyles was watching the man closely in the dim night light. He knew exactly what the man was there for now. Furthermore he knew precisely how to deal with him. He was weighing in his mind the extent to which he could trust him. His detestation of the race increased, while yet every nerve was alert to miss no chance.

“Straight buying and selling is good when you’ve found a buyer, and got – something to sell,” he said.

The man shrugged.

“I sure got something to sell, an’ I guess you ought to be the buyer.”

Fyles nodded.

“I mostly buy – what I need. What’s your line?”

Again the man laughed. His uneasiness had passed. He felt they understood each other.

“Mostly hot air,” he said carelessly.

Fyles hated the man’s contemplated treachery. However, his duty was plain.

“Well, I might buy hot air – if it’s right, and the price is right.”

The man turned with an alert look and peered into the police officer’s face.

“They’re both right,” he said sharply. Then his manner changed abruptly to one of hot intensity. “Here let’s quit talkin’ fool stuff. I can tell you what you’re needin’ to know. And I’ll tell you, if you’ll pass me over, and let me quit clear without a question. I need to get across the border – an’ I don’t want to see the inside of no penitentiary, nor come up before any court. I want to get right away quick. See? I can tell you just how a big cargo’s comin’ into Rocky Springs. I know, because I’m one of ’em bringing it in. See? And when I’ve told you I’ve still got to bring it in, or those who’re running it with me would guess things, and get busy after me, or – or change their plans. See? Give us

your word of a free run for the border, an' I'll put you wise. A free run clear, on your honor, in the name of the Government."

"Why are you doing this?" demanded Fyles sharply.

"That's up to me."

"Why are you doing this?" Fyles insisted. "I need to know before I make any deal."

"Do you?"

Pete thought for some moments, and Fyles waited. At last the man looked up, and his evil face was full of the venom of his words.

"I want to give 'em away," he cried with bitter hatred. "I want to see the boss pass on to the penitentiary. See? I want to see the boss rot there for five good, dandy years."

"Who's the boss?" demanded Fyles sharply.

The man's eyes grinned cunningly.

"Why, the feller you're going to get Monday night, with fifty gallons of good rye."

Fyles sat up.

"Monday night?" Then he went on. "Say, why do you want to put him away?"

"Ah."

"Well?"

Again the half-breed hesitated. Then with a sudden exclamation of impatience his desire for revenge urged him on.

"Tcha! What's the use?" he cried fiercely. "Say, have you ever had hell smashed out of your features by a lousy dude? No. Well,

I owe a bit – a hell of a bit – to some one, and I guess I don't owe nothing in this world else but money. Debts o' this sort I generally pay when I get the chance. You're goin' to give me that chance."

Fyles had satisfied himself. The man sickened him. Now he wanted to be done with him.

"What's your story? I'll pay you the price," he cried, with utter contempt.

But the man wanted added assurance.

"Sure?" he cried eagerly. "You're goin' to get me with the rest? Savee? You're goin' to get me, an' when you get me, you're goin' to give me twenty-four hours' free run for the border?"

"If I get you you can go free – for twenty-four hours."

The man's face lit with a devilish grin of cruelty.

"Good. You'll shake on it?" He held out his hand.

Fyles shook his hand.

"Guess it's not necessary. My word goes. You've got to take my word, as I've got to take yours. Come on. I've no more time to waste."

Pete withdrew his hand. He understood. His venom against the white race was only the further increased.

"Say," he growled, his eyes lighting with added ferocity. "That cargo is to be run down the river on Monday night about midnight. There'll be a big rack of hay come in by trail – the river trail – and most of the gang'll be with it. If you locate it they calculate you'll get busy unloading to find the liquor. Meanwhile the cargo'll slip through on the river, in a small boat. Savee?"

Guess there'll be jest one feller with that boat, an' – he'll be the feller that's – that's had you red coats skinned a mile all these months an' years.”

Fyles gathered up his reins.

“Just one word,” he said coldly. “I hate a traitor worse than poison, but I'm paid to get these people. So my word goes, if your story's true. If it isn't – well, take my advice and get out quick, or – you won't have time.”

Before the half-breed had time to reply Peter threw up his head, and set off at the touch of his master's spurs.

CHAPTER XXXIII

PLAYING THE GAME

For some moments the two men faced each other in a sort of grim silence. It was already daylight. Sunday morning was breaking under a cloudless sky.

At last McBain rose from his seat at the deal table which served him for a desk. He reached out and turned out the lamp. Its light was no longer needed. Then he stretched himself and yawned.

“Had enough of it?” inquired Fyles, catching the infection and stifling a yawn.

“Just what you might notice, sir.” A shadowy smile played about the Scot’s hard mouth, but it was gone in a moment.

Fyles nodded.

“So have I,” he agreed. “But we’ve broke the back of things. And – you’ll be kept busy all day to – I was going to say to-morrow. I mean to-day.”

McBain sat down again.

“Yes, sir. A couple of hours’ sleep’ll do me, though. We daren’t spare ourselves. It’s sort of life and death to us.”

Fyles shot a keen look into the other’s face.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if it were literally so.”

“You think, sir – ?”

McBain's voice was sharply questioning.

But Fyles only laughed. There was no mirth in his expression, and McBain understood.

"Never mind," the officer went on, with a careless shrug. "Best turn in. We'll know all about it when the time comes."

He rose from his seat, and McBain, with a brief "Good night, sir," disappeared into the inner room.

But Fyles did not follow his example for a few moments. He went to the door and flung it open. Then he stood for awhile gazing out at the wonderful morning daylight, and drinking in the pure prairie air. While he stood thus his thoughts were busy, and a half smile was in his eyes. He was thinking of the irony of the fact that Kate Seton's superstition had completely taken possession of him.

Two hours after sunrise McBain and his superior were at work again. They had snatched their brief sleep, but it was sufficient for these hardy riders of the plains. The camp was full of activity. Each man of the patrol had to be interviewed, and given minute instructions, also instructions for the arising of unforeseen circumstances, where individual initiative would require to be displayed. Then there were rations to be served out, and, finally, messengers must be sent to the supernumerary camp higher up the valley. But there was no undue bustle or haste. It was simply activity.

At ten o'clock Stanley Fyles left the camp. McBain would continue the work, which, by this time, had returned to

conditions of ordinary routine.

Peter ambled gently down the valley. His rider seemed in no hurry. There was no need for hurry. The village was five miles away, and he had no desire to reach it until just before eleven. So he could take his leisure, sparing both himself and his horse for the great effort of the morrow.

Just for one brief moment he contemplated a divergence from his course. It was at the moment when he left the cattle track which led to his camp and joined the old Indian trail to the village. He reached the branching cattle track on the other side of it which would have led him to the mysterious corral, which was possessed of so much interest and suspicion. But he remembered that a visit thither would violate the conditions of his wager with Kate. The place belonged to Charlie Bryant. So he pushed on.

As he rode he thought of Kate Seton's determination to absent herself during the critical events about to happen in the village. On the whole he was pleased with her decision. Somehow he felt he understood her feelings. The grip of her superstition had left him more understanding of her desire to get away.

Then, too, he would rather she were away when his own big effort came. Should he fail again, which now he believed impossible, he would rather she were not there to witness that failure. He knew, only too well, from bitter experience, how easy it was for the most complete plans to go awry when made against the genius of crime. No, he did not want her to witness his failure. Nor would he care to flaunt the success he anticipated, and

consequently the error she had fallen into, before her distressed eyes. He felt very tender toward her. She was so loyal, so courageous in her beliefs, such a great little sportswoman. No, he must spare her all he could when he had won that wager. He would not demand his pound of flesh. He would release her from her debt, and just appeal to her through his love. And, somehow, when he had caught this man, Bryant, and so proved how utterly unworthy he was of her regard, he felt that possibly he would not have to appeal in vain.

He reached the old Meeting House as the earliest of the village folk were gathering for service. He did not ride up, but left Peter, much to that creature's disquiet, tied in the bush some fifty yards from the place.

His interest became at once absorbed. He chatted pleasantly for a few moments with Mr. Blundell, the traveling Methodist minister, and greeted those of the villagers whom he had come to know personally. But all the while his eyes and ears were fully alert for the things concerning his purpose. He noted carefully all those who were present, but the absentees were his greatest interest. Not one of those who constituted the gang of smugglers was present, and particularly he noted Charlie Bryant's absence.

Among the last to arrive were Big Brother Bill and Helen, and Fyles smiled as he beheld the careful toilet of the big city man. Helen, as usual, was clad in her best tailored suit, and looked particularly bright and smart when he greeted her.

"Miss Kate not at – service?" he inquired, as they paused at

the door of the building.

Helen shook her head, and her face fell.

“No. She’s preparing for her journey to Myrtle,” said the girl. “How she can do with that noisy old creature Mrs. Radley I – I – well, she gets me beat every time. But Kate’s just as obstinate as a fifty-year-old mule. She’s crazy to get away from here, and – and I left her about to dope the wheels of the wretched old wagon she’s going to drive this afternoon. Oh, dear! But come along, Bill, they’re beginning service.”

A moment later the police officer was left alone outside the building.

It was not his way to take long arriving at a decision. He walked briskly away, and vanished amid the bush. A minute later he was once more in the saddle, heading for the bridge in front of Kate’s house.

Kate was still at her wagon when Fyles arrived. At the sound of his approach she straightened herself up with a smiling, half-embarrassed welcome shining in her eyes.

“Don’t you come too near,” she exclaimed. “I’m all over axle dope. It truly is the messiest job ever. But what are you to do when the boys clear out, and – and play you such a scurvy trick? I’ve been relying on Nick to drive me out and bring the wagon back. Now I’ll have to drive myself, and keep the wagon there, unless I can hire some one to bring it back, so Charlie can haul his last hay to-morrow.”

The policeman ran his eyes over the wagon. At the mention

of Charlie Bryant's name, his manner seemed to freeze up. He recognized the vehicle at once.

"It's Bryant's wagon?" he said shortly.

Kate nodded.

"Sure. He always lends it me when I want one. I haven't one of my own."

"I see."

Fyles's manner became more easy. Then he went on.

"Where are your boys? Where's Pete?"

Kate's eyes widened.

"Gracious goodness only knows," she said, in sheer exasperation. "I only hope Nick turns up to drive me. I surely will have to get rid of them both. I've had enough of Pete since he got drunk and insulted Helen. Still, he got his med'cine from Bill all right. And he got the rough side of my tongue, too. Yes, I shall certainly get rid of both. Charlie's always urging me to." She wiped her hands on a cloth. "There, thank goodness I've finished that messy job."

She released the jack under the axle, and the wheel dropped to the ground.

"Now I can load up my grips," she exclaimed.

Fyles looked up from the brown study into which he had fallen.

"This Bill – this Big Brother Bill hammered master Pete to a – pulp?" he inquired, with a smile of interest.

"He certainly did," laughed Kate. "And when he'd done with

him I'm afraid my tongue completed the – good work. That's why this has happened.” She indicated the wagon with a humorous look of dismay.

Fyles laughed. Then he sobered almost at once.

“I came here for two reasons,” he said curiously. “I came to – well – because I couldn't stay away, for one thing. You see, I'm not nearly so much of a police officer as I am a mere human creature. So I came to see you before you went away. You see, so many things may happen on – Monday. The other reason was to tell you I've had a wonderful slice of – hateful good luck.”

“Hateful good luck?”

Kate raised a pair of wondering eyes to his face.

“Yes, hateful.” The man's emphasis left no sort of doubt as to his feelings. “Of course,” he went on, “it's ridiculous that sort of attitude in a policeman, but I can admire a loyal crook. Yes, I could have a friendly feeling for him. A traitor turns me sick in the stomach. One of the gang has turned traitor. He's told me that detail you couldn't give me. I've got their complete plan of campaign.”

The wonder in Kate's eyes had become one steady look of inquiry.

“Their complete plan of campaign?” she echoed. Then in a moment a great excitement seemed to rise up in her. It found expression in the rapidity of her words.

“Then you know that – Charlie is innocent? You know now how wrong you were? You know that I have been right all the

way through, and that you have been wrong? Tell me! Tell me!” she cried.

Stanley Fyles shook his head.

“I’m sorry. The man had the grace to refuse me the leader’s identity. I only got their plan – but it’s more than enough.”

Kate breathed a sigh as of regret.

“That’s too bad,” she cried. “If he’d only told you that, it might – it might have cleared up everything. We should have had no more of this wretched suspicion of an innocent man. It might have altered your whole plan of campaign. As it is – ”

“It leaves me more than ever convinced I am on a red-hot scent which must now inevitably lead me to success.”

For a few moments Kate looked into the man’s face as though waiting for him to continue. Then, at last, she smiled, and the man thought he had never beheld so alluring a picture of feminine persuasion.

“Am I to – know any more?” she pleaded.

The appeal became irresistible.

“There can be no harm in telling you,” he said. “You gave me the first help. It is to you I shall largely owe my success. Yes, you may as well know, and I know I can rely on your discretion. You were able to tell me of the coming of the liquor, but you could not tell me exactly how it was coming. The man could tell me that – and did. It is coming in down the river in a small boat. One man will bring it – the man who runs the gang. While this is being done a load of hay, accompanied by the whole gang, will come

into the town as a blind. It is obvious to me they will come in on the run, hoping to draw us. Then, when caught, they rely on our search of the wagon to delay us – while the boat slips through. It's pretty smart, and," he added ruefully, "would probably have been successful – had I not been warned. Now it is different. Our first attention will be that boat."

Kate's eyes were alight with the warmest interest. She became further excited.

"It's smart," she cried enthusiastically. "They're – they're a clever set of rascals." Then, for a moment, she thought. "Of course, you must get that boat. What a sell for them when you let the wagon go free. Say, it's – it's the greatest fun ever."

Fyles smilingly agreed. This woman's delight in the upsetting of the "runners" plans was very pleasant to him. There could be no doubt as to her sympathies being with him. If only she weren't concerned for Bryant he could have enjoyed the situation to the full.

Suddenly she looked up into his face with just a shade of anxiety.

"But this – informer," she said earnestly. "They'll – kill him."

Fyles laughed.

"He'll be over the border before they're wise, and they'll be held safe – anyway."

Kate agreed.

"I'd forgotten that," she said thoughtfully. Then she gave a shiver of disgust. "I – I loathe an informer."

“Everybody with any sense of honor – must,” agreed Fyles. “Informer? I’d sooner shake hands with a murderer. And yet we have to deal and bargain with them – in our work.”

“I was just wondering,” said Kate, after another pause, “who he could be. I – I’m not going to ask his name. But – do I know him?”

The policeman laughingly shook his head.

“I must play the game, even – with an informer. Say, there’s an old saw in our force, ‘No names, no pack-drill.’ It fits the case now. When the feller’s skipped the border, maybe you’ll know who he is by his absence from the village.”

Suddenly Kate turned to her wagon. She gazed at it for some moments. Then she turned about, and, with a pathetic smile, gave vent to her feelings.

“Oh, dear,” she cried. “I – I wish it was after dinner. I should be away then. I feel as if I never – never wanted to see this valley again – ever. It all seems wrong. It all seems like a nightmare now. I feel as if at any moment the ground might open up, and – and swallow me right up. I – I feel like a dizzy creature standing at the edge of a precipice. I – I feel as if I must fall, as if I wanted to fall. I shall be so glad to get away.”

“But you’ll come back,” the man cried urgently. “It’s – only till after Monday.” Then he steadied himself, and smiled whimsically. “Remember, we have our wager. Remember, in the end you either have to – laugh at me, or – marry me. It’s a big stake for us both. For me especially. Your mocking laughter

would be hard to bear in conjunction with losing you. Oh, Kate, we entered on this in a spirit of antagonism, but – but I sort of think it'll break my heart to – lose. You see, if I lose, I lose you. You, I suppose, will feel glad – if you win. It's hard." His eyes grew dark with the contemplation of his possible failure. "If I could only hope it would be otherwise. If I could only feel that you cared, in however slight a degree. It would not seem so bad. If I win I have only won you. I have not won your love. The whole thing is absurd, utterly ridiculous, and mad. I want your love, not – not – just you."

Kate made no answer, and the man went on.

"Do you know, Kate, as the days go on in this place, as the moment of crisis approaches, I am growing less and less of a policeman. I'm even beginning to repent of my wager with you, and but for the chance of winning you, I should be glad to abandon it. Love has been a hidden chapter in the book of life to me up till now, and now, reading it, it quite overwhelms me. Do you know I've always despised people who've put true love before all other considerations? I thought them weak imbeciles, and quite unfit. Now I am realizing how much I had to learn all the while, and have since learned."

He paused, and, after a moment's thought, went on again.

"Do you know a curious thought, desire, has grown up in me since our compact. I know it's utterly – utterly mad, but I can't help it. Believing now, as I do, that Bryant is no more to you than you say, I feel that when I get him – I feel I cannot, dare not keep

him. I feel a crazy longing to let him go free. Do you know what that means to me? It means giving up all I have struggled for all these years. Do you know why I want to do it? Because I believe it would make you happy.”

Kate’s eyes were turned from him. They were full of a great burning joy and love. And the love was all for this man, so recklessly desirous of her happiness.

She shook her head without turning to him.

“You must not,” she said, in deep thrilling tones. “You must not forego the duty you owe yourself. If you capture Charlie he must pay the price. No thought of me must influence you. And I – I am ready to pay the forfeit. I made the wager with my eyes wide open – wide, wide.”

Fyles stirred uneasily. He meant every word he had said, and somehow he felt he was still beyond the barrier, still outside the citadel he was striving to reduce.

“Yes, I know,” he said almost bitterly. “It is just a wager – a wager between us. It is a wager whereby we can force our convictions upon each other.”

Kate nodded, and the warm light of her eyes had changed to a look of anxiety.

“There is a whole day and more before the – settlement, a day and night which may be fraught with a world of disaster. Let us leave it at that – for the present.” Then, with an effort, she banished the seriousness from her manner. “But I am delaying. I must pack my grip, and harness my team. You see, I must leave

directly after dinner.”

Fyles accepted his dismissal. He turned to his horse and prepared to mount. Kate followed his every movement with a forlorn little smile. She would have given anything if he could have stayed. But – .

“Good luck,” she cried, in a low tone.

“Good luck? Do you know what that means?” Fyles turned abruptly. “It means my winning the wager, Kate.”

“Does it?” Kate smiled tenderly across at him. “Well, good luck anyway.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

AN ENCOUNTER

Service was still proceeding at the Meeting House. The valley was quiet. Scarcely a sound broke the perfect peace of the Sabbath morning. The sun blazed down, a blistering fragrant heat, and the laden atmosphere of the valley suggested only the rusticity, the simple innocence of a pastoral world.

At Kate Seton's homestead a profound quiet reigned. There was the occasional rattle of a collar chain to be heard proceeding from the barn; the clucking of a foolish hen, fussing over a well-discovered worm of plump proportions, sounded musically upon the air, and in perfect harmony with the radiant, ripening sunlight. A stupid mongrel pup stretched itself luxuriantly upon the ground in the shade of the barn, and drowsily watched the busy hens, with one eye half open. Another, evidently the brother of the former, was more actively inclined. He was snuffing at the splashes of axle "dope" on the ground beneath the wagon. He was young enough to eat, and appreciate, anything he could get his baby teeth into.

There was scarcely a sign of life about the place otherwise. The whole valley was enjoying that perfect, almost holy, calm, to be found pretty well all the world over, yielded by man to the hours of worship.

Inside the house there was greater activity. Kate Seton was in her homely parlor. She was at her desk. That Bluebeard's chamber, which roused so much curiosity in her sister, was open. The drawers were unlocked, and Kate was sorting out papers, and collecting the loose paper money she kept there.

She was very busy and profoundly occupied. But none of her movements were hurried, or suggested anything but the simple preparations of one about to leave home.

Her work did not take her long. All the loose money was collected into a pocketbook, bearing her initials in silver on its outer cover. This she bestowed in the bosom of her dress. Then, very deliberately, she tore up a lot of letters and loose papers, thrust them in the cookstove, and watched them burn in the fragment of fire smouldering there. Next she passed across to the wall where her loaded revolvers were hanging, and took one of them from its nail. Then, with an air of perfect calm and assurance, she passed out of the room to her bedroom, where a grip lay open on the simple white coverlet of her bed.

Her packing was proceeded with leisurely. Yet the precision of her movements and the certainty with which she understood her needs made the process rapid.

Everything was completed. The grip was full to overflowing. She stood looking at it speculatively. She was assuring herself that nothing was forgotten for her few days' sojourn away from home.

In the midst of her contemplation she abruptly raised her eyes

to the window and inclined her head in an attitude of listening. A sound had reached her, a sound which had nothing to do with the two puppies, or the hens, outside. It was a sound that brought a swift, alert expression into her handsome eyes, the look of one who belongs to a world where the unusual is generally looked upon with suspicion.

A moment later she was peering out of the window into the radiant sunlight. The sound was plainer now, and she had recognized it. It was the sound of a horse galloping, and approaching her home.

Still the doubtful questioning was in her eyes.

She left the window and passed out of the room. The next moment she was standing in the doorway at the back of the house, and in front of her stood the wagon that was to bear her to Myrtle. The slumberous pup was on its feet standing alertly defiant. Its brother was already yapping truculently in its baby fashion. The old hen had abandoned its search for more delectable provender, and had fled incontinently.

A horseman dashed up to the house. He had ignored the front door and made straight for the barn. He drew up with a jerk, and sat looking at the wagon standing there. Then, with an excited, impatient ejaculation, he flung out of the saddle.

The next moment he became aware of Kate's presence in the doorway. With eyes alight and half-angry, half-impatient, Charlie Bryant turned upon her.

"Why have you taken this wagon, Kate?" he demanded, going

to the point of his concern without preamble.

The woman drew a sharp breath. It was as though she realized that a vital moment had arrived, a moment when she must grip the situation, and use all her power of domination over the questioner.

“You’ve placed it at my disposal at all times,” she said, smiling into his excited eyes.

The man rushed on.

“Yes, yes, I know; but why have you taken it now? You say you are going to Myrtle. You don’t need it. You could ride to Myrtle – in the ordinary way. You are welcome to the wagon at all times. To anything I have. But why are you taking it now? I only found out it had gone this morning. I – ” he averted his gaze – “I only happened to go over to the corral this morning – and I found it – gone.”

Quick as a shot Kate’s answer was formulated and fired at him.

“Why did you go to the corral – this morning?”

The man’s reply was slow in coming. His cheeks flushed, and it looked as though he were seeking excuse.

“I had to go there. I – needed my wagon for to-morrow’s work.”

Kate smiled. She was feeling more confident.

“For hauling your hay? Won’t it wait? You see, I can’t carry a grip on the saddle.”

Great beads of sweat were standing on Charlie’s youthful face. He raised one nervous hand and brushed it across his forehead.

He cleared his throat.

“Say, why – why must you go now, Kate? What is this absurd talk I have heard? You going away because – because of that tree business? Kate, Kate, such an idea isn’t worthy of you. You going? You flying from superstition? No, no, it’s not worthy of you. Kate – ” he paused. Then, with a gulp: “You can’t have the wagon. I refuse to – lend it you. I simply must have it.”

Kate was leaning against the door casing. She made no move. Her smile deepened, that was all. She understood all that lay behind the man’s desperate manner, and – she had no intention of yielding.

“If you must have it, you must,” she said, in her deep voice, so like his own. “You had better send for it, but – ” her look suddenly hardened – “don’t ever speak to me again. That is all I have to say.”

The man’s determination wavered before the woman’s coldness. He looked into her dark eyes desperately. They were cold and hard. They had never looked at him like that before.

“D’you mean that, Kate?” he demanded desperately. “Do you mean that if I take that wagon you have – done with me forever? Do you?”

“I meant precisely what I said.” Kate suddenly bestirred herself. The coldness in her eyes turned to anger, a swift, hot anger, to which the man was unused, and he shrank before it. “If you are sane you will leave that wagon to me. You *do not* want it for your haying to-morrow. Anyway, your haying excuse

is far too thin for me. I know why you want it. If you take it I wash my hands of you entirely. You must choose now between these things, once and for all. I am in no trifling mood. You must choose now – at once. And your choice must stand for all time.”

Kate watched the effect of every word she spoke, and she knew, long before she finished speaking, she was to have her way. It was always so. This man had no power to refuse her anything. It was only in her absence, when his weakness overwhelmed him, that her influence lost power over him.

All the excitement had died out of his eyes. Anger gave way to despair, decision to weakness and yielding. And through it all a great despair and hopelessness sounded in his voice.

“Oh, Kate,” he cried, “I can’t believe this is you – I can’t – I can’t. You are cruel – crueller than ever I would have believed. You know why I want to keep the wagon just now. I implore you not to do this thing. I will do most anything else you ask me, but – leave that wagon.”

Kate shook her head in cold decision.

“My mind is quite made up,” she said. “There is nothing more to be said. You must choose here – and now.”

The man hesitated. Just for a moment a gleam of anger flashed into his eyes, but it died almost at its birth, and he made a gesture of something like despair.

“You must do as you see fit,” he said, yielding. Then, in a moment, his weakness was further displayed in an impotent obstinacy. “You must do as you see fit, and I shall do the same.

My mind, too, is made up. I shall carry out the plans I have already made, and if harm comes – blame yourself.”

He turned away abruptly. He refused even to look in her direction again. He sprang into the saddle with remarkable agility and galloped off.

Charlie Bryant raced back to his house. For the moment a sort of frenzy was upon him. He flung out of the saddle, and left his horse at the veranda. He rushed into his sitting room, and, in a sort of impotent excitement and anger, he paced the floor.

He went through the little house without object or reason. At the kitchen door he stood staring out, lost in a troubled sea of racing thought. Presently he returned to the sitting room. He was about to pass out on to the veranda, but abruptly paused. With a gesture of impatient defiance he returned to his bedroom and drew a black bottle of rye whisky from beneath the mattress of his bed. Without waiting to procure a glass he withdrew the cork, and, thrusting the neck of the bottle into his mouth, took a long “pull” at the contents. After a moment he removed it, and gasped with the scorch of the powerful liquor. Then he took another long drink. Finally he replaced the cork and returned the bottle to its hiding place.

A few moments later he was on the veranda again looking out over the village with brooding eyes. For a long while he stood thus, his stimulated thought rushing madly through his brain. Then, later, he became aware of movement down there in the direction of the Meeting House. He realized that service was

over. In a few moments Bill would return for the mid-day meal which was all unprepared.

With a short, hard laugh he left the veranda and mounted his patient horse. Then, at another headlong gallop, he raced down toward the village.

It was sundown the following day. A horse stood grazing in the midst of a small grass patch surrounded by a thick bush of spruce, and maple, and blue gums. A velvet twilight was gathering over all, and the sky above was melting to the softer hues of evening.

The horse hobbled about in that eager equine fashion when in the midst of a generous feed of sweet grass. Its saddle was slightly awry upon its back, and its forelegs were through the bridle reins, which trailed upon the ground. The creature seemed more than content with its lot, and the saddle disturbed it not at all.

Once or twice it looked up from its occupation. Then it went on grazing. Then, quite suddenly, it raised its head with a start, and the movement caused it to raise a foreleg caught in the trailing reins. Something was moving in the bushes.

It stood thus for some moments. Its gaze was apprehensively fixed upon the recumbent figure of a man just within the bush. The figure had rolled over, and a pair of arms were raised above its head in the act of stretching.

Presently the figure sat up and stared stupidly about it.

Charlie Bryant had awakened with a parching thirst, and a head racked and bursting with pain. It was some minutes before his faculties took in the meaning of his surroundings. Some

minutes before they took in anything but the certainty of his parched throat and racking head.

He stared around him stupidly. Then, with a dazed sort of movement, he rubbed his bloodshot eyes with the knuckles of his clenched fists. After that he scrambled to his feet and stood swaying upon his aching limbs. Then he moved uncertainly out into the open. He felt stiff, and sore, and his head was aching maddeningly.

Now he beheld his horse, and the animal's wistful eyes were steadily fixed upon him. Every moment now his mind was growing clearer. He was striving to recollect. Striving to remember what had happened. He remembered going to the saloon. Yes, he had stayed there all day. That he was certain of, for he could recall the lamps being lit – and yet now it was daylight.

For a moment his dazed condition left him puzzled. How did this come about? Then, all in a flash he understood. This must be Monday. He must have left the saloon – drunk, blind drunk. He must have ridden – where? Ah, yes, now it was all plain. He must have ridden till he fell off his horse, and then slept where he fell. Monday – Monday. He seemed to remember something about Monday. What was it – ah!

In a moment the cobwebs of his debauch began to fall from him, and he became alert. He felt ill – desperately ill – but the swift action of his brain left him no time to dwell upon it. He moved across to his horse, and set the saddle straight upon its

back. Then he disentangled the reins from about its feet, and threw them over its head. The next moment he was in the saddle and riding away.

It was some moments before he could make up his mind as to his exact whereabouts. He knew he was in the valley, but – . At that instant he struck a cattle track and promptly followed it. It must lead somewhere, and, sooner or later, he knew that he would definitely locate his position.

He rode on down the track, pondering upon all that must have occurred to him. He must have slept for eighteen hours at least. He knew full well he was not likely to have left O'Brien's until the place was closed, and now it was sundown – the next day. Sundown on Monday. He quickened his pace. His nerves were shaking, and – he wondered in what direction the river lay. He was consumed with a fierce thirst.

Suddenly his horse threw up its head and pricked its ears. Charlie sat up, startled, and peered out ahead. The next moment he had reduced his horse's gait to a walk. He knew where he was, and – he heard a sound like a distant neigh.

In a moment he was out of the saddle. He tied his horse just inside the bush and then proceeded on foot. The old corral lay ahead of him. That corral where he usually kept his wagon, and where the old hut stood.

He moved rapidly forward, and, as he neared the clearing, he left the cattle track and took to the bush. That tell-tale sound, his horse's pricked ears, had aroused his suspicions.

A few moments later he reached the fringe of the clearing. Keeping himself well hidden, he pressed to the very edge, and peered out from amid the bush. As he did so he breathed a sigh of thankfulness. Two horses were tied to the corral fence, and the door of the little old shack was wide open.

One of the horses he recognized as belonging to Inspector Fyles – the other didn't matter. So he waited breathlessly, while one hand went to his coat pocket, an unconscious movement, and rested on the revolver it found there.

He had not long to wait. The sound of voices reached him presently. Then they grew louder. And presently he beheld two men appear from within the hut. Inspector Fyles came first, closely followed by a half-breed whom he recognized at once. It was Pete – Pete Clancy.

In a moment the waiting man understood. A sort of blind fury mounted to his brain and set his head swimming. Now, too, his right hand was withdrawn from his gun pocket, and the weapon was gripped tightly, and his finger was around the trigger.

But the men were talking, and the watcher strained to catch their words. He felt he must know. He must know what treachery was afoot, and how far it affected —

“The game's a pretty bright one,” Pete was saying; and the waiting man ground his teeth as he realized the swagger in the man's tones, and the grin of triumph on his still scarred features. “Maybe it ain't a new sort of play, but I guess it ain't none the worse for that. Y'see, that wagon is kept here right along. It's

allers my work runnin' it back here, and fetchin' it along when it's needed. That's how I know about things here," he added, with a jerk of the head in the direction of the hut. "It's far enough from the village for folks not to know when it's here or not. Then the feller runnin' this layout keeps other things here. Y'see, when a job's on he don't fancy folks gettin' to know him. So he keeps an outfit o' stuff back in the hut there as 'ud hide up a Dago ice-cream seller. Maybe he has other uses for that shack. I ain't wise. But that hidin' hole I located dead easy. Guess he figgers it's a dead secret – but it ain't."

Then Fyles's voice, sharply imperious, carried to the listening man.

"Who is he?" he demanded, turning suddenly upon his companion as they reached the horses.

The grin left the half-breed's face, and Charlie held his breath. The half-breed halted. An ironical light possessed his discolored eyes.

"Why, the feller you're getting to-night – in the boat."

Fyles eyed his man sternly.

"That's the second time you've answered me in that way. I'm not to be played with. Who is this man?"

A curious truculence grew in the half-breed's face.

"I've told you all I'm going to tell you. Guess you'll be askin' me to lay hands on him for you, next. I've earned my freedom, and when you get these folks I'll be square with the game. You can't bluff me on this game. No, sir. I got the law clear. You can't

touch me for a thing. It's up to you to get your man. I showed you the way."

Charlie breathed again, though his fury at the miserable traitor was no less.

Fyles swung himself into the saddle. He bent down, and his voice was harshly commanding.

"Maybe I can't touch you – now," he cried. "But see you play the game to-night. You get your free run, only if I get the man I'm after. The rest of the gang don't count a lot, nor the liquor. It's the boss of the gang I need. If you've lied to me you'll get short shrift."

"You'll get him all right."

The half-breed grinned insolently up into the officer's face. Then Fyles rode away, and, from the moment his horse began to move until it vanished down the cattle track, the muzzle of Charlie Bryant's gun was covering him. His impulse was homicidal. To bring this man down might be the best means of nullifying the effect of Pete's treachery. Then, in time, he remembered that there were others to replace him, and, in all probability, they knew already the story Pete had told their chief. There was one thing certain, however, that liquor must not be run to-night.

Urgent as was the moment Charlie had not yet finished here. The moment Stanley Fyles had disappeared he turned back to the half-breed. He saw Pete take his horse and lead it on to the grass some distance from the corral fence, and his gun held

him covered. Then he watched him go back to the hut and carefully close the door. After that he watched him disturb his own footmarks and those of the policeman in the neighborhood of the doorway.

Charlie moved. The bushes parted, and he made his way into the open. The half-breed's back was turned. Then, quite suddenly, a deep, harsh challenge rang out, breaking up entirely the sylvan peace.

“You damned traitor!”

With a leap the half-breed swung about. As he did so the gleaming barrel of his gun flashed with a sharp report. A bullet whistled through Charlie Bryant's hat, another tore its way through the sleeve of his jacket. But before a third could find a vital spot in his body his own gun spat out certain death. The half-breed flung up his hands, and, with a sharp oath, his knees crumpled up under him, and he fell in a heap on the ground.

His face livid with passion, Charlie hurried across the intervening space. For one moment he stood gazing down upon the fallen man. Then he aimed a kick of spurning at the dead man's body and moved away.

It was some minutes before he left the precincts of the old corral with its evil history. He went into the hut and opened the secret cupboard. It was quite empty, and he closed it again. Then he passed out, and removed the saddle and bridle from the half-breed's horse, and turned it loose. Then, after one last look of hatred and loathing at the dead man, he moved away and

vanished among the trees.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON MONDAY NIGHT

Big Brother Bill, after an evening of considerable worry, had retired to his little lean-to bedroom with its low, camp bedstead. It was useless sitting up any longer attempting one of those big worrying "thinks" which, usually, he was rather proud of achieving.

On this occasion thinking led him nowhither. His worries had come swiftly and significantly. In the first place, on Sunday afternoon he had been seriously concerned about Helen. It was not until Kate's going that either he or Helen had realized the girl's lonely position in the house on the river bank. It came home to them both as they returned thither at about sundown, to find that neither of the hired men had shown up again, and the work, even to the "chores" of the homestead, was at a standstill.

He really became angry in his anxiety. Angry with Kate, angry with the men. However, his displeasure was not likely to help matters, so he and Helen turned to and fed the few livestock, made them snug for the night, and then proceeded to consider Helen's position. After some debate it was decided to appeal to Mrs. John Day. This was promptly done, and the leading citizeness, after a closer cross-examination, consented to take the girl under her brusque wing, and lodged her in her own rather

resplendent house.

This was comparatively satisfactory, and Bill breathed his relief. But hard upon this came the more alarming realization that Charlie did not return home on Sunday night. Not only that, but nothing was heard of him the whole of Monday. All the alarmed brother was able to discover was the fact that Charlie had left the saloon at the time O'Brien closed it, about midnight on Sunday, in a hopelessly drunken condition.

So, what with assisting Helen with the work of her homestead, and searching for his defaulting brother, Bill's day was an anxious one. Then, at nightfall, a further concern added fresh trouble to his thought. Kid Blaney had defected as well, and, in consequence, the work of Charlie's little ranch had been completely at a standstill the whole day.

In the end, quite wearied out with his unusual exertions, Bill abandoned all further attempt to get a grip on the situation and went to bed. He knew he must be up early in the morning, at daylight, in fact, for he had promised Helen to be at the ceremony of the felling of the pine tree, for which all preparations had been duly made under the watchful and triumphant eye of Mrs. John Day.

Sleep, however, was long in coming. His brain was too busy, a sign he was secretly pleased at. He felt that during the last two days he had more than proved his ability in emergency. So, lying awake, waiting patiently for sleep to come, he rather felt like a general in action, perfectly assured of his own capacity to meet

every situation successfully.

It was nearly midnight when he finally dropped off into a light and rather disturbed slumber. How long he had slept, or even if he really had slept at all, he was never quite sure, for, quite suddenly, he was aroused, and wide awake, by the sound of his own name being called in the darkness.

“Bill! Bill!”

At the second pronouncement of his name he was sitting up with his bare feet on the bare floor, and his great pajamaed body foolishly alert.

“Who in – ” he began. But in a moment Charlie’s voice cut him short.

“You there? Thank God! Where’s the lamp? Quick, light it.”

To Bill’s credit it must be admitted he offered no further attempt at a blasphemous protest, but leaned over toward the Windsor chair on which the lamp stood, and fumbled for the matches.

The next moment he had struck a light, and the lamp was lit. He stood up and looked across the room. Charlie’s slight figure was just inside the doorway. His face was ghastly in the yellow lamplight. His clothes were in a filthy condition, and, altogether, in Bill’s own words, he looked like a priceless antique of some forgotten race.

However, the hunted look in the man’s eyes smote his brother’s generous heart, and a swift, anxious inquiry sprang to his lips.

“What’s – what’s up, Charlie?” he cried, gathering his clothes together, and beginning to dress himself.

Charlie’s eyes glowed with a reflection of the lamplight.

“The game’s up, Bill,” he cried hoarsely. “My God, it’s been given away. Pete Clancy, the feller you hammered, has turned informer. I – I shot him dead. Say, the gang’s out to-night. They’re coming in with a cargo of liquor. Fyles is wise to their play, and knows just how it’s coming in. They’ll be trapped to a man.”

“You – shot Pete – dead?”

In the overwhelming rush of his brother’s information, the death of the informer at his, Charlie’s, hands seemed alone to penetrate Bill’s, as yet, none too alert faculties.

“Yes, yes,” cried the other impatiently. “I’d have shot him, or – or anybody else for such treachery, but – but – it’s the other that matters. I’ve got to get out and stop that cargo. It’s midnight now, and – God! If the police get – ”

Bill’s brain was working more rapidly, and so were his hands. He was almost dressed now.

“But you, Charlie,” he cried, all his concern for his brother uppermost. “They’ll get you. And – and they’ll hang you for killing Pete – sure.”

Suddenly a peal of hysterical laughter, which ended in a furious curse, rang through the room.

“God Almighty!” Charlie cried fiercely, “don’t stand there yapping about me. Hang me? What in hell do I care what they do

to me? I haven't come here about myself. Nothing that concerns me matters. Here, it's midnight. I've time to reach 'em and give 'em the word. See, that's why I'm here. I don't know what's happened by now, or what may happen. You offered to help. Will you help me now? Bill, I've got to get there, and warn 'em. The police will try and stop us. If there are two of us, one may get through – will you – ?”

Bill crushed his hat on his head. His eyes, big and blue, were gleaming with the light of battle.

“Give me a gun, and come on,” he cried. “I don't understand it all, but that don't matter. I'll think it out later. You're up against it, and that's good enough for me. Somebody's going to have to look bright if he lays hands on you, if it's Fyles, or McBain, or the devil knows who. Come on.”

Picking up the lamp, Bill took the lead. Here, in action, he had no doubts or difficulties, Charlie was in trouble; Charlie was threatened; Charlie, his foolish, but well-loved brother.

Five minutes later two horsemen, regardless of rousing the inhabitants, regardless of who might see and recognize them, galloped headlong through the heart of the village.

CHAPTER XXXVI

STILL MONDAY NIGHT

The little river wound its silvery way through the heart of the valley. The broken summer clouds strove to shut out the brilliant light of the moon, and signally failed. The swift-moving currents of air kept them stirring, and breaking. So the tattered breaks through which peeped the radiant lamp of night, illuminated each fringe of mist with the sheen of burnished steel.

In spite of the high wind above, the night was still in the heart of the valley. So still. High up above, the racing wind kept up the constant movement, but not a breath below disturbed one single sun-scorched leaf. It was warm. The night air was heavy with the fragrance of ripening vegetation, and the busy droning sounds of stirring insect life chorused joyously and seductively with the murmuring of speeding waters.

The very stillness thrilled. It was the hush of portent, the hush of watchfulness, the hush of a threatening tension.

In the wide heart of the valley the waters of the river laughed, and sang, and frolicked on their way, while under cover of the deep night-shadows lurking figures waited, with nerves set, and weapons of destruction ready to fulfill their deadly mission. Strife loomed heavy amid the reigning peace, the ruthless, savage strife which seems ever to center the purpose of all sentient life.

So the moments passed. Minutes grew. With every passing minute the threat weighed heavier and heavier, until it seemed, at last, that only the smallest spark was needed to fire the train.

The racing clouds melted. They gathered again. Again and again the changes came and went. It was like one great, prolonged conflict wherein the darkening veil strove to hide the criminal secrets upon the earth below from the searching gaze.

For awhile the moon held sway. The river lit, a perfect mirror. Only the shadowed banks remained. Round the bend came a trifling object, small, uncertain in its outline. A sigh of relief went up from many lips. The tension was relaxed.

Caught in the dazzling light the object shot across the water to the sheltering bank. Then the clouds obscured the moonlight, and eyes strove vainly to penetrate the shadow.

The moments passed. Again the moon shone out. Again was the object caught in the revealing light. Now it was closer, and as it raced once more for the wood-lined bank the watching eyes made out a deep-laden canoe, low in the water, with a solitary figure plying a skillful paddle.

It crept on under the bank. With a wonderful dexterity the man at the paddle steered his course beneath the green of drooping foliage, while now and then his narrow, evil, humorous eyes surveyed the heavy cargo at his feet with a smile of satisfaction.

But the shadows could not claim him for long. The full stream lay beyond in the middle of the river. His cargo was heavy, and the sluggish water under the bank made his progress slow and

arduous. Again he sought the stream, and the lesser effort, and the little craft raced on.

Then, of a sudden, the peace of the night was broken. A chorus of night cries awoke to the sharp crack of a carbine. A voice shouted a swift command, and the canoe was turned head on to the hither bank. In a moment a ring of metal was thrust into the face of the man with the paddle, and the hard voice of Sergeant McBain bade him throw up his hands.

The boatman glanced swiftly about him. His evil eyes lit with a smile of appreciation as he dropped his paddle and thrust his hands high above his head. There were ten or twelve police troopers upon the bank – and he was only one.

“Haul him out o’ that, boys, and yank the boat up out o’ water. We’re needin’ his cargo bad.”

The man was dragged unceremoniously from the boat, and stood before the hard-faced sergeant.

“Name?” he snapped.

“Holy Dick,” chuckled the prisoner.

The sergeant peered into his face. At the moment the clouds had obscured the moon.

Was this the man they were waiting for? He made out the gray hair, the smiling, evil eyes. He knew and recognized the features.

The officer struggled with himself for a moment. Then his authority returned.

“You’re under arrest for – running this cargo of liquor,” he said sharply.

Holy Dick's smile broadened.

"But – "

"If you're going to make a statement I'm here to listen, but – it'll be used against you."

Sergeant McBain rapped out his formula without regard for the letter of it. Then, while one of the troopers placed handcuffs upon the prisoner's wrists, he turned to those at the canoe.

"How many kegs?" he demanded.

For a moment there was no reply. Holy Dick sniggered. McBain glared furiously, and his impatience rose.

"How many?" he cried again, more sharply.

One of the troopers approached him and spoke in a low voice.

"None, sergeant," he said, vainly striving to avoid the sharp ears of their prisoner. "The boat's loaded heavy with loose rocks. It's – "

A cunning laugh interrupted him. Holy Dick was holding out his manacled arms.

"Guess you'd best grab these off, Sergeant; maybe you'll need 'em for someone else."

But the policeman's reply became lost. A rattle of firearms far off on the other side of the river left it unspoken. Something was happening away over there, something they had not calculated upon. The rest of the patrol, with Fyles, was divided between the bank and the more distant trail. He turned to his men.

"Loose him and get into the saddle sharp!" he cried. "They've fooled us. By God, they've fooled us – again!"

The uncertain moonlight revealed to Stanley Fyles a movement on the distant rise of ground where the trail first mounted, and, beyond, finally disappeared. His night glasses made out a rapidly oncoming vehicle, accompanied by a small band of horsemen.

The sight rejoiced him. Things were working out well. The man Pete had not lied. McBain held the river. No boat could pass him. He would take these men as part of the gang, working in conjunction with the boat. All was well, and his spirits rose. A sharp order was passed back to his men, ambushed in the bluff where he had taken up his position. The thing would be simple as daylight. There would be no bloodshed. A few shots fired to hold the gang up. Then the arrest.

He waited. Then he backed into the ambush out of sight. The wagon came on. Through his leafy screen he watched for the details of the vehicle, the entire convoy. It would not be Bryant's wagon; that he knew would be elsewhere. It would probably be some hired conveyance which did not belong to the village.

Nearer drew the little convoy, nearer and nearer. It was less than one hundred yards away. In the uncertain moonlight its pace seemed leisurely, and he could hear the voices of the men escorting it. He wanted it nearer. He wanted it under the very muzzles of his men's carbines. The rattle of wheels, the plod of horses' hoofs were almost abreast. A few seconds more, then —

Half-a-dozen shots rang out, the bullets whistling across in front of the wagon, and above the horses' heads. The teamster

reined up, throwing his horses upon their haunches. Then, like a log, he fell headlong from his driving seat.

Fyles turned with a bitter curse upon his lips for the criminal carelessness of his men. But he was given no time to vent it. A cry went up from the wagon's escort, and a hail of bullets rained upon the ambush.

In a second the troopers charged the wagon, while two of their horses, with empty saddles, raced from the cover, and vanished down the trail.

Then the fight waged furiously.

It lasted but a few moments. These savage men about the wagon had been goaded beyond the power of their restraint, at no time great, by the fall of their comrade. A wild fury at the wanton killing by the troopers had fired the train of their passions. Retaliation had been certain – certain as death itself.

But, after that first furious assault, these untamed prairie souls realized the inevitable result of their action. They broke and fled, scattering across country, vanishing like shadows in the night. The next moment, acting on a sharp command, the police were in red-hot pursuit, like hounds breaking from leash. Only Fyles and three men stayed behind with the fallen teamster and his one other dead comrade.

But at the moment of the flight and pursuit, the sound of racing wheels some distance away caught the officer's ears. In a moment he was at the wagon side. His men were close upon his heels. The wagon was empty. It was the blind he had anticipated,

but – that sound of speeding wheels.

He shouted to his men and set off across country in the direction. Nothing must be left to chance. There was no doubt about the peculiar rattle which sounded so plainly. It was a buckboard being driven at a racing speed. Why?

As his horse ploughed through the low scrub his men followed hard upon his heels. Farther on the country was open, and a wide stretch of prairie grass spread out without cover of any sort. It was over this the buckboard was racing.

He strove to estimate its distance away, the start it had of him, by the sound. It could not be much over a mile. A light buckboard and team could travel very fast under the hands of a skilful teamster. It would take a distance of five miles to overhaul it. The direction – yes, it was the direction of the village. The buckboard might get there ahead of them.

Fyles rammed both spurs into the flanks of the faithful Peter, and, as he did so, he saw a party of horsemen converging on him from the left. They drew on, and, in a moment, he recognized McBain and his men.

He called out to the Scot as they came together.

“You get the boat?”

McBain shouted his reply.

“Sure, but – there was nothing doing. It was loaded down with rocks.”

Just for one brief instant a bitter imprecation hovered on the officer’s lips. Then, in a wave of inspiration, he shouted his

conviction.

“By God, then we’re on the right trail now. It’s the buckboard ahead. We must get it. That’s the cargo, sure as fate. Come on!”

A light buckboard was moving leisurely over the open prairie. It was just an ordinary, spidery buckboard drawn by an unusually fine team of horses, and driven by a slightish man clad in a dark jacket and cord riding-breeches, with a wide prairie hat drawn firmly down upon his dark head, its brim deeply shading his boyish, good-looking face. Running beside his team, tied to the neck yoke of the near-side driver, was a saddle horse. It was a fine beast, with racehorse quarters, and a shoulder laid back for speed.

The buckboard was well loaded. Nor was its load disguised. It consisted of a number of the small wooden kegs adopted for the purpose of transporting contraband liquor.

But though the vehicle moved over the rough grass in such a leisurely fashion, the man’s eyes were alert and watchful. His ears, too, were sharply set, and lost no sound, as his eyes lost no sight, in the distant prospect of the country through which he was traveling.

His gait was by no means the result of any reposeful sense. It was the well-calculated result of caution. There was caution in his whole poise. In the quick turn of the head at any predominating sound. In the sharp glance of his dark eyes at any of the more fantastic shadows cast by the searching moonlight. Then, too, a tight hand was upon the reins, and there was an alert searching

for those badger and gopher holes so perilous for horses in the uncertain light of the moon.

He was traveling in a parallel, a mile to the south of the river trail, and, far ahead, to the right, he could see the bush which marked the winding course of the river.

Now he was listening to the faint rumble of a wagon moving along the trail, and, with which, though so far away, he was carefully keeping pace. This was his whole object – to keep pace, almost step for step, with the rumbling movement of the distant wagon.

At his present gait his wheels gave out practically no sound. They gently, almost silently, crushed their way over the tufted grass, and the sound of his horses' hoofs suggested a muffling.

So he made his way, stealthily, secretly. His was the brain which had planned, and this vital work of convoying his smuggled liquor could be entrusted to no other hand. The work he demanded of others was simple; it was the background to his central purpose. He had no desire to risk his helpers. His must be the risk, as, too, his must be the chief profit.

With all his caution he yet had time to think of those other things which frequently brought a smile to his dark eyes. Why not? There was a wild exhilaration in this work. He reveled in the thought of his risk. He reveled in laying plans which could beat all the best brains among the law officers. The excitement of the chances was as the breath of life to him, and the cargo once safely secreted he could feel that he had not lived in vain.

He knew full well that the penitentiary doors were wide open waiting to greet him, but he meant them to remain open, and spend their whole time in a yearning which he vowed should never be fulfilled. Five years. He smiled. Five years — wearing a striped —

What was that?

A shot! One single shot! Far away, there, by the river. Ah, yes. That big bluff. Holy Dick was probably busy. Holy Dick in his boat. He smiled. But all unconsciously he eased his hand upon the lines, and his horses quickened their gait. It was just the slight, nervous quickening as the critical moment of his effort drew near.

The buckboard was less silent. The wheels began to rattle over the hummocky surface of the prairie grass. He listened even more acutely for the rumble of the wagon on the trail. He must definitely assure himself he was still abreast of it. That was all important.

He could plainly hear it. Was he abreast? For the moment he was not quite sure. Therefore, he further permitted his horses to quicken their pace. It was better to —

He sat up, and a look of alarm peered out from under the brim of his hat. The sound of a volley being fired over there on the trail suddenly disconcerted him. This was something he had not reckoned on. This was something he had wished to —

Hark! Again! An answering volley! The first was the heavier. The latter was the familiar note of revolvers. A definite alarm

took hold of him. What was the meaning of it? An attack? Were the men on the trail resisting the police? He had warned them. He – . Listen! The shouting! Now he could distinctly hear the sound of galloping horses.

He leaned forward and grabbed the whip from its socket on the dashboard, and brought it smartly down upon his horses' backs.

In an instant they leaped into a gallop, and he was racing over the rough grass at a perilous pace.

The fools. The mad, idiotic fools. Resisting the police. An armed attack on the police. If they killed any of them – . Great God, was there ever such a pack of fools and madmen? It was no longer simple contraband. It was no longer playing up a ridiculous law. It was —

Again he brought his whip down upon his horses. He must get through now. He must get to the cache with the liquor, and trust to the luck of the reckless to get away. Further concealment was out of the question.

Hark, what was that?

Horsemen coming his way. Yes – horsemen. There could be no doubt of it. The racing hoof-beats were unmistakable. Down came the whip again, and the great team, with the saddle horse beside them, raced with bellies low to the ground.

Now he had no thought but for getting away. His mind ran over the possibilities. If only he could get clear with the liquor there might yet be a chance of his comrades' and his own escape. He had no knowledge of what had happened to the others, except

that there was shooting and pursuit. The only comfort to be drawn was from the certainty in his mind that the first shooting he had heard was the heavy firing of police carbines.

Hark! Yes, there was no doubt of the pursuit. Furthermore, the pursuit was hard behind him. Why? The police must have heard the buckboard. He flogged his horses to a greater effort. They were the speediest team in the country, and he had only three miles to go. They —

“Hold up, you beast,” he cried, his deep voice hoarse with excitement.

One of the horses lunged forward, stumbling in a badger hole. The buckboard jolted terrifically. The driver was nearly thrown from his seat. Under his firm hands, however, the beast managed to recover itself. Then, as though he saw the gates of the penitentiary closing upon him, a feeling of unutterable horror shivered through the man’s body and settled upon his heart. The horse was dead lame.

But there was no time now for feeling, no time for regrets. The pursuers had found his trail, and were hard upon his heels. The cargo must go. Everything must go. Personal safety was the only thing to be considered. From the confidence of victory now he had fallen to the zero of certain failure.

He pulled his sweating team up and sprang to the ground. He ran up to the saddle horse, and, casting the neck-rope loose from the neck yoke, looped it over the horn of the saddle. The next moment he was in the saddle and racing over the grassland in the

direction of the village.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE NIGHT TRAIL

The trail declined over a long, gradual slope. At the bottom of it was a broad, almost dried-out slough. A wooden culvert spanned the reed-grown watercourse. Then the trail made a sharpish ascent beyond, and lost itself behind a distant bush, beyond which again stretched out a broad expanse of grass.

Two horsemen were speeding down the longer slope. Their horses were fresh and full of speed. There was no speech passing between them. Eyes and ears were alert, and their grimly set faces gave warning of the anxious thought teeming through their brains.

The indications of the night were nothing to them. The trail might ring with the beat of their horses' hoofs, or only reply with the soft thud of a deep, sandy surface. They were not out to consider either their horses or themselves. Each knew that his journey was one of desperate emergency, and one of them, at least, cared nothing what might be his sacrifice, even if it were life itself.

The horses came down the hill with a headlong rush. Loose reins told of the men's feelings, and the creatures, themselves, as though imbued with something of their riders' spirits, abandoned themselves to the race with equal recklessness.

Halfway down the hill the foremost of the two, the smaller and slighter, abruptly flung a word across his shoulder to his companion behind.

“Someone coming,” he said, in a deep, hoarse voice.

The second man beat his horse’s flanks with his heels, and drew abreast.

“I can’t see,” he replied, shading his eyes from the light of the moon, which, at that moment, shone out from behind a cloud.

The other pointed beyond the culvert.

“There. Riding like hell. Gee! Look – it’s – trouble.”

Bill Bryant now discerned the hazy outline of a moving figure. It seemed to him that whoever, or whatever it was, it was aware of their approach and desirous of avoiding them. The moving object had suddenly left the trail. It had taken to the grass, and was heading straight for the miry slough.

“The fool. The madman,” muttered Charlie. “Does he know what he’s making for?”

“Is it – a stream, Charlie?”

Bill’s question seemed to irritate his brother.

“Stream? – Damn it, it’s mire. His horse’ll throw himself. Who – ?”

He leaned forward in the saddle searching the distance for the identity of the oncoming horseman. His horse shot forward, and Bill’s was hard put to it to keep pace.

“Can’t we shout a warning?” cried Bill, caught in his brother’s anxious excitement.

“Warning be damned,” snapped Charlie over his shoulder. “This is no time to be shouting around. We don’t – Hallo! He’s realized where he’s heading. He’s – . Oh, the hopeless, seven sorts of damned idiot. Look! Look at that! There he goes. Poor devil, what a smash. Hurry up!”

The two men made a further call upon their horses, urged by the sight of the horseman beyond the slough. He had crashed headlong into the half-dry watercourse at the very edge of the culvert.

The man’s disaster was quite plain, even at that distance. He had evidently been unaware of his danger in leaving the trail for a cross-country run to avoid those he saw approaching him. As he came down to the slough, all too late he had realized whither he was heading. Then, instead of keeping on, and taking his chances of getting through the mire, he had made a frantic effort to swing his horse aside and regain the culvert. His reckless speed had been his undoing. His impetus had been so great that the poor beast under him had only the more surely plunged to disaster, from the very magnitude of its effort to avoid it.

Charlie was the first to reach the culvert. In a moment he was out of the saddle.

The stranger’s floundering horse struggled, and finally scrambled to its feet. The rider was close beside it, but lay quite still where he had fallen. To Charlie’s critical eye there was little doubt as to what had happened. The adjacency of the edge of the culvert warned him of what had befallen. The rider must have

struck it as he fell.

As Bill dismounted he pointed at the stranger's horse.

"Grab it," cried Charlie. The next moment was kneeling beside the fallen man.

Then, in a moment, the wondering Bill, looking on, beheld a sight he would never forget.

Charlie bent down over the silent figure. He reached out and placed an arm under the man's body and turned him over. The next instant a cry, half-stifled in his throat, a cry as of some dumb creature mortally wounded, a cry full of hopeless, dreadful pain rose from the kneeling man, and its agony smote the sympathetic brother as though with a mortal blow.

Then came words, a rush of words, imploring, agonized.

"Kate! Kate! Oh, Kate, why did you do it? Why? Oh, God, she's dead! Kate! Kate! Speak to me. For God's sake speak to me. You're not dead. No, no. Not dead. It can't be."

The man's hand caressed the soft pale cheek under it. He had thrust back the prairie hat which still retained its position, pressed low upon the head, and a mass of dark, luxuriant hair fell away from its place, coiled tightly about the small head.

At that moment the horrified voice of Bill broke in.

"Charlie! Charlie! I can hear horses galloping in the distance!" he cried, alarmed, without actually realizing why. And some sort of desperate instinct made him thrust his hand into his revolver pocket.

For an instant only Charlie looked up at him in a dazed, only

half-understanding. Then his eyes lit with a stirring alarm as he turned a listening ear to windward.

The next moment his arms were flung about the body of the disguised woman at his feet, and, with a great effort, he lifted her and struggled to his feet.

Bill stared in stupid wonderment when he beheld the figure of Kate Seton clad in man's clothing, but he continued to hold on to the horses, and, with a hand on his revolver, awaited his brother's commands.

At that moment Kate opened her eyes and gazed into the dark face above her. In a moment the ardent eyes of Charlie smiled down at her. Then the injured woman's lips opened, and, as they formulated her halting words, his smile gave place to something like panic. She was still in a fainting condition, but power was vouchsafed her to impart a story which drove him to something like a frenzy of activity.

"It's the police," she gasped. "It's – it's shooting. They're – behind. They're right after me – O-oh!"

She had fainted again with her last word, and the dead weight in the man's arms became almost unsupportable.

But now there was no longer any uncertainty. Kate was alive. The police were behind. At all costs – the woman he loved must be saved.

Charlie looked up at Bill, and his voice became harshly commanding.

"Quick! On your horse, man," he cried, almost fiercely.

“That’s it,” as Bill flung himself into the saddle without question. “Here, now take her. You’re strong. Get her across your saddle in front of you. There, that’s it – lift. So. Gently. Get her right across your lap. That’s it. Now take my horse and lead it. So.”

Bill obeyed like a well-disciplined child, and with equal enthusiasm. He leaned down from the saddle and lifted the fainting woman out of his brother’s arms. She was like a babe in his powerful arms. He laid her across his knee. Then, as his brother passed the reins of his own horse up to him, he took them and slung them over his supporting arm. The command died out of Charlie’s tones, and his whole attitude became an irresistible appeal.

“Now, Bill,” he cried, urgently. “Down there, along the bank of the slough.” He pointed away southwards. “Along there, into that bush. Get into hiding and remain till the coast is clear. Then get her back to her home. Leave the police to me, and – and remember she’s all I care for – in the world.”

Bill waited no further word. Once he understood what was required of him he could do it – he would do it – with all his might. He moved off with all the confident air of his simple, purposeful nature.

Charlie watched him go. He saw him vanish amid the shadows of the bush. Then he turned to Kate’s horse and sprang into the saddle.

For a moment he sat there watching and listening. But his purpose was not quite clear. It had not been clear to Bill, who had

asked no question, feeling such to be superfluous at the moment.

But his own purpose was clear enough to Charlie's devoted mind. There must be no chance of Kate's discovery by the police. Whatever had happened before, there must be no chance of harm to her now. His mind was quite clear. His thought flowed swiftly and keenly.

The distant sound of galloping horses was growing. The summit of the rising ground over which they must come was not more than two hundred yards behind him.

He waited. The clatter of hoofs was growing louder with each passing second. The police must certainly be near the top of the rise now. Bill was well away. He was well in the bush by this time.

Hark! Yes. There they were. The moon was hidden just now, but even so Charlie could see the bobbing figures at the hilltop.

Suddenly he rammed his heels into his horse's flanks and dashed off up the slope which he had so recently descended. As he went he drew his revolver and fired two shots in swift succession in the direction of the horsemen approaching. Well enough he knew, as he raced on toward the village, that the police were beyond his range, but his purpose was that there should be no doubt in their minds that he – he was their quarry – that he was the man they had already been pursuing so far.

Ten men made up the tally of the pursuers riding with Inspector Fyles. McBain was not among them. He had remained with the abandoned buckboard while the rest of the police were scouring the neighborhood for the fugitives from the first

encounter.

As Fyles came over the rise, and beheld the culvert below him, and heard the two defiant shots hurled in his direction, a thrill of satisfaction swept through him. The man was less than three hundred yards ahead of him with a long hill to climb, and something over a mile to go before the village, and the possibility of safety, was reached.

There was no match in the country for Peter when it came to a long, uphill chase. He told himself the man hadn't a dog's chance with Peter hard on his heels.

"We've got him, boys," he cried to his men, in his moment of exuberance. "He ought to have been half a mile on by the start he got. It's the poor devil of a horse playing out. He's beat – beat to death. Now, boys, hard on my heels for a spurt."

Peter leaped ahead under the sharp reminder of the spur, and, in a few moments, the clatter of iron-shod hoofs left the wooden culvert behind it, and the race up the hill began.

The moon now blazed out, as though at last it had definitely decided to throw its weight in against the fugitive. The summer clouds were lifting and vanishing with that wonderful rapidity with which, once the brilliant moon gains sway, she seems to sweep all obstruction from her chilly path.

The steely light poured down upon the slim back of the fugitive, and left both horse and rider sharply outlined. The distance diminished under the terrific spurt of the police horses, and a confident look began to dawn in the eyes of their riders.

They were gaining so rapidly that it seemed hardly necessary to press their bronchos so hard. The top of the hill was still a quarter of a mile away. The fugitive's evidently wearying beast could never make that last final incline. The man would be forced to turn and defend himself or yield for very helplessness. The whole thing was too easy. It was absurdly easy. Nor could there be any sort of a "scrap." They were ten to one. It was disappointing. These riders of the plains reveled in a genuine fight.

But Fyles's contentment suddenly received a disconcerting shock. Peter was stretching out like a greyhound. The pace at which they pursued the hunted hare was terrific. But now, although they were, if anything, traveling faster, they seemed to be no longer gaining. The three hundred yards intervening had, in that first rush, been reduced to nearly one hundred. But, somehow, to his disquiet Fyles now realized that there was no further encroachment.

He shook Peter up and left his companions behind. But it quickly became evident he could make no further impression. If anything, his quarry was gaining. An unpleasant conviction began to make itself felt in the mind of the policeman. The man had been foxing. He had been saving his horse up for that hill, calculating to a fraction the distance he had yet to go.

He called to his men to race for it.

They came up on his heels. The man nearest to him was a corporal.

“We’re not done with him yet, corporal,” he said grimly. “I wanted to get him without trouble. Guess we’ll have to bail him up. Once over the top of that hill, he runs into the bush on the outskirts of the village. We daren’t risk it.”

The corporal’s eyes lit.

“Shall we open out and give him a round, sir?”

Fyles nodded.

“Let ’em fire low. Bring his horse down.”

The corporal turned back to his men, and gave the necessary order.

“Open out!” he cried. “It’s just over a hundred yards. Fire low, and get his horse. We’ll be on him before he can pick himself up.”

“There’s fifty dollars between you if you can bring him down and keep his skin whole,” added Fyles.

Still keeping their pace, the men spread out from the trail, withdrawing the carbines from their leather buckets as they rode. Then came the ominous clicking of the breeches as cartridges were thrust home. Fyles, with Corporal Mooney, kept to the trail.

A moment passed. Then the first carbine spat out its vicious pellet. Fyles, watching, fancied that the fugitive had begun to flog his horse. Now, in swift succession, the other carbines added their chorus. There was no check in the pace of the pursuers. The well-trained horses were used to the work.

The first volley seemed ineffective. The men had not yet got their sights. The fugitive had another fifty yards before he reached the top of the long incline.

The distance to the top of the hill was lessening rapidly. Fyles was becoming anxious. It had become a matter of seconds before the man would clear the ridge.

“Keep low,” cried the corporal, warningly, in the excitement of the moment. “A ricochet – anything will do. Get his horse.”

The horseman was twenty yards from the crest of the hill. Fifteen. The carbines again rattled out their hurried fire.

Ten yards – in a moment he would be —

A cloud of dust arose suddenly among the feet of the fugitive’s horse. It cleared. Fyles gave a sigh of relief and raced Peter forward. The man’s horse had crashed to the ground.

Fyles was gazing down upon the body of the fallen man. The horse was lying a few yards away, struggling to rise. A great welter of blood flooded the sandy track all about it.

A trooper walked up to the horse. He placed the muzzle of his carbine close behind the poor creature’s ear. The next moment there was a sharp report. The head dropped heavily to the ground and remained quite still.

The corporal looked up at his superior. He was kneeling beside the body of Charlie Bryant.

“I’m afraid it’s all up with him, sir,” he said seriously. “But he wasn’t hit. I can’t find a sign of a hit. I – think his neck’s broken – or – or something. It was the fall. He’s dead, sir – sure.”

The officer’s face never changed its stern expression. But the suspicion of a sigh escaped him. He was by no means an unfeeling man, but he had his duty to do. In this case there was more

than his duty concerned. Hence the sigh. Hence any lack of appreciation.

“It’s the man I expected,” he said. “A foolish fellow, but – a smart man. You’re sure he’s dead? Sure?”

The corporal nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“Poor devil. I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE FALL OF THE OLD PINE

The gray of dawn was slowly gladdening toward the warmer hue of day. The eastern skies lit with that pallid yellow which precedes the gold and amber of the rising sun. Somewhere, far below the horizon, the great day god was marching onward, ever onward, shedding its splendor upon a refreshed and waking world.

The valley of Leaping Creek was stirring.

Whatever the shortcomings of the citizens of Rocky Springs, morning activity was not one of them. But they knew, on this day of days, a fresh era in the history of the village was about to begin. Every man knew this. Every woman. Even every child who had power to understand anything at all.

So, as the golden light spread upward toward the vault of the eastern heavens, the spirals of smoke curled up from among the trees on the breathless air. Every cookstove in the village was lit by the unwillingly busy hands of the men-folk, while the women bedecked themselves and their offspring, as befitted the occasion and their position.

Breakfast ensued. It was not the leisurely breakfast of every day, when men required an ample foundation to sustain their daily routine of laborious indolence, but a meal at which coffee

was drunk in scalding gulps, and bread and butter, and some homely preserve, replaced the more substantial fare of chops and steak, or bacon and cereals.

Then came the real business of the day. Doors opened and men looked out. Children, with big bow ties upon their heads and sashes at their waists, scuttled through, about the legs of their parents, and reached the open. Neighborly voices hailed each other with a cheery greeting, and the tone was unusual. It was the tone of those who anticipate pleasantly, or are stirred by the excitement of uncertainty.

Minutes later the footpaths and unpaved tracks lost their deserted appearance. Solitary figures and groups lounged along them. Men accompanied by their well-starched womenfolk, women striving vainly to control their legions of offspring. They all began to move abroad, and their ways were convergent. They were all moving upon a common goal, as though drawn thither by the irresistible attraction of a magnet.

From the lower reaches of the village, toward the eastern river, that better class residential quarter, where the houses, four in number, of Mrs. John Day, of Billy Unguin, of Allan Dy, and the local blacksmith were located, an extremely decorous cortege emerged. Here there was neither bustle nor levity. These were the chief folk of Rocky Springs, and their position, as examples to their brethren of lesser degree, weighed heavily upon them.

Mrs. John was the light about which all social moths fluttered. The women supporting her formed a bodyguard sufficiently

impressive and substantial. The men-folk were allowed no nearer than the fringe of their bristling skirts. It was like the slow and stately progress of a swollen, vastly overfed queen bee, moving on her round of the cells to deposit her eggs. The women were the attendant bees, the men were the guarding drones, whose habits in real life in no way detracted from the analogy, while Mrs. John – well, Mrs. John would have made a fine specimen of a queen bee, except, perhaps, for the egg-laying business.

They, too, were being drawn to the magnet point, but, as the distance they had to travel was greater than that of the other villagers, they would certainly be the last to arrive. This had been well calculated by Mrs. John, who was nothing if not important. She had well seen to it that the ceremony, so shortly to take place, was on no account to begin until her august word had been given. To further insure this trifling piece of self-aggrandizement she was defraying the whole of the expenses for the demolition of the aged landmark of the valley.

The saloonkeeper, O'Brien, coldly cynical, but eager to miss nothing of the doings of his fellow citizens, took up his position at an early hour with two of the most faithful adherents of his business house.

It was his way to observe. It was his way to watch, and read the signs going on about him. This valley, and all that belonged to it, had little enough attraction for him beyond its possibilities of profit to himself. Therefore the signs about him were at all times important. And the signs of the doings of the forthcoming

day more particularly so.

Those who accompanied him were Danny Jarvis and "fighting" Mike. They were entirely after his own heart, and, perhaps, if opportunity ever chanced to offer, after his pocket as well. They accompanied him because he insisted upon it, and with a more than tacit protest. As yet they had not sufficiently slept off the fumes of their overnight indulgence in rye whisky. But O'Brien, when it suited him, was quite irresistible to his customers.

Having roused these two inebriates from their drunken slumbers on the hay in his barn with a healthy kick, he proceeded to herd them out into the daylight with a whole-hearted enthusiasm.

"Out you get, you lousy souses," he enjoined them. "There's a big play up at the old tree goin' to happen right away. Guess that old crow bait, Ma Day'll need all the youth an' beauty o' Rocky Springs around to get eyes on her glory. I can't say either o' you boys fit in with these things, but if you don't git too near hoss soap and cold water mebbe you'll pass for the picturesque."

After a brief interval of blasphemous upbraiding and protest, after these two men had exhausted their complimentary vocabulary on the subject of the charms of the lumber merchant's wife, to all of which O'Brien turned a more or less deaf ear, the three set out for the scene of action, and took up an obscure position whence they could watch every detail of the proceedings without, themselves, being too closely observed.

As O'Brien looked out upon the preparations already made, and while his two friends stood chewing the silent cud of angry discontent, with a diluting of black plug tobacco, he had to admit that the moment certainly was a moment, and the scene had assumed a fascination which even contrived to take possession of his now somewhat rusty imagination.

There, in the center of all, stood the villainous old pine, clothed in all its atmosphere of unconscionable evil. It stood out quite by itself in the midst of a clearing, which had been carefully prepared. Every tree and every bush had been cut away, so that nothing should interfere with the impressive fall of the aged giant.

O'Brien studied the position closely. His eye was measuring, and he was forced to admit that the setting was impressive. More than that, he felt constrained to appreciate the imagination of Mrs. John Day. With a view to possibilities the approximate height of the tree had been taken, and a corresponding radius had been cleared of all lesser growths. This was excellent. But – and he contrived to find one objection – the old Meeting House was well within the radius. It was the preparation for its defense to which he took exception. He scorned the surrounding of lesser trees which had been left to guard it from the crushing impact should the tree fall that way. Nor was he slow to air his opinions.

He eyed the discontented features of his companions, and snorted violently.

“Say,” he cried, forcefully. “Look at that, you two bokays o’

beauty.” He pointed at the Meeting House. “There – right there. If that darnation stack o’ kindlin’ was to fall that aways, why, I guess them vegetables wouldn’t amount to a mush o’ cabbige.”

Fighting Mike deliberately spat.

“An’ who in hell cares?” he snarled.

O’Brien turned on the other for a sign of interest. But Danny’s stomach was in bad case.

“Oh, hell!” he cried, and promptly turned his gaze in another direction.

O’Brien looked from one to the other, torn by feelings of pity and anger, with a desire for bodily assault uppermost.

“You sure are bright boys,” he said at last, a sort of sardonic humor getting the better of his harsher feelings.

He had no intention of having his enjoyment spoiled by what he termed “bad bile,” so he yielded his full attention to the tree itself. It certainly was a magnificent piece of Nature’s handiwork. Somehow he regretted that he had never studied it carefully before. From the tree he turned to a mild appreciation of the other preparations for its fall. Long guide ropes had been set in place, high up the vast, bare trunk. These, four of them in number, had been secured at the four points of the compass to other trees of stout growth on the fringe of the clearing. They were new ropes provided for the purpose. Then again, a heavy cable chain had been girded about the lower trunk, and to this, well out of range of the fall of the tree, were hitched two teams of heavy draught horses. It was obvious that they were to haul as

the tree, steadied by the guides, began to fall.

He summed up the result of his observations for the benefit of his companions, in a pleasantly conversational manner.

“Makes a dandy picture,” he said doubtfully, “but I guess there’s a whole heap o’ things women don’t understand. Hand ’em a baby, an’ they got men beat a mile, an’ they most gener’ly don’t forget to say so. That’s all right, an’ we ain’t kickin’ a thing. Guess we ain’t yearnin’ to share that glory – none of us. But babies and fellin’ trees ain’t got a spark o’ resemblance far as I kin see, ’cep’ it is an axe is a mighty useful thing dealing with ’em when they ain’t needed. What I was comin’ to was this old sawdust bag, Ma Day’ll have a hell of a mouthful to chew when that tree gets busy. These guides ain’t a circumstance. They won’t hold nothin’. An’ I guess I don’t get a step nearer things than I am now.”

Mike gazed around on the speaker with billious scorn.

“Don’t guess that’ll hurt nothin’,” he sneered.

Danny was beginning to revive.

“Ain’t you goin’ to hand the leddy compliments?” he inquired sarcastically. “You got an elegant tank o’ hot air laid on.”

O’Brien remained quite unruffled.

“She’ll hand herself all the compliments she’s yearnin’ for. Women like her can’t do without bokays, an’ they don’t care a cuss how they get ’em. Say – ”

He gazed up at the tattered crest of the tree. But the immensity of its height, looking so directly up, turned him dizzy, and he was glad to bring his gaze back to the unattractive faces of his

companions.

“ – I’m gettin’ clear on to higher ground. You boys stop right ther’. If the old tree gets busy your ways it won’t matter nothin’. Guess your score’s overrun down at the saloon, but I lose that without a kick. You’re too bright for me.”

He turned away, and, moving up the hill, took up a fresh position.

Here he had a better view. He had abandoned the pleasure of listening to any speeches which he felt sure would be made, but his safety more than compensated him. Without the distractions of his companions’ society he was better able to concentrate his attention upon details. He observed that the tree was already sawn more than half way through, and he congratulated himself that he had not discovered it before. Also he saw a number of huge, hardwood wedges lying on the ground, and beside them two heavy wooden mauls.

Their purpose was obvious, and he wondered who were the men who would handle them. And, wondering, he cast an interested eye up at the sky with the thought of wind in his mind. The possibility of such a tragedy as the sudden rising of a breeze to upset calculations, and, incidentally, the half-sawn tree, had no effect upon him. He was out of range. Those gathering about the tree in the open were welcome to their belief in the strength of the guide ropes.

In a few moments all his interest was centered about the gathering of the villagers. He knew them all, and watched them

with the keenest interest. He could hear the babel of tongues from his security. Nor could he help feeling how much these people resembled a flock of silly, curious sheep.

His eyes quickly searched for those whom he felt were really the more important in the concern of the tree. Where were Charlie Bryant, and those men who were concerned in his exploits? His eyes scanned every face, and then, when his search was completed, something like excitement took possession of him.

Charlie Bryant was absent. So were his associates, Kid Blaney, Stormy Longton, Holy Dick, and Cranky Herefer. Where were Pete Clancy and Nick Devereux, Kate Seton's hired men? They were all absent. So was Kate herself. Ah, yes, he had heard she had gone to Myrtle. Anyway, her sister, Helen, was there – with Mrs. John Day. Where was her beau – Charlie Bryant's brother?

His excitement rose. The coincidence of these absences suggested possibilities. The possibilities brought a fresh train of thought. He suddenly realized that not a single policeman was present. This, of course, might easily be accounted for on the score of duty. But their absence, taken in conjunction with the absence of the others, certainly was remarkable.

But now the ceremony was beginning. Mrs. John Day had assumed command, and, surrounded by her select bodyguard, she was haranguing the villagers, and enjoying herself tremendously. Yes, there was no manner of doubt about her enjoyment. O'Brien's maliciously humorous eyes watched her

expression of smiling self-satisfaction, and estimated it at its true worth. Her face was very red, and her arms swung about like flails, beating the air in her efforts to carry conviction upon an indifferent audience. He felt that the glory of that moment was something she must have lived for for days, and a feeling of awful anticipation swept over him as he considered her possible verbal and physical antics at such time as the new church should be opened. He felt that it would really be necessary to take a holiday on that occasion.

However, the speech terminated, as speeches sometimes do, and a chorus of applause dutifully followed, as such choruses generally do. And now the great interest of the day was to begin.

Menfolk began to press the crowd back beyond the safety line, and two of Mrs. Day's lumbermen, evidently sent down for the occasion by her husband from his camp, picked up the two wooden mauls. At the same time a man took his place at each guide rope.

O'Brien rubbed his hands. Now for the fun, and he thought of the old legend. He wondered which of those silly-looking sheep, gazing in open-mouthed expectation, were to be the victims of the old Indian curse. And curiously enough, hard-headed, callous as he was, O'Brien was convinced someone was to pay the penalty.

The great wedges were placed in position, and the heavy stroke of one of the mauls resounded through the valley. A second wedge was placed, and a second stroke fell. Then several

strokes in swift succession, and the men stood clear, and gazed upward with measuring eye.

O'Brien, too, looked up. The tree had begun to lean, and two of the guides were straining taut. He wondered. He wondered if the men at the guides were used to the work. Now, for the first time, he realized that the crest of the tree had a vast overhang of foliage on one side, and mighty misshapen limbs. He regarded it speculatively.

Then he glanced at the lumbermen. They were still looking up at the lean of the tree. Suddenly he found himself expressing his opinions aloud, as he ominously shook his head.

"They're raw hands, or – jest mill hands," he muttered. "They sure ain't sawyers."

And again his eyes lifted to the ominous overhang.

A further scrutiny enlightened him. They were endeavoring to fell the tree so that its crest should drop somewhere on or near the trail toward the new church. This made its fall in the direction of, but to the south of, the old Meeting House. This was obviously for the purpose of simplifying haulage. Good enough – if all went well.

The lumbermen seemed satisfied and turned again to their wedges. As they did so a gleam of smiling irony began to grow in O'Brien's eyes. He had detected a slight swing in the overhang of the crest, and the strain on the two guides was unequally distributed. The greater strain was on the *wrong* guide.

The swing of the tree was slightly out of its calculated

direction, and inclining a degree or two nearer the direction of the Meeting House.

As the heavy strokes of the mauls fell he glanced over the faces of the onlookers. What a picture of expectancy, what idiotic delight he saw there!

A crack, sharp and loud, echoed over the clearing. The double team were straining mightily on their heavy tugs. The lumbermen had stood clear. The strain on the *wrong* guide had increased.

O'Brien looked up. The swing had changed several more degrees, further out of its direction.

The expression of the upturned faces had changed, too. Now it was evident that others had realized what O'Brien had discovered already. Loud voices began to point it out, and the lumbermen stared stupidly upward. The tree was in the balance, and slowly moving, bearing all its crushing weight upon that single *wrong* guide.

There was a rapid movement near O'Brien, and Mike and Danny Jarvis joined him hurriedly.

"Say," cried the latter, "the blamed galoots'll bust up the whole durned shootin' match."

Which remark warned O'Brien that Danny had awakened to the threatening danger to the Meeting House.

"They done it," returned O'Brien calmly, his eyes riveted upon the leaning tree.

Mike thrust his hands into the tops of his trousers.

"It sure was time to quit," he said with satisfaction.

The saloonkeeper's only comment was to rub his hands in a sort of malicious glee. Then in a moment, he pointed at the straining guide. "It's got way," he cried. "Look, she's spinning. The rope. She'll part in half a tick. Get it? Say, might as well try to hold a house with pure rubber, as a new rope. It's got such a spring. It's give the old tree way. Now it's - . Gee!"

His final exclamation came as a terrific rending and cracking, far louder than heavy gunshots, came from the base of the tree. There was a vision of the lumbermen running clear. The next instant the straining guide parted with a report that echoed far down the valley. Then, caught by the other restraining guide, the whole tree swung around, pivoting on its base, and fell with a roar of splitting and rending, and a mighty final boom, along the whole length of the roof of the Meeting House.

All O'Brien had anticipated had come to pass. Furthermore, the mush of "vegetables" surrounding the house was more than fulfilled. The vast trunk cut its way through the building, everything, like a knife passing through butter, and finally came to rest upon the ruined flooring inside.

With the final crash an awful silence prevailed. Not a voice was raised among the onlookers. The old superstitions were fully stirring. Was this the beginning of some further disaster to come? Was this the work of that old-time curse? Was this only a part of the evil connected with that tree? It was not the destruction of the house alone that filled them with awe. It was the character of the house that had been destroyed.

But in a moment the spell was broken, and O'Brien was the first to help to break it. The tree had fallen. It lay there quite still, like some great, dead, evil giant. Now his callous mind demanded to know the full extent of the damage done.

He left his post, followed closely by his companions, and ran down toward the wrecked building. With his movement a rush came from other directions among the spectators, and, in the twinkling of an eye, the ruined Meeting House was swarmed with an eager, curious throng of men and women clambering over the wreckage.

What a gladdening result for the sensation-loving minds of the callous! O'Brien and his companions were among the first to reach the scene.

There lay the fallen giant, the greater part of its colossal crest far beyond the extreme end of the demolished building. Only a few of the lower, bare branches, just beneath the foliage, had caught the house, these and the trunk. But the wreckage was complete. The walls had fallen as though they had been made of loose sand, walls that had withstood the storms of years, and the old, heavy-timbered roof was torn to shreds, and lay strewn about like matchwood.

As the eager crowd swarmed over the *debris* an extraordinary sight awaited them. The weight of the tree, and the falling roof timbers, had almost completely destroyed the flooring, and there, in its place, gaped an open cavity extending the length of the building. The place was undermined by one huge cellar, divided

by now crushed and broken cross-supporting walls.

The searching eyes of the saloonkeeper and his companions lost no detail. Nor did the prevailing astonishment at the discovery seem to concern them. With some care they clambered among the *debris* to add further to the discovery, if such additions were to be made. And their efforts were rewarded without stint. The all-unsuspected and unknown cellar was no simple relic of a bygone age, but displayed every sign of recent usage. Furthermore, it was stocked with more than a hundred liquor kegs, many of which were empty, but, also, many of which were full of smuggled rye whisky.

Within five minutes the entire village, from Mrs. John Day down to the youngest child, knew that the cache of the whisky-runners had been laid bare by the fall of the old pine.

The wave of sentimental superstition again broke out and fastened itself upon the minds of the people, and the miracle of it was spoken of among them with almost bated breath.

But O'Brien had no time to waste upon any such thought. He clambered round through the cellars with eyes and wits alert. And he chuckled delightedly, as, groping in the half-light among the kegs, he discovered and recognized his own markings upon many of the empty kegs.

The whole thing amused him vastly, and he dilated upon his various discoveries to those who accompanied him.

"Say, Danny, boy, don't it beat hell?" he cried gleefully. "While all them psalm-smiters were busy to death sweepin' the

cobwebs out o' their muddy souls upstairs, the old wash-tub o' sins was full to the bung o' good wholesome rye underneath 'em. Was it a bright notion? Well, I'd smile. If it don't beat the whole blamed circus. Is there a p'liceman in the country 'ud chase up a Meetin' House for liquor? Not on your life. That dope was as safe right there from discovery as if it was stored in the United States Treasury. Say, them guys was smart. Smart? Hell – say – what's that?"

Excited voices were talking and calling loudly beyond the walls of the ruined building. Even amid the dark surroundings of the cellars O'Brien and his companions detected the words "police" and "patrol."

Ready for any fresh interest forthcoming, the saloonkeeper clambered hurriedly out of the cellar with the other men close behind him. They mounted the broken walls and looked out upon the crowd.

All eyes were turned along the trail coming up from the village, and O'Brien followed the direction of their gaze. A half-spring police wagon, followed closely by a wagon, which many recognized as that of Charlie Bryant, were coming up the trail, escorted by Inspector Fyles and a patrol of police troopers. The horses were walking slowly, and as they approached a hush fell upon the crowd of spectators.

Suddenly Stanley Fyles urged his horse forward, and came on at a rapid canter. He pulled up at the ruined building and looked about him, first at the wreckage and then at the silent throng.

Then, as he beheld O'Brien standing on the wall, he pointed at the ruins.

"An – accident?" he inquired sharply.

O'Brien's eyes twinkled.

"A damn piece of foolish play by folks who orter know better," he said. "They tried wreckin' this durned old tree an' succeeded in wreckin' the soul laundry o' this yer village. Mebbe, too, you'll find things down under it to interest you, inspector. I don't guess you'd be lookin' for whisky an' religion goin' hand in hand, so to speak."

The officer's eyes were sharply questioning.

"How's that?"

"Why, the cellars are full o' kegs of good rye – some full, some empty. Gee, but I'd hate spilling it."

The wagons had come up, and now it was to be seen that coarse police blankets were laid out over them, the soft material displaying something of the ominous figures hidden under them.

"Say – " cried the startled saloonkeeper, and paused, as his quick eyes observed these signs. Then, in an excited voice, he went on. "Say, them – wagons – are loaded some."

Fyles nodded.

"I was bringing 'em along to have them laid out here – in the Meeting House, before – burial."

"Burial?"

O'Brien's eyes opened wide. A sort of gasp went through the silent crowd of onlookers, hanging on the police officer's words.

“Yes, it was a brush with – the runners,” Fyles said seriously. “We got them red-handed last night. It was a case of shooting, too. Two of our boys were shot up. They’re in the wagons. There’s three of the gang – dead, and the boss of it, Charlie Bryant. They’re all in the wagons. The rest are across the border by now. Guess there’ll be no more whisky run in this valley.”

The hush which followed his announcement was far more eloquent than words.

It was O’Brien whose temerity was strong enough to break it.

“That’s so,” he remarked thoughtfully. Then he sighed a world of genuine regret, and his eyes glanced along the vast timber of the old pine. “Guess the old cuss has worked out,” he went on. “No, there’ll be no more whisky-running.” Then he climbed slowly down from the wall. “I’ll have to get – moving on.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

FROM THE ASHES

The nine days' wonder had come and passed. Never again could the valley of Leaping Creek return to the conditions which had for so long prevailed there. And strangely enough the victory won was far more a moral than a physical one. True, one or two lives had paid for the victory, but this was less than nothing compared with the effect achieved.

Within three weeks a process of emigration had set in which left the police with scarcely an excuse for their presence in the valley at all. All those who, for long years, had sought sanctuary within the shelter of the vast, forest-clad slopes of the valley, began to realize that the immunity which they had enjoyed for so long was rapidly becoming doubtful. The forces of the police suddenly seemed to have become possessed of a too-intimate knowledge of the shortcomings which had driven them to shelter. In fact, the limelight of government authority was shining altogether too brightly, searching out the shadowed corners in the lives of the citizens, and yielding up secrets so long and so carefully hidden.

The first definite result of the police raid apparent was the "moving on" of Dirty O'Brien. It came quite suddenly, and unexpectedly. Rocky Springs one morning awoke to find that

the old saloon was closed. Inquiry soon elicited the true facts. O'Brien had vanished. The barn was empty. His team and spring wagon had gone, and the house, and bar, had been stripped of everything worth taking. The night before O'Brien had served his customers up to the usual hour, and there was nothing unusual to be observed. Therefore, the removal must have been effected swiftly and silently in the dead of night, performed as the result of careful, well-laid plans.

This was the first result of the definite establishment of police authority. Evidently the future of Rocky Springs no longer appealed to the shrewd saloonkeeper, and so he "moved on."

This was the cue for further goings. With the saloon closed, and the police authority established, Rocky Springs was Rocky Springs no longer. So, one by one, silently, without the least ostentation, men began to yield up their claims as citizens, and, vanishing over the distant horizon, were heard of no more.

The sledgehammer of police methods had penetrated through the case-hardening of the village, and the place became hopelessly impossible for its population of undesirables.

For Helen Seton those first three weeks left her with a dull, apathetic feeling that quite suddenly her whole world had been turned upside down. That somehow a complete wreckage of all the life about her, her new life, had been consummated. Nor did she understand why, or how. It seemed to her she was living in a new world where all was misery and depression. Her usually bubbling spirit was weighted down as with an avalanche

of responsibility and unhappiness.

For her the change had begun with almost the very moment of the felling of the old pine, and, somehow, it seemed to her as if that wicked, mischievous monument of bygone crimes were responsible.

With the yielding up of the secrets of the Meeting House had started a succession of shocks, each one harder than its predecessor to bear, until she was left almost paralyzed and quite powerless to resist them.

With Stanley Fyles heading the procession of death, with the man's brief outline of the circumstances attending his raid, her heart seemed suddenly to have turned to stone. Her thought turned at once to her sister. That sister, even now away from home, waiting in dreading unconsciousness for the completion of the disaster she so terribly feared. To Helen's sympathetic heart the horror of the position was magnified an hundredfold. Kate had been right. Kate had understood where they had all been blind, and Kate, loyal, strong, brave Kate, must learn that the very disaster she had prophesied had come, and, in coming, had overtaken the one man they had all so earnestly desired to shield – Charlie Bryant.

Without waiting another moment she left the scene. She had blindly rushed from the proximity of that gaping, awe-stricken, curious crowd. And her way had taken her straight home. She had no thought for any object. How could she? Her mind and heart were overflowing with fear and concern, and a world of sympathy

for Kate – the absent Kate. Charlie was dead. Charlie had been caught red-handed. Charlie, that poor, helpless, besotted drunkard. He – he – after all their faith in his integrity, after all Kate's lavish affection, he was the real criminal, and – Fyles had run him to his death. She had no thought now of Bill's absence from her side. She had no thought of anything but this one overwhelming disaster.

So she ran on home. Nor did she pause till she flung herself upon the coverlet of her little white bed in a passionate storm of weeping.

How long she lay there she never knew. A merciful Providence finally sent sleep to her weary brain and heart. And when she ultimately awoke it was to start up dazedly, and find herself staring into the solemn, dreadful eyes of her sister, Kate, who was standing just beyond the open doorway of her bedroom, gazing in upon her.

Then followed a scene never likely to be wholly forgotten.

She sprang from her bed and ran toward that ominous figure. She was prepared to fling herself upon that strong support which had never yet failed her. But, for once, no such support was forthcoming. Long before she reached her side Kate had stepped into the room and seemed to collapse into the rocker beside the dressing bureau. The brave Kate was reduced to a pitiful outburst of tearless sobs.

For one brief instant Helen was again on the verge of tears, but she remembered. With a great effort she forced them back,

and held herself in a strong grip. Then, slowly, a change began to creep over her. It was not she who must look for support from Kate. It was she who must yield support, and the memory of all those years when Kate, never by word or act had failed her, came to her aid.

But though she sought by every means in her power to comfort the heartbroken woman, her efforts were wholly unavailing. They were perhaps worse than unavailing. For Kate proved as unreasonable as any weak, hysterical girl, and, rebuffing her at every turn, finally broke into such a storm of bitter self-reviling as to leave her sister helpless.

“Leave me, Helen,” she cried, through her grievous sobs. “Don’t come near me. Go, go. Don’t look at me; don’t come near. I’m not fit to live. I’m a – murderess. It’s I – I who’ve killed him. Oh, God, was there ever such punishment. No – no. Go away – go away. I – I can’t bear it.”

Horrified beyond words, stunned and confused, poor Helen knew not where to turn, or what to do. She stood silently by – wondering. Then, without reasoning or understanding, something came to her help just as she was about to yield to her own woman’s weakness once more.

She moved out of the room, nor did she know for what reason. Nor was her next action any impulse of her own. Mechanically she set about the housework of her home.

It was her salvation, the salvation of the situation. She worked, and gradually a great calm settled upon her. Thought began to

flow. Practical, helpful thought. And as she worked she saw all those things she must do for poor Kate's well-being.

It was a long and terrible day. And when night fell she was utterly wearied out in mind and body. She had already prepared a meal for Kate, which had been left untouched, and now, as evening came, she prepared another.

But this, like the first, was never partaken of by her sister. When she went into her own bedroom, where Kate had remained, to make her second attempt, she found to her relief and joy that her sister was lying on her bed sound asleep.

She stole out and closed up the house for the night.

Nor was Helen prepared for the miracle of the next morning. When she arose it was to find her bedroom empty, and her bed made up. She hurriedly set out in search of her sister. She was nowhere in the house. In rapidly rising dismay she hurried out to search the barn, fearing she knew not what. But instant relief awaited her. Kate was outside doing all those little necessary duties by the livestock of her homestead, which she was accustomed to do, in the calm unruffled fashion in which she always went about her work.

Helen stared. She could scarcely believe her eyes. The miracle was altogether beyond her comprehension. But her delight and relief were profound. She greeted her sister and spoke. Then it was that she realized that here was no longer the old Kate, but a changed, utterly changed woman. The big eyes, so darkly ringed, no longer smiled. They looked out at her so full of unutterable

pain, as full of dull aching regrets. There was such a depth of yearning and misery in them that her greeting suddenly seemed to jar upon her own ears, and come back to her in bitter mockery. In a moment, however, understanding came. Intuitively she felt that her sister's grief was her own, into which she could never pry. She must ask no questions, she must offer no sympathy. For the moment her sister's mantle had fallen upon her shoulders. Hers had suddenly become the strength, and it was for her to use it in Kate's support.

So the days wore on, long dreary days of many heartaches and bitter speculation. Kate remained the dark, brooding figure she had displayed herself on that first morning after her return. She was utterly unapproachable in those first days, while yet at the greatest pains to conceal the sorrow she was enduring. No questions or explanations passed between the two women, and Helen was left without the faintest suspicion of the truth.

Sometimes, Helen, in the long silent days, strove to solve the meaning of everything for herself. She thought and thought till her poor head ached. But she always began and ended with the same thought. It was Charlie's capture, Charlie's death which had wrought this havoc in her sister, and she felt that time alone could remove the shadow which had settled itself so hopelessly upon her.

Then she began to wonder and worry at the prolonged absence of her – Bill.

Kate had just finished removing the remains of the evening

meal. Helen had curled herself up in the old rocker. She was reading through the numerous pages of a long letter, for perhaps the twentieth time. She was tired, bodily and mentally, and her pretty face looked drawn under its tanning.

Her sister watched her, moving silently about, returning the various articles to the cupboards where they belonged. Her eyes were shadowed. The old assurance seemed to have gone entirely out of her. Her whole manner was inclined to a curious air of humility, which, even now, seemed to fit her so ill.

She watched the girl turn page after page. Then she heard her draw a long sigh as she turned the last page.

Helen looked up and caught the eyes so yearningly regarding her.

“I – I feel better now,” she declared, with a pathetic little smile. “And – please – please don’t worry about me, Kate, dear. I’m tired. We’re both tired. Tired to death. But – there’s no help for it. We surely must keep going, and – and we’ve no one now to help us.” She glanced down at the letter in her lap. Then she abruptly raised her eyes, and went on quickly. “Say, Kate, I s’pose we’ll never see Nick or Pete again? Shall we always have to do the work of our little patch ourselves?” Then she smiled and something of her old lightness peeped out of her pretty eyes. “Look at me,” she cried. “I – I haven’t put on one of my nice suits since – since that day. I’m – a tramp.”

Kate’s returning smile was of the most shadowy description. She shook her head.

“Maybe we’ll get some hired men soon,” she said, quietly. Then she sighed. “I don’t know. I hope so. I guess we’ll never see Nick again. He got away – I believe – across the border. As for Pete,” she shuddered, “he was found by the police – shot dead.”

Helen sat up.

“You never told me,” she cried.

Kate shook her head.

“I didn’t want to distress you – any more.” Just for one moment she averted her eyes. Then they came back to Helen’s face in an inquiry. “When – when is – Bill coming back?”

“Bill?” Helen’s eyes lighted up, and a warm smile shone in them as she glanced down at her letter again. “He says he’ll be through with Charlie’s affairs soon. He’s in Amberley. He’s had to see to things through the police. He’s coming right on here the moment he’s through. He’s – he’s going to wire me when he starts. Kate?”

“Yes, dear.”

Kate turned from the cook stove at the abruptness of her sister’s tone. Helen began to speak rapidly, and as she talked she kept her gaze fixed upon the window.

“It’s – it’s a long while now, since – that day. We were both feeling mighty bad ’bout things then. We,” she smiled whimsically, “sort of didn’t know whether it was Rocky Springs, or Broadway, did we? And there was such a lot I didn’t know or understand. And I never asked a question. Did I?”

Kate winced visibly. The moment she had always dreaded had

come. She had realized that it must eventually come, and for days she had wondered vaguely how she would be able to meet it. The smile which strove to reach her eyes was a failure, and, for a moment, a hunted look threatened. In the end, however, she forced herself to perfect calmness.

“I don’t think I could have answered them then if you had,” she said gently. “I don’t know that I can answer many now – for both our sakes.”

Helen thought for some moments. Then she appeared to have arrived at a determination.

“How did you – come home that day – and why? I didn’t expect you until the next day.”

Kate drew a deep breath.

“I came back – riding,” she said. “I came back because – because I had to.”

“Why?”

“Because of the – disaster out there.”

“You knew?”

Kate nodded.

“Pretty well everything. That is all I can tell you, dear.” Kate crossed the room, and stood beside her sister’s chair. She laid one gentle hand upon her shoulder. “Don’t ask me any more about that. It – it is like – like searing my very soul with red-hot irons. That must be my secret, and you must forgive me for keeping it from you. Ask me anything else, and I will tell you – but leave that alone. It can do nobody any good.”

Helen leaned her head on one side till her soft cheek rested caressingly upon her sister's hand.

"Forgive me, Kate," she said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'll never mention it again – never."

For some moments neither spoke. But Kate was waiting. She knew there were other questions that must be asked and answered.

"Was it because of the felling of that tree you went away?" Helen asked presently.

Kate shook her head.

"No."

Helen started up.

"I knew it wasn't. Oh, Kate, I knew it wasn't. It was so unlike you. I know why you went. Listen," she went on, almost excitedly. "You always defended Charlie. You pretended to believe him straight. You – you stuck to him through thick and thin. You flouted every charge made against him. It was because of him you went away. You went to try and help him – save him. All the time you knew he was against the law. That's why you went. Oh, Kate, I knew it – I knew it."

Helen was looking up into her sister's shadowed face with loyal enthusiasm shining in her admiring eyes.

Kate gravely shook her head.

"I believed every word I said of Charlie. As God is my witness I believed it. And I tell you now, Helen, that as long as I live my heart will be bowed down beneath a terrible weight of grief and

remorse at the death of a brave, honest, and loyal gentleman. I have no more to say. I never shall have – on the subject. I love you, Helen, and shall always love you. My one thought in life now is your welfare. If you love me, dear, then leave those things. Leave them as part of a cruel, evil, shadowed time, which must be put behind us. All I want you to ever remember of it – when you are the happy wife of your Big Brother Bill – is that Charlie was all we believed him, in spite of all appearances, and he died the noblest, the most heroic death that man ever died.”

Kate bent down and tenderly kissed the beautiful head of fair, wavy hair. Then, without waiting for the astonished sister’s reply, she moved across to the door.

“Some day,” she said, pausing with her hand on the catch, and, turning back, smiling gently through the gathering tears, “Bill will tell you it all. He knows it all – everything. Just now he is bound to secrecy, but he will be released from that some day, and then – he will tell you.”

CHAPTER XL

THE DAWN

A girl was leaning against a solitary post, a hundred yards or so from where the descent into the valley of Leaping Creek began. All about her stretched the vast plains of grass, which seemed to know no end. The wide flat trail, so bare and hard, passed her by, and vanished into the valley behind her. In the opposite direction, at long intervals, it showed up in sections as it passed over the rises in the prairie ocean, until the limits of her vision were reached.

Not a single object stood out to relieve the monotony of that desert of grass. Any dwelling of man within reach of the searching eye must have been hidden in the troughs between the crests of summer grass. It was all so wide, so vast, so dreadful in its unspeakable solitude.

Helen's eyes were upon the last section of the trail, away to the northwest, just as far as her bright eyes could see. She was searching, searching. Her heart was beating with a great and buoyant hope, and every little detail she beheld in that far-off distance she searched, and sought to mould into the figure of the horseman she was waiting for.

The sun was hot. Its relentless rays, freed from the wealth of shade in the valley below, beat down upon the parching land

with a fiery intensity which must have been insupportable to unaccustomed human life. But to Helen it meant nothing, nothing but the fact that its brilliant light was in keeping with every beat of the warm, thrilling heart within her bosom.

He was on the road. Bill – her Big Brother Bill. He was on the road, and must be somewhere near now, for the telegram in her hand warned her that he hoped to reach the valley by sundown.

Four long weeks since the dreadful day. Four long weeks in which her aching heart and weary thought had left her in wretched unhappiness. Four weeks of doubt and trouble, in which her sister seemed to have shut herself out of her life, leaving her to face all her doubts and fears alone.

Bill was away on his dead brother's affairs. Loyal Bill, seeking by every means in his lumbering power to shield the memory of the dead man from the effects of the manner of his death. Helen honored her lover for it. He was just the good, loyal soul she had believed. And now, as she stood with the tinted paper message, announcing his return in her hand, she smiled, and wondered tenderly what blunders he would contrive in the process.

Sundown. Sundown would not be for at least two hours. Two hours. Two hours meant some fourteen or sixteen miles by horse upon the trail. She told herself she could not see for sixteen miles, nor even for eight. It was absurd waiting there. She had already been waiting there over an hour. Then she smiled, laughing at herself for her absurd yearning for this lover of hers. He was so big, so foolish, so honest and loyal – and, he was just hers.

She sat down again on the ground, as already she had seated herself many times. She would restrain her impatience. She would not just get up at every —

She was on her feet again at the very moment of making her resolve. This time her eyes were straining and wide open. Every nerve in her body was at a tension. Some one was on the trail this time. Certain. It was a horseman, too. There was no mistake, but he was near, quite near, comparatively. How had she come to miss him in the far distance?

She saw the figure as it came over a rising ground. She watched it closely. Then she saw it was not on the trail, but was making for it — across country. Now she knew. Now she was certain, and she laughed and clapped her hands. It must be Bill, and — of course he had lost himself, and now, at last, had found his way.

The horseman came on at a great pace.

As he drew nearer a frown of doubt crossed the girl's face. He did not appear big enough — somehow.

He dropped down into a hollow, and mounted the next crest. In a moment, as he came into view, Helen felt like bursting into tears of disappointment.

The next moment, however, all thought of tears passed away and a steady coldness grew in her eyes. She felt like hiding herself back there in the valley. She had recognized the man. Without a doubt it was Stanley Fyles. But he wore no uniform. He was clad in a civilian costume, which pronouncedly smacked of the

prairie.

It was too late to hide. Besides, to hide would be undignified. What was he coming to the valley for? Helen's eyes hardened. Nor did she know quite why she felt resentful at the sight of him. Yes, she did. It was for poor Charlie, Bill's brother. And Kate had sworn that Charlie was innocent.

She stood thinking, thinking, and then a further change came over her. She remembered this man's work. She remembered his duty. Ought she to feel badly toward him?

And Kate? What of Kate? Would she – What on earth brought him to the valley – now?

It was too late to avoid him now, if she had wanted to. And, somehow, on reflection, she was not sure she did want to. So she stood her ground as he came up.

He reined Peter in as he came abreast, and his dark eyes expressed his surprise at sight of the waiting girl.

“Why – Miss Helen, this – ” He broke off abruptly, and, turning in his saddle, looked back over the long, long trail. When his eyes came back to the girl's face they were smiling. “It's kind of hot out here,” he said. “Aren't you afraid of the sun?” Then he became silent altogether, while he interpreted to himself the somewhat stony regard in her eyes.

In a moment something of the awkwardness of the encounter occurred to him. His mind was full of other things, which before he had missed the possibility of.

“I don't mind the sun, Mr. Fyles,” said Helen coldly. “Besides,

I guess I'm not standing around here for – fun. I'm waiting for some one.”

Fyles glanced back over the trail. Then he nodded. “He’s coming along,” he said quietly. “Guess he started out from Amberley before me. Say, he’s a bully feller, sure enough, and I like him. I’ve seen a good deal of him in Amberley. But I guessed he wouldn’t be thanking me for my company on the trail, so I came another way, and passed on ahead. You see – I, well, I had to do my duty – here, and – well, he’s a bully feller, Miss Helen, and – you’ll surely be happy with him.”

While he was talking, just for a moment, a wild impulse stirred Helen to some frigid and hateful retort. But the man’s evident sincerity won the day and the girl’s eyes lit with a radiant smile.

“He’s – on the trail?” she cried, banishing her last shadow of coldness. “He is? Say, tell me where, and when he’ll get in. I – I had this message which said he’d be here by sundown, and – and I thought I’d just come right along and meet him. Have – have you seen him? And – and – ”

Fyles shook his head. “Not until just now,” he said kindly. “He’s about four miles back. Say,” he added, with less assurance, “maybe your sister’s home?”

For a moment Helen stared incredulously. “Yes,” she answered slowly. Then in agitation: “You’re not going to – ?”

The man nodded, but his smile had died out. “Yes. That’s why I’ve come along,” he said seriously. “Is – is she well? Is she – ?”

But Helen left him no time to finish his apprehensive inquiries. At that moment she caught sight of a distant figure on the trail. It was the figure of a big man – so big, and her woman’s heart cried out in love and thankfulness.

“Oh, look! It’s Bill – my Bill! Here he comes. Oh, thank God.”

Stanley Fyles flung a glance over his shoulder. Then without a word he lifted Peter’s reins. Then he seemed to glide off in the direction of the setting sun.

As he went he drew a long sigh. He was wondering – wondering if all the happiness in the world lay there, behind him, in the warm heart of the girl who was waiting to embrace her lover.

Kate Seton was standing at the window of her parlor. Her back was turned upon the room, upon the powerful, loose-limbed figure of Stanley Fyles.

Her face was hidden, she wanted it to remain hidden – from him. She felt that he must not see all that his sudden visit, without warning, meant to her.

The man was near the center table. One knee was resting upon the hard, tilted seat of a Windsor chair, and his folded arms leaned upon the back of it. His eyes were full of a deep fire as he gazed upon the woman’s erect, graceful figure. A great longing was in him to seize her, and crush her in arms that were ready to claim and hold her against all the world.

All the atmosphere of his calling seemed to have fallen from him. He stood there just a plain, strong man of no great

eloquence, facing a position in which he might well expect certain defeat, but from which there was no thought of shrinking.

Silence had fallen since their first greeting. That painful silence when realization of that which lies between them drives each to search for a way to cross the barrier.

It was Kate who finally spoke. She moved slightly. It was a movement which might have suggested many things, among them uncertainty of mind, perhaps of decision. Her voice came low and gentle. But it was full of a great weariness and regret, even of pain.

“Why – why did you come – now?” she asked plaintively. “It seems as though I’ve lived through years in the last few weeks. I’ve tried to forget so much. And now – you come here to remind me – to stir once more the shadows which have nearly driven me crazy. Is it merciful – to do that?”

The woman’s tone was baffling. Fyles searched for its meaning. Resentment he had anticipated. He had been prepared for it, and to resist it, and break it down by the ardor of his appeal. That dreary regret was more than he could bear, and he hastened to protest.

“Say, Kate,” he cried, his sun-tanned features flushing with a quick shame. “Don’t think I’ve come here to remind you. Don’t think I’ve come along to taunt you with the loss of our – our mad wager. I want to forget it. It became a gamble on a man’s life, and – and I hate the thought. You’re free of it, and I wish to God it had never been made.”

The bitter sincerity of his final words was not without its effect. Kate stirred. Then she turned. Her beautiful eyes, so full of pathos, so full of remorse, looked straight into his.

“Then – why did you come here?” she asked.

The man started up. The chair dropped back on to its four legs with a clatter. His arms were outstretched, and the passionate fire of his eyes blazed up as the quick, hot words escaped his lips.

“Why? Why?” he demanded, his eyes widening, his whole body vibrant with a consuming passion. “Don’t you know? Kate, Kate, I came because I couldn’t stay away. I came because there’s just nothing in the world worth living for but you. I came because I just love you to death, and – there’s nothing else. Say, listen. I went right back from here with one fixed purpose. Maybe it won’t tell you a thing. Maybe you won’t understand. I went back to get quit of the force – honorably. I’d made my peace with them. Oh, yes, I’d done that. Then I demanded leave of absence pending my resignation. They had to grant it. I am never going back. Oh, yes, I knew what I was up against. I wanted you. I wanted you so that I couldn’t see a thing else in any other direction. There is no other direction. So I came straight here to – to ask you to forget. I came here to tell you all I feel about – the work I had to do here. I came here with a wild sort of forlorn hope you could forgive. You see, I even believed that but for – for that – there was just a shadow of hope for me. Kate – !”

The woman suddenly held up her hand. And when she spoke there was nothing of the Kate he had always known in the

humility of her tone.

“It is not I who must forgive,” she said quickly. “If there is any forgiveness on this earth it is I who need it.”

“You? Forgiveness?”

The man’s face wore blank incredulity.

Kate sighed. It was the sigh of a broken-hearted woman.

“Yes. If there is any forgiveness I pray that it may come my way. I need it all – all. I can never forgive myself. It was I who caused Charlie’s death.”

Quite suddenly her whole manner changed. The humility, the sadness of her tone rose quickly to a passionate self-denunciation.

“Yes, yes. I will tell you now. Oh, man, man. Your words – every one of them, have only stabbed me more and more surely to the heart. You don’t understand. You can’t, because you do not know what I mean. Oh, yes,” she went on desperately, “why shouldn’t I admit it? I love you. I always have loved you. Let me admit everything fully and freely.”

“Kate!” The man stepped forward, his eyes alight with a world of happiness, of overwhelming joy. But she waved him back.

“No, no,” she cried, almost harshly. “I have told you that just to show you how your words have well nigh crazed me. I can be nothing to you. I can be nothing to anybody. It was I who brought about Charlie’s death. He, the bravest, the loyalest man I ever knew, gave his life to save me from the police, who were hunting me down. Oh,” she went on, at sight of Fyles’s

incredulous expression, “you don’t need to take my word alone. Ask Charlie’s brother. Ask Bill. He was there. He, too, shared in the sacrifice, although he did not understand that which lay in the depths of his brother’s brave heart. And now – now I must live on with the knowledge of what my wild folly has brought about. For weeks the burden of thought and remorse has been almost insupportable, and now you come to torture me further. Oh, God, I have paid for my wanton folly and wickedness. Oh, God!”

Kate buried her face in her hands, and abruptly flung herself into the rocker close behind her.

Fyles looked down upon her in amazed helplessness. He watched the woman’s heaving shoulders as great, dry, hard sobs broke from her in tearless agony. He waited, feeling for the moment that nothing he could say or do but must add to her despair, to her pain. Her self-accusation had so far left him untouched. He could not realize all she meant. All that was plain to him was her suffering, and he longed to comfort her, and help her, and defend her against herself.

The moments slipped away, heavy moments of intense feeling and bitter grief.

Presently the grief-stricken woman’s sobs grew less, and with something like a gesture of impatience she snatched her hands from her face, and raised a pair of agonized eyes to his.

“Leave me,” she cried. “Go, please go. I – I can’t bear it.”

Her appeal was so helpless. Again the impulse to take her in his arms was almost too strong for the man, but with an effort

he overcame it.

“Won’t you – go on?” he said, in the gentlest possible tone. “It will help you. And – you would rather tell me.”

The firmness of his manner, the gentleness, had a heartbreaking effect. In a moment the woman’s eyes were flooded with tears, which coursed down her cheeks. It was the relief that her poor troubled brain and nerves demanded, and so Fyles understood.

He waited patiently until the passion of weeping was over. Then again he urged his demand.

“Now tell me, Kate. Tell me all. And remember I’m not here as your judge. I am here to help – because – I love you.”

The look from the woman’s eyes thanked him. Then she bowed her head lest the sight of him should leave her afraid.

“Must I tell it all?”

Kate’s tone was firmer. There was a ring in it that reminded the other of the woman he used to know.

“Tell me just what you wish. No more – no less. You are telling it for your own sake, remember. To me – it makes no difference.”

“There’s no use in telling it you from the start. The things that led up to it,” she began. “I have been smuggling whisky for nearly five years. It’s a pretty admission, isn’t it? Yes, you may well be horrified,” she went on, as Fyles started.

But the man denied.

“I am not horrified,” he said. “It is – the wonder of it.”

“The wonder? It isn’t wonderful. It was so simple. A little

ingenuity, a little nerve and recklessness. The law itself makes it easy. You cannot arrest on suspicion.” Kate sighed, and her eyes had become reflective, so that their calmness satisfied the waiting man. “I must tell you this,” she went on quickly. “My reasons were twofold. Helen and I came here to farm. We came here because I was crazy for adventure. We had money, but I soon found that we, two women, could never make our farm pay. We were here surrounded by outlaws, who were already smuggling liquor, and their trade appealed to me. I was just crazy to take a hand in it for the excitement of it, and – to replenish our diminishing capital.”

“Helen knows nothing about it,” she went on, her voice hardening as though the shameful story she was about to tell were forcing the iron deeper and deeper into her soul. “She has never guessed, or suspected, and I could almost hope she never will. It didn’t take me long to make up my mind. This was about the time Charlie came to the valley,” she sighed. “Well, I quickly contrived to get at the men I wanted. I talked to them carefully, and finally unfolded to them a plan I had worked out to smuggle whisky on a large and profitable scale. It doesn’t matter about the details. They all came in at once. It pleased their sense of humor to be run by a woman. I was to disguise myself as a man, which nature made easy for me, and my real personality was to be our chief safeguard. No one would suspect unless we were caught red-handed. And that – well, that was not a great chance, anyway, in those days. I was responsible. I was to purchase cargoes across

the border. The others were only my helpers, under my absolute orders. And I ruled them sharply.”

The man nodded without other comment.

“But Charlie had arrived, and very soon his coming began to complicate matters,” Kate went on, after the briefest of pauses. “He came out here to ranch. He was turned out of his home. And I – I just pitied him, and strove to turn him from his drunken habits. This is where the mischief was done. I liked him. I sort of felt like a mother to him. He was so gentle and kind-hearted. He was clever, too – very clever. Yes, I looked upon him as a son, or brother – but he didn’t look on me in the same way. I don’t know. I suppose I didn’t think. I was foolish. Anyway, Charlie asked me to marry him. I refused him, and he drank himself into delirium tremens.”

Again came a long-drawn sigh at the memory of that poor, wasted life.

“Well, I nursed him, and finally he got better, and again I went on with my work. Then, one day, I received a shock. Charlie came to me and told me he’d found a mysterious old corral, away up, hidden in the higher reaches of the valley. He begged me to let him show it me. Feeling that I owed him something, I consented to go with him. So we rode out. You know the place. But maybe you don’t know its secret.”

Fyles nodded.

“Yes – you mean the – cupboard in the lining of the wall.”

“You know it?” Kate’s surprise was marked. However, she

went on rapidly. “Well, while we were there he showed it to me, and then, looking me straight in the eyes, he said, ‘Wouldn’t it be a dandy hiding place for things? Suppose I was a big whisky smuggler. Suppose I wanted to disguise myself. I could keep my disguise here. No chance of its being found by police or any one. It would be a great place.’ Then he went on, enlarging enthusiastically upon his idea. He said, ‘A feller wants to do things right if he’s going to beat the law. If I were running liquor I’d take no chances. I’d run it on a big scale, and I’d cache my stuff in the cellars under the Meeting House. No one knows of ’em. I only lit on ’em by chance.

“Not a soul even suspects they’re there. Guess they were used for caches in the old days. Now, I’d take on the job of looking after the place, keeping it clean, and all that. That would let me be seen there without anybody getting suspicious.’ All this time his eyes were watching me shrewdly, speculatively. Then, still pretending, he went off in another direction. He told me he’d bought a good wagon. He said, ‘I’d keep it here in the corral. It would be better than a buckboard.’ Then I knew for certain that he was aware of my doings. For I used a buckboard. It was a desperate moment. I waited. All of a sudden he dropped his mask of lightness, and became serious. I can never forget his poor, dear face as he gave me his final warning. ‘Kate,’ he said, ‘if there was anybody I – liked, and was anxious about, running whisky in this place, I’d show them the corral and tell them what I’ve told you. You see,’ he added ingenuously, ‘I’d give my life for those I like,

then how readily would I help them like this. This is the safest scheme I can think of. And I'm rather proud of it. Anyways, it's better than keeping disguises kicking around for any one to find, and caching liquor under bushes.' He had discovered all my secret. All – how? The thought set me nearly crazy.”

“Did you – question him?” The man's voice cut sharply into the momentary silence.

Kate shook her head.

“No. I couldn't. I don't know why, but I couldn't.” She drew a deep breath. “The next thing I knew was that I was shadowed in all my work, and I knew that shadow was – Charlie. Here came a memorable day. I think the devil was in me that day. I remember Charlie came to me. He smiled in his gentle, boyish fashion. He said, ‘No one's adopted my scheme yet – and I've left the wagon down at the old corral, too.’ It was too much. I laughed. I told him that now no one could ever use his scheme for I had secured the work – voluntarily – of seeing to the Meeting House. His response was deadly serious. ‘I'm glad,’ he said. ‘That will end temptation for – others.’”

“He thought of using it – on your behalf – himself!”

“I fancy so.” Kate paused. Then, with an effort, she seemed to spur herself to her task. “There seems so much of it. Such a long, dreary story. I must skip to the time you came on the scene. It was then that serious trouble began. Danger really increased. But I was used to it by then. I loved it. I didn't care. I was pleased to think I was pitted against the police. You remember White

Point? Like all the rest, I planned that. I was there. We beat your men on the trail, too. We contrived to temporarily cache the cargo, and afterward remove it to the Meeting House. Then later. You remember the night that you found Bill by the pine tree, which, by the way, served me as a mail office for orders from my local customers? They placed money and orders in one of the old crevices under the bark. You see, I never came into personal contact with them. It was I you saw there. I had just been there to get an order from O'Brien. Bill saw me – and mistook me for Charlie. Charlie was probably there, but it was I you saw drop down into hiding. That night was a great shock to me. I discovered that, disguised as a man, by some evil chance I became the double of Charlie. You can imagine my distress. In a flash I was made aware of the reason that he was bearing the blame for all my doings. This brought me another realization, too. My personality had been discovered. People must have seen me before. I was known by, perhaps distant, sight, and Charlie was blamed for all my doings. It left me with a resolve to defend him to my utmost, all the more so that I was convinced in my mind that he was doing his utmost to divert suspicion from me to himself. Even his own brother believed in his guilt.

“When you opened your campaign against him, my cup of bitterness was full. Then it was I resolved to run cargo after cargo in the wild hope that some chance would reveal to you that Charlie was not your man. I resolved this, knowing you – and – and liking you, and being aware that every time I succeeded I

was further helping to ruin you with your superiors, and in your career. It had to be. I had to sacrifice all my own feelings to – save Charlie.”

The shining eyes of the man gazed admiringly on the sad face of the loyal woman.

“I think I see,” he said.

Kate raised her shoulders.

“I hardly expected any one would see, or understand, what I felt, and the way I reasoned. You remember the cargo from Fort Allerton? It was my two boys, acting under my command, who bound and gagged your patrol, and fired the alarm. Pete brought me word of your plans. He had spied on you in your camp. But there was very nearly disaster in that affair. I dropped my pocketbook on the trail. It was full of incriminating papers. I did not discover my loss till I returned my disguise to the secret hut. You can imagine my horror at such a discovery. It meant everything. I waited desperately, expecting it to have been found by your men. Two days later, in a fever of apprehension, I went to search my clothes again at the corral. I felt it was useless. It could not be there. But my guardian angel had been at work. It was in its place in my coat pocket. Then I knew that Charlie was still watching over me. He had found it, and – returned it.”

Fyles nodded.

“He was on the trail that night – I saw him.”

“Do you want to know the rest?” Kate went on. “Is it necessary? The heartless game I played on you. Do you

understand it now? Oh, it was a cruel thing to do. But you drove me crazy with your suspicions, your obstinate suspicions, of Charlie. I was determined to pursue my ruthless course in his defense to the end. It was my only hope of relieving Charlie of suspicion – without betraying myself. But there were things I had not calculated on. Two things happened after I had offered you my challenge. I made my plans, and ordered my cargo, after telling you when and where it was to arrive. Then the two things happened. First? Bill ran foul of Pete. Pete was drunk and insulted Helen. Bill was there, and thrashed him soundly, and I was glad. But I feared for mischief. He knew my plans. I talked to him, and quickly realized my fears were well-founded. There was no help for it. I promptly changed my plans. The cargo was to come in by water. The escorted empty wagon by trail. I left that disposition, except that I decided the boat should be empty, too, and, unknown to any one but Holy Dick, I should bring in the cargo on a buckboard myself. You see, it left me free of any chance of treachery. When you told me of Pete's treachery I knew I had done well. Then the second thing happened, which served me with an excuse for leaving the village, which had become imperative to complete my change of plans. You remember. It was the tree. You remember I feared the old superstition, and I went to – Myrtle.

“The rest. Yes, let me tell it quickly, while I still have the courage. You must fill in the gaps which I leave for yourself. Before I left, Charlie came here. He tried to stop me. I know

why. He had some premonition of disaster. I, too, had the same premonition, but – I was quite reckless. He refused me his wagon, but I took it in spite of him. I had to have it. We quarreled for the first time. He left me in anger, and – I went. Everything was carried through successfully. I was in the road on Monday night with the cargo. I was keeping abreast of the wagon, in my buckboard, away to the south of it. I intended to make a quiet dash while you were busy with the boat and wagon. But my star was not in the ascendant.

“While I was waiting for the moment to arrive I suddenly heard the firing, and I knew at once that the game was up. It was no longer simply smuggling. To me such shooting meant killing – and that –” she shuddered. “Perhaps I lost my head. I don’t know. I raced for it. You came after me. One of my horses stumbled, and when it recovered I found it was dead lame. I had a saddle horse with me. You were hard on my heels by then. I abandoned the buckboard and cargo, and took to the saddle. I was keeping well ahead of you, and was only a short distance from the village. I raced down the hill to the culvert over the hay slough. As I did so I saw two horsemen coming in the opposite direction. I believed them to be police. I swung out to the south, intending to take the slough at a jump, and get away toward the border. Too late I realized the slough’s miry state. I tried to get back to the culvert, but my horse failed me. The troubled beast floundered, then he fell, and my head struck the culvert.”

Kate was breathing quickly. The horror of it all was getting

hold of her. But she went on in broken jerky sentences.

“When I opened my eyes, Charlie was bending over me. I told him what had happened. Then he passed me over to Bill, and I fainted again. When I awoke I was here – at home. Bill had brought me here, and I know now what Charlie must have done.”

Fyles nodded.

“He took your place, and drew us after him,” he said. Then, after a pause. “Say, he did a big thing, Kate, and – he did it with his eyes wide open.”

But Kate was not listening. Tears were coursing down her cheeks, and she sat a poor, suffering, bowed creature whose spirit could no longer support the strain of her remorse. Her confession was complete, and again the horrors of her earlier sufferings were assailing her weakened spirit.

Fyles waited for the storm to lessen. He no longer had doubts. His pity was for the reckless heart so hopelessly crushed. He had no blame, only pity, and – love. He knew now that all he had hoped and longed for was to be his. Kate cared for him. She had loved him from the start. His were the arms that would shelter her. His were the caresses that must woo that warm, palpitating spirit back to its confidence and strength.

What was her past recklessness to him? He passed it by, and thanked God that, for all its wrong against the laws, she assessed a courage so fearless, and a brain so keen. There was no evil in her. She was a woman to love and live for. To work, and – to die for. And his feelings he knew had been shared by another.

He rose from his chair and passed behind Kate's rocker. He leaned down and kissed her masses of beautiful dark hair.

"Look up, Kate. Look up, dear. The old pine has fallen at last, and now – now there is to be peace in the valley for all time. Peace for you. Peace for me. We will go away together now, dear. And presently, please God, we'll come back to our – home."

Two days later Stanley Fyles and Big Brother Bill were standing at the doorway of Kate's house. It was evening, and four saddle horses were tied together in a bunch, ready saddled for the road.

Bill stood chewing his thumb in silence. His thoughtful, blue eyes were gazing out across the valley at the little ranch house on the hill.

Fyles was equally thoughtfully filling his pipe.

"We haven't talked much about things before," he said, pressing the tobacco firmly into the bowl of his pipe with his little finger. "Guess there wasn't much room for talk between – you and me. But we had to say things sooner or later, on – account of – the girls. It's bad med'cine starting out brothers with any trouble sticking out between us. That's why I've started talking now – with the horses waiting saddled."

Bill nodded.

"I was desperate sore," he said, his blue eyes coming back to the other's face. "You see, I couldn't think right at first, back there in Amberley, and I blamed you to death. Still, I've done a big think since then. Yes, a huge big think. And – do you know

I'm kind of sure now Charlie was just glad to do what he did." Then his voice dropped to an awed undertone. "It's queer how thinking makes you see things right. I kind of feel now, if Charlie was here, he'd tell us right away he's gladder he is where he is than ever he was – here. I'm just certain of it. That's the best of thinking hard. You sort of understand things better. I'm going to shake hands with you. Guess Charlie 'ud like me to – now. And it'll be a mighty hard shake, so you'll know I've thought hard, and – and just understood."

Fyles winced under the giant's grip. But he smiled and nodded. Bill smiled and nodded, too, and then released the injured limb. It was the way of two men who understand.

A sound came from within the house. It was the jingle of a spur and a swish of skirts.

Fyles indicated the direction with his pipe.

"Best quit talking now," he said. "It's – it's the girls."

Bill wagged a sapient head, and moved over to the horses.

"Right ho, Stanley."

"Right ho, Bill."

The big blue eyes met the steady brown eyes in a final, smiling glance of mutual understanding as Kate and Helen appeared in the doorway.