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By Hal G. Evarts

THE CROSS PULL

THE PASSING OF THE OLD WEST

THE BALD FACE: AND OTHER

THE SETTLING OF THE SAGE

FUR SIGN

TUMBLEWEEDS

SPANISH ACRES

THE PAINTED STALLION

THE MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH

FUR BRIGADE

TOMAHAWK RIGHTS

THE SHAGGY LEGION

**THE
SHAGGY
LEGION**

By

HAL G. EVARTS

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1930

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THE SHAGGY LEGION

CHAPTER I

Lazily, Arapaho Gilroy watched the approaching bull train. Having penetrated the virgin West with the mountain men in his early youth, Gilroy had resided for many years among the Arapahoes. His contemporaries of an earlier day, therefore, had dubbed him Arapaho Gilroy, which, being something of a mouthful, had been shortened to Rapaho Gil, by which title and no other, he was known wherever Indians of whatever tribe or white men of long experience in the West forgathered. Rapaho Gil, then, trained an indolent but speculative eye upon the bull train.

Jim Bridger, old in the annals of the West, came forth to join him. Of late Bridger had turned his vast knowledge of the country and his intimate familiarity with Indian customs to account by serving as scout in various Indian campaigns. William Comstock and California Joe also were temporarily domiciled at Rapaho Gil's post.

The advance of the bull train was so slow as to be almost imperceptible, a thin film of dust providing the only evidence to indicate that it moved at all. A single horseman rode on ahead of the train and dismounted before Gil's post. Six feet in height, rangy and powerful, the newcomer nevertheless was barely out of his teens. Garbed in moccasins and buckskin leggings, a woolen hunting frock that dropped to his thighs, his head protected by a battered broad-brimmed hat, his garb marked him as a plainsman.

"Breck Coleman," Gil called over his shoulder to his Arapaho squaw. "Any business in my line?" he made inquiry of Coleman, jerking his head toward the crawling train. "Many tenderfoots amongst the bulls?"

Coleman nodded. "A sprinkling," he confirmed. "Several pilgrim outfits that joined us have their bulls' feet wore down to the quick."

His eyes strayed toward Rapaho Gil's sod corral and sized up the two-score oxen that were confined therein. Twice that many head grazed on the prairie a half mile away in charge of a half-grown Arapaho lad. Gil was engaged in a unique business of his own—the business of "two-for-one"—a calling made possible only by the conditions of that particular period on the plains. Bull-train travel on the trail was tremendous. Many travelers set forth from the settlements with sound oxen, only to watch the animals grow daily more tender-footed from the steady grinding of hard-packed earth, sand and gravel as the weeks wore on. Rapaho Gil had stripped the sod from a sizable area behind his post, using the sod thus removed to fashion a corral wall. Water had been turned into the corral from the little creek, soaking the clay of its floor. Gilroy traded one sound bull for two with tender feet. The animals thus acquired were turned into the "puddle pen." Standing about in the wet clay between short periods of grazing on the adjacent prairie soon put the hooves of these tender-footed ones in shape. Newcomers on the plains then were known as pilgrims, oxen with worn-down hooves as tenderfeet; so no doubt the latter term, as applied at a somewhat later date to those humans who were new to the plains, originated with the business of two-for-one.

"It was tenderfoots I come on ahead to see about," Coleman said. "There's a pilgrim family with two wagons and eight bulls, the whole lot of them with wore-down feet. There ain't fifty cents amongst them. A little corn meal, salt pork and molasses is their grub layout except for such meat as I rustle for them. They couldn't go on with four bulls. I'll pick out eight sound critters from your herd and you make some excuse to trade even. I'll settle up the difference with you sometime soon after snow flies."

Rapaho Gil nodded, half filled a pint cup with whiskey from a barrel and tendered it to Coleman. "It's a deal, son. Cut the trail dust out o' your neck with this here. Family of Pikes, is it, that you're befriending thisaway?"

"Yeah. Pikes," Coleman asserted. "Real Pikes, I mean," he amplified.

The woodsmen of Ohio and Kentucky, pushing on to the west of the big river as the settlements overtook them, had conquered the wilderness of Missouri at a very early date. Many had forged on to scour the whole West with the fur brigades, some pressing south somewhat later to espouse the cause of the Texans against Mexico. Others of their breed had remained behind to settle up the wilderness. Many of these had reared their families in splendid isolation in what later had become Pike County, Missouri. Illiterate but wholly efficient in all matters pertaining to survival in a new land, the residents of Pike County had grown up from infancy recognizing no law but the iron-clad code of their clans, bred to enforce that code by personal violence, resulting in the consequent feuds that such a system inevitably invokes among a clannish people. Of late the overflow from Pike County had pressed westward with the increasing tide of emigration. Mostly, the men who hailed from those parts were a lean and wiry lot, powerful and tireless. Invariably, they were high-

tempered, quick to sense affront and quicker to resent it, determined always to avenge it. They fought with equal abandon with knife or gun, with fist or foot, and there were no niceties in their manner of engaging in personal combat. To gouge with a thumb for an opponent's eye, to bite such an offending thumb, to put the boot, even if hobnailed, to the head and body of an overthrown antagonist, all were recognized as well within the etiquette of staging a man-to-man affray.

Gradually, then, from these predominant characteristics displayed by the men hailing from Pike County, Missouri, it was becoming customary throughout the West to refer to any turbulent, fighting person as a "Pike." Coleman's qualification to the effect that those whom he wished to befriend were real Pikes was merely by way of explaining to Gilroy that they hailed actually from Pike County, as against being so designated from any mere tendency to violence.

Rapaho Gil so understood it. "Who's the boss bullwhacker?" he inquired.

Coleman's gray eyes hardened slightly. "Red Flack," he informed. "The big devil half killed a couple o' whackers all over nothing a few days back; put the boot to one till his face won't ever again look human. Also, he's dead set to tell me about my business."

Old Gil grunted his disapproval of Flack. Already the Arapaho youth was herding the oxen slowly toward the post. Coleman rode out to meet him, observing the animals as he returned with them. He singled out eight excellent oxen and indicated his choice to Gilroy. The latter nodded. "I'm not to open my trap about your part in it? Let the head of the Pike lodge think he's made a foxy trade, eh?"

"Yeah," Coleman assented. "Carrolton is the name."

The lead wagon of the train neared the post. The whacker unyoked his bulls and watered them at the creek. Behind, resembling some great sluggish snake half a mile in length, the other units of the bull train crawled forward, the occupants of each wagon branching out to select some point on the bank of the little creek. Midway of the train came the two Carrolton wagons.

Walking beside the two yoke of oxen that drew the forward wagon was a lean individual whose straggling beard and mustache obscured such of his countenance as otherwise might have been visible beneath the drooping brim of his black slouch hat. He wielded a heavy bull whip and the fifteen-foot lash popped like a pistol shot on the hip of the near ox of the wheel team. A similar demonstration occasioned a slight increase in the pace of the near leader.

At a command from Carrolton, the patient, plodding oxen veered from the line of march and swung out at right angles, followed by those that drew the second wagon. A quartette of barefooted and hatless children ranging from six to twelve years of age trudged sturdily beside the wagons. Reclining upon a corn-husk tick in the rear vehicle, the mother nursed a week-old infant that had been born *en route*. Two small tots peered from the rear opening. But Coleman's eyes were all for the girl who rode the seat of the rear wagon.

Deeming herself a woman grown despite her mere fifteen summers, Sue Carrolton's face was fresh and still unlined from the drudgery that so early aged the majority of frontier women. A few strands of auburn hair showed above her blue eyes and beneath the blue sunbonnet that graced her head. Lithe as some cat creature, she leaped from the wagon, favored Breck Coleman with a sidelong glance and walked to the shallow prairie creek into which she stepped. As the cool current played about her bare feet and ankles, the wind tugging at her faded calico dress, she swept off her sunbonnet and the sun struck a coppery glint from her hair. Coleman thought that he had never seen so lovely a picture. Fully conscious of his regard but pretending to be blandly unaware of it, the girl from Pike County stood there in the creek and posed for his benefit.

Carrolton now felt in full measure the gloom that had hovered over his entire family for the past two weeks. His eight oxen were too weak and tender-footed to proceed. Having attached himself to the bull train for greater protection in crossing the plains, he must keep pace with it. Unless he could secure fresh oxen he would be forced to drop behind. He could, of course, lay over for a month or two and rest up his own animals. But then he would be forced to travel on alone and winter would overtake him before he could expect to reach trail's end. He knew from the bullwhackers that Gilroy drove hard bargains. Straight two-for-one, the whackers said of him. Carrolton's only alternative was to trade in his eight worn animals for four sound ones. That meant leaving one wagon and part of the family effects behind. Well, he would do the best he could. He strolled over to inspect Rapaho Gil's ox herd with practiced eye. The eight animals that grazed by themselves he regarded with envy. They were young and sound, sleek and powerful. They had been cut out, likely, because old Gil did not wish to sell or trade them, Carrolton reflected.

"Good bulls you got here," Rapaho Gil greeted as Carrolton returned to his wagons. "Pike County stock. I've been a-wanting to get some o' that there blood for quite a spell. Couldn't trade you out of them, could I?"

Carrolton's native suspicion flared uppermost and hard points of light showed in his blue eyes as they bored into the trader's. Was this fellow trying to get funny with a man from Pike County? Carrolton knew well that his oxen were toil-worn, thin and footsore. Besides, a man did not begin a trade by praising the other fellow's stock.

"They're a mite run-down and foot-weary now," Jim Bridger put in, sizing the animals up speculatively. "But they're mighty good stock, Rapaho, like you say. A few weeks in the puddle pen will fix up their feet. Good grass and rest'll give 'em strength. Mighty good bulls, I'd say."

"I'm real anxious to get some of that breed," Rapaho Gil amplified. "Tell you what. See them eight bulls off to themselves. I warn't aiming to let them go. But if you'll make an even swap, my eight agin yourn, you can yoke 'em up right now."

Carrolton—still suspicious that these old men of the plains were exercising their sense of humor, which would prove unhealthy for them if such were the case—closed the deal at once. For Carrolton was an excellent judge of oxen and he knew that this was by all odds the best trade of his career. Subsequent traders, he noted, fared far worse. Rapaho Gil was not in business for his health.

Sue Carrolton, too, was a good judge of oxen. Similarly, in common with her millions of sisters, she fancied herself as a judge of men. This fine sense of discrimination long since had informed her that Breck Coleman was a most superior mortal. The knowledge had caused her eyes to follow his movements day by day as the train crawled across the plains. Just prior to reaching the post she had leaned from her seat to watch Coleman loping on ahead. Later, she had observed him riding with the Arapaho lad as he drove the ox herd toward the post. She had watched the segregation of the eight oxen in question. Then, without preliminary skirmishing, Gilroy had offered to trade that particular four yoke for her father's trail-worn stock. And she knew from old Ike Williams that Coleman and Rapaho were fast friends. Coleman, then, had been responsible for this most advantageous trade. It must follow that he wished to see the Carrolton emigrant wagons proceed with the bull train. Her eyes softened as she turned them toward Coleman.

He stood talking with Rapaho Gil, Bridger, Comstock and California Joe before the post. Red Flack, boss bullwhacker of the train, moved up to join them. A powerful apelike figure, his long arms swinging well below his heavy torso to the thighs of his short, sturdy legs, Flack was a truculent and fearsome figure of a man. His fiery red whiskers sprouted in wild confusion. Most men develop nervous habits. Flack was no exception. To chew contemplatively upon a straw or splinter of wood was common practice, seemingly an inherent trait of human nature, as evidenced by school children who chewed pencils interminably. Flack was given to this practice. But he chewed savagely, grinding his teeth upon the unoffending stick as a wild beast might worry a fallen foe. He seldom failed to cut a short length of quarter-inch or larger willow, cottonwood, plum brush or other vegetation in passing. After chewing the end to the fibrous proportions of a paintbrush, he would spit it out and repeat the operation at the next clump of brush or wooded patch. As he approached now, an eight-inch length of stick protruded from among his whiskers.

"Every time I see Flack a-champing his teeth on a stick thataway, I've got a feeling that he'd do that to my nose if ever he got me down in a scrimmage," Comstock observed.

"He's been knowed to do that more'n oncet," California Joe declared.

Flack strode up to Coleman. "We'll lay over here till morning," he announced.

The young plainsman nodded.

"I'm expecting a sizable party of Cheyennes in to trade most any day now. When they come it'll be one big carouse. They'll be pilferin' and beggin' all through your outfit if you're strung out like you are now, Flack," Gil said. "Better wheel your wagons into corral so's you can hold your bulls inside 'em if the Cheyennes do come in. Injuns can't help stampeding stock and pretending it's an accident."

Burly and truculent, Flack scowled blackly. "I'll put the bull whip to the first thievin' red that comes prowlin' round," he declared.

Coleman regarded him levelly. "You're a first-rate train boss, Flack. You know bull whacking from first to last. But you

don't savvy Injuns."

"The hell I don't!" Flack objected. "Ain't I crossed the plains to Salt Lake three times and back? And more'n that many times I've bossed trains down the Santa Fe Trail. If you think in all that trailin' I've missed having many a brush with Injuns you're a-barking up the wrong tree."

"Sure. I said you was a good wagon boss—which includes guarding against attack and stampeding of stock," Coleman returned equably. "But there's no mite o' sense in begging for trouble. We're going to break new ground this trip—up through the country of the Crows. They'll be poison mad anyway at a train breaking new trail-way through their hunting grounds; but maybe we can palaver them out of a general painting-up for war. If you put the whip to a Cheyenne when he's in your camp, he'll be out for trouble with his friends behind him. The Cheyenne dog soldiers'll be hanging on our flanks and watching their chance to stampede our stock and lift some scalps. The Cheyennes is at peace with the Crows now. If the dog soldiers follow us up into the Crow country they'll rouse the Crows against us and we'll have to fight our way through, every step. Don't you go laying a bull whip on any Injuns that come in."

"Who's bossing this train?" Flack demanded. "Me! And when I boss a train, I boss it."

"Boss it, then," Coleman conceded. "And when I guide an outfit through Injun country, it means that I have the final say as to route and all dealings with the Injuns. Otherwise, you can get another guide."

"Guide!" The burly train boss scoffed. He swept an arm to the westward. The deep-rutted trail, wide and well-defined, led on over the green prairies to disappear into the sky as a fine white line in the distance. "A blind man can follow that without a guide."

"Yeah," Coleman agreed. "But we'll be turning off to travel three-four hundred miles through country that don't show even a wheel track. Listen, Flack; they signed you on as wagon boss because you can boss a bull train. But when Injuns show up you can't tell whether it's a war party or a squaw march out on a berry-picking spree; or if it is a war party, whether they're out to jump us that very living second or are coming in to palaver and beg. The reason they signed me on as scout and guide is because I know all them things as sure as you know a red ox from a white one. I don't tell you how to boss your bull train and manhandle your whackers. And you're about through telling me how to guide a train and deal with Injuns. Long as we both leave it at that we're doing what Majors Russel and Waddel hired us to do."

The firm of which he spoke was the biggest and most far-reaching of its kind. With tens of thousands of freight wagons on all the overland trails, Majors Russel and Waddel also inaugurated the overland stage routes and the Pony Express. The firm was a power on the plains.

Coleman turned and moved away. The train boss scowled after him, spitting the chewed stick from his mouth, its end frayed to a fibrous likeness of a paintbrush. "Instead o' me not layin' a lash on an Injun without he says so," Flack growled, "it's more'n likely that I'll drag a bull whip off'n him some day without no man's leave."

Rapaho Gil and old Jim Bridger merely chuckled.

"Yeah," California Joe remarked amiably. "It wouldn't s'prise me any to speak of if you was to try that out some day."

Comstock merely grinned.

Flack glared at the quartette and the several bullwhackers who had gathered round. He snarled swift orders to the latter. In an amazingly short space of time, Flack had brought order out of disorder. The wagons were arrayed in an oval, an opening left at one end, two wagons posted in such fashion that only a space of seconds would be required to wheel them by hand into the open space and block it. Flack was, as Coleman had conceded, an efficient train boss.

The bull train was made up of twenty-four heavy freight wagons, each drawn by four yoke of oxen. A big freighting concern had contracted to send this train, loaded with provisions, liquor, mining machinery and sundry other merchandise to the mining towns of Bannock and Virginia City in far-off Montana. In the main, bullwhackers were a hard and quarrelsome lot. The boss bullwhacker of a train, invested with absolute authority by his employers, nevertheless must be a man who could enforce that authority by personal physical coercion if occasion arose in handling such a hard-bitten breed as the bullwhacking freighters of the plains. Flack, a ruffian by training and inclination, gloried in the fact that he could handle the toughest crew of freighters that ever signed on with a bull train. Like the bucko mates of the old Yankee clipper ships, Flack seldom overlooked an opportunity to demonstrate his ability. His brutality was a byword on

the plains. But the trains he bossed moved on to destination without the mutinies that sometimes resulted in the destruction or delay of other outfits. He was, therefore, a valuable man in the eyes of those who dispatched bull trains laden with valuable merchandise for distant parts.

A half dozen pilgrim outfits, men moving their families into the West, had attached themselves to the train for greater protection; the Carroltons; an Ohio family with one prairie schooner drawn by six mules, and four other families with their stock and wagons.

Old Ike Williams—a relic of a still earlier West, contemporary of Bridger and Rapaho Gil but temporarily a freighter, since he had spent his all in a glorious spree in the settlements and now was returning to the mountains by bullwhacking for this train—sauntered over to the post and renewed his long acquaintance with the pair. Williams and Gil drank deep and heartily.

"How long's that storm been brewing?" Gil inquired.

"Flack and Coleman? Ever since the start," Williams testified. "How!"

"How!" Rapaho Gil echoed as they drained their cups again. "Flack'll crawl his hump then, before many moons. Then what?"

"Well, Rapaho, you and me's both witnessed many a big chief start for the happy huntin' grounds swift and unexpected," Williams said. "Here's to the early days."

The trio quit the post and squatted on their heels outside of the stockade that surrounded it. Presently Coleman joined them there.

"How's trade?" Coleman inquired.

"Dead both ways," Gil testified. "The demand for robes is falling off and the price is down. Three dollars top is all I can get for the best squaw-dressed buffalo robes to-day, agin five to seven dollars average twenty-thirty year ago."

Coleman nodded. He knew the history of the fur trade in the West. When first the fur brigades had come to scour that virgin land the supply of beaver had been reckoned as inexhaustible. But by the middle 'thirties, the beaver had been wiped from the streams and the fur trade had collapsed from its own greed. One factor, a sudden world-wide demand for Indian-dressed buffalo robes, had saved the fur trade of the West from following the trail of the beaver into oblivion. Several big companies and numerous individual traders had held on. As formerly all trade had been reckoned in terms of beaver skins, the buffalo robe for almost thirty years now had been the basis of all bargaining.

"And on the other hand, it's a sight more difficult to get robes than it was," Bridger said. "Every tribe on the plains is all worked up about the whites violating Injun hunting grounds. Chiefs and medicine men is laying themselves out to prevent robe trading. They say thar was half a million or more a year traded off for close to a quarter century, which is only helping to kill off the buffalo. The robe trade's following the trail that the beaver traveled in the 'thirties."

Coleman knew all that. He had heard that the American Fur company alone had shipped round seventy thousand robes a year. With every company and every trader in the West engaged in the robe trade, the annual total must have been tremendous.

The oxen, mules and the few horses of the train grazed on the prairie two hundred yards from the wagon corral. Rapaho Gil's herd, under the care of the Arapaho youth, fed slowly along some distance behind the post. Many of the freighters and pilgrims slept in the shade of the wagons. Coleman, Rapaho Gil, Bridger and Ike Williams talked of this and that.

Flack left the wagons and moved toward the four men who sat outside the post. A number of freighters manifested signs of sudden interest. The wagon boss had been in an ugly mood since his recent altercation with Coleman. He had chewed a stick with unusual venom. Having battered and booted his way the length of all the overland trails, it was unlikely that Flack would overlook Coleman's words. He took no back talk from any man. The freighters sensed something purposeful in his stride. They were about to witness another of those merciless affairs in which Flack, after mauling his adversary to earth with sledge-hammer fists, proceeded to put the boot to the victim's face. His completed jobs always afforded ample evidence of the fact that it was unwise to indulge in back talk with the toughest train boss on the plains.

To the watching freighters, it appeared that the four men outside of the stockade paid no heed whatever to Flack's purposeful approach. Had they been closer, they might have noted that Coleman was eyeing the advancing train boss narrowly and without humor, while the eyes of the three old mountain men glinted with speculative amusement.

When Flack was still a dozen yards away, Coleman tilted suddenly forward as if crouched to spring. But it was merely that his attention had been transferred to something far beyond Flack. Rapaho Gil leaped to his feet, as did Bridger and old Ike Williams.

"Jumpin' Gees!" Rapaho yelled; and Williams loosed a Comanche yell of warning.

Flack halted and stared truculently, suspecting a combined attack. But Gilroy was scooting round the corner of the stockade. Coleman was heading for his horse. "Get the stock in!" old Ike Williams roared at Flack. "They're onto us!"

Rapaho Gil, lifting his voice in long-drawn yell, was making signals to the Arapaho youth. But the boy's sharp eyes had discovered the menace and even then he was heading the ox herd toward the sod corral. Flack turned and stared. Three miles or so away he saw a swarm of antlike moving specks.

Behind them there was a fine dark line, as if the green prairies ended there.

He loosed a bellow of warning to the freighters, who already were on their feet, and started running toward the grazing mules and oxen. His big voice boomed across the prairie, giving orders as he ran, and between commands he swore volubly about "Gilroy's damned Cheyennes" that were hazing a buffalo herd down upon the train.

Several whackers were mounting mules that had been kept saddled as wrangle mounts. They followed Coleman and gathered the grazing stock, heading the animals toward the wagons. Several refractory oxen tried to quit the bunch and break back or out to either side. Bull whips popped with sharp reports as the freighters poured the leather to such troublesome beasts.

Coleman looked over his shoulder. The advancing dark line was still a mile away. A dull rumble jarred in his ears. Plenty of time. Already the leading oxen were entering the opening left in the end of the oval corral of wagons. The riders crowded the whole herd through and rode inside themselves. The two wagons were wheeled into place to block the gap.

Freighters and pilgrims were catching mules and oxen and tying them to the wheels of the freight wagons. Coleman looked across and saw that Gilroy, Bridger, Comstock, California Joe and the Arapaho boy had succeeded in crowding the last of the trader's stock into the sod corral and putting up the bars. None too soon, Coleman thought. He stationed himself in the narrow gap between the two Carrolton wagons.

The forefront of the stampede was but little over a hundred yards away. The running horde of buffalo poured down upon the wagons in an irresistible rush. It seemed that no power on earth could prevent that resistless sea of stampeded beasts from overwhelming the camp. Coleman's big Sharp buffalo gun was pressed to his cheek. He squeezed the trigger, and the bellowing report rang out above the thunderous rumble of countless churning feet. A bull went down as the heavy ball struck him at the juncture of throat and chest. Others stumbled over the prostrate animal and piled up in a struggling heap.

Carrolton fired from between the next two wagons. Freighters were emptying their guns into the front of the rushing horde. Coleman unlimbered his big "navy" revolver and emptied its six chambers at the point where the herd was splitting round the pile-up occasioned by his original shot. A terrific double roar crashed just above his head, almost deafening him, as Sue Carrolton, leaning from the front of the wagon, fired both barrels of her father's fowling piece. Carrolton's long Kentucky rifle spoke again from the far end of the wagon. The herd was splitting in the face of this concentrated fire. A few scattered buffalo, catapulted from the herd by the pressure of the mass behind, ran straight for the wagons in blind panic. A great bull brought up against a Carrolton wagon with a splintering crash. Coleman's Sharp roared as the bewildered bull strove to push on through. The sound of another heavy impact off to the left heralded a similar accident.

Terrified oxen bawled within the wagon corral and made frantic, surging rushes in their endeavors to break out. Freighters fought them back. High above the tumult, Flack's big voice boomed profane commands.

But the herd had split. A hundred yards away it divided into two rushing torrents and boiled past on either side of the

wagon camp. Coleman, reloading swiftly, heard the sharp tump-tump of a ramrod and looked up to see Sue Carrolton reloading the fowling piece. He leaped upon the footboard beside her.

"They're split now! Likely they won't close in again," he called above the uproar.

The girl nodded. Cheeks pale beneath their tan, her eyes were wide with excitement. The freighters were keeping up their fire. Coleman singled out an occasional animal in the passing ranks and dropped it with the big Sharp. He waved a hand to either side and the girl's eyes traveled with his gesture. For as far as she could see on either hand the plains seemed a moving sea of brown. For twenty minutes the shaggy horde rushed past. Then Sue Carrolton stood with Coleman and watched the billowing brown sea roll into the distance across the prairies.

She trembled with excitement. It was her first glimpse of the shaggy horde. A buffalo stampede was nothing new in the lives of the freighters, however. Stamping a buffalo herd down upon a wagon-train camp in the hope of sweeping horses, mules and oxen away with the rush of it was a favorite pastime of the savages. Failures to steer stampedes on a straight course for the destined target far outnumbered successes, but the Indians seldom overlooked an opportunity to try the thing again. In the aggregate, losses inflicted in this manner were tremendous. Flack's train, even though the wide front of the stampede had run true, had been fortunate enough to weather it without the loss of an animal.

"Thought the soldiers just had another big peace powwow with the Northern Cheyennes!" Flack stormed. "This is what comes of it!"

CHAPTER II

Sue Carrolton heard the freighters attributing the stampede to Indians.

"But how could they know we were camped here?" she inquired of Coleman, her eyes sweeping the empty prairie.

It was most difficult for those unversed in plains travel and Indian customs to realize that every wagon train that traversed the regular overland trails was under constant surveillance. Without having revealed the least sign of their presence, scouts of the savages signalled every movement of every train, even where the view was unrestricted to the far horizon. Evidence of it was afforded by the fact that small outfits were suddenly attacked and overwhelmed. Larger caravans traveled without molestation or even alarm for as long as they went into corral at night, sent scouts ahead and out on either flank to guard against ambush at strategic points and made adequate provision for guarding their stock at every stop. But let the train boss of the largest outfit relax his vigilance after days or weeks of immunity and it was big odds that a few savages, mounted or afoot, would swoop like darting hawks and stampede the carelessly guarded stock, or that a war party would launch a vicious surprise attack upon the incautious train.

All this Coleman explained to Sue Carrolton. "That's why Flack's a good train boss," he said. "Flack don't savvy Injun sign or can't tell a war party from a squaw march; but he does know that Injuns spring from nowhere to run off stock at any moment, so at every camp he never fails to keep things well in hand."

The girl's eyes narrowed at this praise of Flack. She did not like the ruffianly train boss. Coming from a fighting strain herself, and reared among those whose lives were ordered by the blood code of warring feudal clans, she subscribed to the law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Shooting down a member of some rival clan from ambush in retaliation for the death of a kinsman, even though the ambushed party had taken no personal part in the demise of said relative, seemed right and just to her. Accustomed to men of violence and swift action, she nevertheless despised the sheer animal brutality which led Flack to crush men to a bloody pulp at the slightest provocation. Also, she knew that the burly train boss looked upon Coleman with unfriendly eye.

"He don't mean any good to you," she warned.

"He don't mean good to any man," Coleman said. "No reason why Flack would be fond of me—nor hold against me more than the dislike he shows for all folks."

The girl, with her more intimate feminine insight into such matters, had not failed to observe Flack's admiration for herself. She had not the slightest doubt that her own preference for Coleman was at the bottom of Flack's ill-concealed animosity toward the plainsman.

"Keep an eye out for him," she counselled.

Coleman nodded. It had been his constant habit since infancy to keep an eye out for everything.

Half a hundred buffalo carcasses dotted the prairie in the immediate vicinity. The freighters cut off such meat as they desired. The pilgrims welcomed this addition to scanty larders and each family dressed out several quarters of meat to be stowed in the wagons. Gilroy's squaw and children were busily engaged in salvaging meat in preparation for drying it. The oxen had been released again to graze under guard.

An hour before sundown Coleman moved over to the Carrolton wagons and pointed to the north.

"Here they come—the Cheyennes," he said to Sue.

The girl trained her eyes in that direction and made out a multitude of tiny moving specks that grew larger and more colorful as they drew near. She watched the vivid scene with interest. Half a hundred warriors arrived first, their ponies skimming the prairies. They dismounted round the post. Behind came a swarm of squaws and children. Half-grown boys herded a band of loose ponies, many of them bearing packs. The squaws led or drove a hundred or more horses behind which travois poles trailed on the ground, laden with personal belongings. Children from three to five years of age were tied to the saddles of ponies that traveled with the herd. The youngsters seemed to experience no inconvenience from the gait of the horses, even when they reared or shied. Older children rode with the grace and fearlessness exhibited by their elders.

The conclave halted two hundred yards downstream. Squaws caught and unpacked the horses. Travois poles served for lodge poles and in an incredibly short space of time a village sprang up along the creek. Twenty-odd teepees stood there, the coverings of dressed buffalo hides painted in crude designs. Smoke soon ascended from the teepee vents.

The bucks had crowded round outside the post. To each in turn Gilroy passed a small drink of alcohol diluted with water, the usual trade liquor of the West.

No less a personage than Little Beaver, a noted war chief of the Northern Cheyennes, headed the party. He had been one of the leading figures in the recent peace conference wherein representatives of the Great White Father and the head chiefs of the northern plains tribes again had agreed to bury the hatchet for as "long as the sun rises in the East and the water runs down hill." Little Beaver had become an adept at promising with the easy facility which he had learned from the white men. Long experience had taught him that the white men made promises only to violate them. Consequently, he had adopted similar tactics. He promised readily enough, then, and knowing that white men would be killing buffalo and invading new boundary lines within the week, he anticipated them and violated the treaty first by lifting a few casual scalps at the earliest opportunity.

"Thought you'd just made peace, and now you stampede a buffalo herd onto the first train that passes through!" Flack growled.

Little Beaver did not like the expression on the countenance of the wagon boss and he asked Coleman to interpret the speech.

"The wagon chief asks if Little Beaver was at the peace conference," Coleman hedged.

"Little Beaver was there. There is but one trail. That is the white man's road. Little Beaver has set his feet upon it. It is smooth and easy walking. Never shall his feet stray from that path and lead him into rough ground. Henceforth the Cheyennes will follow the white man's road." That was the expression by which all plains Indians conveyed the meaning that they intended to emulate the example of the whites in all things. "The Cheyennes are anxious now to live in big lodges of logs like the white men. We are weary of moving about and would stay always in one spot. We will plow the ground and raise corn and tame buffalo. We are anxious to start. The Cheyennes follow the white man's road."

Coleman interpreted this oration to Flack. Aside, to Bridger, he said: "He's an amiable old liar and will lift the hair of the first pilgrim he can catch off guard."

Several of the Cheyennes recognized Coleman. He assented to some proposition that these acquaintances put to him and the freighters watched curiously as he stepped back eight paces from the stockade while a Cheyenne marked a four-inch circle on the log wall. Numerous bets were placed. Coleman drew the heavy knife from his belt and hurled it without apparent aim or effort. It landed point first in the circle and quivered there. He performed the feat several times.

"It's balanced to make one turn in twelve feet, two turns in twenty-four, and land point first," he explained to a freighter who had inquired. "Injuns balance their tomahawks to make a turn in so many feet when they heave 'em."

The Cheyennes demanded more liquor. Rapaho Gil shook his head.

"I will trade high-wine for robes," he said.

However, he tendered the Cheyenne chief a drink. Haughtily, Little Beaver refused to partake.

"The firewater of the white men makes my people crazy!" he said fiercely. "They trade off their robes and their furs and the next day have nothing." He swept his arm to indicate the dead buffalo scattered round the prairie. "The white men come into the country of the red men and kill our buffalo."

"There are so many buffalo that they will never grow few," old Gil answered in the Cheyenne tongue.

"So in my youth the first white men said of the beaver," the chief returned. "We believed it then. But for thirty summers the whack of the beaver's tail upon the water has not been heard in the land of the Cheyennes. Soon the buffalo will follow the trail of the beaver and the bellies of the Cheyennes will be empty with hunger. The white men must stop killing the buffalo that belong to my people."

He harangued his braves, urging them to trade only for ammunition. A few tentative trades were made for powder and

ball. Loudly, one warrior demanded liquor. He snatched off the robe that covered him and tendered it to Rapaho Gil. The trader in return gave him two pints of the diluted liquor.

The prevailing price for years had been one pint of diluted alcohol for one buffalo robe. So universal had this practice become that for a quarter of a century buffalo robes had been known as "pints" to red man and white alike.

"No more," Rapaho Gil said regretfully to Coleman. "It's a quart for a robe nowadays. Twice as much as I paid twenty year ago and I sell a robe for half the price I got for one in them days. The robe trade is blown up."

The Cheyenne quaffed half his liquor on the spot, tendering the rest to his fellows. A few more similar trades were made. Then the Cheyennes rode down to the camp that had been prepared by the squaws. A continuous stream of savages plied between camp and post, bringing in finely dressed robes and carrying the "high-wine" back to camp. By midnight the whole Cheyenne camp was in a drunken uproar. Squaws and children screeched in abandon and warriors recited their valorous deeds without the usual audience. Before dawn the Cheyennes were robeless and the trader's stock of liquor was running low. In the morning, a few squaws and braves came to the wagon camp to beg for sugar and trinkets. But when the bull train moved out, the majority of those in the Cheyenne camp still were sleeping off the effects of their night-long debauch.

Some weeks later Coleman turned from the regular trail and led the train northward through trackless country. They had left the short-grass prairies far behind and now traversed sage-clad plains and foothills with occasional higher ranges covered with a sparse growth of stunted juniper.

Coleman scouted the country ahead to pick the most feasible route. Also, he killed game when opportunity offered. Scarcely a day passed but what he dropped elk, mule deer, buffalo, antelope, bighorn sheep, or bear, leaving the animals where they fell to be picked up by the following train. And always, of course, he kept his eye peeled for Indian signs.

Sue Carrolton borrowed a mule one day and rode ahead with him. He pointed out to her presently an Indian trail. "Not a war party," he said. "It's a Crow village on the move. The sign's more'n two weeks old."

"How do you know all that just from looking at the tracks?" the girl inquired.

"First off, this is Crow country. It was a big party—hundreds of 'em; and the travois marks prove it was a village on the move, or at least a big band traveling with their squaws and children and personal effects. A war party don't travel with travois or take their families along. And no other nation would move a village into Crow country. At least it ain't likely. But to cinch the point, the cast-off moccasins along the trail are of Crow make. The squaws of different tribes use different seam patterns and different trimmings in making moccasins. The last rain was two weeks back and this trail has been rained on."

"You know so much about those things," the girl murmured.

"Sure I do. It's my business to know. Any pilgrim can tell the difference between a village picnic and a regiment of soldiers. Well, I know a war party from a squaw march when an Injun village is shifting camp. Settlement folks know a church meeting from a horse race by the sound. And I can tell two mile off whether an Injun village is feasting, scalp dancing or wailing for their dead. Any pilgrim or bullwhacker can tell the difference between a horseshoe and a muleshoe at first glance. And me, I can just as easy distinguish between the moccasins of different tribes. Most folks can tell Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards and so on apart. And a plainsman knows a Sioux from a Mandan and a Piute from a Cheyenne just as easy. That's all there is to it, Sue."

"Why do the Indians call you the Little Mandan?" the girl made inquiry, her eyes traveling over his six feet of length.

"Account of a grandpap o'mine, Hunter Breckenridge. Breckenridge is my first name—Breck for short. He lived among the Mandans for a spell and later among the Pawnees. He was quite a figure, they tell me, in the days of the fur brigades, and they called him the Big Mandan. My mother was his oldest daughter. She'd not quite turned fifteen yet when she married my dad back in Missouri and started out over the trail with the front end of the Oregon emigrants. I was born on the trail and my folks both died on the way. I was raised in a trading post on the Snake River. When the old-time traders and trappers told the Injuns who my kinsfolk was, they used to come to see me and called me Little Mandan."

"Some of my kin lived among the Indians, too—my great-grandfolks," the girl told him. "Rod Buckner, the old man's name was. He married a white girl that was a captive in the Shawnee towns—White Fawn, they called her—and come

west of the Mississippi when Boone and the woodsmen left Kentucky."

Both felt a certain sense of fellowship in thus having sprung from strains that similarly had thrust ever deeper into the wilderness. It seemed somehow to cement a bond between them. Neither could put it into words. The girl essayed it when she said, "And here's my folks and me still pushing on. Seems like you and me spring from a restless breed. What'll our sort o' people do when there's no new places left to go?" And she laughed lightly at her own flight of fancy.

Coleman, however, did not laugh. Instead, he glanced at her, startled at her voicing of the thought that had been taking vague shape in his own mind for several years. Young as he was, he had seen the day when the greater part of the West was the undisputed domain of the red men. The Oregon emigrants and the California stampeders had held to the established trails while everything for hundreds of miles on either side of those highways had been the great unknown to all save roving bands of trappers, who, of course, had known the country intimately even then. But now matters changed with increasing rapidity every year. California had been settled. Oregon was being settled up with great rapidity. The Mormons had settled Utah. The mining excitement in Montana had lured many thousands to that far-off spot. Rich strikes in Arizona and New Mexico had caused a rush of miners to those parts, the discovery of the Comstock Lode had drawn frenzied swarms of people to Nevada, while other gold seekers poured across the Kansas prairies to the mountains of Colorado. A long line of settlements had been thrust the length of the Missouri. Settlers pressed south and west through Kansas and north through Texas. Army posts, pony express and overland stage stations had sprung up everywhere. Freighting across the plains in all directions had increased to monumental proportions. And still they came in increasing swarms—settlers, soldiers, hunters, freighters, miners, gamblers and adventurers. Railroads were coming too, pushing slowly across Kansas. There was talk of steel rails that would connect the Pacific with the Mississippi. They were even driving big herds of cattle up from Texas to Baxter Springs, Kansas, and Southwest Missouri.

"What you thinking about?" Sue Carrolton inquired.

"That what you said was true—about soon there'd be no new place left for restless breeds o' folks like ours to go," he said.

The girl laughed gaily. "I didn't say soon," she corrected, waving a hand to indicate the vast scope of country round them. "We haven't seen a human in ten days. This country right here is new, and will be for a long time yet."

Coleman shook his head and related to her the opposite thoughts that had been cruising through his mind.

"It's coming sooner than you think," he prophesied. "I was born out here and I've seen this country filling up."

"Then what?" she asked. "When that time does come?"

This time it was Coleman who chuckled at his own flight of fancy. "Then you and me'll have to backtrack along the trails our kinsfolk blazed out for us," he said. "We'll head east, maybe, as they headed west. That'll be new country to us, Sue. I never yet set foot as far east as the Mississippi."

Even as they conversed, Coleman's eyes roved over the country ahead and to either side. No detail escaped his eye. Constant wariness was as natural to him as to a panther in some country that swarmed with hunters. A lifetime of experience had taught him that the most peaceful-appearing landscape might harbor a thousand ambushed braves; that days and weeks of immunity from attack might mean but the lull before the cyclone. Those who permitted vigilance to be relaxed and allowed themselves to lapse into a sense of false security did not wear their hair for long.

"Anyway, the Crows haven't discovered yet that we're traveling through their country," the girl remarked.

Coleman grunted dissentingly. Even then, he was observing smoke puffs that ascended from a distant range of hills. For three days now he had been observing them. "They know." He pointed to a wisp of smoke that rose from a mountain in the distance. "The news has been signalled to every village. Crow scouts are watching every move we make. They're holding powwows and medicine chats all through the whole Crow nation. The braves of every village are in council. They just haven't decided on their course yet. We'll run foul of them before long. The very fact that a bunch of them haven't dropped in with their squaws to visit round and beg is proof that they haven't made up their minds yet. But they know all about us. Don't fool yourself."

They had been riding more slowly, the gait intentional on Coleman's part, as he had no wish to ride too far ahead of the train in company with the girl. Despite the uninterrupted absence of Indians for ten days past—or perhaps because of it

—he knew that an ambush was an hourly possibility. The stunted sage afforded ample cover from which a thousand painted braves might spring at any instant. The Crows, firm friends of the whites since the days of Lewis and Clark, long had prided themselves upon the fact that the Crows never had taken a white man's scalp. But of late years, since the prospectors, taking advantage of Crow hospitality, had invaded their mountain habitat in numbers while hunters shot down the buffalo in the lower valleys, there had been brushes of minor importance. The Crows knew that wherever a wagon train broke trail, highways of travel soon would follow. Would they permit this train to leave its tracks through their country unmolested? Coleman doubted it. He dropped back to within a few yards of the lead wagon.

"I've got to skirmish on ahead a piece," he said. "You fall back with the train."

Flack, as Coleman had stated, was an efficient wagon boss. Engrossed with his responsibilities in crossing through this virgin country, he had, apparently, laid aside his quarrel with Coleman. The freighters knew him better than to believe, however, that this amnesty was more than temporary. Watching Coleman riding ahead with the girl, Flack's jealous temper flared. He rode ahead on his mule.

"I heard somewheres that you was supposed to be scouting for this outfit," he said to Coleman with manifest truculence.

"Yes," Coleman assented.

"Well, sitting here on your horse and gabbing with a girl ain't scouting, way I look at things."

"No? Well, you ain't supposed to know much about scouting, whatever way you look at things," Coleman said. "But anyway, I was just about to skirmish on over that next low pass."

He turned his horse and rode on ahead. Flack scowled after him. Sue Carrolton had been treated to various demonstrations of Flack's brutality. An involuntary shudder passed through her as she pictured Coleman being hammered and kicked to a bloody wreck as those others had been.

"I'll teach him his business if he stays with a bull train that I'm bossing!" Flack asserted.

"He knows his business," the girl retorted.

"Yeah? Then let him 'tend to it," Flack said.

The girl favored him with a scornful glance and dropped back to ride beside the Carrolton wagons midway of the train. The wagons wound their slow way up the slope and crossed through the saddle in its crest. Far ahead was a tiny moving speck that Sue knew was Coleman riding on across the sea of sage.

She rode ahead with him again for an hour or two the following day. Watching the pair of them, Flack's temper did not improve. He was in an ugly mood when the girl dropped back to join the train. Round noon she looked ahead and saw Coleman, a toy figure in the distance, riding in the center of a five-mile-wide bottom. He reined in his horse and dismounted. When, an hour later, the bull train reached that point, it was to find him waiting there beside a tiny creek.

"Thought maybe you'd want to stop over here till sundown, rest and feed the stock and make a night march of it to the next water," Coleman said to Flack. "There's no water ahead for twenty-five miles or better."

"There'd ought to be water over that next rise," Flack objected.

"Yes. There'd ought to be. But there's not," Coleman returned. "I've been all through here. That next rise ain't the crest of a divide. It's the start of a twenty-mile sloping dry bench."

"We'll go on and see for ourselves," Flack said.

Coleman shrugged his indifference. He dropped back to the Carrolton wagons and said to Sue, "Pass me out your water keg."

He filled the small wooden cask at the creek, rode on to overtake the train, balancing the heavy keg before him, and handed it into the wagon. Then he rode on in advance. The wagon train attained to the rise but instead of the usual dip beyond, the view consisted of a gradually rising stretch of country that merged with the distant sky. Flack knew then that he had been in error. The knowledge served only to increase his rancor toward Coleman.

Throughout the afternoon and on until close to midnight, they crept across the arid bench. Then the weary animals could go no farther without rest. A halt was called and the train made a dry camp. The bawling of thirst-tormented oxen beat up against the ears of those who tried to sleep. In the early dawn, Flack gave the order to break camp.

Coleman filled his hat with water from the Carrolton's keg and carried it to his horse, then made a second trip.

"Think your horse has special privileges over what the other critters have, so's he's entitled to use folk's drinking water?" Flack demanded, chewing savagely upon a juniper stick.

Coleman turned for a moment and looked at him. The wagon boss did not like what he saw in Coleman's eyes. Plainsmen, he knew, were an uncertain quantity. One might stand up and take his medicine with fists and feet, no matter how terrible the treatment. The next might have a scalping knife or a bullet into an opponent the second that trouble started. Flack, while endowed with abundant animal courage to carry him through the most savage physical encounter, was not equipped with that quality which permitted a man to face another with a naked knife or gun with the life of one or the other as the stakes. Coleman must realize the fact that Flack could kick him into a senseless heap in a brace of minutes. Yet the train boss sensed the fact that Coleman had not the least fear of him. Did that lack of fear mean that Coleman was prepared to kill him if he forced the issue? Some way, the steely points of light in Coleman's eyes just now reminded Flack of the steel point of that knife which the plainsman hurled so accurately. Coleman shook the remaining water from his hat, placed it on his head and turned away.

Flack knew that the freighters had observed and commented among themselves upon the clash of wills existing between himself and Coleman. He could not afford to let matters stand as they were. The freighters would assume that he feared Coleman unless he administered a beating such as he dealt out to all others who crossed him. He must figure out some way to pass the whole thing off as a joke.

Bawling oxen were being yoked, mules harnessed and hooked to wagons. Some of the thirst-tortured animals were unruly. Coleman, having saddled, was in the act of mounting. Flack saw his chance. The long lash of his bull whip curled above the backs of an intervening yoke of oxen and the tip of the lash bit into the horse's rump with a vicious report. The startled beast gave a mighty leap, hung his head between his forelegs and pitched across the sage. Coleman, half in the saddle, managed to gain his seat and ride the animal out.

Flack laughed uproariously, "I overshot the mark," he shouted. "I missed that ornery bull and touched up Coleman's horse."

The freighters would know that it was no accident. Flack's skill with a bull whip was too precise. If he could pass it off to Coleman as an accident, without the latter making an issue of it, the joke would be on the plainsman. Flack could laugh it off and thereafter act in more jovial fashion toward Coleman, avoiding further clash of wills.

Coleman had brought his horse under partial control. Flack still laughed uproariously. Then the grin froze on his face as he observed that Coleman's attention was divided. Even while attempting to quiet the animal, Coleman's eyes remained on the train boss. The gray of them seemed hard as moss agate. He headed the horse, still prancing nervously, straight toward Flack. His right hand dropped to the hilt of that heavy knife in his belt instead of to the big "navy" revolver. Flack essayed a grin.

"I overshot my mark," he laughed.

"I won't overshoot mine," Coleman promised grimly. The knife slid from its sheath.

Flack fancied that Coleman's eyes held something of the same wild light that he had seen in the eyes of outlaw horses. But even as he stared back into them in a species of fascination, Flack sensed a swift change in them. Coleman's gaze, instead of boring into Flack's eyes, apparently had become fastened upon a point some two feet above the latter's head. The wide-eyed stare was transformed into a narrowed regard while the tense knife arm relaxed. Stupidly, Flack wondered at this swift transition. Then Coleman's voice cut sharply across his daze.

"They're onto us!"

He gestured with the deadly knife and Flack turned to peer behind him in the direction indicated. The gray sage stretched away to the far horizon.

"Injuns!" Flack bellowed suddenly. A mile away and spread out over a broad front, hundreds of mounted warriors were riding swiftly toward the train. Fortunately, the train had not yet broken corral formation. Instantly, Flack became again the efficient train boss.

"Bulls inside!" he roared. "All stock to the center and take your posts!"

In an incredibly short space of time the stock had been led inside the wagon corral. Freighters and pilgrims alike were stationing themselves to repel the impending onslaught of the savages. Flack's big voice boomed everywhere above the turmoil.

The Indian advance was now within a quarter of a mile. The vague moving tangle had resolved itself into a colorful panorama. Ponies of every conceivable color and pinto pattern stood out individually in the early morning light. Gaudily painted shields and resplendent war bonnets flashed in the rays of the rising sun. A woman screamed hysterically from an Ohio emigrant wagon. From within one of the Carrolton wagons the ailing mother coughed hollowly.

The savages came to a sudden halt three hundred yards away and the warriors pressed into huddled groups. Coleman estimated their numbers at more than half a thousand.

"Now!" Flack said. "We'll pour it to them while they're bunched up thataway. They ain't yet larned the range o' these new Spencers. Once we've poured a few volleys through that cluster they'll know better than to do anything worse than swoop round half a mile away and yelp."

"Wait!" Coleman said. Within the limit of his experience, Flack was right. The war parties of the plains tribes that haunted the regular overland trails usually contented themselves with feint attacks, stampeding of stock or lifting a few scalps from the heads of careless stragglers when a surprise could not be effected. They seldom pressed home an attack in the face of determined opposition. But such war parties chiefly were out for sport and easy plunder. This case was most decidedly a different matter. If the Crow council had decided that the crossing of this wagon train was a menace to their country, the whole Crow nation would rise to contest its passing. It would not consist of mere tentative skirmishes, but instead of desperate onslaughts, ambushes at every strategic point, nightly efforts to stampede, kill or cripple stock.

"Wait, Flack," Coleman insisted. "They ain't quite decided whether to fight or palaver."

"How can you tell that?" Flack demanded. "They're betwixt us and water and they're out for hair."

"Yes—if it comes to an issue. But if the Crow council had been unanimous for war, they wouldn't have come riding at us across the open this way when we're in corral and ready to receive 'em," Coleman pointed out. "They'd have surprised us at daybreak without warning or ambushed us at some bad point while we were on the march."

Flack grunted skeptically. A lone warrior spurred from among his fellows, rode furiously to within a hundred yards of the train, flung himself on the off-side of his pony and dashed away, righting himself to look back and indulge in derisive gestures.

"Young buck showing off his courage," Coleman said. A second brave emulated the example of the first. "I'll ride on out and hold a medicine chat."

Flack felt certain that any man who rode out there was taking his life in his hands. He would experience the opposite of grief if Coleman failed to return.

"All right," he growled. "You think you know." Gripping her father's fowling piece, Sue Carrolton kept her eyes upon the savage throng. Beside her, in his hands an ancient flintlock, her oldest brother, Buckner Carrolton, not yet turned twelve years of age, cursed in excited whispers and threatened dire vengeance against the painted warriors of the Crows. The elder Carrolton, stationed with his long Kentucky rifle in the opening between the next two wagons, spat copiously sidewise without removing his gaze from the enemy. From within the wagon there came again that hollow, racking cough and Sue's quick concern and sympathy went out to the woman who reposed there on a corn-husk pallet. Then suddenly the girl's heart skipped a beat and seemed to turn cold and heavy within her. Coleman was riding out alone toward that savage throng. His horse was performing in peculiar fashion, with apparent aimlessness. The animal advanced obliquely to the left for a few yards, then swung to a right oblique, veered again to the left and continued its zigzag course toward the enemy. Was Coleman asleep in the saddle, or was he sick and unable to control his horse? She did not learn until later that this zigzag advance of a lone rider was the universal sign by which one side or the other announced its desire

for a conference among all plains tribes. As she watched, a warrior swept forward alone on a splendid black-and-white stallion. A streamer of blood-red cloth dangled from his lance head. His bull-hide shield bore some heraldic device in bright greens and yellows. A gorgeous war bonnet of eagle feathers trailed behind upon the rump of his flashy horse. Was this to be a single-handed combat? She saw Coleman rein in his horse and lean from the saddle. He placed his rifle upon the ground, then removed the navy revolver from his belt along with his scalping knife. These were deposited with his rifle. The Crow chief also had leaned to place upon the ground his musket, bow, quiver of arrows, tomahawk and scalping knife. Then the two rode on to meet midway between the savages and the corralled wagons of the bull train.

CHAPTER III

"The grandson of Big Mandan is known to Black Elk," the war chief of the Crows greeted. "Always he has been welcome in the lodges of the Crows. Why does he now lead all these white men here to kill the buffalo of Black Elk and his people? The buffalo is following the trail of the beaver. Soon they will be gone. The white men must not kill buffalo in the country of the Crows. Tell them to turn back at once."

"These men do not come to kill the buffalo," Coleman said.

"It is the way of the white man to kill buffalo wherever he goes," Black Elk returned. "Why do these men come here? They are not wanted."

"Up in the country of the Blackfeet there are white men's mining towns, as Black Elk well knows," Coleman said. "The dogs of Blackfeet trouble them. We hasten through with supplies and the new medicine guns that shoot many times to help them fight the Blackfeet. We do not stop in the Crow country but hasten through. We would gain the permission of the great war chief Black Elk to pass through with all haste."

Black Elk pondered the matter. He was loath to go to war with the whites. Also, since before the days of his father's father, the Crows had been inveterate enemies of the Blackfeet. Any blow that the whites might inflict upon the Blackfeet would be most welcome. In the long ago, Big Mandan had led the wild trappers of the fur brigades against the Blackfeet. It was logical that his descendant would lead men to war against them. But there was the matter of the buffalo. The entire Crow nation was unalterably opposed to the abundant and useless killing among the herds by white men in Crow country.

"Black Elk has it from the Shoshones, who have it from the Utes, that the white-men-who-take-many-women on the shores of the big lake of salt possess medicine guns that are always loaded," the Crow chief said. "So much sooner will our buffalo be gone if your men turn those medicine guns upon the herds. If Black Elk knew that the guns would speak against the Blackfeet and remain silent among the buffalo the village-on-wheels might cross."

"No buffalo will be killed," Coleman said.

"Black Elk has never known a white man who did not kill buffalo," the chief said doubtfully. "How can the Crows know that these men are different?"

Coleman struck himself on the chest with his closed fist. "Coleman says it! Coleman is known to Black Elk as a great warrior whose lodge is black with the scalps of his enemies. They tremble at his name. Black Elk knows that his tongue is not split and that his words are straight! Would Coleman be such a senseless one as to kill buffalo in the heart of the Crow nation when the mighty Black Elk, chief of all the Crows, says it must not be? No! Coleman says no buffalo will be killed."

There was much further palaver.

"A man walks on two feet and has but one tongue in his head. A snake walks in the grass on but one foot and has two tongues in his mouth," Black Elk said at last. "I have watched your mouth and I have seen but one tongue in it. That is good. The Crows do not want war with the white men. Always they have slept under the same robe. Coleman says the white men will not kill our buffalo. Black Elk says the village-on-wheels may cross through. It is written."

The watching freighters and pilgrims saw the two men separate, each riding to rejoin his own faction.

"You can march on to water now," Coleman said to Flack.

"Break corral and get strung out on the march so's they can have a better chance at us?" Flack demanded. "Not me!"

The cloud of warriors turned and rode off across the sage.

"Well, we'll try it. Got to reach water," Flack said.

Sometime after noon the train descended to a shallow valley and went into camp on the shores of a sparkling little creek. It was at this stopping place that Mrs. Carrolton gave up the struggle and within the hour the new infant followed her.

They were buried together beside this singing creek in the heart of the Crow nation. Carrolton seemed dazed, as if he scarcely comprehended his loss. Time after time he wandered to the wagon and peered into it as if to assure himself that the recent ceremony in the light of a blazing fire had been but a dream. Sue, dry-eyed now, comforted the younger children.

The stock was turned out to graze for the night. "I don't trust no damn Injun," Flack declared to Coleman. "Likely this is just a play o' theirs to get us off guard, then spring something. I'll have night guards to ride herd on the stock as usual."

If he had expected Coleman to take issue with him on that point, he was mistaken. "Well, I would think so!" Coleman agreed. "Stock stealing is the breath o' life to an Injun. The Crows as a whole will stand by what they said. But there's no chief that can control all his wild young bucks. A parcel of them might take a notion to run off our stock at any minute. But they won't attack. We're safe from that."

Flack grunted his doubt as to their immunity from attack by Crows. Coleman followed his usual procedure in bedding for the night. A hundred yards or more from the wagon corral he stretched himself out with his saddle at his head. Against it, ready to his hand, was propped his big navy pistol. His rifle he took to bed with him, sheltered from the weather by his buffalo robe. He slept undisturbed by the usual sounds. But on several occasions during the night he waked, listening, after the fashion of some wary animal. It was not until an hour before dawn that anything occurred to excite his suspicions. Then he opened his eyes, every sense alert, with a distinct feeling that all was not well. In common with all plainsmen and Indians, Coleman never failed to heed such obscure warnings. He could not have explained it in words, but the fact remained that in a large percentage of such awakenings there was some underlying cause. A stray scent drifting to his nose, a stealthy footfall reaching his ears or some similar message, traveling over the paths of his physical senses while he slept, had penetrated his consciousness and roused him to instant preparedness. Minutes passed but his tense watchfulness was not relaxed. His eyes probed the darkness, his ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound alien to the sleeping camp.

The ox herd had bedded down a hundred yards away and the night guards sat sleepily on their mules. Several oxen had risen from their beds to graze again. Coleman could hear their occasional slow movements, the stamp of a restless saddle mule. Then an ox snorted, a loud blowing sound denoting sudden suspicion. There was a swift rumble, the cracking of joints as every animal in the herd rose to its feet as one.

"What the hell!" the voice of one of the guards drifted from the night. "Ride round 'em, boys. They're going to make a run." Coleman heard the guards calling out soothingly to their charges. There was an ominous quiet about the herd as if every animal in it, suspicions roused as Coleman's had been, stood tense and alert. The slightest alien sound, scent or movement would serve to start them running now.

It might be that a grizzly had wandered along the creek, Coleman thought. Undoubtedly, the Crows had scouts observing the camp. Perhaps one had ventured too close or had crossed upwind. A vague movement attracted Coleman's gaze, as if perhaps there had been merely an eddying current to stir the surrounding darkness, a deeper shadow imposed upon the steel-blue background of the night. A crouching figure, silent as a cat, moved upwind toward the herd. From his prone position, Coleman could see the few upright feathers sprouting above the savage's head in silhouette against the sky. Some unruly young Crow braves intent upon stampeding the stock, he decided. A shot would stampede the herd. Coleman's hand sought his knife. But if he took the life of a Crow, even when the latter was engaged in attempting to steal the stock, it would mean war. Stock stealing was a recognized and honorable occupation among all Western tribes. Coleman held his hand and spoke to the crouching savage in low tones.

"Black Elk will be angry if his young men frighten the white man's stock," he said in the Crow tongue.

Even before he had finished speaking, the savage had leaped erect with a fierce grunt, hurling a few words at his unseen foe. A bowstring twanged sharply and an arrow hissed above Coleman's head. This was no Crow that addressed him. Coleman did not speak the Blackfoot tongue but he divined on the instant that the marauders were not Crows but raiding Blackfeet who had slipped into Crow country. His knife arm described an arc through the air. The night was rent by a sudden wild shriek. Dark figures sprang into view in the blackness and leaped toward the herd. The yelping gobble of the dread war whoop rose above the thunderous rumble of hooves as the ox herd left the bed ground. All had occurred within ten seconds from the time that Coleman had spoken the first words to the stalking savage.

Bowstrings twanged sibilant accompaniment to the war whoops. Muskets roared and crimson flashes cut brilliant streaks

across the dark background of the sage. Coleman, on his knee now, with his big Sharp rifle pressed to his cheek, fired at a dark figure just behind one of those crimson flashes.

A death screech rewarded him. Then he was running, pistol in hand, in the general direction that the stampede had taken. He saw the flashes as one of the night guards emptied his pistol. Behind him, faintly, he heard Flack roaring orders. After running for half a mile without having sighted an enemy, Coleman dropped suddenly flat as a slender form loomed just ahead. A low bubbling gurgle reached his ears. The figure lurched sidewise and fell to the ground with a crash of mangled sagebrush. Coleman knew then that the slender form had been that of a wounded ox, facing him. He advanced and pulled the arrow from the side of the stricken beast. Then he turned to make his way back to the wagon camp. It was growing light now, and there was need for haste.

The white tops of the prairie schooners loomed vaguely as some ghost city in the gray dawn. Coleman found the camp prepared to resist attack.

"Thar's how much a Crow promise amounts to!" Flack roared.

"Blackfeet," Coleman returned shortly. "Raiding party out to steal Crow horses or take a few easy scalps and make a run for it. They chanced across us instead." He exhibited the arrow that he had drawn from the dead ox. "Blackfoot make and marking. There'll be a party of Crows flanking us all the way through their nation, three-four mile off where we never set eyes on them. Their scouts would have heard the ruckus and read the sounds right. Won't be long before Crows will be swooping in. Give orders that not a man fires on them."

Even as he spoke, a rise of ground half a mile away suddenly swarmed with mounted warriors that popped continuously over the skyline and raced their ponies toward the camp.

"I'll go out to meet them. You can send men on out to help the night guards round up the stock. I'll get the Crows to lend a hand."

Coleman went out to meet the advancing Crows. He mounted an extra horse that one of the warriors led. With Black Elk at the head of fifty braves, he rode round the train toward the spot where the two slain Blackfeet lay. Already Flack and another freighter had discovered the nearest body and stood there looking down at it curiously. Flack shivered slightly as he observed the handle of the knife, its heavy blade buried to the hilt in the dead warrior. The Crows dismounted and stripped the scalps from the Blackfeet.

Then, accompanied by several freighters, the party swept on at full speed on the trail of the stampede. The Crows fanned out over a wide front to cut the trail of the Blackfeet. Here and there along the way, small groups of oxen and occasional mules were discovered and freighters were detailed to gather them and start them moving back toward camp. Several badly wounded animals were dispatched. Some six or eight miles out from the train, at the base of a high range of hills, the weary night guards had gathered the bigger part of the herd. Black Elk detailed a score of braves to scour the surrounding country in search of strays that might have quit the run during its course.

The main band of Crows, led by Black Elk himself, took the trail of the Blackfeet and followed it into the higher hills, only to find that the raiders had separated, after the usual custom of the Blackfeet when pursued, each one shifting for himself, and had been lost in the maze of canyons that led back up into the peaks. In the early evening the Crows returned to the wagon camp where the last of the scattered stock had been gathered through the efforts of the warriors detailed for that purpose.

The Crows made camp a few hundred yards down the creek. Huge fires were kindled and throughout the night the savages hopped, shuffled and chanted in the frenzied throes of the scalp dance round the two wisps of hair wrenched from the Blackfeet. The steady throbbing of the tom-toms boomed until high dawn.

The Crows now looked upon the members of the wagon train as allies. Particularly, they viewed Coleman as a mighty brave. Black Elk was heavily indebted to him. Coleman, of course, had slain the two Blackfeet, but neither he nor others of the freighters had touched the bodies. Black Elk himself had been first to fling from his pony and strike the dead with his coup stick before wrenching off the scalps. An Indian received no credit for an enemy killed at long range. Victory was accorded only to the first man who reached a fallen foe and struck him with a weapon held in the hand. Thus Black Elk was entitled to boast two more "coos" that he had counted upon his enemies. Naturally, his regard for Coleman was high.

Thereafter, parties of mounted Crows flanked the route of march. At every stopping place, Crow squaws and children materialized as if by magic to beg for sugar and for trinkets. Still adamant in their refusal to allow buffalo killing in their country by white men, Crow hunting parties brought meat in abundance and supplied the train.

The Crows observed that Coleman rode on occasion beside the wagon wherein Sue Carrolton rode; that he sat with her round the campfire of nights. They spoke of her as the squaw whom the grandson of Big Mandan would soon take to his lodge. Also they observed that the burly wagon boss coveted this girl and that his heart was bad toward Coleman. Among themselves it was agreed that Coleman, a great warrior, soon would be wearing Flack's scalp at his belt if the wagon boss opened hostilities.

Something of that same feeling had taken shape in Flack's own thoughts. He knew that most men had to nerve themselves to the point of killing a fellow human. Coleman, he divined, had no need to nerve himself—was always primed, in fact, to kill a man as readily as he might slay a wolf if the need arose. He recalled the haft of that heavy knife protruding from the side of the Blackfoot brave in whose heart the blade had been buried. Save for the timely appearance of the Crows that first morning, it was highly probable that that knife would have found its mark in his own body. There had been no indecision in Coleman's eyes on that occasion; instead a cold fury and the intent to kill. His dislike for Coleman smouldering, Flack nevertheless refrained from any further clash of wills.

The Crows wondered why Coleman did not take the blue-eyed squaw to wife at once.

"She wails for her dead," one brave suggested. "When her period of wailing has ended, he will take her to his lodge."

"It is not that," another submitted. "Coleman, though a great warrior, is poor. He owns but one horse. The wagon chief is rich. He has many cattle. The wagon chief will buy the blue-eyed squaw from the head of her lodge. He can pay the biggest price. He will get her. You will see."

The Crows pondered this and did not find it good. They had scalp-danced every night over the two tufts of Blackfeet hair. Black Elk, their greatest war chief, could boast two more coos because of Coleman's run-in with their hereditary enemies. Flack found no favor in their eyes.

The train reached the edge of Crow country at last. Coleman had ridden on ahead as the outfit started to break camp. Black Elk and several braves appeared suddenly from the mouth of a gulch. They led a number of ponies, several of which were packed with finely dressed buffalo robes and furs. Formally, they tied the ponies to the wheels and tongues of Carrolton's wagons.

Carrolton had been in more or less of a daze since the loss of his wife. He seemed oddly vague, as if some vital part of him were missing. Now he gazed uncomprehendingly at Black Elk as the Crow chief addressed him.

Chuckling, old Ike Williams stepped forward to act as interpreter. His heavy earrings sparkled in the early morning light. His mind slipped back to that time when the mountain men, himself among them, had vied with one another as to who could do the most for the mite of an infant in the trading post on Snake River, grandson of Hunter Breckenridge, the Big Mandan, wild hawk of the fur brigades. It was Williams, himself, who had rustled an Arapaho squaw whose infant had died and whom he had induced to cross South Pass and accompany him to Snake River to nurse the orphaned infant. He chuckled again at the recollection.

"The Injuns don't love Flack overmuch," he explained to Carrolton. "They think he'll make a bid for Sue and that you'll take his offer."

"Sue? Flack!" Carrolton said with sudden spirit. "That coyote could never have my gal. Tell the Injuns that and shoo 'em off so I can yoke my bulls."

"They're off'rin' you the ponies and the robes and other plunder to purchase Sue for Breck Coleman," the old mountain man grinned.

Carrolton snorted angrily. The girl flushed scarlet beneath her tan. "Just what variety o' varmint do them miscreants think I am—to barter off a gal o' mine for ponies?" Carrolton demanded truculently.

"It's the Injun way of getting their selves a wife," Williams said. "They mean all right. If 'twas me, I'd take the ponies."

Carrolton had wondered about Sue and Coleman. He looked at the girl's flushed cheeks and dancing eyes.

"She can wed the man she picks on without any one a-bribing me with horses. Tell 'em that for me!"

"They wouldn't savvy. It ain't within the bounds of Injun understanding that a man won't sell his daughter if the price is right—any more'n a white man could understand selling his daughter at any price. See? They'd think you was holding out for a better price. Accept the ponies and they'll be mighty pleased. An Injun's mind don't follow the white man's road in such matters."

Carrolton looked at his daughter. "Is it that way betwixt you and Breck?" he asked.

The girl nodded assent.

"Yes. Some day, if things come right. I can't go to him yet awhile. These youngsters has to have some one to look after them, now since Ma's gone. It'll have to be me. But some day—yes, it's that way with Breck and me, I reckon, Pa."

"Well, you tell them Injuns that I thank 'em kindly but that my gal can go to Breck if she's a-mind to and they don't need to bribe me with no ponies," Carrolton instructed.

Williams turned to Black Elk. "The head of the blue-eyed squaw's lodge says the price is right," he lied glibly.

With exclamations of satisfaction, the warriors turned and rode off across the sage.

"They says to keep the ponies and other truck as a weddin' present for Sue," Williams explained amiably to Carrolton. The old mountain man returned to the task of yoking his oxen. To himself he added virtuously, "When thar's two parties dickering, neither of which can travel the other's trail o' reasoning, it's always a good idee to take the middle ground. All hands are mighty well satisfied with themselves now; and I ain't got any reasonable cause for complaint agin myself."

The train crawled slowly on toward destination and eventually reached the mining camps. Sue Carrolton, mounted on one of the Indian ponies, rode in the lead with Coleman as the bull train pulled into Virginia City, the first capital of Montana, while the miners cheered.

CHAPTER IV

The pulsing throb of the skin drums rose and fell in barbaric rhythm. There was monotony in the sound, monotony fraught with curious insistence—a compelling urge exerted by the evenly spaced and sonorous reverberations of the tom-toms, as if one's blood attuned itself to pulse in unison with that demanding throb. It broke down reason and seized upon the primitive emotions. Deep and vibrant, that steady dum, dum, dum, dum beat up against the ears with maddening regularity.

Lieutenant Stone was assailed by the curious thought that there was something age-old and deathless, a survival of the beginning of all things in that savage pulsation—something universal, as if all living creatures, and even the trees and the tides, had been swaying in accord with it since the dawn of time. He had only to close his eyes, he thought, give way to it, and he would be swept back twice ten thousand years to find himself in the jungle dancing to the drums. He could not have that! He shook his head angrily as if to clear his vision.

The tempo of the drums slowed down but the slowing tended to quicken the spectator's expectancy. It seemed fraught with immediate portent. A row of warriors advanced in perfect slow time, their bodies painted jet-black save for a sprinkling of white specks. They represented darkness with the stars showing bright against the midnight sky. They retired before a second line of advancing braves, their bodies a bright vermilion shot through with vertical white streaks, portraying the first rays of the sun thrusting up through a rosy dawn to drive the night away.

Through it all the maddening insistence of the skin drums wove a throbbing insanity. Two mighty warriors, garbed in the entire skins of grizzly bears, shuffled into the wild picture, lurching and swaying in time to the savage strains. A brace of half-grown lads followed, their bodies painted chalk-white, feet and noses black, portraying a mated pair of swans. Next came those whose bodies were painted in clever imitation of the scales and markings of a serpent. Still others were adorned in the rear with the dried tails of beaver, their bodies clothed in the skins of those animals. The lordly elk, the mule deer, the bighorn sheep and other creatures of the plains and hills were represented there in pairs. In and out among the other performers like young boys skipped actively, jerking their bodies to whisk white flaps of skin that dangled behind them to represent the light rump patches of the antelope that frisked through every scene the length and breadth of the western plains.

But all these furnished mere atmosphere to lend realism to the scene about to be enacted. The principal actors made entrance now, in pairs, each brave encased in the whole skin of a buffalo, peering through the eyeholes of his headpiece, his back held horizontal so that the bison's small tail dangled behind.

The booming strains of rattle and drum increased in volume. Above the rhythmic throb of it rose the savage growls of the grizzlies; the serpents hissed, the bull elk bugled, the wolves howled, the swans voiced their clarion trumpeting, all woven into a wild barbaric chant, while in and out through the scene frolicked the antelope, flashing their rump patches in mock alarm, all as an accompaniment to the main event. In perfect time with the savage chant and the booming drums, the chief actors portrayed the mating moon of the buffalo herds.

That slow infernal movement! The resplendent costumes weaving colorful patterns in time to that chanted refrain of beasts and the rhythmic roll of drums! It drugged the senses. Stone felt his carefully acquired impassivity breaking down.

"What's it all about?" he demanded with assumed gruffness.

"It's the bull dance of the Mandans," Stone's companion answered. "It's aimed to insure a plentiful supply of buffalo in the Mandan hunting grounds."

Lieutenant Stone snorted some scornful comment about pagan nonsense. "Can't you bribe some of them to start now so that we can be getting on?"

"Nary a one would stir foot outside the village until the bull dance ceremonies end," Coleman said. "They'll finish it up to-night. We'll start to-morrow."

"Let's leave the beggars and go on alone," the officer suggested irritably.

Slowly, the plainsman shook his head.

"We'd better have a few Mandan braves to help keep an eye on our horses of nights," he said. "No. We'll make a start at sunup."

He was calmly final about it. Lieutenant Stone, specializing in the arts of war and recently graduated as an expert, felt again that rankling sense of offended dignity that he had known from the first because of Coleman's casual assumption of knowledge pertaining to things warlike.

The dance and the booming tom-toms ceased as one; the throng surged to the big medicine lodge at the head of the village. Here the young warriors prepared to undergo the self-imposed ordeal of proving their own powers of physical endurance. The head medicine man made incisions some two inches apart in the flesh of these aspirants, lifted up the broad bands thus laid open and fastened through each such incision a horsehair or rawhide rope. Some such openings were made in the flesh of the breast, others in the back or thighs. Each participant was accorded two or more ropes. The actors chose their own individual methods of freeing themselves. Some caused their friends to fasten them aloft, where, struggling in mid-air, they endeavored to break the bands of flesh and free themselves. Others were made fast to the central support poles of the medicine lodge and leaped violently to the end of their tethers. Some had elected to have buffalo skulls attached to the ends of their tethers. These latter ones left the lodge to careen across the prairies until the trailing burdens would tear away the bands of flesh.

"And what has all this devils' business to do with the bull dance and the mating moon of the buffalo?" Stone inquired.

"Nothing much," Coleman said. "But it's held at the same time—a sort of religious rite to prove to each brave whether or not his own medicine is good or bad in the near future. It's common in some form with all plains' tribes. The Mandans call it O-Kee-Pa; the Cheyennes Hock-e-a-um, meaning 'the lodge-made-of-cottonwood-poles,' because their tribe used to hold it in a lodge of that type. The Cheyenne name is understood and used by all tribes. In effect, it means church, to include the place where it's held, the ceremony itself, the people who are there and so on. A single Injun often decides to hold Hock-e-a-um by himself to atone for something or other. I don't know the Sioux name for it, but the white men call it the Sun Dance of the Sioux. It's largely similar, in whatever tribe you run across it."

Well, Stone reflected, the less intelligent among all races and all religions had resorted to self-torture as a matter of penance or entreaty. Why not the Indians? But he was in no mood to watch the barbaric spectacle longer and crossed the intervening strip of prairie to the little soldier camp a half-mile outside the village. A young Mandan brave came leaping past him, several buffalo skulls bouncing behind him on the prairie sod.

Throughout the night that infernal throbbing of the drums seemed to pound on in Stone's brain long after the sound itself had ceased. An hour after dawn his party was on its way, Coleman riding in the lead with Stone. Six troopers and six Mandan warriors, each leading a pack horse, followed. The new green grass formed a vivid velvet carpet on the undulating prairies.

Some three hours after noon, Coleman reined up and pointed. "There's the buffalo you've been hankering to see."

Stone's eyes swept the immediate foreground and he saw no signs of buffalo. Eventually his gaze focussed on a swarm of tiny, antlike specks in the middle distance. He had expected bison to loom up bigger than that.

"They're close to three miles off," Coleman said.

Stone focussed his field glasses upon the distant specks. "Great guns, man! That big dark splash is a herd bedded down. Hundreds of them. Thousands!" he reported.

Coleman nodded. "Yeah; and train your glasses over southeast a piece. You'll pick up tens of thousands. Good buffalo belt hereabouts."

"Let's be after them," Stone urged. The powerful field glasses brought the scene into closer perspective and the officer marveled. For as far as the vision extended there were those dark splotches against the table of green, scattered units of the great herd, some bedded, others grazing slowly. He picked up one band of fifty or more that traveled in single file.

"On the march—headed for water, likely," Coleman said when Stone commented upon the peculiar formation.

Three troopers and three Mandans took charge of the led horses while their companions followed Coleman and Lieutenant Stone. Coleman veered to the right, against the wind, to come upon one of the outermost units of the big herd.

The band toward which he headed was composed of some two hundred animals, most of them bedded on the prairie. He chose a shallow depression as the route of approach.

The officer was examining his rifle, one of the type with a revolving cylinder that held six shots.

"Don't run 'em too far," Coleman advised. "If you empty your rifle, better keep your pistol in reserve until you can reload."

"In case a buffalo should charge?" Stone asked.

"No. In case the Sioux jump us up. They might," Coleman said.

Stone thought the prediction an unlikely possibility but was too intent upon his first buffalo hunt to comment upon the matter at the moment. The draw concealed them until they were within a hundred yards of the edge of the herd.

"Now!" Coleman said, and led the way. The eight riders bore down upon the bison band at a full run. There was a dull rumble of hooves as the buffalo gained their feet and dashed away in mad panic. The racing horses soon overtook the rearmost members of the herd. Coleman rode near Lieutenant Stone as the officer singled out a bull and reined his mount toward it. The cavalry horse snorted and veered away—would not approach within twenty yards of the flank of the stampeded herd. The horses of the troopers performed in similar fashion. Stone fired three shots at the bull, two of them taking effect but without retarding the animal's speed. The three troopers also were emptying their rifles promiscuously into the herd. The Mandans, mounted on trained buffalo ponies, each singled out an animal and rode close alongside, launching arrows from a distance of ten feet.

One cow went down with the first shaft. Two others required three feathered darts apiece before tumbling headlong to the prairie.

Stone emptied the remaining three loads of his rifle into the wounded bull. The great beast staggered in his stride and lurched to his knees, then rolled over on his side. Stone waved his empty rifle in triumph.

The Mandans had accounted for seven of the shaggy brutes. Two others had dropped from the promiscuous herd shooting of the troopers while several others, more or less severely wounded, left the course of the stampede and strayed off across the prairie. The cavalrymen, heeding Coleman's original admonition, did not fire their pistols but instead dropped out of the chase to reload their rifles.

The run led over the crest of a low prairie divide, and as Coleman and Stone topped out on the ridge, it was to come close upon the rear of a huge herd into which the animals they pursued had stampeded. Coleman held up his hand as a signal for Stone to halt but the officer, enthralled by the wild scene that unrolled before his eyes, failed to note. His horse, a magnificent animal, bore him on and on. The rumble and jar of countless feet rose about him. On all sides and ahead, as far as he could see, thousands of buffalo were rushing in a mad stampede. He pulled the big pistol from its holster and with the first shot brought down a bull, drilled behind the ear. Elated, Stone pulled in behind another. His mount seemed to encounter more difficulty in overtaking this last one. But the horse settled to the chase, his powerful muscles driving him on and on. The rider saw several wolves loping off at right angles to the course of the chase. A band of antelope flashed across in front of him as if bent upon proving their superior speed. A dozen or more elk were running far off to one side. And the whole prairie seemed to be a rushing mass of buffalo.

Stone fired two shots at a cow that his horse had overtaken, both taking effect in her rump. She held her lead for half a mile. Stone's horse was breathing heavily now but he made a gallant effort and drew alongside the cow. The man fired two shots into her flank. The cow whipped sidewise in a vicious lunge, her horn missing the horse by inches. The startled horse stampeded and before Stone could regain control of the animal the cow had gained more than a hundred yards and was running in the wake of the rushing herd. Even at her diminished speed it was with difficulty that the horse gained on her. The gap seemed to close only by inches. At the end of a mile the horse was breathing heavily. Stone glanced back over his shoulder and saw only the lifeless green of the prairie. He had crossed another low divide after distancing Coleman. Well, at least he had showed the self-sufficient young plainsman that he was no mean competitor in a race. The main herd was streaming over a low roll of ground two miles or more ahead. The last of them disappeared and in all that sunlit expanse of green there was only the wounded cow moving ahead of Stone. Suddenly she lurched in her stride, ran in a crazy half circle and pitched down. The horse came to a stop, sides heaving, dripping at every pore, its breathing labored. Stone dismounted and finished the cow with a shot behind the ear—the last shot in the big

revolver.



CHAPTER V

Breck Coleman turned in his saddle as soon as Stone disappeared in the wake of the rushing herd. He executed a few signals which one of the three Mandans behind signified that he understood. Two of the Indians mounted and rode on after Coleman. The third headed back to the three troopers. He pointed in the direction of the chase, then rode on to summon the rest of the party.

Coleman held on in the direction in which Stone had disappeared. He rode at a trot to cool his horse out gradually after the run. There was no sign of Lieutenant Stone in the next mile-wide sag of the prairie. From far ahead there drifted the heavy reports of black powder.

"Now his pistol's empty," Coleman commented aloud, "and his horse run to a standstill, likely."

Stone, however, was not concerned with such matters. His entire attention was centered in his prize. He examined the dead cow at some length. Coleman and the others would not come on, probably, until they had dressed out such meat as the party could use.

The vast emptiness round him seemed somewhat incredible after the recent scene with tens of thousands of great brown bodies rushing across the green spring prairies. Now there was not a living creature within sight. Stone's glance circled the horizon. Apparently he was located near the center of a great shallow depression, fashioned by nature into the semblance of a mammoth soup plate, its rim, miles out in all directions, but very little higher than its floor. He detected slight movement far off on the rim of that plate. There were a number of small moving specks. They seemed to be traveling with a queer flopping gait. Stone leaped to the conclusion that he had sighted a flock of turkeys. They wheeled into a huddle as he glanced toward them. He mounted his horse and rode him in slow circles round the dead buffalo so that the animal would not cool off too rapidly. He was glad to have shown Coleman that he could run down and shoot buffalo with the best of them. Some day he'd show the young plainsman that he also could take part with equal efficiency in an Indian scrimmage. Confound it! Why was he so concerned about making a good impression on Coleman anyway? What could the latter's opinion amount to in his life? No doubt his wish to impress Coleman was because General Crook—veteran of many Indian wars and whose knowledge of the red men equalled that of the plainsmen—had given Coleman such a high rating as a scout. As Stone swung round the circle, he saw Coleman riding slowly toward him, still almost a mile away.

"Buffalo tongue and rib-roast to-night," the plainsman greeted as he rode up, eyeing the dead cow.

Two Mandans had appeared and were riding toward them. Stone recalled the fact that he had not recharged his weapons. He measured the powder into the chambers, rammed home the bullets and fitted fresh percussion caps on the nipples. This in turn reminded him of Coleman's advice against emptying both rifle and pistol at the same time.

"You were remarking about Sioux," he said. "Being at war with the Mandans, they wouldn't venture so near the Mandan village, would they?"

"It's the favorite stomping ground of war parties of young Sioux braves," Coleman said. "They loiter round watching a chance to steal horses or to cut off Mandan squaws and children out to gather roots or fruit. If their scouts see a buffalo stampede they suspect that a Mandan hunting party caused it, likely. At the end of a buffalo chase the hunters are scattered out, arrows and ammunition mostly shot away and their horses run to a standstill. The Sioux are wolves at timing it to pounce about then and collect easy scalps."

Stone's pride of accomplishment rather trickled away as he recalled that his own horse had been completely spent at the moment when both rifle and pistol had been guiltless of charges.

"I didn't see anything more dangerous than a flock of turkeys half a mile off there," he said, pointing.

Coleman nodded as he watched the three troopers swing into view. The two Mandans arrived and, after a brief conversation with Coleman, kindled a fire of buffalo chips. Stone might have observed, but did not, the fact that Coleman and the Mandans trained their eyes frequently toward the low rims of the basin in the direction in which he had seen the turkeys. There was a certain casual alertness in their manner. The sun was still more than an hour high. Stone was rather surprised at Coleman's suggestion that the little spring near by would make a good camp site. Again he experienced that

sense of irritation. Coleman was not under his command—not attached to the army as a regular scout. He had volunteered to guide the party at General Crook's insistence, as a matter of personal friendship. Coleman always suggested, never seemed to dictate, but there was something about his manner of suggesting which conveyed the impression of a certain logical finality. But Stone merely nodded acquiescence. The rest of the party arrived with the pack horses. A whole side of buffalo ribs was propped slantingly above the fire and bits of tongue and hump meat soon were roasting, impaled upon arrow shafts and ramrods. The sun sank low in the west, leaving only a gold and old rose afterglow to shed its waning light across the darkening prairies. The horizons were drawing in. Horses cropped eagerly near by. One after another, the Mandans slipped away from the fire and disappeared upon some mysterious business of their own. Coleman answered Stone's questions but the plainsman's attention seemed to be elsewhere, as if his every sense had been employed to sweep that outer darkness. The enlisted men crossed to the dead cow to cut off a few more choice steaks for the morrow.

Coleman had loaded his pipe and the smoke ascended from it in lazy spirals. "Not a bad place to stay the night," he said, "if it warn't for those pesky Sioux keeping an eye on us."

Stone turned with swift interest. "Do you think that Sioux are watching us?"

"Dead certain," Coleman said. "This clear air deceives folks at first; up until they get used to new measures for judging distance. You can see a long ways out here. Makes big objects quite a piece away look like smaller objects nearer to hand. Now that flock of turkeys you thought you saw a half mile off was a war party of mounted Sioux more'n two mile away. Several of 'em was decked out in war bonnets and as they flounced along they did look a sight like turkeys."

"You saw them?" Stone asked.

"Yes. And they saw me. That's why they halted and wheeled into a huddle, then ducked back out of sight across that little ridge as soon as they sighted me. They'd figured to jump a Mandan hunting party. First glimpse of your uniform, and the miscreants knew that it was a soldier outfit that had been hazing the buffalo. But how big was the outfit? Anyway, there you was, fair game and no one else in sight. Good chance to swoop down and lift your hair before help arrived. They started their run just as I rode into view. They knew there'd be scouts with a soldier outfit. See? There might be a hundred troopers just behind me over the rise. So the Sioux ducked back to watch how things would break. That's the way an Injun's mind works; and as soon as they headed back I knew there warn't any immediate danger. Our outfit kept stringing in a few at a time and still the Sioux couldn't know for sure that more warn't on the way. But they know now."

Lieutenant Stone experienced a sense of complete deflation. He pictured that tale going the rounds of army circles; his horse run to a standstill, his weapons unloaded—and then his having mistaken a war party of mounted Sioux for a flock of wild turkeys. Never would he be able to live that story down.

"I wouldn't mind a brush with them," he said earnestly.

"No," said Coleman. "No. I know you wouldn't. But there's more officers new to the plains that parts company from their hair by being overanxious to fight on any terms than there is by exercising a mite of caution. I only sighted about twenty; but there might be ten times that many."

"What do you suggest then?" Stone inquired stiffly.

It had been quite dark for half an hour. "They're satisfied by now that we didn't get sight of them. Likely they'll give us a chance to get to sleep and then stampede our horses, leaving us afoot so they can make a try for us to-morrow. We can start soon now and give the varmints the run-around."

They discussed ways and means. Outwardly, Stone was all soldier, calm and unruffled. Inside, his spirit was shrivelled by the thought of how inevitably the tale of his double error would be relished by fellow officers. But he merely acquiesced in such suggestions as Coleman made. Crook had said, "If anything comes up, do as Coleman says." Then the veteran had called Stone back to add, dispensing with military formality, "Listen, Stone. Those're orders. Young officers—and old, too, for the matter o' that—who override the judgment of their scouts in Indian country are due for trouble and plenty of it. Don't you get such notions too. You listen to Coleman." Well, he was listening to Coleman now, outwardly cool and concise despite that secret rankling sense of injured self-esteem.

The enlisted men returned from their work of securing meat from the slain cow. Before Stone could speak, Coleman

opened up conversationally: "The Lieutenant has decided to make a night march of it to give the slip to a parcel of Sioux that's been a-watching us. The Lieutenant and me spotted them before you all arrived." He turned to Stone. "I'll be 'tending to my end of it, Lieutenant, and ready to pull out any time you give the order."

Stone's resentment ebbed and gradually was transformed into relief and a warm gratitude as Coleman's back disappeared in the outer darkness. It seemed that the plainsman did not intend to make capital of his error. Quietly, Stone issued the orders to his men. They saddled in the outer darkness. Coleman and the Mandans packed the extra horses.

Fresh fuel was added to the fire. Then the party moved off, maintaining strict silence. The gold points of the stars seemed close overhead in the cloudless steel-blue canopy of the sky. After covering two miles at a walk, Coleman eased his horse into a trot and held on steadily for an hour.

"It's noways likely they'll jump us at night," he said then to Stone. "Injuns are downright averse to night skirmishes, except maybe to creep up on a sleeping camp sometimes; and even that's infrequent."

"Will they take our trail to-morrow?" Stone inquired.

"No telling. They'll know there's small chance to surprise us, now that we're on the watch for them; so they may not take our track. Then again, they might."

A halt was called at midnight. The troopers snatched two hours' sleep while the Mandans stood guard and rode herd on the horses as they grazed. Then the march was resumed. Coleman turned in his saddle at intervals to peer back through the night. After two hours he reined in his horse. Far away on their backtrack, twenty miles or more perhaps, a brilliant pin point of light glowed redly.

"Signal fire," he said to Stone, pointing.

"That's a bright star on the horizon, isn't it?" Stone countered.

"Injun fire on a prairie knoll," Coleman said. "Watch it."

The bright point of light disappeared as Stone gazed at it, reappeared half a minute later, blinked out again and continued its strange performance at varying intervals.

"They hold a buffalo robe in front of it, then pull it aside," Coleman explained. "There's other war parties of Sioux out hereabouts and that first parcel of miscreants is signaling our numbers and which way we're headed."

He turned and rode on. Faint gray light, then crimson dawn thrust up in the east. Coleman selected a tiny stream that threaded a wide shallow valley and suggested that it was a likely spot to camp. The sun was an hour high by then.

Stone looked about him. There was an unobstructed view for miles in all directions. He did not, in fact, realize just how far he could see until his vision focussed upon thousands of tiny specks and, with a shock of surprise, he recognized them as buffalo. "No cover here," he said. "Indians could see us for five miles."

"And we can see them just as far," Coleman returned. "Camp in cover that'll hide a snake and Injuns can work up all round you. Out here they can't. If you're out to surprise Injuns, camp in cover. If they're out after you, camp in the clear."

The horses were hobbled and turned out to graze. The party ate; then slept. Stone felt almost indecently exposed. He waked frequently, always to find one or two Mandans sitting round gorging on raw buffalo meat. Once he opened his eyes to find Coleman and the Mandans awake and watching several hundred buffalo that had come in to water at the little stream some distance below camp. An hour later he waked again to find Coleman propped upon an elbow, apparently staring vacantly at nothing in particular. The Mandans, too, were gazing in the same direction. Stone saw only the distant herds of buffalo. Then he observed a tiny cloud floating above the far horizon. It flattened out upon some current of the upper air and another pufflike cloud ascended toward it.

"Smoke puffs," Coleman said.

The party started on at noon. Within half a dozen miles the country became somewhat rougher, the ridges higher, the valleys deeper and less than a mile in width. Coleman spoke to the Mandans in their native tongue. Thereafter some one of the warriors rode well in the lead, topping out on the next ridge ahead while the main party was still traversing the

floor of the valley.

On each rise he halted his horse for a minute and sat there motionless. After some three hours on the march, the horse of the Mandan scout whirled round several times as he topped out on a ridge half a mile or more away.

"Better give the order to dismount and corral, Lieutenant," Coleman said. "The Sioux will be onto us."

"Sioux? Where?" Stone could see no enemy.

"When an Injun scout sets his pony motionless on some high point it means that he can see considerable country and no enemies in sight. When he whirls his horse round in short circles it means 'gather together quick—enemy coming.' And he threw out his right arm and drew his hand across his throat. That's the sign language for cutthroat, meaning Sioux, in use by every tribe on the plains. Better corral, Lieutenant. They're a-coming and no mistake."

Still doubtful that a man could divine all that simply from a casual glance at a distant Indian scout, Stone looked about him. There was not a stick of cover, nothing but the short curly mat of buffalo grass.

"Best possible place to make a stand," Coleman said. "Wherever there's cover to hide a snake, Injuns will find some way to crawl up in range and pick you off."

The Mandan scout had whirled his pony and was now heading back at a full run toward the main party. Stone's eyes were riveted on that low wave of ground behind the racing scout. It showed green and smooth and peaceful against the sky. Then suddenly it boiled with movement. All along its crest, mounted warriors popped into view, their ponies ranging from milk-white to raven-black. The savages, naked save for breech clouts, were painted with black soot, ocher, vermilion and white clay. Gaudy streamers fluttered from glittering lance heads. Here and there a gorgeous war bonnet trailed in the wind.

"Dismount! Corral! Horses' heads to the center!" Stone ordered. In a space of seconds troopers and Mandans alike stood in a compact circle, the heads of pack horses and saddle animals turned to the center, their rumps and legs forming a barricade of living horse flesh that accorded almost perfect protection save for the tops of the men's heads as they peered along the barrels of their rifles between saddles and packs. The Mandan scout had joined the circle, wedging his pony between the bodies of two cavalry mounts.

"Fifty-odd," Coleman estimated. "They won't run up on us here, likely. They'll circle round and whoop."

As if his prediction had been an order, the apparent charge broke at a distance of two hundred yards and developed into an encircling movement while the dread gobble of the Sioux war whoop rose in yelping volume. With their ponies running furiously, the long file of warriors swooped in a wide circle. An occasional puff of white spurted forth as some brave fired his musket. The Mandans, despite Coleman's counsel, tried an occasional shot and shouted insults at the Sioux, daring them to attack. The troopers stood fast, awaiting Stone's orders to fire.

Stone, in turn, waited for the expected attack when the fire of his men would become more effective at close quarters. Then suddenly, as leaves are dispersed by the wind, the Sioux scattered, wheeling across the prairies to re-form a half mile away.

"What the devil?" Stone demanded. "Almost four times our number and drawing off without a charge?"

"Soo he come back. You wait see," a Mandan said in English.

"How do you know?" Stone asked.

The Mandan merely said, "Soo come back."

"Sign talk is common to all plains tribes," Coleman explained. "Most of the time that an Injun is orating with his mouth he's also a-talking with his hands—at least sketching in the high points of his subject. And another Injun usually can tell you whether the enemy is talking about coming back, planning to jump you on better ground or on quitting the fight altogether, just from watching the leaders conversing half a mile away. They're seldom wrong."

"Soo he come," the Mandan reaffirmed positively.

"They could ride us down with one headlong charge, if only they knew it," Stone said.

"They do know it, but they know it would cost a dozen or more braves," Coleman said. "To an Injun leader, that's a high price to pay for victory. They're the greatest strategists and horseback fighters in the world, but they don't consider certain heavy loss good strategy. They think it's plain damn-foolishness. Likely they'll try to charge in close enough to stampede our horses and scatter us. If they do, our hair ain't worth a puff o' smoke. If they can't make out to scatter us, 'taint anyways likely they'll charge home."

Stone had heard from army officers of long experience in the Indian wars that this corral formation had been adopted by the early trappers and that the savages, except under unusual circumstances, hesitated to attack even vastly inferior numbers when such tactics were put in use.

"Now Soo come quick," the Mandan said.

"Yeah. They're a-coming," Coleman agreed.

Even as he spoke, the Sioux gave voice to the war whoop and raced furiously down upon the huddled group of men and horses on the open prairie. When within four hundred yards, a chief halted his pony on a prairie knoll and from that point directed every movement of his warriors by sign talk. This time the charge was pressed to within a hundred yards. Then it suddenly fanned out into the usual circling formation. As the beleaguered men peered down their rifles, every attacking warrior threw himself upon the far side of his pony, effectually concealed from view. Then, suddenly, a dozen ponies, breaking from different points of the encircling line, spurred swiftly in a closer spiral, their concealed riders shrieking hideously, some of them flapping buffalo robes, others discharging arrows from beneath their ponies' necks with incredible rapidity.

"Fire at will!" Stone's barked command rose above the clamor.

Troopers fired at these swooping hawks of the prairies as they spurred past. The horses reared and plunged as the arrows found them. Necessarily, while struggling to control the horses, with their targets flitting past like skimming swallows, the fire of the troopers was none too effective. A soldier shot a passing pony through the shoulder. As the animal went down its rider landed on his feet and made a running mount behind a comrade. Stone brought down a pony that flitted past within twenty yards. As the dismounted Sioux gained the back of a comrade's horse, Coleman, who had awaited such an opportunity, shot him in the armpit.

The Sioux slid from the horse and sprawled upon the prairie. Instantly two warriors swooped to retrieve his body. Regardless of the fire of the defenders, the two mounted braves leaned from their saddles, each seizing a foot of the dead warrior as they raced past, lifted the body and flung it across the neck of one rescuer's pony. Coleman and Stone fired again. The doubly burdened war horse staggered a dozen yards and went down. Coleman shot the unwounded savage through the back at the instant that Stone's bullet went through his head.

A dozen braves, each concealed on the off-side of his horse, streamed past between the two fallen Sioux and the whites, loosing a swarm of arrows as they passed. Under cover of this movement, others darted in and carried away with them the two bodies. Then, swiftly as they had come, the Sioux were gone, scattered widely and racing across the prairie. The troopers and the Mandans had slain another pair of Sioux and seriously wounded several others, all of whom similarly had been carried off. Eight dead ponies dotted the near-by prairie.

A Mandan had been shot through the middle by a chance arrow that had slipped through between the horses. The point protruded from his back. The shaft was extracted, big wooden plugs being forced into the wounds to prevent bleeding. The Mandan submitted to these ministrations without sign of discomfort. A trooper had been shot through the calf of the leg.

The Sioux had halted half a mile away and the leading warriors were conferring.

"Soo he pretty soon ride off—no come back," a Mandan said after watching for a time.

A chief rode alone to within three hundred yards of the party to deliver a harangue. Both Coleman and the Mandans could read the sign talk which the chief used as an accompaniment to his discourse.

"He's cussing us out for killing buffalo and leaving the big part of the kill where it fell," Coleman explained to Stone.

"It's the same old grievance that all the plains tribes bring up."

The Sioux rode off across the prairies and the little cavalcade resumed its march.

CHAPTER VI

"Trail's end," Coleman announced some days thereafter. "It ought to be somewheres within a few miles."

The Mandans had divided, scattering up the creek and down its course on either side, while the soldier contingent waited. Within the hour, a Mandan rode into view on a high point of ground upstream, removed his buffalo robe and waved it.

"All right; he's found them," Coleman said, and Lieutenant Stone gave the order for his men to mount.

The scene which they viewed shortly thereafter was a grisly one. A gully, the result of a buffalo trail that had been worn into a deep and narrow cut by drainage water, led from the level prairie to the bed of the creek, its entire length not exceeding thirty yards. The little gulch was barely three feet wide at the top, narrowing to but a foot or so at the bottom. Midway of the floor of this tiny arroyo the bodies of five men reposed. They were near skeletons. Clothing had been torn to shreds and loose earth had been filtered through the tattered fragments.

At Coleman's suggestion, Stone gave orders for his men to remain well back from the spot while Coleman and the Mandans made a minute examination of the surroundings. The officer accompanied Coleman as the plainsman made his investigation.

"Do you think you can determine what tribe did it?" Stone inquired.

"Likely," Coleman predicted.

A hunting party of Aricaras, coming into a post on the Upper Missouri a few weeks before, had reported the finding of the slain men. Stone's party had been dispatched to investigate and to give the men a decent burial.

"It's the work of white men," Coleman announced unhesitatingly after a cursory survey.

"But the men are scalped," Stone objected.

Coleman nodded, mounted his horse, and followed by Stone, rode to a point a hundred yards away at a Mandan's summons. There were evidences of a temporary camp at that point. Forty or more small skeletons were scattered round the vicinity.

"Hm," Coleman muttered. "That accounts for why they was killed."

"Yes?" Stone inquired.

"They was wolfers, those five," Coleman said. "Not much question but what they was killed for their outfit and their winter's haul of wolf pelts."

He examined the surroundings. "They hadn't camped here long. Only stopped over a day, likely, to skin out such wolves as they'd collected from poison baits put in hereabouts by one or two of their number a few days before. It was done the last of the winter or early spring."

"How do you make that out?" Stone inquired.

Coleman pointed to a spot some fifteen feet across where the buffalo grass was exceptionally tall and green. "Here's where their fire was, and it spread eight-ten feet on all sides through the dry grass before they stamped the edges out, like it always does when the grass is dry. The frost warn't out of the ground yet. It was iron-hard. Notice that the wagon wheels scarcely dented the surface. Not much signs of a battle, as if they'd put up a fight. Wolfers would have been armed with better guns than the average soldier outfit has—Sharps and the new repeatin' .44 Henrys. There'd be cartridges scattered round by the hundred. There's no dead horses or mules, as there likely would have been if there'd been much of a fight."

"Couldn't Indians have crept up at daylight and killed the lot of them at the first fire?" Stone asked.

"Yes. There's that to think about," Coleman agreed. "But there'd have been arrows scattered round a-plenty, and other trinkets. Next place, Injuns would have stripped every body bare o' clothes, both to get the garments for themselves and

so's they could mutilate the remains. Injuns mighty near always do that. It ain't just plain ferocity, like some believe. It's religion, sort of, or superstition, whatever you're a-mind to name it. An Injun believes that a man appears in the happy hunting grounds with his carcass in the same shape it's left behind by the parties that killed him. That's the reason plains Injuns will run the worst chances to carry off the remainders of a dead friend in battle before the enemy can snatch his hair and hack him up. You saw that with the Sioux."

"Yes," Stone assented.

"Then again, Injuns would have left the men where they fell. They'd never have packed the bodies a hundred yards and dropped 'em in that crack o' ground and kicked the edges in so's dirt would cover them. Not an Injun! That was done so's the bodies wouldn't be discovered—and scalped so if they was chanced across it would be put down as the work of savages. Of course the wolves scratched the dirt off and worked on them a considerable."

Again Lieutenant Stone nodded his understanding.

"And savages would have burnt the wagons on the spot and scattered stuff around," Coleman amplified. "They'd never have hooked up the mules and drove the wagons off. It was white men did it, Lieutenant. They was killed for their outfit and their winter's take of wolf skins. No doubt about it. I'll stake my hair on that."

"White man, he kill um," the English-speaking Mandan stated positively.

"My orders were to investigate," Stone said. "Could the trail left by the wagons be followed at this late date?"

"Fast as a horse can run, Lieutenant," Coleman said. "Wherever those wheels bit down, there'll be a different look to the grass—ridges growed a mite higher than the rest. No trouble about that. But o' course, they'll hit for the main trail off southeast, which they'd have reached a month or more back. Plenty of wolfin' outfits would have been moving eastward along the trail about that time to market their catch. But we could maybe pick up some information. That part's up to you."

"Very well. We'll follow it," Stone decided.

They prepared to give the five bodies a decent burial. The remains were beyond all sign of recognition as the Mandans and the troopers lifted them from the floor of the gully. Coleman, looking down at them, suddenly trained his attention upon the mummified face of one, the shriveled features almost covered by a flowing white beard. But it was the ears which claimed his attention. The dead man's ears had been pierced for earrings, heavy ornaments having stretched the lobes to exaggeratedly pendulous proportions. In each ear was a heavy pendant of turquoise and beaten silver.

Coleman knew those ears and the ornaments that adorned them. In common with so many of the old-time trappers who had lived much of their lives in Indian lodges, old Ike Williams had developed the same childish love of finery that characterized the savages. In the long ago he had acquired those turquoise and silver pendants from the Navajos of the south and had worn them ever since Coleman could remember.

Stone observed that Coleman's gaze had narrowed as he stood erect after inspecting the ornaments.

"Shall we take them for purposes of possible identification?" he asked.

"No," Coleman said. "Old Ike Williams set a heap o' store by those bangles while he was living. We'll bury 'em with him, now he's dead."

"You knew him?" Stone asked.

"He was one o' the mountain men that helped raise me up in a trading post from the time I was two weeks old. 'Twas Ike Williams that rustled an Arapaho squaw, whose papoose had died, to nurse me through till I could wrestle buffalo steak and flapjacks. Yes, I knew him. I'd like right well, Lieutenant, to learn what miscreants did this job."

Stone, observing the cold quality of polished moss agate in Coleman's eyes as he looked down upon the body of his friend, suddenly felt that there would be no need for either criminal procedure or military trial by court martial if by any chance Coleman were to discover the identity of the slayers.

Coleman, peering down into the trench, stiffened suddenly to attention. He was conscious of a prickling sensation along his spine as if the cells of long-dead hairs sought to bristle there, as a dog's roach will bristle at the old scent of some

ancient enemy. He leaped down into the narrow gulch and retrieved a small object from the spot where old Ike Williams' earthly remains had rested. Stone saw him regarding closely a willow stick some ten inches in length by three-eighths of an inch in diameter. One end of it was frayed into the semblance of a paintbrush. Coleman was stowing the object away carefully in his woolen hunting frock.

"What is it?" Stone inquired.

"It don't seem anyways likely, Lieutenant," Coleman said slowly, "but it's just possible that a certain coyote left his sign here. I aim to inquire round as to his whereabouts at the time when that chawed-up stick was left beneath old Ike Williams' remainders. And on second thoughts, I expect I'd better take one of them ear bangles. We'll let old Ike wear the other one into the happy hunting ground."

The five bodies were given decent burial. In lieu of stones, fifty or more bleached buffalo skulls were fashioned into a cairn to mark the spot. At this camp the Mandan who had been shot through the body by a Sioux arrow died. In common with all Indians, he had no doubt or apprehension as to his future destination. Indians, even squaws and little children, died naturally and unafraid. There were no touching death-bed scenes, therefore. The wailing and lamentation for the dead by stricken relatives came later. The Mandan conversed with his fellows until the last, making disposition of his effects, reciting his deeds of valor, and, toward the end, he chanted his death song until carried away by an internal rush of blood.

The Mandans refused to bury him in the earth with the five white men. His spirit could not free itself from such a tomb, they insisted. The body was lashed upon a pony and accompanied the party on the trail until a few scattering box elder trees in a creek bottom were reached. In the branches of one, wrapped in his buffalo robe and accompanied by all of his arms and finery, the Mandan was lashed upon a crude platform of sticks. His favorite pony was shot at the foot of the tree to provide transportation on the departed one's trip to the haunts of the Great Spirit.

As Coleman had predicted, the trail was a simple one to follow. Stone could look far ahead and trace the course of the twin streaks in the new spring grass. The pressure of the wheels seemed to have bruised the roots of the grass sufficiently to have caused them to put forth added effort and the grass along the tire tracks was slightly taller than that on either side. Even where buffalo had cropped the grass short, the streaks were easily discernible.

Day after day the party rode hard to the south and east on the trail, fording shallow streams and swimming their horses across swollen ones. They covered from thirty to forty miles a day.

Stone had no further doubt that the murderers had been white men who had appropriated the slain men's outfit. At some overnight camps the party had picketed their stock and the sign had revealed the fact that there were eight mules, four for each of the two wagons, in addition to three shod horses; likewise that there were three men in the party. Otherwise there was little to be learned from the trail. On two occasions, though, one or another of the Mandans leaned from the saddle and presented Coleman with a ten-inch length of stick, the end chewed to fibre. Each of these he stored with the first among his effects.

At one point where the party had camped, however, one of the Mandans made a discovery that might prove important. Long since, Coleman had learned the color of the three horses. The tracks of the mules had revealed the fact that they were big animals and Coleman had assumed that they were of the usual brownish-black or slaty-black that characterized the average Missouri mule that had come into fame with the Mexican war. But at that spot, in a creek bottom graced by a few box elders, a Mandan came to Coleman with a few tufts of cream-colored hair.

"This is a point in our favor, anyway, Lieutenant," Coleman said. "One of the mules is a claybank, a buckskin mule. They ain't any too plentiful. The Mandans plucked this hair off from where the mule had been rubbing himself against a box elder tree."

Stone examined the hair. Less than half an hour before, Stone had jumped a band of elk as the party rode into the bottom and had shot a cow elk for camp meat. "Mightn't it be elk hair?" he asked.

Coleman shook his head and plucked a pinch of hair from the cow elk. "Notice the difference? Elk hair is coarse and hollow. You can break a single hair like breaking a straw. This other's finer a lot, and pliable. You can't break it or scarcely tear it apart. It's mule hair right enough."

After many days' travel to the south and east the party came out into the main Oregon and Salt Lake trail and followed it east a dozen miles to a stage station. All trace of the party they had followed, of course, was lost, once the well-traveled highway was reached.

Coleman questioned the station keeper and the stock tender. Travel on the trail had been tremendous. Neither man could state accurately the number or size of outfits that had passed continually up and down the trail. Yes, there'd been a dozen or so wolfing outfits along in the early spring. The tender did recall a two-wagon outfit with a claybank mule among the lot. The station keeper remembered, sort of, that there was three men with that layout, and now that Coleman mentioned it, he guessed maybe there had been a big, red-whiskered party that was the he-coon of the lot, he drawled, scratching his head as an aid to recollection.

"It would do little good to follow on down the trail," Stone said. "They must have been six weeks ahead of us. By now they've sold their wolf pelts and outfit in Kansas somewhere and scattered. Even if we found out who passed along the trail with such an outfit that long ago, they could claim they'd purchased the whole layout from others. The evidence wouldn't hold in any court or even in a court martial, I'm afraid."

Coleman nodded thoughtfully. "I reckon that's right, Lieutenant," he agreed. "But I don't figure someway to let it drop just here. After a spell I'll inquire round a little more. Old Ike Williams was powerful good to me when I was a colt. It's a long trek back to the Mandan villages. And after I land you there, I'll be pushing on to the mining camps. There's a family up Virginia City way I'm growing anxious to see again."

"And what about the other half of our mission?" Stone inquired. "It was left open, rather. General Crook said, 'If it came handy' to get in touch with Little Beaver's band while we're out. Can we get in touch with them on the return trip?"

"Easy enough, likely," Coleman said.

"That very thing you cited awhile back—about every tribe objecting to the whites killing off the buffalo in their hunting grounds—is one of the many points that renders such a conference futile," Stone said. "It's something that will never be remedied. So after all, what is the use of such a palaver?"

Coleman chuckled. "Mighty little, since you ask me. Worse'n useless. General Crook knows that. Likely he had orders from higher up or he wouldn't have sent any one on any such wild goose chase. He'd never have done it on his own account. Like you say, it'll prove a mighty futile mission. But it won't do any harm and Crook can report that it was carried out."

The dog soldiers, Little Beaver's band of Northern Cheyennes, had been out again upon the rampage, murdering along the trails. The resulting campaign had been inconclusive. Now the government wished to put forth tentative feelers towards reopening negotiations for another peace.

Between the encroaching whites and the savages there was a deadlock throughout the entire West. The pioneering settlers, miners and hunters would respect no treaty that prevented their operating upon the lands guaranteed by the government to any tribe. The savages would respect no treaty that prevented their lifting the scalps of such intruders. When desirous of driving an entering wedge into any forbidden territory set aside by the government by treaty for some tribe, the whites had no hesitancy in committing every sort of atrocity. From the Northern Cheyennes, the Blackfeet of Montana and the whole Sioux nation of the northern prairies to the Southern Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches of western Kansas and the Texas plains, all were restless and engaged in more or less frequent outbreaks as increasing swarms of encroaching whites invaded their ancestral hunting grounds. The same was true of the Snakes of Idaho and Oregon, the Crows of what is now Wyoming, the Piutes of Nevada, the Utes of Utah and Colorado, the Navajoes and Apaches of Arizona and New Mexico. Scarcely a month passed but what some new war broke out. Scarcely a month passed that did not find the government engaged in peace negotiations after some inconclusive campaign. Settlers, miners, freighters, plainsmen, cattlemen, the more experienced army officers and the red men themselves all were aware that there could be no permanent peace until every hostile tribe had been rounded up by force and confined to reservations. Meanwhile, the government—yielding to the pressure of eastern humanitarians who had no actual knowledge of conditions and who believed that the desperate hatred existing between savage and pioneer could be adjusted by pacific means—continued its policy of conducting an endless series of new peace talks and new treaties, which were violated by savages and pioneering whites alike almost before the ink was dry.

"Yes," Coleman said. "We'll promise Little Beaver that the Great White Father will permit no more killing of buffalo in

the Cheyenne hunting grounds. Little Beaver will promise to bury the hatchet and travel the white man's road. Then almost before we're out of earshot his band will be out sacking some emigrant outfit and white hunters will be gunning up Cheyenne buffalo or attacking a berry-picking party of Cheyenne squaws. Mighty futile proceedings, these peace talks, like you say."

He was anxious to bring that matter to a conclusion, return with Stone to the Missouri and hasten on to the Montana mining camps to locate Sue Carrolton.

And at that precise period Sue Carrolton, with heavy heart, was preparing to head back toward Missouri. Carrolton was no miner. He was, by nature and experience, a tiller of the soil. He had tried farming, growing garden truck for the mining camps, but the returns were small. His heart was not in his work. Some vital part of him seemed to be missing since the loss of his helpmate. He longed for his native Missouri hills while those of Montana seemed ice-bound and oppressive. So at last he made his decision to return. Acquaintances warned him against going back overland alone. The Crows, too, had been committing depredations. Subsequent travelers over the trail that Flack's wagon train had broken had killed game too profusely despite the injunctions of the Crows. The latter had pounced upon several small outfits and annihilated them. The route had never come into general use and now had been abandoned. Freight and emigrants destined for Montana came up the Missouri in steamboats to Fort Benton and spread overland from that point. But the Carroltons had not the funds necessary to return down the Missouri by steamboat. Carrolton merely shook his head to all suggestions and "allowed" that he'd return over the route by which he had arrived.

So the Carroltons, with all household effects packed in one wagon, to which were hooked their remaining four oxen, set forth on the backtrack towards Missouri. Sue Carrolton, riding the seat, reflected that already she had started on that back trail which Breck Coleman had predicted that the two of them would one day travel. And she wondered a bit wistfully where in all that great expanse Coleman might be.

She had not set eyes on him since that day almost three years before when he had bade her good-bye and left the mining camps. More or less inarticulate in matters pertaining to affection, as were all pioneer folk, neither had put their feelings into words. Assuming that Coleman's wish was the same as her own, and without waiting for his formal declaration, she had told him upon their arrival in Virginia City, "Looks like it'll be years now before I can have a man and a home of my own. I've got to look after these youngsters now, since Ma's gone. It'll be a long time, maybe."

Coleman merely had assented without so much as expressing his regret. He had stood there twisting his big hat in his hands and nodding.

"Sure does loom up thataway, Sue," he had agreed.

Then he had ridden away. Sue had known somehow that he intended to come back for her some day. But men changed their minds. Had he really cared? Had his business of hunting, trapping and scouting kept him away so long? Or had he forgotten? Her heart, already depressed at the prospect of this long and dangerous return journey, grew heavier still as she wondered if perhaps he had not fallen victim to savages before now.

She had cared for the younger children well. Buckner Carrolton, now turned fifteen, was almost a man grown in point of efficiency in all manner of frontier labor. He could help his father in swimming the oxen across streams and in ferrying the wagon over. Adept with a gun, he could keep the family in meat while *en route*.

But while the elder Carrolton—anxious to return to Missouri and without room in his mind to give much thought to other matters—seemed indifferent to or unaware of the dangers of such a trip, both Sue and young Carrolton were fully aware of the desperate nature of such a venture. They set forth with active doubts. However, it was not until the single wagon had traversed almost the length of the Crow country that the thing which Sue Carrolton had dreaded hourly occurred. One minute she was gazing across an endless expanse of gray sage. The next minute half a hundred painted demons sprang from nowhere, completely surrounding the wagon. Two stalwart warriors seized the elder Carrolton before he could raise a hand. One lifted a tomahawk threateningly above his head. Two others had seized the bridle of Buck Carrolton's pony and wrenched his rifle from the buckskin scabbard. The terrified girl looked into savage faces in which she could read no mercy, merely cruel delight in such an easy victory. One brawny brave snatched the youngest Carrolton child from the rear of the wagon and held the little girl aloft as if about to dash out her brains against the wagon wheel.

Then, suddenly, murderous intentions seemed to be suspended in mid-air, as it were. The warrior lowered the little girl to earth. Those threatening Buck and the senior Carrolton drew away. She felt herself the center of all eyes. Hideously

painted faces were turned toward her. She shuddered, recalling tales of the lot of women who had been carried into Indian captivity. Every eye upon her, the savages discoursed excitedly among themselves. Some among them had recognized the girl as Coleman's blue-eyed squaw. Had not Black Elk himself purchased this girl from her father so that she might go to Coleman's lodge as his squaw? The Crows respected Coleman as a great warrior, a fast friend in times of peace, a valiant enemy in times of war. They would have taken his scalp with joy during war times. But even now Coleman had guided a party to make peace with Little Beaver and his Northern Cheyennes. The Crows had buried the hatchet with that tribe and now considered Little Beaver as their ally, although the two tribes did not operate together. This was Coleman's lodge. Could they murder the members of his lodge while he was endeavoring to make peace with their allies? Besides, it was through the ministrations of their own war chief that Coleman had gained this woman as his squaw.

They conferred excitedly among themselves. Then one fierce warrior, his face a painted mask of savagery, advanced and extended his hand to the girl.

"How!" he said. "How!"

The girl shrank from him, believing that the gesture was a command to go with him. Seeing her terror, he grinned, his face becoming even more terrifying. "No 'fraid," he said. "Co'man squaw. Co'man squaw. No 'fraid."

A chorus of "Hows" rose about her. Her heart seemed to beat again. They had recognized her as Coleman's squaw. Several braves shook Buck and the elder Carrolton vigorously by the hand as they had seen white men do. A warrior restored the terrified little girl to the wagon. The savages indicated by gesture that the party could proceed.

As the oxen plodded slowly on through the sage, that phrase, "Co'man's squaw, Co'man's squaw," kept cruising through Sue Carrolton's brain. As the lone emigrant wagon neared the edge of the country of the dreaded Cheyennes the girl observed smoke puffs by day and signal fires by night as Coleman had taught her to do on that other trip. As the days dragged by and the single wagon carried them ever nearer to the great main traveled trail, while never an Indian appeared to molest them, the girl felt some way as if Breck Coleman was reaching out to protect her. These particular savages, at least, would not harm her because she was Coleman's squaw.

The Carrolton family pulled out at last into the main trail and made camp on a little creek. A bull train a mile in length was disappearing into the West. Another, still miles away, was moving toward them. Within an hour a troop of blue-coated cavalymen, accompanied by two plainsmen and half a dozen Pawnee scouts, trotted past. The head of a long east-bound bull train pulled into view in the distance. Carrolton announced his intention of joining it for the eastward trip.

The girl was amazed at the amount of travel on the trail. Day by day they passed soldier outfits, emigrant wagons and tremendous bull trains. Pony-express riders and overland stages dashed past; an occasional mule-drawn army supply train. Some one told her that well over half a million oxen, mules and horses were that year employed in freighting, military, stage-coach, emigrant or other operations on the various overland trails. Perhaps she might get news of Coleman's whereabouts when the train reached Rapaho Gil's post, she thought.

But Rapaho Gil was gone. The robe trade had died. A stranger was running a store and saloon in Gilroy's old post. A small settlement had sprung up along the creek.

The girl could not know that even then Coleman, having returned with the soldier party to the Mandan villages, was on his way to the Montana mining camps in search of her. As the train pulled on toward Missouri she shook her head, recalling the time when the Crows had brought the ponies and furs to her father. She was sure now that Coleman had forgotten.

"Coleman's squaw!" she said bitterly. "Bought and paid for—but not delivered."

CHAPTER VII

It is reported that when Daniel Boone first stood in the passes of the Cumberlands and looked down upon the lovely valleys of Kentucky, swarming with great herds of bison, he said to his companions, "I am richer by far than the man in the Scriptures who owned the cattle on a thousand hills, for I own the wild cattle of more than a thousand valleys."

As in the west the buffalo laid out trails that traversed the prairies and disappeared in the sky, so in Kentucky their countless hooves had laid out broad roads. "Buffalo traces," the pioneering settlers termed these beaten highways. And it was over these traces laid out in advance for them by the shaggy herds that the settlers advanced into the wilderness of Kentucky and won it from savagery. The vast bison herds of Kentucky at first were believed to be inexhaustible. But the white men took a heavy toll. In a surprisingly short span of time the herds had been thinned out in eastern Tennessee and Kentucky, Ohio, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and the broad savannas of western Georgia. The countless buffalo of the Illinois prairies were next to suffer, and somewhere round 1830 the buffalo was believed to be extinct throughout all of its former great range everywhere east of the Mississippi River.

There were left then the countless millions of the shaggy legion that ranged from the plains of Texas to the Canadian prairies almost to Great Slave Lake, from the Mississippi to the high mountain meadows of the Rockies and in some places beyond that great divide.

But long prior to 1830 the white men had begun their deadly work upon the western herds. The first of that famous little group of men who became known as Northmen—Alexander Henry, Thompson, Peter Pond, and, slightly later, McKenzie, Frazer, Peter Ogden and others equally prominent in the annals of the Northwest Company—had penetrated far to the north and west to establish a trading post in 1775 or thereabouts, which later became known as Edmonton, Alberta.

The records left behind by those early *voyageurs* portrayed a picture of animal life in such abundance that even the African game fields scarce could equal it. In addition to the limitless herds of buffalo and antelope, great bands of deer and elk were everywhere in evidence on the prairies. Bears rambled unafraid across the open country. It was no unusual occurrence for a party of *voyageurs* to kill from three to a dozen bears in a day's journey if so inclined. To sight from fifty to a hundred wolves in a day's travel among the game herds was not unusual.

There is reason to believe that round 1800, in addition to the regular trade in furs and swan skins, kegs of pickled tongues constituted at least a small item of commerce. Shortly thereafter the American fur brigades pressed on to scour the West. They, too, took heavy toll of the herds. Then more than a quarter of a century of robe trading had accounted for millions of the shaggy brutes. The trade with Santa Fe, the settlers swarming into Texas and eastern Kansas, Iowa and the length of the Missouri River, hunters for the emigrant trains to Oregon and California, subsequent bull-train travel throughout the West, the numerous mining camps, overland stage and pony express stations and military posts—all had tended to reduce the numbers of the buffalo legions. And now the Kansas Pacific, pushing westward across Kansas, hired hunters to supply the grading and construction camps with meat.

The buffalo still were believed to be inexhaustible. But Breck Coleman was firmly of the opinion that there was not one buffalo remaining for every four that had roamed the plains in his early youth. The remaining herds were diminishing rapidly. The robe trade had died so of course the tremendous killing for robes had ceased. That would tend to offset the killing done by settlers and meat hunters. It would be a long time before the buffalo disappeared. Not in his lifetime, Coleman thought. If by any chance they did disappear, his occupation as a professional hunter would pass out with the buffalo. To what could he then turn for a livelihood? Cows, he thought. He had paid but little heed to all the talk of wealth to be derived from bringing Texas cows up to range on the prairies. But the sight of a big trail herd destined for the Dakota country had fired his imagination. Some day he would turn stockman. It would take money, though. However, he already had a considerable credit balance with a dozen or more stores and trading companies. He knew nothing of banking. When he sold his catch of furs—or formerly, before the robe trade had died, the buffalo robes he had secured from the Indians as an independent trader—to some trading company, he simply took such trade goods as he needed and left his credit balance on deposit. He could raise a sizable sum by collecting those various balances. He'd go on hunting and make as much more as was necessary. Then, when he felt inclined to change occupations, he would be prepared. He had been meat hunting for the new mining camp of Denver. But so many impoverished gold seekers had taken to hunting as a means of securing a grub-stake that the market had been over-supplied. Coleman could never be certain of selling a load of meat after he had hauled it into camp. He had moved toward the south and east, therefore, intending eventually to

view for himself those Texas trail herds that were arriving at central Kansas points.

He traveled with his two wagons, each drawn by four mules, the reins of the second rig handled by Dick Conley who had hired out to Coleman as helper in wolfing and meat hunting operations at a flat sum of five dollars a day. Just prior to sundown they made a halt on the prairie and cooked a meal. Half an hour after darkness had settled they hitched up and drove on for some five or six miles before stopping for the night. This as a precaution against being located and surprised by any prowling hostiles who might have seen the smoke of their cook-fire. This was dangerous country.

There was a hundred-mile-wide strip of country from round Fort McPherson on the Platte, stretching south across the Republican and past Fort Wallace on the Smoky Hill, including the Arkansas country from west of Fort Dodge eastward to Fort Larned and on south to the Cimarron and the Washita that was known to many plainsmen under the general name of the "war road" country.

From time immemorial both northern and southern plains tribes, when at war, had traversed that strip in raiding one another's country. There was peace among the tribes now. They had buried the hatchet among themselves. Sioux, Kiowas, Arapahoes, Comanches and the Northern and Southern Cheyennes still traveled the war road country in visiting back and forth. When war parties of any of those tribes traversed that stretch nowadays it was for the purpose of harrying the whites. But the tribes were quiet now. However, none knew better than Coleman that they would take to the war path unexpectedly when they did go out again. And that wouldn't be long, likely. Coleman did not believe in taking unnecessary chances with the red men.

On the second morning thereafter, he and Conley having made camp in the vicinity of a big buffalo herd, he started out on a meat hunt. Working up into the wind, he came first to the great herd bulls that always were to be found on the outskirts. But it was meat that Coleman wanted and these stringy old bulls were unfit for food. He worked his way up a ravine and presently came within range of a group of fifty or more cows, calves and yearlings.

The wind was right and before firing the first shot he made careful preparations by placing a hundred or so of the big Sharp cartridges in a row on the edge of the ravine. Resting the buffalo gun on his hat, which he had pressed down over the fresh earth of a gopher mound, he drew a careful bead behind the shoulder of a cow something over a hundred yards away.

He heard the impact of the heavy ball. The cow went down in a heap. The buffalo nearest her peered about in all directions but could see no enemy. Only Coleman's head showed above the bank of the ravine. The blood scent excited the animals and they drew near to inspect the stricken cow. One young bull lowered his head and gorged her carcass.

Another cow dropped as a slug from the big Sharp struck her behind the shoulder. The group of buffalo could see no enemy, the wind carried no tidings of danger to their nostrils and their stupidity was such that they failed to connect the distant reports with the casualties among their number as one after another fell prey to the sharpshooter in the ravine. The herd milled stupidly and Coleman, firing rapidly but accurately, dropped nineteen animals almost in their tracks with the big buffalo gun. Then a cow, slightly wounded, rushed madly away at the impact of the bullet. The panic was communicated to the rest of the herd. The remaining animals stampeded in the wake of the running cow. Other near-by groups became alarmed and ran in the same direction.

Coleman did not bother to cross to his victims. Instead, he returned to his horse, mounted and crossed a prairie ridge into the next valley. The buffalo there were unalarmed and he soon repeated his performance, killing twenty-three cows and yearlings from one stand. He rode back to the scene of his former operations and found Conley there with the wagons, already engaged in dressing out the kill.

The two men took only the hind quarters and a section of the back of each animal, leaving the foreparts for the wolves. Having dressed out and loaded the meat they repaired to the scene of the second kill. Then Coleman headed on toward Fort Wallace on the Smoky Hill route that led through Northern Kansas to the new mining camps of Colorado. There he disposed of his meat at the prevailing price of five dollars a saddle, which included the hind quarters and back of a buffalo.

A few days later he disposed of another load in Pond City, the settlement that had sprung up a few miles from Fort Wallace. Moving eastward along the Smoky Hill stage route, he encountered the outfits of many gold seekers, their prairie schooners bearing the legend "Pike's Peak or Bust." He sold some little meat at various overland stage stations along the trail, disposed of a full load of forty-odd saddles in Fort Hays and another in Hays City, a mile or more north

of the fort.

He found a ready market. The camp was buzzing with excitement over a coming sporting event that had been widely heralded on the plains. William Cody, formerly scout, freighter, overland stage driver and pony express rider for the great firm of Majors, Russel and Waddel, had hired out to the Kansas Pacific railroad contractors to provide the construction camps with buffalo meat. So successful had Cody been in this pursuit that the railroaders had bestowed upon him the title of Buffalo Bill.

William Comstock, noted scout and frontiersman, was a favorite among Army officers on the plains, particularly round Fort Wallace in the war road country. They insisted that if there was to be a Buffalo Bill on the plains, Comstock should have the title. Their partisans had induced the two principals to stage a match. The Kansas Pacific had advertised the event and booked excursionists from as far east as St. Louis.

Coleman decided to attend. Wild Bill Hickok, Sharp Grover and Coleman rode to Sheridan, where the contest was to be staged. Coleman found a vast concourse of people in Sheridan. Bets were running high. He was desirous of placing a wager but could not decide which contestant to back. He had known Cody when the latter had been riding pony express on the Sweetwater. Also, he was well acquainted with Comstock. Both were expert shots from the back of a running horse. Both were experienced buffalo hunters.

"What gun are you using, Bill?" he inquired of Comstock.

"Henry," Comstock informed him.

Cody was using the new army "needle" gun. It threw a much heavier ball than the Henry carbine. Coleman rather favored Cody's weapon against the Henry. The luck might break either way. Much would depend upon the horses. Cody, who had been hunting steadily for months, had his horse trained to a hair; and the animal had been kept in daily practice. Comstock's mount was a good buffalo horse but he had not been used so steadily of late. Coleman favored Brigham, Cody's horse. He decided to back Cody, producing gold drafts on St. Joseph traders that had been given him in payment for wolf pelts, and credit slips on several near-by trading companies. Having made up his mind, he was prepared to back his judgment to the limit. He managed to place round twelve hundred dollars, even money.

The officers of Fort Wallace and vicinity favored Comstock. The railroad element backed Cody to win. Plainsmen and freighters were divided of opinion. The swarm of excursionists bet on either man, according to the various counsel they received from those who considered themselves authorities.

A herd was located not far from town. The spectators flocked to a low prairie ridge from which an excellent view could be obtained. The starter gave the signal and Comstock and Cody raced down upon the herd. The spectators cheered with wild enthusiasm as each of the trained horses carried his rider alongside a running buffalo. Both men fired. Both buffalo went down. The horses, without breaking their stride, swooped to the flanks of the next victims.

Both horses knew their jobs to perfection. Their riders were left free to attend to their shooting. Both men were dead shots. The reports drifted back to the ears of the spectators in swift succession. One after another, with incredible rapidity, buffalo fell dead at each report.

This was everyday business with Brigham, a sport he loved. His proficiency was such that drawing alongside of each buffalo in turn seemed effortless. The chase disappeared in the distance. Spectators swarmed along the course on horseback and in buckboards. The official counters who had accompanied the run tallied each contestant's buffalo as they fell.

Cody and Comstock had stopped to rest their horses. The official count revealed that Cody had killed thirty-eight buffalo, Comstock twenty-three. Two more runs were to be made before sundown. During the last chase of the three, Cody stripped saddle and bridle from the gallant Brigham and merely headed the buffalo horse down upon the herd at full speed. The horse performed with the same clocklike precision that he had shown in the preceding two runs.

The final tally for the day accounted for one hundred and seventeen buffalo, Cody sixty-nine, Comstock forty-eight. Cody retained the title of Buffalo Bill. The latter informed Coleman that he had killed well over four thousand head of buffalo during his year and a half of hunting for the Kansas Pacific construction camps.

Coleman was twelve hundred dollars to the good. "That'll buy a few cows, once I'm ready to start up in business," he

mused. "I reckon now I'll mosey along east and see some o' those trail herds coming through."

It was to be some time, however, before he was destined to see the trail herds. While riding eastward on the Smoky Hill route, he met a party of gold seekers headed toward the new mining excitement in Colorado. From one of the number he learned that a group of Missouri families, weary of California and other western points, had settled on the Big Blue, well to the Northeast, and that other discouraged Missourians, returning from the West, were settling near that first colony. With the hope of locating the Carroltons, he left the trail and angled northeast toward the head of the Blue. The settlers thereabouts had not heard of the Carroltons.

It was while returning westward along the route of the Kansas Pacific that he observed a big claybank mule among the many long-eared hybrids in a contractor's camp. It was not likely that this animal had any connection with that former tragedy, he reflected, or even that he could trace the connection definitely in case this mule happened to be the same claybank. Still, he hadn't seen a claybank mule in the intervening time. There were not many.

"Let's see," the contractor said in answer to Coleman's query. "That claybank critter? I bought him last year along with twenty head from a party named Enders. Him and his two pardners is sizable mule traders. No, I don't just recall the names of the other two."

Coleman did not know any one by the name of Enders. Nothing to be learned here, he thought. He headed on west toward Fort Wallace. There seemed something odd about the appearance of the next stage station on the Smoky Hill road as he viewed it from a distance. He could not say just what was wrong but that ever present, almost animal wariness rose within him. He quit the road and held to open country where there was no possibility of an ambush, approaching the stage station from the rear. There were no horses in the corral and none grazing on the near-by prairie. It was that general dearth of stock, no doubt, that had occasioned his distrust even at a distance, without his having been able to name the character of the deviation from normal. He knew now that something was grossly wrong. Approaching cautiously, he discovered the bodies of the two stock tenders and the station keeper, scalped, stripped and mutilated, the bodies stuck full of arrows of both Sioux and Cheyenne make. He rode on into Wallace at night, where he was greeted by Sharp Grover, Comstock and California Joe.

"Lucky to get in with your hair," Comstock said. "The tribes have gone out again. Thar's hell to pay on the war road country these days."

He explained the situation. Generals Hancock and Custer had been sent with fifteen hundred men to hold a conference with the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Sioux, Kiowas and Comanches to inquire just why the young men of those tribes had been pillaging on the overland trails of Kansas when supposed to be at peace. Upon the arrival of the expedition at Fort Larned it was learned that the Sioux and Cheyennes had come north of the Arkansas. The two generals had held conference on the Pawnee Fork with chiefs Bull Bear, Roman Nose and Medicine Wolf of the Cheyennes, Pawnee Killer, Bad Wound, Tall Bear and other chiefs of the Sioux. Roman Nose had explained that the reason for the depredations on the part of the dog soldiers of the Cheyennes had been in a spirit of revenge for the Chivington Massacre a few years back, when an exasperated citizenry and soldiery had surprised and exterminated an entire Cheyenne village on Sand Creek. But the generals had been assured that no further hostilities were intended. Every evidence of friendliness was given by the chiefs. And the following morning the huge village had been found deserted. The Indians had headed north. Custer's command, with Wild Bill Hickok and a detachment of white scouts and another of Delaware Indian scouts had started in pursuit while Hancock marched on to Fort Dodge to hold conference with Satanta, Lone Wolf and Kicking Bird of the Kiowas, Yellow Bear and Little Raven of the Arapahoes. Those, too, had given utmost assurances of peaceful intentions. Satanta himself had just returned from a swift and bloody raid in Texas, which, he gracefully explained to the officers, had been perpetrated, not by himself but by a marauding band of Apaches. The savages had retired—and a week later Satanta himself led the assault against Fort Dodge.

Before Custer could overtake the north-bound Sioux and Cheyennes, they had swooped across the overland stage route along the Smoky Hill between Fort Wallace and Fort Hays, surprising and murdering the occupants of the overland stage stations.

"This here's a general war, and no mistake," Comstock said to Coleman.

"Real war, this time," Coleman assented. "It was bound to come. The Injuns have been hatching a general outbreak for two years to try and drive the whites out of the buffalo country between the Arkansas and the Platte. That's what it's all

about. The Northern Cheyennes and the Brûlé and Ogalallah Sioux of the North will dip into it mighty soon."

He sold his mules to the government and he and Dick Conley volunteered as scouts. Every plainsman possessed some favorite horse or mule in which he placed great reliance. Coleman was no exception. His favorite mount, Fleabit, revealed few points of excellence to the average civilized judge of horse-flesh. But he possessed every requisite demanded by plainsmen and Indian warriors alike—speed and staying qualities in abundance. He could carry Coleman from sixty to eighty miles in a day when necessary and, after a day's rest, he was no worse for his exertions.

Coleman was detailed to carry dispatches to Fort Dodge on the Arkansas. Declining an escort of a dozen men, he elected to set forth alone. In common with all plainsmen of experience he preferred to travel alone or with but one companion when engaged upon such a mission. A single scout could get through where a small detachment of troops would fail. Hence all plainsmen considered such an escort a handicap rather than an advantage.

Setting forth at nightfall, Coleman rode steadily until two hours before dawn. In the center of a ten-mile expanse of prairie, he slept while Fleabit, his lariat attached to his master's hand, grazed eagerly. After resting himself and Fleabit for two hours he started on. It was not until he was within five miles of Fort Dodge that he encountered trouble. Then twenty-odd Comanches and Kiowas spurred their ponies from a depression a half-mile to his left and endeavored to outrun him in the race for the fort. Fleabit stretched out into his greyhound stride and even the fresh mounts of the Comanches and Kiowas, lashed to furious speed by their riders, gained on him but slowly.

Nevertheless, the foremost warriors were but two hundred yards behind when Coleman had yet a mile to go. The savages opened with repeating carbines and the balls whined past too close for comfort. Coleman, giving Fleabit his head, turned in the saddle and opened on his pursuers with his rifle in an effort to retard them.

A sentry on duty at the post had discovered the race. A cannon boomed thunderously from the walls of the fort and a troop of cavalry issued from it, deployed at a gallop and charged down to meet the fleeing dispatch bearer and his assailants. The savages dispersed and lashed their mounts toward safety.

Two days later Coleman headed back toward Fort Wallace. Throughout the duration of the uprising, his activities centered round that post. Wallace was, in fact, the central spot in a general war that raged throughout the western half of Kansas. He carried dispatches to other posts and to commands operating in the field and scouted for various detachments. Woodcutters for the fort were attacked and slain repeatedly. The Rose Creek ranch supplied Wallace with several hundred tons of hay a year. It scarcely could be harvested now without heavy escorts of troops for the hay cutters. Buffalo swarmed on the adjacent prairies but hunting them to supply the fort with meat was extremely hazardous as the war increased in magnitude and intensity. In all of these activities Coleman played a part in common with other scouts.

A man one day boasted of the part he had played in Quantrill's bloody raid on Lawrence. Comstock shot him dead on the porch of the sutler's store in Fort Wallace. Comstock retired to the Rose Creek Ranch, which he now owned. Generals Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman came to Wallace *en route* to Denver. There was hope of keeping the Smoky Hill route to the Colorado mining camps open despite Indian depredations. Sheridan induced Comstock to return to Wallace as scout and he consented to guide Custer's command north from Hays on past the Republican to the Platte. The young men of every plains tribe painted for war and rode forth upon the bloody trail. A supply train of Custer's outfit fought a desperate engagement with Pawnee Killer's band of Sioux just outside of Wallace. Lieutenant Kidder's detachment, dispatched from Fort McPherson on the Platte by General Sherman, was attacked and killed to the last man at the point of the supply train's battle of a few days before.

All of Coleman's old-time friends were scouting for various detachments. Jim Bridger was chief of scouts for Crook far up in the northwest. Buffalo Bill was chief of scouts for General Carr's command, operating between the Arkansas and the Smoky Hill, with Wild Bill Hickok attached to the same command. Similarly, because of the extremely hazardous nature of their work, there was correspondingly great mortality among the scouts. Sharp Grover and Comstock left Wallace to make a scout round the headwaters of the Solomon River. Grover, badly wounded, returned to Wallace to report that Black Kettle's dog soldiers had taken Comstock's scalp.

Recovering, Grover marched with Forsythe's scouts to the Arickaree Fork of the Republican. There the fifty scouts were attacked by an overwhelming force of Cheyennes, Brûlé and Ogalallah Sioux who had swooped down from the north. For nine days, until the survivors were relieved by troops from Wallace, the scouts fought the historic battle of Beecher's

Island. Several of Coleman's friends went down in that engagement.

Wild Bill Hickok rode into Wallace, shot three times through the body during a desperate single-handed engagement with savages while carrying dispatches, and was mustered out for physical disability. Custer had appointed California Joe as his chief of scouts. Sharp Grover, who had succeeded Comstock as owner of the Rose Creek Ranch, was shot down by a man during a quarrel. Frank Nixon took it over and was killed shortly thereafter by a man who resented Nixon's efforts to ride a horse into his place of business in Pond City, just outside Fort Wallace. Homer Wheeler, post trader at Wallace, later to become Colonel Wheeler of the United States Cavalry, acquired ownership of the ranch and stocked it with the first herd of cattle to be brought into northwestern Kansas. The buffalo herds were so tremendous, the Wallace region being in the very heart of the best buffalo range on the continent, that it was extremely difficult to prevent the cattle from joining them and straying to parts unknown.

Coleman, traveling at night with dispatches and hiding out by day, drew within a dozen miles of the Rose Creek Ranch some two hours after sundown. A dim glow of coals caused him to investigate cautiously. The remains of an emigrant wagon smouldered there, and near it the mutilated bodies of a man and a woman.

Another two miles and he reined in Fleabit as an unearthly shriek, faint from distance, drifted to his ears. "Captive," he said, and cursed savagely below his breath. He headed toward the sound, guided by occasional animal screams of anguish. The night was velvet black. The rays of a small fire presently rewarded him. Riding within four hundred yards, he dismounted and tied Fleabit's head down to a forefoot with a hitch that could be loosened with a single tug at the free end of the rope and left the horse standing there on the prairie.

His moccasins made no sound as he drew near the revolting scene and the twenty-odd savages who made up the war party were too thoroughly engrossed with their devilish game to have ears for anything save the tortured shrieks of their victim and their own shouts of derision. The captive was staked out upon his back on the prairie. The painted fiends were nearing the end of their ingenuity for they had kindled a tiny fire upon his naked breast, the inevitable prelude to the end when plains savages of whatever tribe staked out a captive. The victim was too far gone to live, even if freed, but the savages might make life last in him for another few dreadful hours. There was no chance for a rescue.

Coleman, having crept within fifty yards, knew what he must do. There was but one release for the captive. Coleman lined carefully down the barrel of his rifle, a new .44 calibre Henry with sixteen rim-fire cartridges in the magazine. He aimed not at the cluster of squatting savages but at the armpit of the victim just below the tiny fire that blazed on his bare chest. With the roar of the Henry a scream was cut short and Coleman knew that the messenger of mercy had found its mark. Three more shots in swift succession he pumped into the ranks of the scattering savages. One fell across the body of the victim.

So accustomed to warfare and surprises were the savages that within three seconds from the first report of the Henry the group had dispersed, racing for their ponies on the far side of the fire. Coleman lifted his voice in the Missouri yell that had been the war cry of the old mountain men. The savages knew and dreaded it.

But even as it left his lips, Coleman was leaping away from, not toward, the fire in a swift sprint for his horse. It would require some minutes for the warriors to make sure that attacking forces were not upon them. Coleman reached Fleabit, pulled the rope end that released the hitch, mounted and fled on through the night. After a few hours he reached Rose Creek Ranch and stopped there for an hour before heading on for Wallace.

He made no mention of his exploit. Too many there were who would censure his act. He only hoped that when his own time came to be a staked-out captive, if it did, some prowling plainsman would do as much for him.

The war increased in scope. Pitched battles were fought between the troops and the savages on the Platte, Republican, Arickaree Fork, Punished Woman's Fork, Smoky Hill, Walnut, Sand Creek, Beaver, Pawnee Fork and the Arkansas. The Cheyennes captured and burned a Union Pacific train and held the line at Plum Creek. Colonel Dodge, two companies of white troops, and a company of Pawnee scouts routed the Cheyennes, reopening the line. The Pawnees took twenty Cheyenne scalps.

Custer's winter campaign far south into the unknown regions of northwest Texas and his surprise attack and defeat of Black Kettle's and Little Rock's village of hostiles on the Washita occasioned the first weakening of the savages' determination to fight to the bitter end. California Joe came in for immortal fame in that campaign.

And throughout, eastern humanitarians, through the press, clamored for peace at any price, assailing the frontiersmen and the army officers in the field as the instigators of the war. Indian agents, eager to exonerate their charges so that they might retain their easy berths and the financial advantages that accrued therefrom, supplied the savages with arms and ammunition, much of it government issue, and were loud in their denunciation of the settlers and the army. The Indian Bureau blamed the War Department and still the bloody war continued throughout the western half of Kansas. All who were in the theatre of war, plainsmen, settlers, army officers and Indian chiefs alike, recognized this struggle for what it was. It had been inevitable from the first. The plains tribes long had planned this general uprising. It was one last desperate attempt on the part of the Indians to retain for themselves the splendid buffalo country between the Arkansas and the Platte. There could be no compromise. It must be fought to a finish to determine for all time whether the best of all the buffalo country was to belong to the white man or to the red.

It was decided eventually in favor of the white men at the treaty of Medicine Lodge.

CHAPTER VIII

Coleman and Dick Conley loaded the two new freight wagons with meat and headed for Fort Wallace. Hunting was relatively safe now since the power of the tribes had been broken. Not that there weren't plenty of small war parties prowling about on the watch for easy scalps and plunder. Still, there was no general war on. And the added measure of safety had induced many to turn their hands to hunting. Coleman knew that there was no certainty of selling a load of meat after making the kill and freighting the meat to some post or settlement.

He merely hoped that other hunters had not visited Wallace and supplied it with meat in the past week or so. As he drew near he observed two wagons in the distance, headed toward Wallace. No doubt it was another hunting outfit. Anyway, he'd beat the other wagons in by a comfortable margin.

Captain Stone stood talking to Rapaho Gil and California Joe in the compound.

"That's Breck Coleman's outfit," Rapaho Gil stated, indicating the approaching wagons.

Captain Stone's eyes sparkled. Since that first trip on the plains with Coleman, Stone had become a seasoned Indian campaigner, short as the time had been. Almost constantly his troop had been in the saddle attached to one or another of the commands that had been operating continuously against the unruly plains tribes from Texas to Montana. He knew that much of the knowledge of savages and their tactics that had stood him in such good stead had been gathered from Coleman. To Stone's knowledge, Coleman never had repeated the story of a young officer who had run his horse to a standstill, failed to reload his guns, then had mistaken a war party of mounted Sioux two miles or more away for a flock of wild turkeys a few hundred yards removed. Later, when the sting had gone out of the recollection and only the humor of it remained, Stone had told the tale himself. It had become a stock yarn in western army circles.

Stone indulged in a deep-chested laugh. "I'll be glad to see him again. He probably thought me a stupid animal."

"Wrong," Rapaho Gil said. "I seen him at Fort Kearney not long after and he says you had more hoss sense than the big run of young officers he'd knowed."

Stone found that he was pleased out of all proportion to the magnitude of the compliment. He stepped forward and wrung Coleman's hand as the latter descended from the wagon.

Wallace now was a sizable place. Civilian families flocked round the wagons to purchase meat at the going rate of five dollars a saddle. Mess sergeants purchased meat from their company funds. Officers' wives sent their servants.

"I'm a graduate turkey hunter now, Coleman," Captain Stone reported. "I can tell the difference between a turkey and a war-bonneted Sioux as far as I can see one."

He related to Coleman the story of what was probably the biggest turkey hunt in history. Returning with Sheridan's and Custer's commands from a campaign against the southern tribes, the expedition had camped on the North Fork of the Canadian, just south of the Kansas border. The scattered timber along the creek bottoms had literally swarmed with great flocks of turkeys, so tame as to afford the easiest of hunting. The enlisted men of the command had been given permission to engage in a general turkey hunt and in the next few hours at least five thousand of the big birds had been slain.

Coleman watched the two wagons, loaded with buffalo saddles, approach. There were three men in the outfit. Coleman recognized Flack as the driver of the lead wagon. Conley had sold out Coleman's meat and Flack found no market for his load.

Flack was loud in his denunciation, both of Coleman for intruding upon what Flack chose to term his territory, and of the occupants of the post for purchasing from others when he had been selling meat there steadily for two months.

"I bring in a load of meat every week. But you all buy from the first outfit that turns ahead of me. I suppose you think my meat can rot!"

"Any hunting outfit is privileged to sell meat here any time there is a market for it," Captain Stone returned coldly. "The fact that you have been selling meat here whenever you found a market for it does not give you a monopoly. Hunting is free to all."

Rapaho Gil spoke to the two men who rode the second wagon, calling them by name. Bronson and Enders were the names he used. Coleman inspected Enders carefully. So he was a trader of mules, with two partners, according to the contractor who had sported a claybank mule in his string.

"You three men partners in business?" Coleman inquired of Flack.

"Yeah," Flack assented. The ex-wagon boss knew the calibre of the four men and contented himself with grumbling. "You're cutting in on my territory," he said to Coleman. "Why don't you pull out somewhar else? I was hunting round here first."

"Move out if you don't like company," Coleman said shortly.

He walked to his wagon and thrust an arm into his war bag. He returned carrying a small buckskin sack. "Every Injun carries his medicine bag. I picked up the habit, sort of, living so long amongst 'em. Ever see what I pack in mine, Lieutenant?"

"Stone is a captain now," California Joe corrected.

"Right glad to hear it," Coleman congratulated.

He drew forth three short lengths of stick, one end of each chewed to a fibrous brush, and a heavy turquoise and silver earring. Recognizing the objects instantly, Stone lifted his gaze to Coleman's face. But Coleman was gazing steadily at Flack. Stone's eyes, too, turned to Flack. The ruffian was staring at the objects in Coleman's hand as if fascinated. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl. Then his eyes flitted from one to another of the group. California Joe and Rapaho Gil were interested spectators, sensing that there was some underlying significance in this byplay but unaware of the nature of it.

"Hell's bells!" Rapaho Gil yelped suddenly, leaning forward. "No man could mistake that, who'd seen it, once. Last time I set eyes on it 'twas dangling from old Ike Williams' ear. I've knowed that bauble for close to thirty year."

"What's this, Coleman?" Captain Stone asked quietly, his eyes still on Flack's livid face.

"Just the contents of my medicine bag," Coleman returned. But his eyes were hard as he trained them on Flack.

"Come on, Flack," Enders urged. "No money to be picked up here. Let's dangle."

Flack mounted the lead wagon and the outfit left the post.

"Do you think that's the man?" Stone inquired of Coleman, drawing him aside.

"Couldn't get the least line on his whereabouts round that time—or pick up a word as to whether he'd come east on the Oregon Trail about then with a claybank mule in the outfit," Coleman said. "But a man named Enders sold a claybank mule to a contractor on the Kansas Pacific."

"Do you think there's enough evidence to order their arrest?" Stone asked.

Slowly, Coleman shook his head. "It wouldn't hold together."

He drove from Wallace in mid-afternoon and made camp five miles or more away. He shot a cow elk in a creek bottom for camp meat. That night he produced a letter from his hunting frock and slit the envelope. It had been handed to him at Fort Wallace. That letter had been written by himself, with the help of army officers, and addressed to Sue Carrolton, Pike County, Missouri. An acquaintance had suggested that he put a return address on it in case it did not reach the girl. Well, it hadn't reached her. After all the months, it had been returned to him. Evidently then, the Carroltons had not returned to their old home. Probably Sue had forgotten all about him—likely was married to some one else by this time. But he had figured, some way, that she'd wait for him. He had planned the big stock ranch of the future with Sue as the mistress of it, installed in the ranch house.

He'd predicted once, he recalled now, that when there were no new places left to go, Sue and himself would backtrack eastward along the trail that their ancestors had blazed into the West. It had been only a fanciful remark. But it had come to pass. Already Sue had started on that return journey. How far to the east had she gone? He himself had been part of the

backlash, so to speak. Born on the Oregon Trail and reared in a trading post on Snake River, here he was now meat hunting on the Kansas prairies. Well, why not? A hunter must hunt where he could find a market for his game.

But he and Sue Carrolton had not been alone in that return movement; far from it. The westward travel was many times heavier than the travel east, but the trails saw no lack of discouraged or home-sick parties returning eastward from California and Oregon. Many of the outfits whose wagons had been labelled "Pike's Peak or Bust" had busted before reaching the new Colorado mining camps or had found no gold after reaching them. But the main travel was west—always would be, likely, Coleman decided.

His thoughts reverted to Flack. He had a strong conviction, somehow, that Flack had had a hand in old Ike Williams' taking off. But there was little evidence to support his belief. Chewing a stick or straw was a common practice. True, Flack chewed a stick more savagely than most. But no such evidence would hold in criminal court or court martial. And a claybank mule might have been bought and sold several times before reaching Enders' hands.

Killing men for their outfits was nothing unusual in the West. On the contrary, such affairs were of commonplace occurrence. The border ruffian element from the Missouri-Kansas border had spread throughout the West after the close of the Civil War—both Missourians and Jayhawkers alike steeped in bloodshed after the long years of sanguinary frontier strife. Taking human life meant little or nothing to such men. In addition, deserters from both armies had sought refuge in the uncharted regions of the West during the progress of the war. Upon its termination, those restless spirits who found it difficult to settle down to peaceful pursuits had quit civilization and headed west. Also, criminals released from eastern prisons and those whose crimes made them apprehensive of imprisonment, had flocked to this new region that was just being opened up. Where murdering for gain became too rampant, miners' safety committees, vigilantes or "stranglers", organized to take the law into their own hands and hang the offenders. Town marshals administered single-handed justice in many new camps. The military took a hand on occasion and court martials were not few. Citizens frequently organized themselves into posses to pursue, capture, try and execute some malefactor on the spot. For a few citizens to deal out summary justice to murderer or thief and leave him swinging in the breeze was considered well within the lawful rights of honest men. Scarcely a cottonwood grove the length and breadth of the plains but what, at one time or another, had served as gallows for some party of desperadoes. Still, that breed swarmed in profusion, gathering new recruits faster than the shooting and hanging citizenry could blot them out. Every man went armed. To kill a man in a personal quarrel, provided that the deceased had been given anywhere near an even break, was not considered cause for interference. Even in court, a man had merely to prove that his deceased opponent had been armed and had made a move for his gun. Inevitably, the jury freed him. To shoot an unarmed man or to shoot from behind was frowned upon by the citizenry and apt to result in a popular lynching unless the perpetrator decamped before irate citizens took his case in hand. Human life was cheaply held and swiftly taken upon slight excuse.

A cow elk yelped from somewhere close at hand. The gruff bark of a doe antelope sounded from the prairie. The wolves began their nightly serenade. A family group of those marauders were snarling over the entrails and foreparts of the elk that Coleman had shot a few yards down the creek.

Coleman laid aside his pondering and slept. In the early morning he and Dick Conley broke camp and drove on across the prairies. They topped out on a low divide and there before them in the next sag a trail herd of Texas longhorns was moving to the north. Two men rode the points to guide the leaders. At intervals along the sides of the long narrow string of cows rode flankers and, far back behind, several men rode the "drags", hazing on the laggards. Then came the chuck wagon and behind it the cavayado or "cavvy yard", the extra horses of the outfit in the care of the day horse herder and the "nighthawk", the man whose duty it was to ride herd on the horses at night.

Again the sight thrilled Coleman. He halted his mule wagons a hundred yards away lest a closer approach should frighten the passing herd.

"Where you headed for?" he called to one of the flank riders.

"Montana bound," the puncher shouted back.

As the rear of herd drew almost abreast of the wagons, a yearling broke from his fellows and made a run toward Coleman. One of the drag riders jumped his horse after the animal to head it back. He passed near the wagons and waved a hand in sudden recognition.

"Hello, Breck!" he shouted.

The rider was but a youth, tall and rangy, a downy beard already concealing the lower part of his face. Coleman couldn't place the boy although there was something hauntingly familiar about his face. He'd run across him before somewhere. Ordinarily, he would have dismissed the matter from his mind and thought no more about it. But that face kept recurring in his thoughts and teasing for identification. It was not until two weeks later that Coleman gave voice to a sudden oath. So Buckner Carrolton, the boy who had been so eager to touch off that old flintlock at the savages during the trip to Virginia City, had grown up and traveled south with a bunch of returning drovers to become a Texas cowboy. And now he was riding up the trail on the long drive from Texas to Montana with a trail herd. It had been young Buck Carrolton, that rider; no doubt of that, now that Coleman's memory had clicked. Why hadn't he recognized the boy at first glance so that he could have made inquiry as to Sue Carrolton's whereabouts? Had the whole family gone to Texas? Coleman found himself unable to answer his own query.

CHAPTER IX

The federal government had subsidized the various railroad companies that were laying their tracks westward through virgin country. It was a land subsidy, instead of grants of cash. In most instances the country on either side of the proposed right-of-ways had been checkerboarded into sections, the railroad gaining ownership of every alternate section for from ten to twenty miles on either side of its tracks.

The more rapidly construction work was pushed ahead, the more rapidly the railroad lands on either side of the right-of-way could be sold to aspiring settlers, providing the funds for still further swift construction.

The Carrolton family, destitute by the time its single wagon had reached northern Kansas on the return journey, had been forced to tarry and rest their toil-worn oxen. Carrolton heard of the high wages being paid for expert mule skinners in the grading camps of the Kansas Pacific. He trekked thither and found work at once. Settlers were taking up homesteads on open sections or buying in the alternate sections of railroad land for miles on either side of the tracks.

Towns were springing up along the right-of-way. Hundreds of Missourians were numbered among the settlers. Carrolton felt himself at home. Particularly, he knew every trait of the Missouri mule. After a few months his knowledge of mule skinning and bullwhacking caused the contractors to promote him and he became foreman of a grading crew at a stipend of ninety dollars a month. That seemed to Carrolton a princely sum. It furnished food and new clothing for his offspring. Talk of rising land values induced him to file upon a piece of land himself.

He located his family on an open quarter section and built a sizable sod house. Young Buckner Carrolton, with the four oxen, put in a few acres of wheat and corn, an acre of potatoes and squashes. Sue Carrolton assigned the younger children to the task of planting every variety of garden truck. The elder Carrolton provided her with chickens, turkeys and two cows.

But farming was not to the taste of young Buck Carrolton. Adventure called him. Not far from the Carrolton place, the little town of Abilene had made a bid for the Texas cattle trade. Men were sent east to induce buyers to meet the drovers at Abilene. Others were sent to the south to meet the trail bosses on their way north with herds and guide them to the new village that felt the urge to become the cattle metropolis of the West.

The herds rolled into Abilene. Buyers were there in plenty. And young Buck Carrolton bade his family good-bye and rode down the long trail to Texas with returning cowboys, intent upon accompanying another trail herd from Texas to the Kansas prairies the next season.

Almost overnight, Abilene had leaped into world-wide fame as a cow town. It was reported that hundreds of thousands of long horns were being gathered in Texas preparatory to starting them north toward Abilene in trail herds the following spring. The little camp mushroomed. Gamblers and speculators flocked there. Dance halls and saloons sprang up in profusion. The place swarmed with cattle buyers, army officers, sporting men, railroad men and the wild riders from Texas as each new herd came up the trail. Iowa and the Dakotas, even far off Montana, were intent upon stocking their ranges with Texas cows. Buyers from those points came to Abilene to bid for trail herds.

And as the town boomed and prospered, Sue Carrolton prospered also to a mild extent. Twice a week she hitched two ponies to a buckboard and hauled garden truck, butter and eggs and poultry into Abilene, where prices were extremely high. Usually her next younger sister, Linda Carrolton, accompanied her. Both girls now had new dresses and both were in great demand at dances and other social functions in the growing cow town.

A frame addition had been built onto the original sod house and this room was seldom without its quota of male visitors in the evenings. In a community where men predominated overwhelmingly in numbers and female society was largely obtainable only in the dance halls, the two sisters had become well-known belles of the countryside.

The sharp edge of her anguish over having lost her first love had dulled. There were times when she told herself that she had forgotten Coleman. During the excitement of various social events and the surplus of masculine attention that was showered upon her, she did forget temporarily. When she remembered again, which she always did, she thought of Breck Coleman with more than a trace of bitterness for his desertion of her.

Flack was much in Abilene with his two principal associates. Enders, dark and suave, was a person of considerable

poise and polish of manner. His speech hinted of former educational advantages. Bronson, the third member of the trio, the youngest, was a curly-haired youngster in the middle twenties. Flack had trimmed his red beard and pruned down his flowing mustache, which improvements gave him somewhat the air of a professorial gorilla.

The three men had prospered and were known in Abilene as men of substantial means. It was known that they traded heavily in oxen, mules and horses in addition to the fact that they had had several meat-hunting outfits in their employ. Once, at least, they had come to Abilene to meet and dispose of a big trail herd of some three thousand head of cows which they purported to have bought. The half-dozen men who had arrived in charge of the herd seemed very few in numbers to have conducted so large a herd up over the long trail from Texas. And they had not been typical drovers.

Flack, Enders and Bronson had turned the herd quickly to a Dakota buyer who had started on with it at once. There had been some later gossip to the effect that the six men who had arrived with the herd had murdered the original trail crew just after the outfit had crossed the Arkansas, then had appropriated the herd and sold it to Flack and his two partners on the trail. No censure could attach to the purchasing trio for that. The bill of sale had been in order, apparently. Besides, there had been so much talk of that variety—and with cause. The border ruffian element of southwest Missouri and southeast Kansas had murdered so many trail crews and stolen so many herds that the practice had killed Baxter Springs, Kansas, as a cattle market within a space of two years. No sensible trail boss would divert his charges to that point no matter how tempting the promises of high prices and ready markets awaiting him there. Baxter Springs, the first boom cow town, had died an unnatural death and nothing could resuscitate it.

Flack and his associates spoke vaguely of large deals in livestock, grading contracts on various railroads then being constructed and of various other ventures of magnitude. A man's business was his own, in Abilene as elsewhere on the plains, and definite inquiry was considered the worst possible breach of etiquette.

Sue Carrolton still retained her original aversion for Flack, softened somewhat, perhaps, by time and the cessation of his train-boss manner. She no longer felt actively hostile toward him but still could accord him only civility, no friendliness.

Seeing this, Flack confined his attentions to Linda, the younger sister. Enders and Bronson vied with one another in their courtship of Sue. She found herself flattered by the considerate regard accorded her by the older man, amused and slightly stirred by the impetuous declarations of the younger Bronson. When she heard of the latter's wild sprees in the dives of Abilene and chided him upon his habits, he excused himself on the grounds of loneliness when he was out of her sight. He was out of her sight frequently, as were the others. The three men left for long trips to various parts of the country. When they returned to Abilene they were much in evidence at the Carrolton homestead. Rumor linked Sue's name with that of Bronson and it was predicted in Abilene that a wedding was not far off. Sue, however, still engrossed with her responsibilities toward the younger members of the family, accused herself of being unable to respond to the advances of her various suitors. Her old wild love for Breck Coleman, of course, had died long since, she assured herself repeatedly. But she seemed unable to accord any such measure of affection to another. All of which caused her to think of Coleman with added bitterness.

The general uprising of the tribes was in full progress a bit to the westward. Troops came through Abilene by trainloads. Then Sue began to hear Breck Coleman's name mentioned among those other well-known scouts whose exploits were on every tongue. She learned by casual inquiry that he had been meat-hunting for western Kansas forts and camps for some months before the outbreak.

She knew that the popularity of the Carrolton sisters had traveled the length of the Kansas Pacific on the tongues of railroad men and army officers. She tossed her head and told herself that, since Coleman had not troubled to come and see her, at least he must know that she was experiencing no lack of suitors. She went about more with Bronson, willing that the tale of the prosperous young man's devotion to her should reach Coleman's ears.

Abilene leaped into world-wide fame, not alone as the cattle metropolis of the West but as the wildest and wickedest camp on earth. Saloons, brothels, dance halls and gambling houses roared wide open every hour of the day and night. Every man went armed. Desperadoes stalked the streets and shot men down in quarrels with the slightest excuse. Soldiers off on leave waxed drunk and shot it out with hard-faced civilians who took exceptions to their activities. Wild trail crews of Texas cowboys, drawing their pay after the long months on the trail and feeling the need of relaxation, went on frantic sprees, rode their horses into various establishments and pulled their guns on all who objected. Most of the men of Sue Carrolton's acquaintance wore notches on their guns as evidence of having come off victor in deadly affrays. Young as he was, Al Bronson had a reputation as a gunman and his Frontier Model six-shooter sported a notch

for each of its six chambers.

Abilene tried in vain to become a law and order camp. Successive peace officers failed even to retard the lawlessness and almost nightly shootings. At last Wild Bill Hickok was induced to come to Abilene as town marshal. The noted scout and gunman, single-handed, tamed this most lawless spot on earth.

Most of the noted gunmen of the plains were Hickok's friends of long years' standing. Such desperadoes as were not his friends knew him as an exceptionally deadly antagonist. Many, nevertheless, did not lack the courage to confront him. Each in turn learned just too late that Wild Bill was perfectly capable of doing what he had declared he would do—bury every turbulent ruffian who set out to upset the peace of Abilene. Shootings declined to a minimum, became extremely rare. Every man who engaged in pistol practice found himself face to face with the town marshal in very short order.

Hickok came upon occasion to visit for an evening at the Carrolton farm. Sue marveled at the intense flame in his blue eyes, contrasting so sharply with the man's extreme placidity of countenance.

Then young Buck Carrolton, having returned after the start of the new year from accompanying the trail herd to far-off Montana, stopped briefly in Abilene on his way to the Carrolton farm. The members of his family greeted the returning way-farer with boundless affection.

"You been seeing considerable of Al Bronson of late, Sue, I heard in Abilene," he said after a space.

The girl nodded. "Considerable," she mimicked. "But not just of late. He's been away for a few weeks. Linda heard that he had come back to Abilene last night."

"Seen much of Breck Coleman?" her brother made inquiry.

Sue's heart skipped a beat. The query had startled her. For a moment she could not formulate a reply. Then, "Not anything of him at all. Is he in Abilene?"

Buck Carrolton looked into his sister's eyes, questioningly, for many seconds. Evidently, she was telling the truth. He was glad of that.

"I was wondering if Bronson's attentions to you had been at the bottom of it," he said. "Nobody seemed to know what the trouble was all about. I'm sure relieved to know your name wasn't mixed up in it."

"What?" Sue demanded. "Mixed up in what?"

"Oh. I thought maybe you'd heard," her brother said. "The trouble between Breck and Al Bronson."

"Trouble?" She was suddenly faint, recalling Bronson's reputation with a gun. Why was it that she feared for Coleman instead of for the other? Coleman could mean nothing to her now. "Tell me!" she insisted.

"Coleman came riding into Abilene early this morning and shot Al Bronson dead in his tracks, the way I heard it," her brother said.

Sue Carrolton sobbed hysterically. She was surprised to discover that her tears were occasioned by a vast relief. Why was she not grieving instead for Bronson? Her brother, however, interpreted her emotion as that of deep sorrow springing from Bronson's untimely end. He frowned in awkward sympathy.

"Coleman turned and rode right on out of town again," Buck Carrolton amplified. "Hickok has gone out after him. That's all I heard about it. I rode right out to see what you knew about the ruckus."

Again he was puzzled by the swift transformation in his sister. Rigidly, as if gazing upon some scene of horror, she was staring at him without seeing him. Her sobs seemed to have been frozen at the fount, so swiftly had they ceased.

She was thinking again of those flaming blue orbs of Hickok's behind the two deadliest guns that the West had known—Hickok, riding out after Coleman to exact justice. Instinctively she knew that Coleman would not run. He'd face the music. Those icy blue eyes of the marshal seemed to be staring into her own accusingly. With a desperate little moan she covered her eyes with her two hands as if to shut out the vision, then besought her brother to ride back into Abilene at once and inquire as to the final outcome.

CHAPTER X

Coleman shot a lone buffalo bull and while the animal was still warm he cut deep gashes through the hide and into the flesh of legs and back, inserting in each a quantity of strychnine which at once impregnated the hot meat of the whole carcass.

This accomplished, Coleman mounted Fleabit and rode on for some four or five miles, never out of sight of the vast herds of buffalo. Antelope stood about or darted away in large bands. He sighted several small bunches of elk and deer in the prairie breaks and huge flocks of turkeys raced along the courses of the draws.

The weather was extremely cold and Coleman wore heavy fur mittens. The collar of his jacket was turned up. He had tied a scarf over his ears beneath his hat. Still, the cold bit into him. Five miles beyond the first poison bait, he shot another buffalo bull and similarly poisoned the carcass.

By nightfall of the second day he had completed a sixty-mile loop over the course of which he had left ten poison baits. He found Dick Conley waiting for him with the mule outfits at the appointed spot. Coleman was glad to sleep in a warm camp bed again after his tour on the winter prairies.

Early the following morning the two men broke camp and drove the few miles to the first bait. Mounting their horses, the wolfers toured in widening circles about the poisoned carcass. Still shapes showed here and there on the adjacent prairie. Coleman passed several dead skunks, both of the big prairie and the little spotted varieties, also a badger. None of these interested him. However, he leaned from the saddle to retrieve the body of a tiny kit fox. Larger forms, those of poisoned gray wolves and coyotes, were scattered round the landscape. These were retrieved and loaded in the wagons, every carcass frozen stiff. The net haul consisted of seven gray wolves, five coyotes, a bobcat and two kit foxes.

The two wolfers then drove on to the second bait and repeated the operation. Before nightfall they had covered the third poisoned carcass and the day's catch totalled twenty-three wolves, eleven coyotes, one bobcat and three kit foxes. They would not attempt to skin their catch until they were treated to one of the bright, warm days that recurred frequently even in midwinter in that region. Or, if such a day were too long in putting in an appearance, they would repair to some creek bottom where wood was available and thaw the frozen carcasses before a fire until the pelts could be stripped off.

However, the third day was bright and warm. The victims of poison baits were scattered on the prairie exposed to the sun, and as soon as the outer parts were thawed a trifle, the two men stripped off the pelts of the animals taken during the previous two days. The following morning they drove on to cover the next bait. On warm days the poisoned wolves and coyotes were skinned where they were found.

Twice during the first ten days they covered the loop of ten baits. By that time the carcasses largely had disappeared. The total catch consisted of almost two hundred wolves and coyotes with a sprinkling of bobcats and kit foxes.

From Montana to the Arkansas River, the great wolf poisoning campaign was on. Buffalo robes had sustained the trappers and the fur trade after the passing of the beaver. Now a sudden world-wide demand for wolf pelts had sprung into being after the robe trade in turn had died. The whole western country literally swarmed with wolves and with a somewhat lesser number of coyotes. It was not unusual to sight from ten to fifty wolves in the course of a day's ride.

They were bold and feared man but little, scarcely troubling to remain beyond gunshot. The Indians had molested them but infrequently. Until recently, white hunters seldom had wasted ammunition on them. As a natural consequence, wolves knew that they had little to fear from the human race. When hungry, they did not hesitate to crowd in upon the remains of a hunter's kill in broad daylight before he was out of pistol range.

It was not surprising, therefore, that they fell such easy victims to the poison baits of wolfers. At first, apparently, the big gray hunters failed to associate man with the great mortality occasioned among their ranks by the poisoned baits. Still accustomed to feed upon the dead and wounded animals left behind by hunters, they failed to distinguish between such offerings and the deadly carcasses prepared by wolfers. In fact, it was not until perhaps nineteen out of every twenty of the whole wolf population of the plains had fallen victim to the poisoning campaign that the survivors gave evidence of even an awakening sense of caution. And at last the few that remained were to become extremely wise and wary. But by that time the great demand for wolf pelts was destined to have come and passed again with the passing of the wolves themselves.

Coleman moved on to put out another loop of baits. When he had collected round four hundred skins he drove to Sheridan to market them, leaving Conley with the remaining wagon to make another round of the baits during his absence.

Interminable herds of buffalo were drifting slowly to the south, as they had been drifting since early in the winter. With the coming of spring, a reverse movement would set in, the herds shifting northward in countless millions yet with no apparent diminution in the numbers of those continuing to put in an appearance from the south.

Coleman found buyers from St. Louis and St. Joseph waiting in Sheridan, eager to bid for the pelts hauled in by wolfers. He secured a price that averaged him a trifle less than three dollars apiece for the lot, including the cheaper coyote skins, and round a dollar apiece for his kit foxes and bobcats. This was the third load that he had hauled in and marketed since commencing wolfing operations early in the fall. Also, he would make still another haul before the wolfing season ended.

Most wolfers contented themselves with a fair catch, then remained in the camps to "blow in" their proceeds, he reflected. But Coleman had need for money. More and more now, as increasing waves of settlement swept westward with the railroads, he visioned a future in which a man would need not only cows of his own but land of his own to succeed in the stock business. Not soon perhaps; eventually, though, to a certainty.

A man could not secure any sizable slice of land by homesteading. He could buy railroad land, of course. In the southwest there were vast Spanish grants for sale. Texas had retained control of her lands upon entering the Union and she had a tremendous acreage for sale at very low figures. But he did not know yet where he wanted to settle; in some spot, he was certain, where settlers would not swarm in like locusts. A year or so back he had heard that there was much Civil War "script" floating about—script issued to soldiers for services and which could be filed to cover any open land upon which the holder of the paper chose to locate himself. Much of it was for sale at prices ranging from a few cents to a dollar an acre. Since learning of it, Coleman had had various friends in the posts and railroad towns on the lookout for bargains in such paper. He had purchased a considerable amount, enough to assure him of several thousand acres of land when the time came for him to locate. And he wanted to buy more if possible.

He sent the returns of this latest batch of wolf pelts on to the post trader at Wallace to be used in the purchase of more script if any were available.

Sheridan now was the big outfitting point for Colorado. Merchandise reached that spot by train over the Kansas Pacific and was freighted on to Colorado camps by bull train or mule-drawn freight wagons. Coleman found Sheridan thronged with people. Winter though it was, half a thousand freight outfits were camped round about. Some were leaving over the trail for the West, others arriving from that direction. Coleman knew that there would be twice that many outfits moving in and out of Sheridan during the coming summer.

And this activity was not confined to Kansas Pacific points alone. To the northward, the Union Pacific had reached Cheyenne. To the south, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe was rushing its tracks toward the valley of the Arkansas on the route of the old Santa Fe Trail. Everywhere along those right-of-ways, towns were springing up overnight and settlers were swarming in to squat upon the land or to purchase land from the railroads.

Coleman headed back toward the point where he intended to join Conley. His four mules were in excellent shape. The faithful Fleabit trailed behind at the end of a lariat. Coleman seldom traveled by mule wagon without taking Fleabit. Then, in case of eventualities, he could leave his mules, mount Fleabit and outrun any hostiles that might jump him.

However, there was little if any danger from savages through this country now in the dead of winter. At the treaty of Medicine Lodge the southern tribes, including the southern Cheyennes, Kiowas, Arapahoes, Apaches and Comanches, finally had agreed to lay down the hatchet and remain south of the Arkansas River upon the promise of the government to permit no buffalo hunting in that region. The Arkansas now was the dead-line, all south of it being Indian country closed to white hunters, all north of it to the Platte being white man's country and closed to the redskins. North of the Platte, the northern tribes still were restless and unruly because of the swift disappearance of the buffalo of that region.

Despite the treaty of Medicine Lodge, Coleman knew that white hunters would shoot what they pleased south of the Arkansas and that war parties of young Indian bucks would sweep north of it to raid the Kansas settlements. But the Indians would do no raiding in midwinter. It was foreign to their ideas of conducting war. At the present time they would be gathered in their villages far to the south along the Canadian and the Washita.

However, while he knew that the danger of an Indian attack anywhere between the Arkansas and the Platte at this season of the year was negligible, Coleman's habitual wariness prevented him from relaxing his customary vigilance.

Then, too, there were other dangers besides that of hostiles. White savages, ruthless as their red brothers, were much abroad in the old war road country of late. Despite the increasing output of the far-famed Missouri mules, the demand exceeded the supply. The government in its military operations, the railroads in their grading camps, and freighting concerns that dispatched merchandise across the overland trails, all competed for the possession of sturdy Missouri mules. Reasonably large animals commanded a price of from four to six hundred dollars a span. Sizable horses, too, were in demand to fill in as work animals and cavalry mounts coincident with the rise of the mule and the decline of the ox in popular esteem.

Such prices as mules and horses commanded necessarily tempted the predatory brotherhood. A regular business of stock stealing was carried on by organized bands. Stealing horses and mules on the Platte, the thieves headed southward, adding to their herd along the Smoky Hill and disposing of the animals along the Santa Fe Trail on the Arkansas. Stealing stock on the Arkansas, the marauders headed north again and sold their herds on the Platte. No man's stock was safe—and no man's life who inquired too closely into the affairs of the horse thief element. The traffic had assumed large proportions. As a friend had remarked to Coleman in Sheridan, the war road country might well be redesignated as the Horse Thief Trail.

Wherefore, men of ripe experience in that section were not prone to ride too precipitately into some isolated camp where an undue number of mules and horses were being held for no apparent reason. Nor did they always trust the good intentions of small bands of heavily armed men that rode about in that country.

That experience presently was to stand Coleman in good stead. He drove across a level stretch of prairie that fell suddenly away to the floor of a small hidden pocket. The eroded sides of the depression indicated that it had been worn by the action of springs. Their waters gathered to flow in a spring-branch through a narrow cut at the lower extremity of the concealed pocket. And there, but a short distance from him, a camp was tucked away in that depression, concealed from the view of any who might cruise the surrounding plains.

Coleman did not so much as alter his course but held steadily on to skirt the edge of the pocket. There were two wagons, six men and forty-odd head of horses and mules in the camp. Coleman nodded and lifted a hand in a casual salute as he passed.

The distance was slightly too great to permit of his recognizing any of the occupants. It was certain that there were entirely too many mules and horses to give the place the appearance of a two-wagon wolfing outfit, although half a hundred wolf hides were in evidence. Coleman's misgivings were not lessened when two men rode from the pocket on an oblique course to intercept him. The foremost of the two riders was Flack, the other Bronson. Enders, then, would be among those in camp, Coleman thought.

He shifted the new sixteen-shot rifle across his knee, his thumb on the hammer, as the two approached. Flack, upon recognizing him, became affable and friendly, an unusual manner for him to adopt.

"Whar you headed, Coleman?" the man inquired amiably, riding alongside.

Bronson, as if by accident, had veered round to the opposite side and now rode abreast of Coleman. He showed his teeth in a wide smile that seemed to Coleman to verge upon wolfishness. Caught between two fires, Coleman decided, weighing his chances. Four good mules, worth a thousand dollars or more, were distinctly a liability to him now. He had no doubt as to the occupation of these men. His mind slid swiftly back to that time when he had found the bodies of old Ike Williams and his four companions left for the wolves, and their outfit appropriated. Apparently Flack was still engaged in the same line of business, merely having transferred his activities to the war road country.

"I've got two more miles yet to go," Coleman answered casually. "Rest o' my outfit's figuring to camp on the head o' Goose Neck Branch. That is, unless they decide not to stop there but to keep a-coming on this way."

"Why should they be coming this way?" Flack queried interestedly.

"We been wolfing thirty mile or more beyond Goose Neck Branch, six four-mule outfits of us throwed in together," Coleman explained. "We've pretty well poisoned the thick of 'em off over thataway and figured to work south toward the

railroad, stopping hereabouts for a week or more, then working south another hitch. Of course, when we planned our route, we'd no notion that you all had pulled in here to start wolfing. I'll tell the boys and we'll move on thirty mile or more west before starting to work south. No use in our wolfing the same country."

The two riders seemed rather at a loss.

"You just on the way back from town?" Flack asked.

"No. I took a swing round to put out a few baits and was just circling back to meet the boys about the time they would be making camp on Goose Neck," Coleman lied glibly. "That was me you heard shooting. I killed a bull and pumped him full of strychnine not two mile from your camp."

Flack and Bronson seemed to ponder this information, their eyes meeting across the backs of the wheel team of mules. This put a different light on matters. There would be six men at least, more, in all probability, with a six-wagon wolfing outfit. If Flack were to shoot Coleman and add his mules to his herd, the other wolfers would miss him and might visit Flack's camp at once. If, as Coleman had declared probable, the wolfers decided to pull on south of Goose Neck before making camp, they might heave in sight at any moment now. It would be only two hours or less until sundown.

Knowing that Dick Conley was at least forty miles away and that in all probability no help was available closer, Coleman's prevarications sounded hollow and unconvincing in his own ears. There was not the least doubt in his mind as to the intentions of these men. Flack and Bronson meant to kill him and take his mules. Doubly would they desire his life since he had chanced across their camp and viewed the forty-odd head of horses and mules with a two-wagon wolfing outfit. He had small hope that his ruse would avail him for long. Flack and Bronson would not be misled by it. But every minute was precious now. His chief hope was that he could lure the two men a half mile or more from the camp. He definitely planned then to attempt to shoot both of them down before they could do the same to him. A half mile between himself and the camp would afford time, provided he came off victor, to step aboard Fleabit, desert his mules and make a run for it before those in camp could mount and reach the spot. He glanced over his shoulder. Two hundred yards in his rear, the four remaining members of Flack's crew had emerged from the concealed pocket and were standing on the prairie, each man with a rifle. He couldn't make his final play until he had put more distance between himself and the watching quartette.

"You'd better ride on over to camp and meet the boys," Coleman invited.

Anything to play for time and put another few hundred yards between himself and that camp. Again Flack and Bronson exchanged glances. There was no use taking unnecessary chances, Flack signaled with a swift shake of his head. Best to draw off and hold a conference, he decided. Then he could ride over and spy out the camp and its state of preparedness after nightfall—unless Coleman suspected their purpose and was lying. In which case, there'd be no camp. But he'd find out, Flack assured himself.

"No," he declined Coleman's invitation. "We can't go 'long with you now. Just rode out to pass the time o' day. Got some work ahead of us between now and sundown. Our stock drifted off last night and we never located 'em and run 'em back to camp until an hour ago. Found 'em mixed in with twenty-odd head o' loose horses and mules. We got to cut out them strays and haze 'em off across the country so they won't bother us no more."

This last, Coleman knew, was a clumsy effort to explain away the surplus animals in Flack's camp. But its mere utterance gave Coleman the first assurance that Flack placed the least credence in his tale of the near-by wolfers' camp. Flack would not have troubled to explain if he intended to shoot Coleman down at once. Flack and Bronson bade him good-bye and rode back toward the camp. Coleman, still apprehensive of a bullet in the back, turned in his seat, ready for action, and watched them go.

Then he heaved a sigh of relief. "My hair is only just now beginning to settle back on my scalp," he informed the mules. "That was one tight pinch. But I ain't out of the woods yet by a wide margin. They'll follow me sure to try and locate that phantom camp I painted for them. After my seeing the amount of stock they had in that camp o' theirs, they'll want my scalp to keep me quiet. But I'm in the clear for the present; and if I see them riding on behind me, I'll throw a few surprises into them."

He drove steadily on, crossed Goose Neck Branch before sundown and turned down its course. Half an hour after nightfall, he turned off at right angles and held that course for several miles, then executed another right-angle shift.

"It'll hustle them some to work out my trail at night—in case they do follow me," he mused.

He kept the tired mules moving steadily until near dawn, then watered them at a prairie creek and drove on until sunrise. Then he halted in an open stretch of prairie and picketed his animals. After a rest of some four hours he moved out again. Before nightfall he joined Dick Conley in camp.

CHAPTER XI

Conley had around fifty wolf pelts on hand. The animals had been poisoned almost to the vanishing point in that particular vicinity, so Coleman moved camp some thirty miles to the east.

He had traveled forty miles in a northeasterly direction after leaving Flack's camp before meeting Conley. Now he had placed another thirty miles between them. It was unlikely that Flack would track him any such distance off the regular north-and-south route of Flack's crew just in order to obtain his mules, Coleman thought. But it was possible. He advised Conley to keep a sharp lookout during his own absence.

Leaving Conley with the wagons, Coleman set forth on Fleabit, leading a bed horse, to put out a loop of poisoned carcasses east of camp. It was well after nightfall on the third day when he returned. Conley reported that not a single human had put in an appearance during Coleman's absence. In the early morning the two started on with the wagons to make the rounds of the baits. Nine dead wolves and coyotes rewarded them in the vicinity of the first poisoned buffalo carcass. The morning being warm and the victims not frozen, they lingered to skin the catch on the spot. They covered the second bait in similar fashion and were preparing to drive on to the next when Coleman sighted a lone horseman riding along a distant prairie crest. Was the rider one of Flack's men, sent out to locate Coleman's camp?

"H'm. Injun," Coleman announced, peering at the distant horseman. "Whatever is a lone Injun doing round these parts this time o' year? Pawnee scout, likely. Ten to one he ain't a hostile."

"It's a yaller hide, sure enough," Conley agreed. "Strange how a man that knows the plains can tell an Injun from a white rider far off as he can see one on the skyline. Why do you reckon it is?"

"First off, an Injun swings his quirt or rope end every jump his horse makes," Coleman said. "Next, an Injun has got a peculiar style of setting a pony. Best horseman in the world, but he sets a saddle like a half-filled sack o' flour, way a white man looks at it. He draws his knees up ahead, sets on the small of his back, then pokes his head forward like a turtle. 'Twould break a white man's back to ride a hundred yards thataway. A hunter or stockman can tell whether it's cows, horses or buffalo he's looking at as far as he can see 'em. He can't tell you how he knows, but he does know. It's the same, likely, in knowing an Injun rider from a white man. There's a different look about them."

The lone horseman turned and came toward the wagons. When he approached, it proved to be Rapaho Gil, not an Indian. "Both of us dead wrong," Conley grinned.

"Not so far off," Coleman said. "Rapaho was captive among the Missouri Injuns as an infant before he come west with the fur brigades when he's a youngster. He learned to set a pony amongst the reds. When it comes to riding, Rapaho's pure Injun."

Rapaho Gil rode beside the wagons as they moved on. "Whyn't you skin out some bufflers and haul the hides in, Breck?" he asked of Coleman. "It'll beat wolfing."

"What would I do with buffalo hides after I'd hauled them in?" Coleman countered.

"Sell 'em. Big market for 'em sprung up, just in the last few days. Tell you how it was."

Some party had conceived the idea of skinning a few buffalo and sending the hides to St. Joseph. At about the same time, another man had made a similar shipment to St. Louis. Both consignments had been snapped up at good prices and queries had come from St. Joseph and St. Louis hide concerns offering to buy all shipments. Several houses, in fact, had sent buyers along the line of the Kansas Pacific. Just within the past few days these men had been offering two dollars apiece for the hides of buffalo cows and three dollars apiece for bull hides in any quantity delivered at any railroad shipping point.

"I wonder how many they could use," Coleman said. "Not any great number, likely."

"Thar's an agent turned up in Hays three days ago offerin' that price for anything up to a hundred thousand hides for one St. Joe concern," Rapaho informed.

Coleman pondered this news. He had made good money in the robe trade at times. By working hard at it, he had netted round five hundred dollars a month at meat hunting in recent years. During the wolfing season, he sometimes netted twice

that much per month. But if Rapaho's information was correct, then robetrading, meat hunting for the settlements and wolfing all constituted were dabbling compared to the possibilities opened up by this new traffic.

"Strange that there should be such a big demand for raw buffalo hides spring up overnight," Coleman said, unable quite to credit the truth of it. "There never has been any value set on them before."

"That's the way I looked at it, fust glance," Rapaho Gil agreed. "That's what I remarked to that buyer in Hays. But he says they'd a-been wuth that figger most any time before now, only ther'd a-been no money in freightin' them long distances by wagon train to the markets. It's the steam-cars that done it. See? He says it was the railroad company, with an eye for business, that had them two parties ship the hides, and that railroad men's been taking it up with all the St. Louis and St. Joe hide houses to work up business. I can't say as to that. Anyway, they're a-bidding that price for hides. That much I do know for a fact."

Coleman thought the matter over at some length. This was going to be a big thing. There was practically no limit to it if the market for hides would hold up. But it might be done to large extent under contract so that independent hunters would find it difficult to share in it. No doubt far-sighted men were contracting to supply certain hide houses with any given quantity of skins that such concerns could use. If the business were to be conducted in that way, it behooved a man to be among the first on the ground so that he could contract for a share of the business. If it were to be conducted as an open market for all the hides any hunter could supply, then it would be of advantage to a man to be among the first to start hunting and skinning before the markets became glutted. In any event, he must investigate the thing at once.

"Wonder if you could make out to trail one wagon behind the other and cover the baits alone for the next few days," he said to Conley.

"Sure. You dangle on into Hays and find out about this thing," Conley returned. "If they want hides, we'll supply 'em as long as their money lasts."

"I'll trail along with Conley and lend a hand for a day or two," Rapaho Gil volunteered. "I'm headed for the Platte but thar ain't no rush about me gettin' to them parts."

"You'll know about where to look for the baits," Coleman said. "They'll average about five miles apart clear round the loop, and every one laying in the middle of an open piece of prairie."

Riding Fleabit and leading a bed horse, he turned south toward the railroad.

Upon his arrival in Hays City, he found conditions as Rapaho Gil had reported them. Two additional buyers for hide concerns had arrived. Others, Coleman heard, had gone on to Sheridan and Wallace. He consulted the buyers about contracts and learned that they were making no definite arrangements with any parties to purchase hides from them to the exclusion of hides brought in by others. Instead, they simply were assuring all who made inquiry that they would purchase all hides that were delivered at railroad shipping points.

"Suppose, now, that I was to organize a sizable crew of hunters and in a few months from now was able to dump ten thousand hides on your hands?" Coleman demanded of a buyer. "I could do that, you know."

"I doubt it," the buyer declared. "But I hope you do—and ten others like you. My instructions are to buy anything up to a hundred thousand hides as soon as I can get 'em. You fetch in ten thousand pelts and you can get your money the day you lay 'em down here. But you won't. A lot of this talk about how many hides each hunter thinks he can bring in is wasted breath. I won't get half ten thousand in a year from all of you combined."

"Mister," Coleman said, "you'll get hides a-plenty. Don't fool yourself. Every plainsman and wolfer in the buffalo country will be setting out to fill your orders. Inside six months there'll be more hides hauled in to the railroad than the railroad can haul off, I'm telling you."

"Now since you've told me," the buyer suggested, "I hope you'll show me. I'm buying hides, not conversation."

"There's sense in that," Coleman conceded. "I'll make good on my conversation. I only hope you'll make good on yours."

He walked about, turning matters over in his mind. The buyers would get hides and thousands of them—tens of thousands. No doubt of that. This was one big thing. The whole guntoting fraternity of the plains would be out after a

slice of that money.

While still pondering the matter he met Buffalo Bill, just returned from Wallace. Cody reported that every railroad point was similarly infested with buyers.

"Already there's some big outfits starting out," he said. "Twenty or thirty miles this side of Wallace I happened to ride up on Red Flack, Enders and Bronson. They were driving round forty head of mules and horses—crossing the stage road and heading south when I rode up on them half an hour after dark. They'd bought the stock up on the Platte somewhere and were driving it down to the Arkansas to look for a market. When I told them about the new offers for buffalo hides they said they might use the stock for a hide-hunting crew instead of selling out."

"When was it you met up with that trio?" Coleman asked.

"Four nights back," Cody informed. "It was when I was headed for Wallace on the way out."

Coleman made swift mental calculations. In order to have reached the Smoky Hill road four nights before, Flack and his crew would have left their camp near Goose Neck Branch four days or more prior to the time Coleman had left Conley and Rapaho Gil. They must have left that camp in the pocket, in fact, immediately after he had seen them. His suspicion that the trio would follow him apparently had been unfounded. Coleman began to formulate definite plans. The new repeating rifles, carrying sixteen forty-four-calibre cartridges, were deadly weapons in an Indian scrimmage and in hunting at close quarters. They were a bit light, though, for buffalo. Unless hit exactly right and at close range, a buffalo required considerable killing with a forty-four. The big Sharp with its heavy ball was the gun for that. Coleman carried a forty-four himself, but when meat-hunting from a stand, "standing buffalo" the hunters termed it, he still resorted to the heavy Sharp. He repaired to a store in Hays City and purchased the last four Sharps left in stock, then bought several thousand rounds of cartridges.

A Missouri outfit, returning from the Colorado mining camps, pulled into Hays City from the westward in two wagons, each drawn by four mules. The animals were sound but now somewhat toil-worn from the long, steady days on the trail. They would bring a price twenty per cent. under that which prevailed in the grading camps. Coleman made an offer for the eight mules and the two wagons. They accepted it, electing to complete the journey by train.

Coleman had a sizable credit with the post trader at Fort Hays and another with a storekeeper in Hays City, left there with the instructions that it be used for the purchase of land script whenever any was available. He found that the two men had purchased round four hundred acres of script. He drew upon his remaining credit to buy out the Missourians, then arranged with a farmer near Hays to keep the mules and feed them until needed. It would require but a few weeks at most, with rest and good forage, to put the animals back in first-class shape. All this business he effected in the two days following his arrival. Then he started back to rejoin Conley.

When he arrived at the nearest bait on the loop—at about the point which Conley should have reached by now—he found that it had not been visited. Numerous dead wolves, coyotes and other smaller meat-eaters were scattered about the adjacent landscape. Coleman set off toward the next bait to discover that that point, too, had not been visited. Could Conley have missed finding these two carcasses? Poisoned wolves were scattered for half a mile around. Sighting any one of the dead wolves would have apprised Conley of the fact that he was in the vicinity of a poison bait. He might have missed one but surely not two such conspicuous locations. Yet he should have reached this point with ease.

Coleman rode on again, following round the loop in the reverse direction from that which Conley would be traveling. Night overtook him and he made camp beside a spring run, starting forth again at sunup. When he found that the third bait and the fourth had not been visited he experienced the first premonition of disaster. He was not far from the point where he had left Conley. The man, apparently, had not moved from the camp made that first night.

Conley was sick or had been hurt during a session with some refractory mule, probably. But he could not be far away now. The knowledge that Flack, Enders and Bronson all three had crossed the Smoky Hill road far to the southwest before the time that he himself had left Conley and Rapaho Gil had quieted Coleman's suspicions concerning the immediate intentions of that trio. Hence he anticipated only sickness or accidental injury. Not that it lessened his apprehensions, however, for either sickness or injury was apt to prove fatal when one was alone on the plains.

CHAPTER XII

Coleman, therefore, was prepared to discover that disaster had preceded him—but not in the exact form in which it presently stared at him.

The bodies of Conley and Rapaho Gil had been stripped, scalped, shot full of bullets and arrows and otherwise disfigured. Coleman's heart turned heavy with grief for the loss of his friends, then swelled with black rage. At first glance, Coleman himself believed that it was the work of savages even though his intuitive knowledge of Indian ways informed him that no war party would stray so many hundreds of miles from the villages in the dead of winter. Also, he was aware of the fact that a favorite ruse of white marauders was to leave the scene of their crimes in such shape that the atrocities, if discovered, would be attributed to savages. He made a careful investigation. There was no evidence to indicate that the thing had been done by white men—until it dawned upon Coleman that there was not a single wolf pelt round the scene. So many hides could not have been burned to the point where no sign of them remained. Even the charred floors of the wagons were more or less intact in spots. And Indians never would have bothered to carry off the wolf pelts. Then again, there should have been numerous pony tracks around the spot but Coleman could discover none save those where the two mounts of the murdered men had been picketed for the night. There were only such negative indications, not one shred of positive evidence that Coleman could unearth until he found the big tracks of two American horses, shod all round, at the edge of a plum thicket two hundred yards from the spot. White men! Scarcely a doubt of that. There might be big shod horses, of course, stolen ones, among a party of Indians; but there would be pony tracks, too, in abundance. The men had tied their mounts here and crept upon Conley and Rapaho Gil as they slept, murdering them in their beds.

It had been the work of some of the organized bands of horse thieves operating in the war road country. Coleman's thoughts reverted to Flack. But Conley and Gil had made camp within a few hours after parting from Coleman. The deed had been committed that first night. And several days prior to that Flack, Enders and Bronson had crossed the Smoky Hill road far to the southwest, heading south with their stolen stock. Impossible to suspect them of the deed.

Then suddenly the whole picture cleared in Coleman's mind. The three strangers in Flack's camp, and probably others, operating under the guise of wolfers, stole stock to the north along the Platte and brought the animals down into the country north of Wallace, holding them there for delivery to Flack and his two partners, who took them on south and marketed them on the Arkansas along the Santa Fe Trail. No doubt another group of men similarly accomplished the actual stealing of horses and mules on the Arkansas, held them somewhere in the uninhabited country north of that stream to be turned over to Flack and his two associates for the northward journey to be marketed along the valley of the Platte.

Flack, Enders and Bronson, therefore, seldom would be in the immediate vicinity when such raids were accomplished. If apprehended while marketing stolen stock they could prove that they had been elsewhere at the time the animals had been stolen. And always, of course, they would be supported by bills of sales. That unsavory trio handled the marketing end of the business, others the actual thieving operations.

Unquestionably, Flack had given orders to some of the men who had remained in that camp to follow Coleman and, if possible, to kill him and his associates. Ordinarily, thieves would not have followed him so far off the main route for the purpose of obtaining eight mules when larger numbers of animals were obtainable in the Platte valley for less trouble. But Flack had wished to silence Coleman's tongue because of his having stumbled across that camp and for what he must have suspected. Also, no doubt, he had desired Coleman's end because of what knowledge the latter might have of that former affair pertaining to the death of old Ike Williams and his fellow wolfers. Coleman's display of Williams' earring and the three chewed sticks had apprised Flack of the fact that Coleman suspected his part in that atrocity.

"I overplayed my hand that time, by showing him those trinkets," Coleman told himself. "Yes, I'd a-done better to sit tight."

Flack's men, no doubt, had not located the camp until after Coleman had left it to put out the loop of baits. They had watched, awaiting his return, but he had not come in till after nightfall. In the morning they had seen him start out with Conley to make the rounds of the baits. They had followed, intending to do their bloody work when he and Conley had gone into camp for the night. Evidently they had failed to observe the fact that Coleman left and that old Rapaho Gil took his place. Finding two men in camp, they had killed them. No doubt they believed that they had finished Coleman. They would now return to the war road country and market his stock. However, the trail led southeast, not southwest. Buffalo

had blotted the tracks somewhat but the horses and mules had left sufficient sign to render the trail decipherable to an expert tracker.

When nightfall overtook Coleman he was still on the trail and it still pointed in a southeasterly direction. His first belief as to the ultimate destination of his stolen stock had been revised somewhat.

Coleman had sold meat on many occasions in every camp on the Smoky Hill route and along the Kansas Pacific from Fort Hays westward. Similarly, he had sold meat repeatedly from the Great Bend of the Arkansas and Fort Larned westward in every camp along the Santa Fe Trail, in addition to having marketed wolf hides in many of those places. Perhaps Flack had feared that some one would recognize Coleman's mules if they were offered for sale anywhere in the latter's customary haunts and so had instructed his men to take them to some point well east of Coleman's accustomed range before attempting to market them.

At daybreak he set forth again. The trail turned almost due east and held that course for miles. Then it angled to the south again. It was not until noon of the following day that Coleman worked it out to the point where it entered the settled districts just north of the stage road and the Kansas Pacific at a point halfway between Fort Hays and Abilene. There he lost it among the farm roads. Once in the main trail, he made inquiry of various settlers whose cabins were near the road. Most of them could not recall the passing of two men leading eight mules and two extra horses. There was so much travel headed both ways along the trail—almost a continuous procession. One man scratched his head and said he guessed he had seen such a layout, now he came to think of it. Headed east, they was, two men leading several head of mules and hosses. Yes, he recalled that some of the mules had been packed with wolf hides.

It was late at night when Coleman reached the outskirts of Abilene and made camp a half mile from town. In the morning he left his bed upon the ground, picketed his pack horse and rode towards Abilene. Half a hundred outfits of various sorts were camped in the vicinity of the stockyards; settlers' families with mule or ox-drawn vehicles, freighting outfits and those who had horses, mules or oxen for sale. The yards themselves were jammed with Texas longhorns. An engine shunted cattle cars to the loading chute where cowhands prodded the unwilling brutes into them, the horns of many of the steers so long that they could get through the wide doors only with difficulty.

Coleman's eyes, however, were all for a cluster of mules and horses, tied to a picket rope and munching hay spread on the ground before them. Two men, hard-faced and hard-eyed citizens, sat cross-legged on the ground near by. The eight mules were Coleman's. Of the four horses, one had belonged to Dick Conley, another to Rapaho Gil.

Coleman had no proof against these men that would hold in any court; a citizens' committee, yes—but Abilene now was a law-and-order camp. The men could swear that they had bought the mules from strangers somewhere along the trail, show bills of sale and appear as innocent purchasers. Coleman could, of course, prove ownership of the mules and recover them. That is, it was probable. But he recalled his two murdered friends, buried in lonesome graves on the prairie, and before them old Ike Williams. He'd find out a few things on his own account before proceeding farther. The matter would require delicate handling.

He rode among the camped outfits and stopped first at a point where a dozen or more mules and horses were in the charge of an old man with a flowing white beard.

"These mules for sale?" Coleman inquired.

"They air," the old man assented.

Coleman dismounted and inspected the animals, asking prices, looking inside the mouths and examining the legs of various mules. "Well, I'll let you know," he said after a quarter of an hour.

The two men in charge of his own mules were not far away. Coleman had turned squarely toward them several times. If these men knew him by sight and were aware of the fact that he was one of the two men who was supposed to have been left dead on the prairie, they would go into swift and deadly action the second that he accosted them. But they accorded him only a few casual glances, apparently without interest or recognition. He mounted and rode across to them.

Both men rose to their feet, their hard eyes regarding him narrowly.

"For sale?" he inquired, jerking a thumb toward the tethered mules.

"Might be," one of the men replied.

"I'm figuring to buy me some mules and start hide hunting," Coleman informed. "You say they're for sale?"

"I said they might be," the man corrected. "They ain't ourn. We're just looking after 'em temporary for the man who owns 'em. He might sell. What's wrong with them mules you was lookin' at over thar?"

"Nothing wrong with the mules. It's the price that's wrong. Too high. Whereabouts is the party that owns these here?"

"In town," the man informed shortly.

Coleman turned his attention to the mules, regarding them for several minutes.

"I'll ride in and see him," he announced at last. "Who'll I ask for?"

"Al Bronson," one of the men told him.

Both men had watched his face narrowly since the instant of his arrival. Perhaps there was some flickering change in his expression at the mention of Bronson. Coleman himself was unaware of altering by so much as the twitch of a muscle or a flicker of his eyes. But members of the predatory brotherhood necessarily were ever alert and suspicious to an uncanny degree. Subsequent events indicated that something in Coleman's manner had roused their suspicions to a considerable pitch.

He only remarked casually, "Bronson. I'll ride in and look him up."

He headed Fleabit toward the single main street of Abilene. So Bronson had not accompanied Flack and Enders on south to the Arkansas with their stolen stock but had come by train from some point near Wallace to Abilene to be on hand to market Coleman's mules in the event that the men detailed for the job by Flack should succeed in their mission and meet Bronson here. Coleman decided to visit the two hide-buying concerns of Abilene and inquire whether the two hard-visaged citizens at the stockyards had marketed any wolf pelts. Also, if possible, to learn their names.

Many recognized Coleman as he rode into town on Fleabit in his plainsman's garb. A group of a dozen or more men stood before a saloon near the end of the main street. One of them had just raised his voice in greeting to Coleman when every eye in the group saw the plainsman rein his mount to a dead halt. His gaze seemed suddenly to have riveted on some object just beyond them. Necks were turned to determine the cause of this fixed regard.

Al Bronson had just stepped from the door of the next saloon. The men saw him start with swift surprise, staring as if confronted by a ghost. But it required only a brace of seconds for Bronson to realize that the two men had bungled their job. They had reported Coleman dead. Swiftly Bronson's hand moved toward his gun. Even as it cleared the holster, Coleman's gun roared in the quiet street. Bronson's knees sagged as the heavy forty-five slug tore through his body. His head drooped forward but his will to kill still lived on and even as he toppled forward he was striving to pull the trigger with his slack forefinger. The weapon exploded as he toppled forward and Coleman's gun barked again. Bronson pitched down on his face and sprawled there on the wooden sidewalk.

For a space of ten seconds Coleman sat there in the saddle regarding the fallen man. The spectators made no move. Then he turned Fleabit and headed back for the stockyards. It was only upon his arrival there that he received the first intimation that any action of his had excited the suspicion of the two men who had been in charge of the mules. Or perhaps it had been merely because his plainsman's garb had caused the two men to suspect that he might have chanced across the scene of the killing and trailed them thither. In any event, they were conspicuously absent.

"They done stepped aboard their hosses and rid off inside a minute after you'd left here," the white-whiskered patriarch informed Coleman.

"Just as well for them," Coleman stated grimly.

He dismounted, released the mules and the two stolen horses from the picket rope, necked the mules together in fours, the horses in a couplet, mounted and led the lot of them to his camp. There he secured them to picket pins left there by some former camper. He sat down to wait.

Wild Bill Hickok, marshal of Abilene, after being abroad throughout the major portion of the night, had retired

somewhere near dawn and still was sleeping peacefully in a room in the Drover's Hotel at the moment of the shooting. It was not until some fifteen minutes later that a zealous citizen roused him from bed to report the affair. The marshal dressed hurriedly and gained the street, making brief inquiry of the bystanders. Then he mounted a borrowed saddle horse, headed for the stockyards and from there for Coleman's camp.

Coleman, awaiting his inevitable arrival, had but just finished picketing out the mules. He held up his left hand, palm out, as a sign of peace, deposited his rifle, pistol and hunting knife on the sod, then walked a dozen yards from them. Hickok rode forward at his signal. Those brilliant, hard eyes of the marshal surveyed Coleman steadily.

"Whatever possessed you to shoot a man down on the streets of Abilene?" he demanded. "That's my bailiwick, Coleman, and you must have known I'd take a hand."

"It was him or me," Coleman said. "I reckon the bystanders informed you that Bronson went for his gun first."

"That's what I gathered," Hickok conceded. "Then why didn't you stay right there? A jury would have cleared you."

"But I couldn't wait for any jury to set on my case, Bill," Coleman explained. "I had a real pressing engagement with two parties that had charge of eight mules at the stockyards—and they was my mules. You'd have had a triple shooting on your hands, Bill, sure as you're a foot high, except that that brace of horse thieves had high-tailed it without leaving any tracks before I got back there. It appeared like a good play to recover my mules right there, so I brought 'em here."

"Likely they've split the breeze for parts unknown and won't show up hereabouts again if they know you can prove that they stole your mules," Wild Bill prophesied.

"But the main point was that I couldn't prove they did steal them," Coleman stated. "I could prove that they are my mules and that those miscreants had them, but I couldn't make it stick in court that they hadn't become innocent purchasers by buying those mules off the actual thieves. In my own mind there ain't a doubt. So I acted according. To tell you the living truth, Bill, it warn't only to recover the mules that was heaviest on my mind. I was out for hair—to play even for Dick Conley and old Rapaho Gil."

Briefly, he sketched events from the time of the discovery of the bodies of old Ike Williams and his fellow wolfers. "I knew too much. It was my scalp Flack was after, chiefly, on that account. They got Rapaho Gil instead. The men Flack sent to get Conley and me didn't know me by sight, likely, never having set eyes on me except riding past Flack's camp in a wagon at some little distance. They didn't know I'd pulled out for Hays and that old Rapaho had rode on with Conley. They found two men in camp that night, murdered them in their beds, come on here with my mules and the boys' two horses, reporting to Bronson that I'm stretched out defunct on the prairie. When Bronson first looked up to see me setting there on Fleabit and looking him over mighty hostile, he acted for a pair of seconds as if he was gazing at a spook. Then he savvyed and moved for his gun," Coleman concluded.

"Looks like you're dead right in your surmise," the marshal said reflectively. "You don't misread your signs any more than I do. I can follow your reasoning step by step right down to date. The very fact that Bronson, without any previous quarrel with you, went for his gun so prompt because you looked him over—which bystanders agree he did—is proof that you was right in his case. But a jury wouldn't convict on any such evidence as a chewed stick here, a horse track there, a claybank mule five hundred miles away and other bits of sign scattered over half the West. Looks like you made the best play you could."

"I was only half-convinced that Flack had been into that deal of killing off old Ike Williams," Coleman said. "Now I'm convinced for sure—and that him and Enders was back of what happened to Conley and old Rapaho Gil, which latter was somewhat my fault, since they was chiefly out for me. That gives me a responsibility in the matter that I don't figure to lay down. I've whetted up my tomahawk and socked into the war post deep where that pair is concerned. From now on, I'm out to lift their hair. They're murderin' dogs that shoot from behind. Flack'll fight any man on earth with fists and feet or kill a man in his bed. But he won't face a man with knife or gun. It'll be hard to make him draw. If he won't, I'll shoot him down in his tracks anyhow. So if by any chance it happens in Abilene, don't you come a-shooting. I'll give up my gun and we'll talk it out."

"Luck to you," the marshal said. "Well, Coleman, I'll be dangling back to town. Only one angle to this that I regret—which is only temporary and will pan out for the best in the end. Little Sue Carrolton will shed some tears at the news of Bronson's finish."

Coleman faced him rigidly.

"Sue Carrolton? Is Sue anywheres round Abilene? And just what difference will the end of a murdering rat like Bronson make to her?"

"Her family's been living here two year or so," Hickok informed. "Bronson has been holding out at her wickiup of evenings for quite a spell, whenever he was round Abilene. It's been talked around that there was to be a wedding some day soon. Do you know Sue?"

"Yes, I know her," Coleman said slowly. "Fact is, I'd hoped it would be me she'd take up with. But I lost track of her up Montana way. Trailed their wagon clear across the Crow Nation, scairt stiff every living second that I'd come up on some place where the savages had jumped 'em. But they got through. I was a couple of months behind them. Never could locate her again."

He seemed to be speaking to himself, unconscious of his companion's presence.

"Well, you weren't alone in that hope," Hickok told him. "Plenty of other male humans who entertained those selfsame ambitions about Sue Carrolton."

"Yes. They would have," Coleman agreed. "Where does she live at?"

Wild Bill told him and rode on into Abilene to report that Coleman's case was one of justifiable homicide in self-defense. The town was satisfied with his interpretation of the law without further formality in this instance as it had been doubly satisfied with his enforcement of the law in others. As far as Abilene was concerned, the case was closed.

Coleman sat cross-legged for an hour after the marshal's departure. After all this time he had discovered Sue Carrolton only to learn that she had been about to wed another. Well, he could not be surprised at that. But now he had shot down the man to whom she had turned. She'd never overlook that or forgive it. A woman wouldn't. Anyway, he must see her and explain. So he mounted Fleabit.

Sue Carrolton, nervous almost to the point of desperation, had dispatched her unwilling brother, Buck, to Abilene for the purpose of inquiring into the final outcome of the marshal's start from town on the trail of Breck Coleman. Linda had driven away in the buckboard to visit a neighbor. Sue twisted her fingers in a nervous frenzy, scarcely hearing the voices of the younger children. She heard hoof beats in the farmyard and rushed to the door, scarce daring to hope that Buck could have returned so soon.

Then, wide-eyed with surprise, she found herself face to face, not with her brother, but with Coleman. She turned faint with relief. The old longing for him swept over her again with all its former poignancy. Every impulse seemed to urge her toward Coleman with extended arms. But the weakness of her knees restrained her. Then tension of the past few hours snapped, leaving her limp and helpless. So she stood there in the doorway while tears streamed down her cheeks.

Coleman, of course, could only attribute the tears to grief. Some one, evidently, had ridden hastily to the Carrolton farm with news of Bronson's finish. He knew that she would hold him responsible. Unaccustomed to women's tears, he became even more reserved instead of more effusive. He maintained, in fact, a dead silence for the space of twenty seconds, not knowing where to begin.

"Anyway, he was a murdering rat," he said at last. "Better you'd never marry than to have been hooked up with him."

It was by no means the explanation that he had intended to utter. Vaguely, he felt that it did not sound as he had intended.

"You'll find a sight better man than he was," he said with intent to comfort.

The girl, in turn, misread his diffidence. He seemed to stand there in cold aloofness. So she'd find a better man, would she? She only half grasped his meaning. But it was evident that he was not returning with the same almost breathless ardor which had swept over her at the sight of him. Pride came to her rescue. Pain and resentment stiffened her knees. She tossed her head, demanding angrily: "What made you come here anyway?"

"Well—" he began, and could think of no further reasons to add.

"You stayed away this long," she said. "Why come at all?"

He found his voice then. "I went back to Virginia City and you'd gone. It scared me, you setting off thataway, through hostile country. I tracked your wagon every foot of the way across the Crow Nation and up until you reached the trail. I was a couple of months or thereabouts behind you and I never did know where you'd gone to until an hour ago. I wrote a letter to you in Pike County. It came back."

With her quicker feminine perceptions in matters of love, she was first to grasp the true significance of their situation. Coleman had tracked her every foot of the way across hostile country after finding that the Carroltons had left the mining towns? He had hunted for her? It hadn't been neglect then. Suddenly she knew that he cared desperately, that his inability to express himself now was occasioned by too much feeling, not by the lack of it. Blessed relief flooded her, but with the knowledge came resentment over the long wait and the present misunderstanding. With true feminine perversity, she decided to place the entire burden for all past heartaches upon Coleman.

"So you think that you can stay away years and years and that I'll be waiting to take you back whenever you say the word!" she flared. "That's the man of it! Well, you needn't think so. I'd not care if you never came back. Why should I?"

Coleman seemed unable to inform her of any good reason why she should care. He simply stood there in silence, twisting his hat in his hands.

"Then when you hear that some other man is nice to me, you think you have the right to shoot him!" she continued.

"It wasn't about you," Coleman said, endeavoring to justify himself. "I didn't know he'd ever seen you until after I had downed him."

Sue had feared that Coleman had shot Bronson for no other reason than the latter's attentions to herself. Believing Coleman in danger at the hands of the marshal, she had heaped blame upon herself. Now she was illogically angry because her fears had proved ungrounded and was ready to heap the blame upon Coleman's shoulders. But the stress of conflicting emotions claimed her again and she turned and buried her face in her folded arms against the door jam.

"You don't need to come around me!" she stormed through her tears. "I never want to set eyes on you again! Do you hear me?"

Coleman could cope with any situation among men. He knew less than nothing of the ways of women. Sue's attitude seemed logical to him, not having learned that no normal woman is ever logical. This situation was growing worse. Evidently his presence was torture to the girl, since he had killed the man she was to marry. Natural enough. Well, he'd clear out. As if in answer to his decision her voice came to him from her buried face, declaring that she never wanted to see him again.

Sue waited for an answer. None came. Coleman's moccasins made no sound as he moved to his horse. The girl looked up presently and was startled to see him settling himself into the saddle a dozen yards away.

"I won't be bothering you any more, Sue," he said, not as if in threat, but more as if he were making a reassuring promise. Before she could answer, he had headed Fleabit swiftly out across the prairie. There had been a certain ring of finality in his words. In growing panic, she recalled that sense of definite finality about all of his acts and decisions. Surprise and alarm rendered her speechless for a space of seconds. Pride and anger crumbled. He could not go this way. But he was going, and swiftly too. She ran out and called to him, but her voice was weak. There seemed something final even about the look of his back. Fleabit was running now. The girl screamed frantically. The stiff prairie wind blew the sound back upon her. If Coleman heard at all, no doubt he believed the sound to be that same prairie wind whistling in his ears as Fleabit carried him into the teeth of it at a run. He did not so much as turn his head. And the girl stood there wringing her hands and crying with frantic impotence.

CHAPTER XIII

Coleman left Fleabit and worked his way up a shallow prairie draw. A careful survey revealed the fact that he was now well within the edge of the herd. As usual, the mature bulls were scattered on the outskirts. Beyond the loosely formed aggregation of bulls, the herds stretched on and on, covering every roll of the prairie. Formerly, particularly in meat hunting, this custom of the old bulls of remaining on the outer flanks of every section of the herd had been somewhat of a handicap. The flesh of a stringy old bull was unfit for food and a hunter must work his way through the outer cordon to draw within easy range of the more closely grouped cows and calves. Now, in hide hunting, Coleman reflected, this same habit was an asset. A man came first upon the bulls, and instead of maneuvering to avoid without alarming them, in order to come upon the cows, he began his work at once, for a bull hide was worth half again as much as the pelt of a cow.

Sprawling prone in his retreat, he arranged a sizable array of cartridges where they would be within easy reach of his hand. Carefully, he arranged a rest for his rifle. Meanwhile he had his eyes upon a tremendous bull that stood within fifty yards.

From far off to the south a heavy report drifted to his ears, another from a slightly different angle, still another from a third quarter. That would be his three sharpshooters—men picked for their unerring ability to drop their game from a stand with the deadly Sharp buffalo gun—commencing their work on the herd. He lined down the barrel at the tremendous bull, centered the sights behind the animal's shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The bull went down as if struck by lightning when the heavy bullet tore through his heart.

Even before the jar of the report had ceased ringing in Coleman's ears, the scattering detonation of three more buffalo guns hurled their distant impact against them. Another bull went down before his second shot. Near-by animals snorted and peered about them. No enemy was in sight. They pawed the sod as if to give warning of their ferocity, yet remained there in savage stupidity as one after another lurched and fell to the prairie under the swift fire of that deadly rifle which spoke from the head of the prairie draw.

And throughout it all, those other dull reports, in rapid succession, drifted to Coleman's ears, punctuating the brief intervals between his own shots. Eventually he wounded a bull that tried to make off instead of remaining to die on the spot. A second shot knocked the animal down but it struggled to its feet again and made off at a lumbering gallop. The others moved in the same direction as if swayed by a sympathetic panic. A third and a fourth shot failed to drop the bull. A fifth ball finished it and the others stopped and stared stupidly round as if they waited for leadership before making another start.

There was none within close range now, the nearest being some two hundred yards away. Again the big Sharp roared and a bull took two quick jumps and fell to the ground. Coleman took even greater pains now, lining long and carefully before squeezing the trigger. Two of the distant guns were silent. The third still continued to sound the death knell swiftly. Four more bulls dropped to Coleman's fire. Two of them required three shots apiece before sinking to the prairie to rise no more. Then the rest of the herd moved away in a panic and disappeared over the next rise of ground.

The remaining sharpshooter that was in action fired another half-dozen rounds before the reports of his buffalo gun ceased to reach Coleman's ears. Coleman retraced his way down the draw to the point where he had left Fleabit. Thirty-seven buffalo from one stand, and every one a bull, was not bad, he reflected. He mounted and rode on to the east. Within two miles he sighted another unit of the big herd that was drifting north. The animals seemed undisturbed.

Coleman studied the lay of the land, giving utmost consideration to the direction of the wind, before making his approach. Soon he was engaged again in dropping a buffalo at every thunderous report of the big Sharp. He heard another gun open up far away shortly thereafter. Still later, he rather imagined that he caught the sound of more distant reports. His three sharpshooters would be going their best to-day, making the biggest possible kill. That was not always the case. When working in a big herd, the hunters sometimes ceased shooting for the reason that the skinning crews could not keep up with them. But to-day was the first time since the start of the present hunt that they had been able to get action on a sizable herd.

Coleman dropped only eleven buffalo from his second stand, all cows. He rode on in search of another undisturbed band. When he ceased operations at nightfall his total tally was seventy-nine victims for the day. It was well after dark

when he rode into the main camp. Two of his sharpshooters were there ahead of him. One reported a kill of sixty-four head, the other of thirty-eight. One pair of skinners had returned with thirty-odd green skins which they pegged out upon the sod after stowing away a ravenous meal. The remaining four pairs of skinners, each couple with a mule-drawn wagon to transport the hides, came in shortly thereafter. The last hunter arrived to report a kill of ninety-one buffalo, having made the best stand of the day on a big band of cows just before sundown.

The crew turned out with the first morning light. Buffalo still were drifting up from the south in tremendous herds. Coleman made his first stand within half a mile of the main camp. The reports that drifted to his ears from other quarters afforded evidence that his three hunters also were engaged. Throughout that day and the next it was seldom that a quarter of an hour passed without being punctuated by the reports of one or another of the four buffalo guns. Frequently all of them were in action at the same time. By sundown of the third day the hunters were ahead of the skinners by some two hundred animals.

"Only the first stand of the day for each hunter to-morrow morning. After that, no shooting," Coleman decreed. "Then hunters turn skinners. We'll drag the hides off the big part of them by to-morrow night."

He killed twenty-eight buffalo at his first stand in the morning. Then, pairing himself with another hunter, he skinned buffalo throughout the day. The remaining two hunters, working together, were similarly engaged. With seven pairs skinning, there were but few animals remaining unpelted at nightfall. Throughout the day, Coleman's ears were alert for the sound of shooting that would show that other hide-hunting outfits had located the big herd. Not a report reached his ears. But such immunity would not last for long.

They would be coming, the hide hunters, hundreds of them, as soon as news of the herd's whereabouts spread. The hunters took the field again the following day. The slow northward drift of the buffalo continued to move up from the south. Another three days and the sharpshooters found themselves ahead of the pelting crews again and left off shooting for a day to devote themselves to skinning.

The crews returned after dark to stow away a huge meal of roasted buffalo ribs, boiled potatoes and Dutch-oven bread, washed down by copious swigs of scalding coffee.

"How's the tongue business?" Coleman inquired of the cook.

"Rushing," that worthy replied.

He had constructed a dipping vat of a green buffalo hide and filled it with a brine solution into which he dipped the tongues of the slain buffalo as they were brought in by the skinners, the only portion of the animals saved except the hides. Two parallel walls of sod had been erected to serve as a smoke house. From sticks placed six inches apart across the top of these two walls, the tongues were suspended, the top covered with buffalo hides to hold the smoke from the smudge fire that was kept smouldering on the floor of the structure.

By far the greater majority of the hide-hunting crews did not trouble to save the tongues. But Coleman's crew was well organized and he was not disposed to pass up the substantial added profit afforded by smoking tongues as a side-line. He paid his cook five dollars a day flat wages. In addition, the man received a bonus of three cents for every buffalo tongue that he brined and smoke-cured. Coleman's three hunters received twenty-five cents for every buffalo cow brought down by their Sharps, thirty-five cents for every bull, Coleman supplying the ammunition. On such days as they were too far ahead of the skinning crews and ceased shooting to turn their hands to skinning, they received the same rate as that paid the regular crews, forty cents for every hide removed. Usually, skinners worked in pairs and divided the proceeds of their joint efforts.

During the night, two men rode into camp and reported that they had contracted to deliver forty buffalo saddles in Dodge City, end of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad, at five dollars a saddle. The following day they dressed and loaded into two wagons the saddles of the first forty cows skinned by the crews, then started for Dodge City, forty-odd miles away. This left only three wagons in camp, which did not matter materially, as the only present use for them was that of transporting hides to camp. The two men would receive half of the price of the meat when they disposed of it in Dodge.

As Coleman resumed his shooting he could hear, in addition to the shots fired by his three hunters, the steady roll of other buffalo guns a few miles to the north. News of the big herd had spread swiftly and other outfits had rallied to the

spot. A few miles to the east and on to the west, too, Coleman heard the swift reports of still more Sharps.

Already there were acres of pegged-out hides round Coleman's camp; also great stacks of hides, dried and folded once. And his crew had the cream of the hunting. The herd, on a ten-mile front, was drifting slowly up from the Indian country south of the Arkansas River. Coleman's camp was just north of that stream in the exact center of the passing column. Every day fresh units of the big herd moved north across the river and each morning his hunters encountered no difficulty in making stands within a short distance of camp.

Lucky, other hide hunters would say of him, since he had been camped and ready to operate in the exact center of the advancing front of the herd even before the vanguard of it had crossed the river. But it had not been luck. It had been foresight. Most of the hide-hunting outfits still were operating, and none too successfully, well off to the northwest in the general vicinity of Fort Wallace and north of that point, on the Republican and the Platte. In that general neighborhood the great hide-hunting campaign of the past two years had been waged. There had been hunting, too, of course, along the line of the Santa Fe Trail, but not to the extent to which it had been carried on in the Wallace region. Already, the legend of the famous "Lost Herd" was springing up. The northern herd seemed to have been mislaid somewhere. In all that country between the Arkansas and the Platte, buffalo had become increasingly scarce during the winter that was just now merging into spring. Now only scattered bands remained in that region. But the hide hunters persisted in scouring those parts, shifting about from spot to spot, confident that they soon would locate that great lost herd.

The herd was lost, as Coleman knew. And contrary to popular belief that the famous lost herd would reappear to repopulate the plains in former numbers, Coleman was well aware of the fact that it had passed on to join the beaver, the old mountain men of the fur brigades and the bulk of the red men, all of whom had preceded the northern herds to the happy hunting ground. It was lost, the great herd, never to return again. There was, of course, a considerable number of buffalo still ranging the Dakotas and in Montana, where lack of transportation had retarded hide hunting. But those northern bands contained only pitiful remnants.

Aware of what was happening, Coleman had moved well to the north of the other hide-hunting outfits the preceding fall. When the slow southward drift of the northern herds had set in, he had met it north of the Republican and had profited accordingly. And when the rearmost of the herd had passed, Coleman had traveled south with it, to find the numbers of the shaggy legion growing ever fewer, swarms of other hunters having worked upon the brown horde clear to the Arkansas River. That, Coleman was convinced, was the last great semi-annual migration of buffalo that would come down into Kansas from the north. Those central masses of the herds had made their last long pilgrimage to that region from whence none return.

As winter had waned into spring, Coleman had realized that if there were to be any further general movements of the herds into Kansas it would have to come from the south, buffalo of the southern herd, in the Indian country, moving north across the Arkansas River. So he had moved south, gathering such hides as had been afforded by small bands of buffalo *en route*.

Then he had sent his three hunters, all experienced plainsmen, into the Indian country to scout there secretly and report upon any northward drifting herd. The Arkansas was the dead line, all south of it being the habitat of the Indians, guaranteed to them by the recent treaty of Medicine Lodge and closed to hide-hunting whites.

Most of the hide hunters still cruised well to the north in the search for the lost herd. It was not strange, Coleman reflected, that it was lost. He had heard that somewhere round three million hides had been shipped by the Union Pacific, the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads during the preceding two years of hide hunting.

A hunter known on the plains as "Old Kentuck", at a point on Punished Woman's Fork south of Wallace, had killed thirty seven hundred head of buffalo in a single year of hide hunting, netting round ten thousand dollars clear profit. The restricted scene of his operations had become known as the "Slaughter Pen." Thousands of hide hunters, perhaps less successful individually, in the aggregate had been fearfully destructive. There had been much talk in Congress about putting a stop to the unrestricted killing. But it had ended where it began, in conversation.

The newer order of hide hunters had laughed incredulously at Coleman's explanation of the popular belief in the lost herd.

"There it is," he had said, pointing. "Once there was live buffalo for as far as a man could see in any direction. Now there's dead ones in any direction you care to cast your eyes." Every sag and every gentle rise of the prairie was dotted

with carcasses. "There's your lost herd. You used to see it alive. Now you see it dead. It's gone, I tell you. She's passed to the happy hunting ground and won't return. She's gone to join the beaver, the mountain men and the big part of the Injuns. I'm telling you."

But they had remained incredulous. Leaving them to search for the lost herd, Coleman had headed south toward the Arkansas. Harper, one of his hunters, had reported the northward drift of a big herd well to the east, so he had moved down river toward Dodge. And on the first day that the leading units of the big column, on a ten-mile front, had crossed the river, he had been camped with his outfit in the very center of the advance.

So, it hadn't been all luck, any more than luck had played any considerable part in the fact that he had met the last big southward drift of the northern herd far north of the Republican the preceding fall.

News of the herd had spread. Other hide-hunting outfits now crowded close about him. Men eager to have a hand in the big hunt quit the grading camps of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe to take a hunt on their own or to apply for work with hide-hunting crews. Coleman would employ none as hunters. He and his three sharpshooters could kill all the buffalo that could be handled. The difficulty was not in the killing but in getting all slain animals skinned. He employed six additional men as skinners at the going rate per hide. Thereafter he and his hunters wielded their big buffalo guns from dawn till sundown and the skinning crews kept up with them.

The slow northward drift of the herd continued to roll up to the Arkansas and cross that stream. Coleman added another hunter and four more skinners to his crew. He put on an extra man to help the cook in preparing the meals and in smoking buffalo tongues. One of his wagons rolled into Dodge on one occasion loaded with more than two thousand smoked tongues which were offered at fifty cents apiece. An eastern buyer took the lot at that figure.

Scores of men, operating singly or in little groups, often without adequate equipment, turned hide hunters. The most of them managed to kill and skin from five to a dozen buffalo apiece per day. Many operated from bivouac camps on horseback without facilities for transporting their hides. They were willing to sell their cured skins to larger outfits at a dollar apiece for cow hides and a dollar and a half apiece for the skins of bulls. Coleman's mule wagons collected thousands of hides from the camps of such small operators.

For round seven weeks the northward drift continued to come up from the south. It was estimated that from three to five hundred thousand buffalo had crossed north of the Arkansas on this one movement. When the movement ceased, Coleman, with the kill of his own hunters and with such skins as he had purchased, found himself owner of round eighteen thousand hides.

"You aiming to follow north with the herd and hunt as we go?" one of his hunters made inquiry when the northward drift had ceased and no more buffalo were crossing the Arkansas.

Coleman shook his head.

"You figure then to wait and meet the herd when it starts drifting south again this fall?" the man persisted.

"It won't drift south this fall," Coleman said. "There's hide hunters by the thousand strung out all along the line north of here. They've killed off the big part of this northward drift by now, likely; and they'll get the rest. No, that herd won't come drifting back."

He paid off his crew with the exception of those who remained to serve as teamsters to freight the hides to Dodge. Coleman was in no haste to sell. Buyers were expecting the same tremendous deliveries of hides that had characterized the past two years and they would not bid up the price. Coleman knew that the kill would be very short. In the main, it would consist of the hides of that one herd that had migrated up from the Indian country. So instead of selling his own hides at the prevailing low prices, he bought the output of other hunting crews as they freighted the results of their hunts into Dodge. He bought round seven thousand hides at the going rates, a dollar and a half for cow skins, two and a half for bull hides, before it became general knowledge that there would be no such tremendous quantities as had been freighted to railroad points in the past. The Eastern markets, somewhat glutted by former huge deliveries, which had occasioned the depression of prices, now had absorbed the surplus and the demand was becoming increasingly active.

Coleman demanded and eventually received a flat price of two dollars and a half for cow hides and four dollars straight for bull hides. He found a good market for his remaining thousands of smoked tongues at fifty cents apiece. Including his

operations in the Wallace country during the previous fall and winter, his net profits for the twelve months had exceeded forty thousand dollars, almost doubling the capital he had amassed in the preceding five years. He believed that there would be no more hide hunting. There were, of course, many small herds of buffalo scattered throughout their former range from the Arkansas north to the Canadian prairies. But they were too few in numbers and too difficult to locate for hide hunting to be anything but a losing venture in the country, save too far north for transportation facilities.

It seemed incredible that the vast herds should have vanished so completely in so short a space of time. Many observers declared that the millions of hides shipped up to date, somewhere round three and a half millions, did not give any accurate idea of the actual number of buffalo that had been killed during the campaign. Inexpert shooting by thousands of inexperienced hunters, resulting in the wounding of more animals than had been killed and skinned; thousands of buffalo that had been shot by hunters in excess of what the skinning crew could pelt before they rotted; the untold thousands of hides that had been spoiled by careless handling and not freighted to the railroad; the hordes of calves that had died after their mothers had been killed; the widespread slaughter by outside sportsmen who had wounded several animals, to die eventually, for every one that had fallen to their fire; all these had taken a tremendous toll. Some competent observers testified that three buffalo had been killed for every hide that had been shipped. Others placed the ratio as high as five to one. It was certain, as Coleman knew, that the waste had been in excess of the number salvaged for their hides. But there'd be no more of that. The only really great herds remaining were south of the Arkansas River in the Indian country, closed to hunting by the treaty of Medicine Lodge.

CHAPTER XIV

As the buffalo died by millions in the great hide-hunting campaign, so Texas longhorns, in other millions, moved up the trails to feed upon the grass of the northern prairies. As hide-hunting grew to incredible proportions, so the northward trek of surplus Texas cattle increased to unbelievable magnitude. And meanwhile the land-hungry horde of settlers pressed steadily westward in ever-increasing swarms.

The first big year of the Texas-Kansas cattle trade had boomed Baxter Springs in 1866. Year by year, settlers frowned upon the herds that surged in increasing numbers toward the north, trampling down their crops. And as settlement swept westward across Kansas with ever greater impetus, the regular cattle trails necessarily were abandoned and new routes of travel were mapped out farther west. Baxter Springs was first to die after a brief flash of fame as a cattle town. Then Abilene, on the Kansas Pacific, blossomed into world-wide renown as the cattle metropolis of the West and the wickedest town on earth, only to lapse back into the sleepest of country villages as Hays and Russel took away the play as cow towns on the Kansas Pacific further to the west. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, farther to the south, built a succession of towns as the end of steel pressed ever westward across the plains and each town in turn came in for its brief spell of glory, lasting but a few weeks, or months at most, as the new cattle center. Newton became known for a brief span as the wildest camp. Eleven men died with their boots on in one night in Newton, victims of various shooting affrays. The sounds of the gun-shots scarce had died away before Newton died with them as a cow town and Wichita became the new boom camp. Then, in swift succession, Great Bend, Larned and, eventually, Dodge City, took the lead.

And Dodge was destined to become the most far-famed of all the cow towns, the last and longest-lived of the whole wild lot. It all had happened with incredible rapidity. The death chant of Baxter Springs had scarcely ceased quivering in the air before the swan song of Abilene began—even as the citizenry of Dodge chanted the war song of that new and rising town that was destined to eclipse all cattle camps before or since. Overlapping waves of land seekers were following so swiftly that already the cattlemen were becoming alarmed. In five years' time, something over two million head of cattle had flooded up the trails from Texas. Now settlement of the Kansas prairies was closing those earlier trails and forcing the trail herds westward at an alarming rate. It was destined to be not many years before the cattlemen, seeing the end in sight, were to meet in St. Louis with intent to protect their interests against over-swift settlement. The government had subsidized the railroads by giving land-grants for right-of-ways. Why should the government not subsidize the cattle industry as well? Why not a national cattle trail, six miles in width, with wider spots at various points for pasturage and bed-grounds, to extend from Texas north to the Canadian boundary? Otherwise, the trail-herding of cattle from Texas to northern points would vanish from the list of occupations since insatiable greed of settlers for new land would cover the landscape to such an extent that pastoral transportation of trail herds would be impossible. The thing seemed logical, but the government failed to act upon the cattlemen's resolution.

Already, Coleman could see that his original belief that a man must sometime own land as well as cows in order to succeed in the stock business was coming to pass sooner than he possibly could have anticipated. Well, he had accumulated slightly more than twenty thousand acres of land script, most of which had cost him less than fifty cents an acre, none of it more than a dollar. Various traders and store-keepers still were purchasing script for him in considerable quantities. Men frequently drifted into stores and tried to turn land script in as legal tender for the purchase of necessities.

Within the past two years, as the buffalo vanished and cows came to dot the prairies in their stead, Coleman, while engaged in his hunting, had looked the country over with an eye for a feasible ranch site. There must be running water through it and, if possible, a few timbered bottoms for winter shelter for stock. There could be few places better than the Kansas prairies for grazing stock, he thought. The short, curly buffalo grass, cured on the stem, made excellent winter feed. Pasturage of that variety would carry a greater number of stock the year round than could be supported on a similar area of any other type of range land.

But he was in no particular hurry to locate. If he had a woman and a family, he thought, he would pick his spot right now. Not being so blessed, he would go on hunting for a while. It was as much a part of his nature to hunt as it was part of an Indian's nature to subsist by the chase. Since hide hunting had depleted the buffalo down to the point where only small roving bands were to be found, the demand for buffalo meat at correspondingly greater prices had increased apace. Probably he would go back to meat hunting, he decided, though it would seem rather trifling after the great days of hide hunting.

After disposing of his entire lot of hides and tongues, Coleman lingered on in Dodge. Having come into its own as the wildest camp on earth, Dodge boasted that its dance halls ran night and day, gambling houses never closed their games or saloons their bars. Many of the roughest characters in the West, noted gunmen by the score, cattle buyers, gamblers and the cow hands who came up the trail from Texas all forgathered there. Also it was headquarters for railroaders and the hide hunters. On the edge of the Indian country, soldiers still were stationed at Fort Dodge. With these various and often conflicting elements thrown together in a new boom camp, shootings were not a few.

Coleman witnessed half a dozen shooting affrays in as many days. The old desire to hunt and to camp on the open prairies surged over him again. He hired some of his former hunters and, with five mule-drawn wagons, set forth on a meat hunt. While making camp on the first night out he glanced up to see a horseman ride up out of a coulee and for an instant he mistook the man for Flack. Then he saw that it was merely a stranger with Flack's variety of red whiskers.

Throughout his hide hunting, Coleman had been on the lookout for Flack and Enders but had set eyes on neither of them since his affray with Bronson in Abilene. The sight of this red-whiskered stranger revived his ambition to chance across them. Some day he would play even for old Ike Williams, Conley and Rapaho Gil.

Stock stealing was more flagrant than ever and he had no doubt that that precious pair still played a prominent part in the traffic. Even the cavalry sometimes took notice of such depredations nowadays. Government mules and horses were not always immune. Thieves decamped with them on occasion. Similarly, beef herds intended for the sustenance of troops quartered in various prairie forts and herds belonging to government contractors for delivery on Indian reservations were stolen with increasing frequency, assembled into trail herds by the predatory gentry and sold to ranchers in distant points on the range.

It was no unusual occurrence, therefore, to meet small details of cavalry, accompanied in most instances by a civilian scout or two, out scouring the country in search of some audacious group of thieves who had departed with government property. It was seldom, though, that soldiers intervened unless it was government stock that was missing. Similarly, the average civilian stock owner troubled himself but little on the score of apprehending the marauders unless his own stock happened to be among the missing, in which event the outraged owner usually enlisted the services of his friends and set out in pursuit. So persistent had thievery become that it ranked above murder in popular disesteem and the horse thief, if captured, was dealt with on the spot.

It was through the cavalry indirectly, that Coleman next was enabled to pick up Flack's trail of depredations. A detachment of a dozen or more troopers, with Captain Stone at their head, came riding into Coleman's camp on the second night out of Dodge. Coleman had shot a buffalo cow and calf and his men were roasting buffalo ribs before a fire.

"Home again. Among friends at last. Here's where my men get fed," Stone greeted Coleman cordially.

"Grub for all hands," Coleman agreed. "Better stop over for the night. We'll even go so far as to give you breakfast—coffee and fryin'-pan bread throwed in."

Stone accepted on the spot.

"Thought you'd been sent back to old Fort Wallace," Coleman said, "which makes this considerable off your beat."

"Yes," Stone assented. "A contractor on the Kansas Pacific out near Denver finished his work. He sent thirty head of mules east over the Smoky Hill route in charge of three men. The trio decided to join the wild bunch, apparently. Somewhere west of Wallace they quit the trail and headed south with the mules. They carelessly took along six of Uncle Sam's mules that a government teamster had turned out to graze for the night. Hence my participation."

"Detailed to recover the mules, eh?" Coleman said. "Right smart of a chore, these days."

"All of that," the officer agreed. "We struck the trail west of Wallace. It angled southeast. We lost it thirty miles west of here. The fact that the thieves had come this far east led me to believe they intended to ride east on the Santa Fe Trail, as if they were coming up from New Mexico, and market the mules in Dodge. Heard of any such outfit arriving within the past week?"

"No. But your reasoning was sound. It's what they would do. They'd bring the mules in in small parcels, though. But of late, if suspecting that parties are close on their trail, thieves from the north have been holding on south across the Arkansas into the Injun country, then east to Wichita. Good market for stock there, and they can claim they've come from

New Mexico by way of the Cimarron country. Know the names of the three men you're after?"

"Only one; the he-coon of the outfit. He was given orders to take the mules east and he hired his own helpers. He's a granger living on a homestead near Abilene. Never have met him but I've met his family. Two right nice daughters in his tribe. He's an old-like party with a Missouri drawl, named Carrolton."

Coleman looked up, startled. Then he pondered the matter for some minutes before committing himself. "I'm betting my last peso he didn't have a hand in it," he said at last. "Not old man Carrolton. His two helpers might a-been members of the wild bunch and they dry-gulched the old man and decamped with the cavvy-yard. Or they might have been honest men and the wild bunch downed the lot of them and took the mules. I'll bet my hair that Carrolton is never seen alive again."

"Seems probable," Captain Stone assented.

For the next two days after the departure of the troops, Coleman brooded. He was satisfied that old man Carrolton was dead. That meant that his wages as foreman of the mule skimmers could no longer be sent to the family on the homestead out of Abilene. What, then, was to become of Sue and the others?

Buffalo were scarce and his hunters killed only one little bunch of five, four cows and a calf. Then Harper, one of his former hunters, turned up in camp, arriving from the Indian country south of the Arkansas. Already there was much talk among the hide hunters of banding together to march south to the Cimarron, Canadian and Staked Plains country for a last big hide hunt in defiance of the treaty of Medicine Lodge. Scouts had reported that the prairies of those regions were black with buffalo, as, only a year or two past, the splendid range country between the Arkansas and the Platte had been darkened by the shaggy legion.

Harper, the new arrival, had been scouting the situation for himself. He related to Coleman and the other hunters the incidents of his trip, reporting that buffalo ranged in untold thousands on the Cimarron, the Canadian and out into the edges of the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains of Texas and New Mexico.

"We'll have to band together and stage one rip-roarin' hide hunt down thar," Harper insisted. "The buffler is thar waiting for us."

"Likewise we'll find Chief Quannah and his Comanche raiders waiting on us," another hunter prophesied. "Quannah will swoop down on us with his braves like a swarm o' hornets if we invade them herds."

All were agreed on that score. Quannah would never brook such an invasion of his rights. No doubt his prestige was such that the Southern Cheyennes, Kiowas, Arapahoes and scattered bands of Apaches all would rise to follow the great war chief of the Comanches in case of an invasion by white hunters.

"Thar's one sizable outfit part way down thar now," Harper stated. "Either it's hide hunters holed up an' watchin' a chance to get into the herds this fall or it's a parcel of hoss thieves. The latter, likely. I come over a rise o' ground and see fifty or so head o' mules an' horses in the bottoms. I ducked back out o' sight and high-tailed it for other parts mighty pronto."

"Where was the camp?" Coleman inquired with sudden interest.

"On Crooked Creek, thirty mile or so this side the Cimarron," Harper informed.

For half an hour Coleman sat and stared into the fire. Unquestionably, a part of the mules seen by Harper on Crooked Creek were those formerly in old man Carrolton's charge.

"It's a thieves' hangout, not a hide hunters' camp," he said at last. "Who all among you'd like to volunteer to ride down with me and clean that nest of murdering miscreants out?"

Every hunter present was eager to join such an expedition on the instant.

"It's apt to be a sizable war," Coleman warned.

"Times has been too peaceable anyhow," Harper declared. "I like war times better."

That was the general sentiment among the hunters. All declared in favor of war. So unanimous was the feeling, in fact,

that Coleman was forced to promise one man fifty dollars to remain behind and care for the mules.

"Which that'll be the hardest fifty I ever earned," the man grumbled. He knew that Coleman had picked him for the job because of the fact that he had been but a skinner during the big hide-hunting campaign and even now was a better camp cook and stock tender than he was an expert rifleman. Those others all were plainsmen of wide experience. All had known scouting service during several Indian campaigns. Each man in the lot was capable of making a stand on buffalo and dropping one after another of the shaggy beasts at two hundred yards with a Sharp buffalo gun. When under fire they could shoot as accurately at an enemy as when firing upon buffalo from a stand.

Coleman, Harper and four others rode off to the south, each with a single blanket and a few pounds of buffalo meat tied behind his saddle. It was round seventy miles to the camp on Crooked Creek. The six men covered the distance easily in two days and on the evening of the second they reconnoitered carefully. There was no evidence of any band of mules in the vicinity. Eight or ten head of horses grazed there, two of the animals picketed, the others hobbled. Four men lounged round a bivouac camp.

"The rest has decamped with the mules—either to run them east to Wichita or southwest into New Mexico or Texas," Coleman surmised. "Sometime after nightfall we'll steal a march on what's left of them. Take some o' them alive if possible. I want to have a medicine talk with them."

The plans were laid. Three hours after nightfall the six men were creeping, stealthily as Comanches, upon the sleeping camp from various directions.

Coleman, moving soundlessly in his moccasins, walked within a hundred yards of the dying fire before any of the blanket-swathed forms gave evidence of life. A pony snorted and galloped a few yards, thumping awkwardly in its hobbles. One of the sleeping men waked and propped himself upon an elbow, listening. Coleman eased himself flat upon the prairie and remained there motionless. Presently the man settled back to his blankets. After a full minute had elapsed, Coleman resumed his stealthy approach. He gained fifty yards before another disturbance occurred to halt his progress. Another pony then snorted loudly.

All four men waked and wondered profanely what the this and that ailed the horses. One kicked off his blanket and moved out to where the animals grazed, spoke to them soothingly. Sprawled prone, his rifle trained upon the camp, Coleman waited for the shot or the shout of warning that would be inevitable if the man chanced across one of the approaching plainsmen. Coleman had heard no sound to indicate the approach of his men from various directions but he knew that they, too, were flattened watchfully somewhere close round the camp.

The man returned from the horses and resumed his blankets. The camp quieted down again. Coleman moved up to within a dozen yards. There he waited for a space of minutes to make sure that his men, too, had gained their distance. The fire was so nearly dead as to be but a feeble glow of coals, fanned to added redness by occasional puffs of wind. The four blanket-swathed men were mere dark blots upon the earth.

The ponies, evidently, had become accustomed to the prowling figures for there was no further sound from them. In fact, their very silence indicated that they were watching, curiously and alertly, the movements of the several dark figures that converged from all directions upon the sleeping camp. One of the men raised on his elbow.

"Boys, thar's something wrong," he said softly to his companions. "First them ponies was snortin' round suspicious. Now they's quiet as the grave. They's a-watching something. It's Injuns maybe. Crawl off a piece and flatten out until we see what busts. Told you all 'twas riskin' your scalps to no parpose to build a fire and sleep at it. Be startin' now."

"Don't you!" Coleman's voice admonished from close at hand. "Steady there! Stay right in your blankets."

The man who had spoken jumped to one knee with an oath, whipped a rifle from beneath his blanket and fired point-blank at the sound of Coleman's voice. The roar of Coleman's Sharp was almost simultaneous and the man was knocked flat and lifeless as the buffalo gun tore a great hole through his chest and shot away a portion of his spine.

"Steady! The rest of you!" Coleman ordered. "There's guns on you from all quarters."

"Better sit tight," Harper's voice counseled from the opposite side of the camp.

"We've got you! Take it setting down or you won't last long enough to draw your breath," a third voice announced from

the night.

The three men, still sodden with sleep and with their nether portions still swathed in blankets, heard stern voices on all sides of them. Their companion lay dead within arm's reach. The thing had come to a head too suddenly.

"What you want of us?" one of the trio demanded, his hands rising slowly above his head. The others followed his lead.

"We aim to hold a council talk on your case," Coleman said. "Stand up out o' your blankets, easy like, and don't fetch a gun up with you. First bad move and down goes your meat house."

Dark forms moved forward and tied the hands of the three men behind their backs.

"What I want to know is where the rest of your outfit went with old man Carrolton's mules," Coleman informed the trio.

"Never heard of him," one man declared. "And we ain't seen no mules. We all just come here to-day and stopped to camp at this p'int because some former outfit had packed a few sticks of firewood here."

"Yeah? Well, you'll talk about those mules—or get your necks stretched a mile long," Coleman promised calmly. "Either way will suit me."

He added fuel to the coals and fanned it to a blaze with his hat. As the flames leaped up he examined the prisoners in the light of them. He found himself gazing upon the hard faces of the two men who had had charge of his stolen mules at the stockyards in Abilene. The third man was younger, tight-mouthed, hard-eyed and reckless.

"I knowed we'd meet again sometime," Coleman said to the two older men.

One of them shook his head. "Can't recall you, stranger," he declared, "Who might you be?"

"Breck Coleman," he watched the men closely. They had learned long since, of course, that they had killed old Rapaho Gil that night instead of Coleman. "It's a long jump from here to Abilene. But likely your memory will stretch back to that time I tracked the pair of you there after you killed Dick Conley and Rapaho Gil in their beds and stole my mules. Your souls will be yelping their way toward the happy hunting grounds before many minutes, so if you've any last messages to leave behind we'll hear what you got to say."

"I got this to say," and the spokesman cursed each and every one of his captors. "And that's all."

"Goes double for me," his companion, less loquacious, seconded.

They were hard men. Human lives meant little to them, including their own. They knew the game was up and were prepared to die as they had lived, defiant to the end.

Coleman recited his facts to the hunters and asked their verdict.

"Not a tree anywhar near," Harper said. "But a rope round the neck and attached to a saddle horn, then jump our ponies off across the prairie, will do the job as well."

"Simpler to line 'em up standing and let daylight through the three of 'em at one clip with a buffler gun," another hunter suggested.

The three prisoners knew that these were not facetious comments but practical suggestions. The six plainsmen were accustomed to taking human life and they intended to execute their prisoners. No false sentiment would stay their hands and permit the three captives to go free to continue their murderous activities. They had an unpleasant job ahead of them and intended to go through with it with all possible dispatch.

"Any choice as to how you step off?" Coleman asked. "You can name your own medicine."

"Long as I'm due to go, the method don't interest me any, just so you make it as quick as is convenient to you," the youngest man of the trio stated.

"Thar's a scatterin' of cottonwoods three-four mile down the creek," Harper suggested. "Moon'll be up in half an hour."

"We'll ride down," Coleman said.

The prisoners were mounted, the horse of each one snubbed to a hunter's saddle horn.

"Thought you spoke some of a choice between hanging and talking about old man Carrolton's mules," one of the older men suggested when they had neared the cottonwoods.

"That was up until I discovered that you was the same pair that downed Conley and Rapaho Gil," Coleman said. "All hell couldn't get you off now."

They rode up beneath the cottonwoods. A rope was adjusted round one captive's neck and the loose end thrown over a low branch and made fast. He was advised to stand in the saddle so that he would get a drop as the horse moved out from beneath him. He acted on the suggestion. Harper snapped a rope end against the pony's rump and the animal leaped ahead. The man dropped to the end of the rope, his neck broken by the fall. The second man followed shortly. The grim business was carried through almost in silence.

"You know," the younger captive said as his turn came, "I wasn't mixed up in that affair of snuffing out your two friends. Never heard of them. It might just be that I'd consider talking about those mules."

"We'll see," Coleman decided. "I'll put three questions to you. Answer 'em straight and fast and you can ride off from here. But don't make any slips. I'm not fond of this vigilante business and I want to get it over with and move out of here. The sight of your two departed friends a-swinging there is depressing to me."

"And me," the young man agreed. "Just what was it you was wanting to know?"

"First off, who killed old man Carrollton?" Coleman asked.

"Easy! You're looking right at them. The two you just swung off downed him after hiring out to help him take the mules east." The man laughed, the sound grating through the silence following his revelation. "You wanted to know who they was so you could catch and hang them, and then you caught and hung them before you found out who they was. That's backfire justice for you. And I could tell without doing them a mite of harm. They was dead before you asked me."

"We'll let it go that it's the truth," Coleman said. "Next in order—was Flack and Enders into this?"

"No," said the prisoner. "Don't know the parties."

"Guess again, Mister," Coleman said grimly. "Every horse thief in the country knows that brace of miscreants."

"Feeling as you do," the man said slowly, "I reckon you'll have to go ahead and hang me after all."

"We'll do that fast enough," Coleman said. "But before you decide, you might as well know this. Whatever you say or don't say won't make any difference in their case if I set eyes on them. If you swing without a peep out of you, it don't alter the fact that I've got Flack and Enders earmarked for the happy hunting grounds first time I get a look at them across my sights."

"That does make it different," the man said reflectively. "If I can't save 'em anyhow by not talking, and can save my own neck by talking—why, yes, come to think of it, Flack and Enders did take charge of those mules and started off to market them four-five days back in Wichita. But they'll be gone from there long before you arrive—and they had no hand in downing Carrolton."

"That's better," Coleman said. "Once more. What's the names of these two defunct horse thieves?"

"No harm in answering that. One styled himself Wichita Brown, the other was known to his friends as Rock. I'll swear I don't know no other name for him but that."

Coleman twitched the noose from about the man's neck and freed his arms.

"Pick out your own horse," he instructed. The man complied. "You can be riding on now," Coleman told him.

"How about my guns?" the man inquired. "This is Injun country, don't forget. They might jump me up before I get clear, and without a gun—well, I don't want to get myself staked out. I might wish you all had hung me after all."

Coleman nodded, emptied the man's rifle and six-shooter of cartridges, told him to put them in his belt with the others

and restored the empty weapons.

"Good-bye, Harper," said the ex-captive.

"Adios, Johnny," Harper returned.

"Never a peep out of either of us that we used to team together," the man remarked. "Thanks."

"I wouldn't have told who you was if we'd had to swing you, Johnny," Harper stated.

The man rode away in the bright moonlight.

"Friend o' yours?" one of the hunters inquired of Harper.

"Was," Harper said. "Johnny Rawlins and me used to wolf together. He was a good man to tie to before he went over to the wild bunch. It would have sort of went against the grain if I'd had to stretch him. I ain't sorry it broke the way it did."

The two figures swayed grotesquely, their moon-distorted shadows moving stealthily back and forth across the ground.

"Let's don't camp here, boys," one of the hunters urged. "I don't mind dead men on the ground or in it. But it sartinly would make me rest uneasy to have them hoss thieves' shadders a-gliding back and forth across me all night long."

"A dead man's shadder is bad luck always," another seconded. "I've heard that whenever a man is touched by one, it's landmarking his own route to the great beyond—and I'd ruther have a dead Injun p'int the way for me than a fresh-hung hoss thief."

They moved a few miles along Crooked Creek, taking the horses and guns of the departed ones with them as a matter of course, and camped for the balance of the night. At Coleman's insistence they agreed not to mention what they had learned of Flack and Enders lest that pair seek cover before Coleman met them. On the second day thereafter they rejoined the outfit. The man left in charge of it was solaced upon hearing that there had been no war to speak of after all.

The meat hunt proved a failure. They killed a few head of buffalo here and there but failed to locate a band of sufficient size to provide them with a load of meat. Coleman was unconcerned as to the result of the hunt. He relished the life in the open above that in the hustling new prairie towns, so lingered on, even though each day showed him a net loss. His mind, in fact, was concerned with entirely different matters.

Sue Carrolton, in all probability, was not yet aware of the fate of her parent. While the old man had provided from his wages as boss mule skinner the funds to keep the family in food and clothing, Sue had made a home for the younger members of the family. They had helped out, too, by raising garden truck and poultry for home consumption and a surplus for sale in Abilene. But that would not suffice now. How could Sue make out? Young Buckner Carrolton's slender wages as a cowhand would not go far in maintaining the others. Well, Coleman himself owed Sue something. He had killed the man whom she had intended to marry. Not but what he'd always been glad of it. He'd saved Sue a lot more misery by that act than he had caused her. Still and all, he reflected, she'd have had a man to provide for her now if he hadn't downed Bronson that time.

Coleman never had felt the least bitterness toward Sue for turning him away with tears and fury. That had seemed logical enough—just what any woman would do to the one who had shot down the man she intended to wed. It had occasioned within him a profound ache of loneliness and longing. He had tried to eradicate it by seeking the female companionship of the dance-hall girls upon his infrequent visits to various towns. But it was only to discover that their interest in him was exclusively that of obtaining his money while his interest in them was a mere pretense. So he had given that up. No, he still wanted Sue. He knew that, though he frequently assured himself that it didn't matter. But after all, he owed her something. One day a brilliant idea came to him in a blinding flash. The other hunters observed that he answered absently and at random when addressed, his thoughts, apparently, being far afield. He dwelt long upon the details of his plans. Then he consulted Harper at some length, schooling him in his part. Shortly thereafter, Harper departed for Abilene upon some mysterious errand and Coleman returned with his crew to Dodge.

There he found groups of experienced hide hunters going into daily semisecret sessions. They planned to enlist a band of seasoned plainsmen and launch an expedition among the buffalo herds of the Indian country south of the Arkansas in defiance of the treaty of Medicine Lodge. To all intents and purposes, such an expedition would constitute an enemy

invasion. It would result, inevitably, in war. After all, it would be but one more instance of repetition in the endless series of such events that had characterized the entire history of the white men in America. And in this instance, the hide hunters assured themselves, the war would occur in the heart of the Indian country itself and cause no outbreak of depredations among defenseless settlers. The brunt of the fighting would fall upon the invaders themselves. Well, every man of them was so versed in savage warfare that it had become rather a life habit of thought. They were going anyway, the expedition already being largely planned and the personnel chosen, so Coleman, a hunter always, decided to throw in his lot with them. It was not to be a partnership venture so far as proceeds were concerned. Each outfit was to conduct its own hunting operations as always in the past. But it was to be a co-operative affair for mutual protection and defense in case of war.

Adobe Walls, on the Canadian River, was to be the central gathering point. Back in the fur days Kit Carson—who but recently had passed on to the happy hunting ground to join his friends of the fur brigades—had been operating out of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas. Carson had been detailed to lead a few trappers down into Comanche land to build a post for the purpose of trading with that tribe. Kit and his men had constructed a building and stockade of adobe and opened up for trade. The Apaches had crept up and stolen their horses. The little party, at great risk and undergoing every conceivable privation, had made their way back to Bent's Fort afoot. The post had been deserted. Later-day plainsmen, finding the crumbling walls still standing but unaware of their origin, had named the ruins Adobe Walls.

"The plains is black with buffler on every side of 'Dobe Walls," the hide hunters assured one another.

So it was planned that the start should be made not long in the future. Coleman marveled at the swift transitions of the past few years. It had been but a short seven years before when Baxter Springs had blazed into glory as a cattle camp. And now Dodge City, three hundred miles beyond, already felt itself an old and established cow town of first magnitude while Baxter Springs had been dead on its feet, many of its buildings, untenanted, for several years. And despite the seemingly limitless herds of buffalo ranging the northern prairies a scant year or two before, hide hunters now were forced to trek far into the heart of the southern plains to find buffalo upon which to ply their trade.

Rumors of the intended invasion leaked out and spread. The military authorities sent word that no such tactics would be permitted in the Indian country. The hide hunters chuckled and perfected their plans.

And at this juncture, Harper, somewhat crestfallen, returned from Abilene and handed Coleman two thousand dollars in gold.

CHAPTER XV

When Abilene passed as a cow town, its former wildness was equalled in extremes only by its subsequent excessive quiet. The surplus population moved on to newer camps. Dance halls and saloons were no more and the tolling of village church bells of a Sunday pealed forth into the uncanny silence with which the town was mantled.

Instead of the booming market for vegetables and other produce, there was no market whatever. Even the townsfolk, in the main, raised their own garden truck, tended flocks of chickens and kept the family cows picketed between milking periods on vacant lots or upon the adjacent commons.

Sue Carrolton could no longer dispose of her surplus foodstuffs in town, so that source of income ceased. However, competent manager that she was, she produced practically all of the food that the family consumed. The wages of the elder Carrolton, seldom at home himself these days, were more than ample to clothe the family and provide a small surplus which the girl saved religiously.

Captain Stone, with supreme confidence in Coleman's opinions in all things pertaining to the plains, did not hesitate to state in his report that it was his opinion that Carrolton had been murdered and the mules stolen as against the first supposition to the effect that Carrolton himself had decamped with the animals.

The substance of that report fell like a bombshell upon the Carrolton family. Sue had received not so much as an intimation even that her parent was missing. After the first numbing shock had passed, she set herself practically to considering ways and means. Buckner Carrolton was somewhere in Texas or on the way back up the trail to Kansas with a trail herd. She could expect no financial aid from him until such time as he was paid off when the herd reached destination.

For a time the girl drew upon their slender surplus for their few necessities. There was more truth than otherwise in the widespread saying to the effect that the West was hell on horses and womenfolk. But the truth consisted of the actual deprivations which frontier women must encounter, not in the attitude of frontier men toward women. The early settlers of the West revered good women above anything else on earth but all too frequently found themselves powerless to alleviate the primitive conditions which these revered women faced.

Sympathetic neighbors aided Sue Carrolton in every possible way. But in the main, every settler was almost as impoverished as the Carroltons themselves. Linda was on the point of wedding a young farmer of the neighborhood. As Sue once had deferred her hoped-for wedding with Breck Coleman, so now Linda as bravely deferred her own in deference to family necessities. She planned to take over Sue's household duties while Sue sought work in town. But work of any sort in Abilene was far from plentiful. Work that a woman could do was almost nonexistent. More through sympathy and personal friendship than from any active need of help, one of the more affluent of the town's families installed Sue in the general capacity of household helpmeet. She was to help in the kitchen, with the general housework and with the family sewing, for which she was to receive twelve dollars a month. To Sue the offer held forth visions of affluence. She would share a room with the elder daughter and be treated as one of the family.

The hunters had spoken freely of having hung the two horse thieves who had murdered Carrolton. So on Sue's first day she heard that Coleman and his hunters had followed her father's murderers far into the Indian country and imposed summary plains' justice upon them. The news not only lifted any last trace of suspicion that might have lingered round her father's name but seemed to create afresh, or rather to strengthen, the old-time bond that drew her heart toward Coleman and prevented other men from entering it. His recent act seemed in some indefinable way to attest his continued interest in her.

From the moment of his departure, after accepting literally the assertions made during her perfectly natural feminine emotional storm, she had faced the fact that she must wait for him to return. There was something inevitable in her love for him. And some day, inevitably, she would see him again and explain. She had instructed Buckner Carrolton to tell Coleman at the first opportunity that she wished to see him. And when Buck, on two successive occasions, had visited the family homestead briefly after returning up the trail from Texas with a herd and still confessed that he had failed to effect a meeting with Coleman, she had reproached him for his remissness.

Her brother, having far less interest in Coleman, had deemed himself unjustly censured. "Suffering cats, woman!" he had expostulated. "I'm on the trail three-fourths the time. Coleman's one of the big guns among the hide hunters and is always

out somewhere among the buffalo herds. Expect me to lay off work for a year and hunt him up? I'll tell him when I see him. It was you chased him off with your foolishness, not me. But if you say the word I'll tell every soul I meet and noise it abroad in every cow town from Texas to Montana that you're a-pining for him. Then he'll be bound to hear. No?" he queried when his sister vetoed any such suggestion. "Then give me time, girl, give me time."

And so matters stood when, during the third week of her sojourn with the Bonner family, a man inquired for her and introduced himself as Harper. He was a grizzled old party and at the sight of his plainsman's garb the girl's thoughts flew to Coleman.

"I was a great friend of your Pa's, Miss," Harper said. "Awhile back, afore bad luck romped up behind him, he lent me a little money he'd laid up agin a dry spell. I'm returning it to you."

The girl thanked him warmly, but when she took from him the heavy buckskin sack, opened it and peered inside, her eyes widened at the hundred golden eagles that reposed therein. Here were untold riches! Where on earth could her father have secured so much wealth to lend casually to some one whose very name she had never heard him mention?

"Where did Pa get all this money?" she cried.

"Well, he made a little turn in business," Harper said. "Or so I gathered."

"What business?" she insisted. Incredulity was spreading, her mind darting to every possibility only to encounter blank walls at the end of every corridor of thought. She knew her father's limitations.

"Well," said Harper again, considering, "seems to me he made considerable of a deal in buffler hides, way I recall it now."

On the spur of the moment he had chosen the one business with which he himself was most familiar and the last one in which Carrolton would have been apt to engage. If he had accused her father of having made a turn in mules or oxen, taking a contract in hay-cutting, grading or freighting, the girl might have lent a credulous ear; but not to this tale of his having engaged in a business so foreign to his natural ways of life. The mention of hide hunting—or perhaps because the thought of him was ever near the surface of her consciousness—drew her thoughts to Coleman. He had hunted down her father's killers. With uncanny perception, she suddenly was quite positive that this, too, was his handiwork. Happiness flooded her as sunshine disperses a shower.

"Where is Breck Coleman?" she asked.

"Couldn't say, miss. I don't know no party of that name," Harper, surprised, replied too quickly.

"Tut!" the girl admonished. "Every plainsman knows Breck Coleman. Do you think he'd come to me if he knew I needed him very badly?"

"Any man would, I reckon," Harper said. Wily strategist in plains craft and in Indian warfare, Harper was helpless to match the subtlety of a woman's guile. The girl took a blind shot.

"If you don't know him, how does it happen that you rode with him to capture the men who killed my father?" she demanded.

Harper knew that his part in that affair had been widely noised abroad. It was unfortunate that the girl had heard it. Nevertheless, he was resolved to do his utmost to carry out his chief's instructions.

"I didn't know the names of all the men that was along," he lied feebly. "If this feller you speak of was there, then he was one of them I didn't know."

Belief now crystallized into certainty in the girl. She leaned forward, smiling at him mistily, and placed her hands upon his shoulders. "Thanks for riding with Breck that time," she said. "Pa would thank you, too, if he only could. Now listen, I want you to take a message from me to Breck. Will you?"

"I tell you I don't know him! Never heard tell of him, even!" Harper insisted stubbornly.

She brushed that aside as if it remained unuttered. "Tell him I can't take his money—but that I need him. I want to see

him. Tell him to come here as soon as he can."

"Never heard o' him," Harper was still protesting, his unwilling fingers closing round the buckskin sack that she thrust into them.

"I know," she soothed. "You promised not to tell—so don't you. But remember the message." She repeated it again. "Have you got it now?"

"Yes. But——"

"All right. Now be sure you don't forget it. And I'll always thank you in my heart for riding down there with him."

And so it was that Harper, keeping faith with Coleman and protesting to the last that he had never so much as heard the latter's name, rode crestfallen back to Dodge and delivered the message as the girl had given it to him. And within the hour Coleman, mounted on Fleabit, was striking a direct northeast course across the plains toward Abilene.

Harper, in the shame of his failure in the realms of diplomacy, had neglected to mention the fact that Sue Carrolton was not residing on the homestead but instead was working in Abilene. Hence it was that Coleman, riding across the farm from the southwest, came first upon the blank rear wall of the sodhouse portion of the Carrolton home, dismounted and dropped Fleabit's reins, then stepped round to the front. It was a warm summer's day, in late afternoon, and the pine door of the front room stood open. His thoughts were all upon Sue.

But a lifetime of hazardous adventure had so fortified him against surprise that his mind functioned swiftly and with utmost coolness at the instant of facing some unsuspected danger. When, therefore, he stepped to the open front door and found himself facing not Sue, but Flack, the move to cover the man with his gun was instantaneous and almost without conscious volition. Then swiftly, the weapon swung slightly to cover Enders instead, the two men being seated some six feet apart in the rear of the front room.

"Sit tight," Coleman advised tersely. The two men had been taken completely by surprise. Coleman kept his gun trained on Enders from the doorway while he watched Flack from the tail of his eye. Flack, he had always felt, despite the man's animal courage in a physical contest and his ruthlessness in shooting from behind, lacked the cold hardihood to take an even break with a knife or gun when life was the stake at issue. Enders, on the contrary, was something of an unknown quantity and Coleman could not be sure of him. So he held the gun on Enders and held Flack with his eye.

Almost, he had shot Flack at the first glimpse of him, remembering just in time. He had come with joy in his heart at the prospect of seeing Sue Carrolton again. He could not wreck that meeting by shooting down a man in her home. Sue was nowhere in evidence but Linda sat at one side of the room, regarding him in wide-eyed amazement. Two of the younger Carroltons stared at him from the door leading into the sod house in rear. In a space of ten seconds, Coleman had decided upon his course.

"Stand up with your hands in the air, the pair of you," he instructed, stepping inside the room, "and march past me going out. Then keep going."

Flack, at this intimation that Coleman did not intend to shoot unless it became necessary, glanced furtively at Linda. Frontier-bred, the girl knew a crisis when she saw one and was aware that silence was her cue. These men would do whatever it was down in the cards for them to do. Flack blustered.

"Who gave you the right to order me around?" he demanded.

"You go from here," Coleman said with such repressed deadliness that it almost lifted Flack from his chair. "You're back from Wichita after selling the mules you stole from Carrolton, eh? Ain't you heard that we hung Wichita Brown and Rock on Crooked Creek, missing you two by a hair? And Johnny Rawlins told us all about you and Enders. I'm letting you go because you're setting in Sue Carrolton's house. Anywheres else on God's green earth I'd have shot the pair of you down on sight. And will yet. Now get going."

Enders, if it had been Coleman's purpose to capture him, would have made a move for his gun. Since, patently, it was Coleman's plan to let him pass, a gun play at the man who had the drop would be sheer idiocy.

"We'll go," he said, rising and elevating his hands. "But under protest, of course." He and Flack passed through the door.

"I want it to be understood that there's no truth in your accusation. It's a misunderstanding all round."

"If you think I haven't proof enough to convince the world," Coleman challenged from the doorway, "ride on into Abilene and stay there half an hour. About that time I'll come riding down the street. If you're there, you'll either shoot it out with me or I'll turn you over to the marshal and have you hung. Step aboard your ponies and get moving."

"We'll be there when you arrive," Enders promised.

"You'd better stay out of Abilene yourself," Flack threatened. "We'll be there."

"You'll be miles away with your horses in a lather and still running," Coleman prophesied. "The whole rest of your natural lives will be spent on the run from now on. Don't forget it. Now vamoose."

The men rode away. Coleman watched them regretfully. Now he had snarled matters up for fair. They'd be a hard pair to get within gunshot of after this. It seemed that he always overplayed his hand with Flack. Then, as his mind had leaped so swiftly from Sue Carrolton to Flack upon having confronted the latter unexpectedly, so now it dismissed the vanishing horsemen and returned eagerly to Sue.

"Where's Sue?" he inquired of Linda.

The girl had risen to face him.

"She's in town, Breck. Was what you said of them true?"

Coleman nodded. "I'd sworn to down the pair of them on sight. Then to think I'd run across them setting here?"

"Why didn't you shoot?" the girl demanded. "What more fitting place for them to die than on the Carrolton farm?" She, too, was the daughter of a feudal clan that clung to the law of reprisal.

"They can be 'tended to some other time," he said. "You say Sue's in town?"

Linda told him where to find her and Coleman headed forthwith for Abilene.

From the day of Harper's departure, still protesting his innocence of Coleman's acquaintance, Sue had started up at the sound of every horse in the quiet side street. Her heart seemed to pulse in unison to the hoof beats as they approached, then to check its fluttering as the sound passed by. She told herself that she could not be wrong in her surmise that Harper had come from Coleman. Then the fear would rise that she had been mistaken. But hope sprang afresh with the sound of every horse that carried a rider along the street. It so chanced that when Coleman did arrive Sue was engaged in making butter on the rear porch and the splash of the dasher in the tall wooden churn drowned out the sound of his horse's feet.

The daughter of the household admitted him at the front door and informed him that Sue was churning on the back porch.

"Friend of her brother's?" the girl inquired, mistaking his plainsman's garb for that of a cowboy.

"You might say," Coleman conceded.

"Well, go right on through," the Bonner girl invited cordially.

So Sue did not know of his presence until he opened the kitchen door and stepped outside. She glanced up to see him standing there looking down at her. Her hands remained clamped upon the dasher of the churn as her eager eyes devoured him.

"Harper said you wanted me, Sue," he said.

"I've always wanted you," she answered.

It came about as simply as that.

"Well, girl, I reckon you know how I've always felt about it," was all Coleman could find to say.

The Bonner girl, scenting romance, had left off her dusting in the forepart of the house and now was busying herself in the kitchen.

"Come for a walk, Sue," Coleman urged.

"Wait till I finish the churning," Sue said. "I'll have a few minutes then before starting supper."

"You stay as long as you like, Sue dear. I'll get supper," the Bonner girl volunteered from within.

"Thanks, honey," Sue accepted.

She began again the rhythmic strokes of the dasher. Coleman seated himself on the porch step, loaded his pipe and watched her hungrily. Deftly, she extracted, kneaded together and worked with a wooden paddle, the golden butter. He was thinking what a glowing picture she would make kneading butter on the porch of their own ranch house. She finished at last and they walked together out beyond the edge of town. Sue's happiness suddenly was clouded by realization of the responsibilities which, now more than ever, she could not lay down.

"You won't mind waiting just a little longer, will you, Breck?" she asked wistfully.

But Coleman, with the prize of his heart now seemingly within his grasp at last, was in no mood to risk losing it again.

"We've waited too long now, Sue, the both of us," he declared.

"I know. It's been hard. But the children—I couldn't leave them now; not yet a while," the girl faltered.

"Who's asking you to leave 'em?" Coleman demanded. "I won't be any great handicap to you in wrangling the dogie detail, will I? Some one's got to drive the calf wagon."

"Breck, you don't mean that you'd have them with us, do you? That you'd like to?" Sue asked, a note of undiluted joy creeping into her tones.

"Why not? With Buck out on his own and Linda wanting to get spliced, it don't leave many does it? Three? Four?"

"About that. I haven't made a count lately," the girl laughed unsteadily. "Then you wouldn't mind coming here and living on the place and having them under foot?"

The limitless horizons amid which he had lived his life seemed suddenly to constrict and close in upon Coleman. He was accorded one brief terrifying vision of the restricted limits within which most mortals spent their daily lot.

"Me? Live here on a little patch o' ground with folks cluttered round on every hand thicker'n a swarm o' bees?" he demanded, unable to picture the terrors of such an existence.

"Then what—" the girl began falteringly, and found herself unable to proceed.

"Bring 'em along," Coleman said. "They're pretty near growed up now as it is. The youngest is round nine now, ain't he—or she? They'll come in handy. We'll set 'em to wrangling chickens and such around the ranch. They'll all be growed up and gone before you know it. Meanwhile they won't be any bother."

The girl turned and took him to her, held him close, disregarding the fact that it was not yet dark. "Breck, honey, I didn't know you had a place of your own."

Always she had pictured him as the very essence of wandering, one to whom the whole wide West had seemed his own, never to be restricted to any one particular spot which he would call home.

Her words recalled to Coleman the fact that his ranch existed merely in his imagination up to date.

"I ain't actually got it pegged down yet, blossom," he told her. "But I've collected better'n twenty thousand acres of land script so's we'll have room to turn around in, and I'm still buying more. I've got the place all picked out. It's way off down in the Injun country yet. But it won't be Injun country long. The boys is going in on a big hide hunt. Cattlemen will come with their cows as the buffalo's killed off. That'll open it up. It ain't open to entry yet, but it will be before so many moons. Meanwhile, I can put up buildings and corrals and squat there. Then when it's open, I'll lay my script and get deed to it."

He described to her the location that he had decided upon—broad miles of solid grass lands with a prairie stream

traversing the half-mile-wide timbered bottom that cut through it.

"There's wood a-plenty and good winter shelter for the stock. There's meadows on it that will cut a thousand ton of prairie hay. It's no end pretty to look at, too."

Stroke by stroke, he painted for her a vivid word picture of the spot which, not so long thereafter, he hoped to make a vast ranch home. And the girl listened, enthralled by the picture that he sketched.

"I'm going in with the boys on the hide hunt, too," he said. "I'll leave plenty money with you. I've got barrels of it. You can close out your things here, farm and all, and wrangle the calf detail over to Dodge by train so's you'll be waiting for me when I come back from the Injun country."

And so it was arranged. "Breck," the girl confided, clinging to him later that night before they parted, "never in all my life have I been so glad just to be alive as I am right this minute."

"And I aim to keep you feeling thataway, girl," he promised. "You're sure a-deserving of it."

As he rode back toward Dodge he found the central Kansas prairies covered with cattle, ranging there in hundreds of thousands where once the buffalo had ranged. And still other hundreds of thousands of longhorns, he knew, were plodding northward up the long trail from Texas.

A trail herd passed, headed north in charge of round a dozen cowboys. One of the flank riders drew aside to borrow a smoke from Coleman.

"Where you bound?" Coleman asked.

"Dakoty," the cowman informed.

"Quite a stretch to cover yet," Coleman commented.

"Well, I don't know," the loyal Texan demurred. "Texas herself is such a 'tarnal big stretch o' country that the big part of a man's time is spent in travelin' to get outside it. Whenever I start out with a trail herd, once we reach the Texas line I always figure that we're almost thar, no matter whar we're bound for."

Coleman passed settlers' sod houses on every hand. Here and there glistening black streaks showed against the green of the prairies where some Nestor had broken the age-old sod to plant a crop.

"I saw it coming, but I'd never have believed it would come to pass so fast. The whole country will be jammed up like this some day, Fleabit, you mark what I say," Coleman prophesied to his horse. "But before that time comes we'll stake us out a piece of ground big enough so's they can't crowd in on us too close."

He found the picked bunch of hide hunters preparing to move south into the Indian country.

"What do you think of it?" he inquired of Bat Masterson and Bob Wright.

"The merchants of Dodge are in favor of it," Masterson told him. "They want to open up the business."

Coleman decided to risk but three of his wagons in the venture. He knew there was trouble ahead and plenty of it. So, with twelve mules and three wagons, he prepared to set forth with the others. His remaining mules he rented to parties in Dodge City.

Every man in that picked band was an old hand at the business, sharpshooters every one. Most of them were veterans of many an Indian war and had seen much service scouting against the savages. They were men to whom fighting was a part of their everyday affairs, handling their weapons in the most desperate scrimmage as coolly as a woodsman wields his ax. It is probable that never since the days of the fur brigades had so peculiarly able a body of men assembled together as the seventy-odd hide hunters who crossed the Arkansas River and headed south through the Indian country toward Adobe Walls.

At the first night's camp, while feasting once again on roast buffalo ribs, the men engaged in rough badinage.

"Better pin your scalp down to your ears," a hunter shouted across the fire to Coleman. "Chief Quannah will be reachin'

for your ha'r."

The name of Chief Quanah came in for frequent mention as the hard-bitten cavalcade moved on toward Adobe Walls.

CHAPTER XVI

The strange life story of Chief Quanah was well known on the southern plains. In the early 'thirties, the pioneering Parker family, destined to become famous in the annals of Texas, took up its habitat on the outermost frontier. The settlement consisted of the elder Parkers and seven grown sons and daughters, six of whom were married and provided with large families of their own. They built their cabins near one another and erected a log stockade from one building to the next, forming a perfect fort.

In 1836, when the majority of the Parkers were at work in the fields, six hundred Comanche warriors launched an attack on the fort. So dauntless and so versed in frontier warfare were the Parkers that the majority of them made good their escape after a desperate affray. Perhaps a dozen were slain and half as many carried away into captivity.

Among the captives was the little beauty of the Parker clan, blue-eyed Cynthia Ann Parker, nine years of age. Far off in the Colorado hills, a roving band of trappers purchased one of the women captives from the Indians and she returned to her people. A wandering band of Delawares, exiled from the East, strayed into the wilds of northern Texas and purchased a captive whom they restored to Sam Houston. One boy became a warrior among the Comanches but returned at last. All of the captives were restored then but Cynthia Ann Parker and for a dozen years strenuous efforts were made to locate her without avail.

The Comanches were divided into numerous bands, each under its own war chief. Rumors were heard to the effect that a blue-eyed squaw rode with the dreaded chief of the band that inhabited the Staked Plains. So wily were these raiders, sweeping in swift forays and fading again to their inaccessible retreats, that all expeditions sent against them were futile. The Texas Rangers were organized to hold the Comanches in check. In 1860 a ranger captain made an extended march, located and surprised the village of the Staked Plains band.

The Comanches, most marvelous horsemen in the world, came out fighting and scattered for their horses. Even small children darted for loose ponies, mounted and dashed away. The ranger captain slew the dreaded chief in single combat, one of his men captured a squaw and a three-year-old baby girl. The squaw could speak no English but she had blue eyes.

"I believe it is the famous Cynthia Ann Parker," the ranger said. "We'll take them back with us."

So Cynthia Ann and her baby daughter, Prairie Flower, were taken to the capital of Texas and restored to her prominent relatives. Throughout the rest of her life she grieved for the little boy, Quanah, son of Cynthia Ann and the dead Comanche chief, who had been among the children to reach their horses and escape. She pictured him riding alone and uncared for in the prairies and begged repeatedly to be allowed to go back and search for him.

Quanah Parker—for he later took his mother's name—was riding on the prairies but not alone. Even in his early teens he became leader of a band of fearless raiders. He stole horses from the Mexicans numbering into the thousands. More and more wild young bucks followed his leadership. While still a mere boy he became the great war chief of the entire Comanche nation. Before he was out of his teens the Kiowas, Eastern Apaches, Arapahoes and Southern Cheyennes listened to his counsel and sometimes followed his leadership in war. He became the most sagacious and dreaded Indian leader in the whole Southwest.

Implacably, he refused to compromise with the white men who sought by treaty to deprive his people of their lands. Fiercely, he had rejected the treaty of Medicine Lodge, refusing to sign with the other chiefs and returning to go his own way with such braves as would follow him. It was written that he would be almost the last southwestern chieftain to give up the struggle and when at last he was to see that all hope was gone, he was to come in with his people and surrender with the simple statement that it was no use to fight longer; that henceforth he would teach his people to follow the white man's road.

As in the past he had rejected all treaties, so after accepting one he was to adhere to it rigidly throughout his life, pick good lands for his people, teach them stock raising and farming and eventually to become as noted a leader in peace as he had been in war.

And it was into Quanah Parker's country that seventy-odd hide hunters now marched. It was certain that Quanah would make a desperate effort to retain these last hunting grounds for his people. The hide hunters established headquarters at

Adobe Walls. Other hunters, hearing of the expedition and finding no buffalo in any large numbers north of the Arkansas, were following southward on the trail of those who had gone before.

The country adjacent to Adobe Walls was covered with vast herds of buffalo. The hunters scattered to make their camps. Coleman pulled out a dozen miles or more and halted his wagons. Then he rode out on Fleabit, while Harper and his other sharpshooters started out in opposite directions.

Coleman worked up a depression in the prairie, drew within easy range of a band, spread his cartridges and pulled behind the shoulder of a bull. The big beast toppled to the ground at the thunderous report of the Sharp. Harper's buffalo gun was speaking swiftly a mile or more to the east, that of the third gunner from the south; and the last great hide hunt of the Southwest was on.

Two enterprising Dodge City men freighted their wares to Adobe Walls, erected two adobe buildings and opened stores. A third opened a saloon.

Because of the menace of Indians that hovered ever above the whole venture, the various outfits in the field did not accumulate any great number of cured hides on the open prairie, freighting them instead to Adobe Walls and stacking them there as soon as each load of hides was cured.

Day after day, Coleman and his hunters watched for Indian signs. The far horizon showed not so much as a smoke column by day or a signal fire by night to indicate that the savages were signalling news of the invasion throughout Comanche land.

"But Quanah knows every move we make; no doubt of that," Coleman said. "His scouts are watching us and he's spreading the news by couriers instead of by signal fires. He knows that signals would put the plainsmen on their guard."

The days merged into weeks without the least indication that there was an Indian anywhere within a hundred miles. That very uncanny lack of Indian signs in the heart of the Comanche nation caused the hide hunters to be ever more upon the alert. Military authorities and the Indian Bureau both objected to the invasion by the hide hunters. There was much talk and interchange of messages, but the government failed to take decisive action. The hide hunters proceeded about their business. Tens of thousands of buffalo fell before the fire of the thundering Sharps. Acres of cured hides were stacked round Adobe Walls. But the hunters were too plains-wise to believe other than that Quanah was biding his time. This was the last stand of the buffalo in the great Southwest. Quanah would make a desperate attempt to save those last herds for the red men. Without the buffalo, the Indians could not subsist save on reservations as wards of the government.

Coleman had cured and freighted something over two thousand hides to Adobe Walls. Before a sufficient number had been cured to make up another load, Coleman, fearing a possible shortage of ammunition, decided to ride to Adobe Walls and bring back a supply by pack horse. His outfit was operating round twenty miles from that point. After hunting all day he set forth some three hours after nightfall, riding Fleabit and leading a pack horse, arriving at his destination an hour after midnight.

Ordinarily, including those who tended store there permanently and such hunters as might have come in for supplies, there would not be more than ten men there at any one time; fewer, usually. Now the place was thronged. Almost thirty men were present. Coleman wondered at this congestion but was not mystified for long.

Several isolated hunters had been slain and scalped by a roving band of savages. Those who had discovered the bodies had warned others as they rode, starting a general movement toward Adobe Walls. Throughout the latter half of the day hunters had been arriving singly or in twos and threes. The matter was discussed at length. Was this just a chance foray or the first blow in a general war? Opinions differed. In any event, outfits operating in different directions must be warned on the morrow. It was now but a few hours before dawn. Several men slept outside. The others slept on the floors of the three buildings that graced Adobe Walls. All was quiet for the night.

Quanah, the great war chief of the Comanches, had planned a wily campaign. It was known to him through his scouts that the invading hunters intended to fall back upon Adobe Walls at the first alarm. He planned to swoop down and sack that stronghold first, taking the few souls found there, then raze the place so that the hunters would have no feasible point of defense in which to make a stand. Then his braves would dart like hornets, scouring the open plains for the scattered hunters, and kill every man of them at all costs. When the news reached Dodge City that every man of the invading expedition had been slain, Quanah believed it would be long before others would attempt to kill off the buffalo herds of

Comanche land. He assembled his own fighting men and picked bands of warriors from among the Kiowas, Arapahoes and Cheyennes. A thousand selected warriors were ready to strike at his bidding.

In the first gray dawn Coleman was roused by a shout as some one slammed the door. He leaped to his feet, rifle in hand. Every man in the place was on his feet in an instant. The ground trembled beneath the pounding feet of a thousand running horses. The war whoop rose from a thousand throats. High above the general uproar sounded the dreadful Comanche scream, freighted with a peculiarity of its own, the most frightful note to which any creature in America, man or beast, gave voice.

The door groaned as horses crashed against it from without, hurled by their Comanche riders in an effort to break it down. A window splintered and a mounted warrior thrust his rifle through it and fired into the dim interior of the room. Coleman touched off his Sharp at the figure outlined there. Other buffalo guns filled the room with an infernal uproar as every hunter went into action. Six-shooters blazed from the bands of men who were expert in their use. From without sounded the Comanche scream, the constant billowing of rifle fire, while the dull muffled roar from the other two buildings of Adobe Walls revealed the fact that their occupants were still in action. Desperate at the unexpected strength of the resistance, the savages rode their horses full tilt against the doors in an effort to break through, hurled themselves at the windows and thrust their heads and rifles through them to pump lead at the occupants.

Coleman shot a savage between the eyes with his Sharp. Another body appeared there behind a rifle. A gun crashed in Coleman's ear as the hunter beside him shot the warrior dead. The room filled with smoke until it was impossible to see the length of it. With a Frontier Model pistol in each hand, Coleman fired at every form that loomed at a window. The reports of his companions' guns were so continuous as to deafen him. Swiftly, he reloaded his guns again. There was a sudden cessation of the din outside. The savages, appalled at the frightful loss, were drawing off for conference. Instantly, sharp-eyed hunters leaped to the windows and trained their buffalo guns upon the retreating horde of warriors. They did not shoot blindly or merely fire into the bunch, but each man picked his human target as unerringly as if picking a single buffalo out of a herd.

Other buffalo guns were talking volubly from the windows of the other two buildings, revealing the fact that their occupants, too, had repelled the savages who had struggled furiously to break inside. Dead warriors and a few dead ponies sprawled on every hand. But the retreat was brief.

Quanah, the great Comanche chieftain, knew that unless his braves took Adobe Wall his whole plan of campaign would fail. Before his warriors were out of gunshot, Quanah rallied them and hurled them back, firing at the doors and windows as they came. Peering from the sides of the windows with but an eye exposed, each hunter took his steady toll with his big Sharp as the advance swept forward. There was no promiscuous shooting. Each man picked a warrior and shot him from his horse.

Then the savages were back again, crowded against the buildings and firing in through every aperture. Flattened against the walls, the hunters fired with pistols through the windows in the very faces of the savages. Such inhumanly accurate shooting was more than the bravest men could face. The savage throng surged back again, taking their dead and dying with them. And again the sharpshooters rallied to the windows and turned their deadly buffalo guns upon the retreating horde.

The two men who had slept outside had been killed at the first onslaught. But there still remained some two dozen defenders within the three squat buildings. Instead of finding a half dozen or so unsuspecting souls there as he had anticipated, Quanah, by sheer accident, had chosen the one morning of all when the floors were strewn with sleeping hunters who had come in with their arms and ammunition; men so difficult to surprise that at the first alarm they had come up shooting—and shooting with fearful precision, too. Practically every man present was a veteran who had shot back into the smoke in many a life-and-death encounter. And it was this accidental gathering of twenty-odd of the deadliest gunmen in the world, ensconced behind bullet-proof walls, that Quanah's naked braves must conquer before his campaign of extermination against the invading hide hunters could succeed.

If the situation of the handful of defenders was desperate, the case of the warriors was scarcely less so. Break this stronghold they must, then wipe out the scattered hunters on the open plains, if they were to retain for the red men this last stretch of the great Southwest that remained untouched by the white man's civilization. Should they fail, the hide hunters would exterminate the great buffalo herds within a few short months. Should they fail, cattlemen and settlers would invade the region as the buffalo disappeared. Failure, in fact, meant the difference between living in the old free,

untrammelled fashion of the red men and settling down in one spot to be fed and clothed as wards by a benevolent white man's government. Quanah knew full well all that hung upon the issue. The red warriors dare not fail. And inside the three squat buildings of Adobe Walls the grim handful of defenders, twenty-odd against a thousand, knew that they must win or die.

The savage horde formed again and charged with redoubled fury. And the swift roll of the buffalo guns took dreadful toll. Then, as the red ranks closed again round the three structures, some warriors even seeking to hurl themselves through the windows, the defenders flattened themselves against the walls, each man with a six-shooter in either hand, and shot with deadly accuracy through the dense white powder smoke that stung the eyes and filled lungs with agony.

A third time the savages retired while the buffalo guns resumed their frightful work from the windows—whirled and charged back again as defenders reloaded pistols with deft speed and drove the assailants off as before.

The great war chief knew the caliber of the men with whom he had to deal. The majority of the scattered hide hunters out on the plains would not draw off and seek safety in flight. Instead with the coming of night, many of them would endeavor to slip through the cordon of besieging red men and join their beleaguered fellows, throwing in their lot with the defenders of Adobe Walls. When a member of any plains tribe from Canada to the Rio Grande wished to convey the word "Comanche" in sign talk, he used the universal symbol—extending his right arm forward and slightly to the left at the level of his shoulder, then pulled the member straight back with a wriggling motion of hand, wrist and forearm. It was imitative of the movements of a crawling snake in the grass, indicative of the extreme ability of the Comanches to creep unseen across country that afforded the slightest cover. Chief Quanah knew that that sign might well apply also to many of the plainsmen who were hide hunting in Comanche land. If another night passed before he could crush and raze the stronghold, the morning would find more, not fewer, defenders behind those walls.

He could not resort to a siege. Those in Adobe Walls would hold out until the last man died. Already, no doubt, volunteers from among such outside hunters as had become aware of the fight were riding at top speed, carrying the news to far-off Dodge City on the Arkansas. Quanah had no illusions. Long before he could reduce Adobe Walls by siege, lengthy columns of blue-coated cavalry would be pounding down from the north in overwhelming numbers. Despite the fact that the invading hide hunters were there in defiance of treaty and against the express orders of the authorities, when the soldiers came it would be as enemies, not as allies of the Indians.

The fate of the buffalo herds and the immediate future of the red men of the Llano Estacado and the adjacent region hung directly upon the outcome of the present fight. It must be won now or not at all. So Quanah hurled his fighting men again and again at those three low 'dobe-walled buildings. And twenty-odd tight-lipped, calm-eyed plainsmen fired point-blank into the faces of a thousand painted warriors. White powder smoke rolled from the windows as if a fire raged within the interior of each building.

From dawn until high noon the battle of Adobe Walls raged without cessation save for a few brief spells when the savages withdrew to form and charge again with desperate, unflinching valor.

Then the savages drew off and the battle resolved itself into a long-range duel. Bat Masterson and Billy Nixon had performed prodigies of marksmanship. Nixon now distinguished himself by singling out a lone savage more than half a mile away, as the warrior rode out beyond his fellows, lining on him carefully with a buffalo gun and shooting the brave dead, the heavy ball knocking him from his horse. The Indians were appalled at such marksmanship. Later, a chief in resplendent dress swept across the distant foreground on his pony. Several plainsmen tried for him. The distant chief fell from his pony and sprawled motionless on the prairie. A Comanche warrior, running his horse furiously toward the fallen chief, leaned from his saddle, seized the prostrate form, lifted it with superhuman strength without slackening the speed of his war horse, and carried his stricken leader to safety across the neck of his racing pony despite the concentrated fire of the deadliest marksmen that the West afforded. The rescued man was the great Comanche war chief, Quanah, merely stunned by a grazing bullet.

Late in the afternoon the savages, after terrible losses, gave up the fight. Save for those killed outside at the first onslaught, the defenders had suffered the loss of but one man. The great battle of Adobe Walls was ended. In point of the number engaged, the overwhelming odds against the defenders and the terrible loss inflicted upon the attacking forces, it was the most crushing defeat ever encountered by the Indians of the plains with one exception—the Medicine Fight. In that encounter in the far northwest, thirty-two men in a corral formed by sixteen loopholed iron wagon beds, which they covered over, beat off Red Cloud and three thousand warriors with such tremendous losses that the Indians thereafter

referred to the disaster as the Medicine Fight, believing that bad medicine had been exercised against them to render the wagon beds bullet-proof and the fire of the whites unerring.

But in point of importance, the battle of Adobe Walls took precedence over any similar engagement. Throughout the night, hide hunters came singly and in little groups to throw in their lot with the defenders. As the tidings of the hide hunters' invasion into Comanche land had spread, other hardy plainsmen had braved the Indian country to take a hand in the last great hide hunt. For weeks they had been drifting into the region. Within a few days of the big fight the men gathered at Adobe Walls numbered almost double the entire strength of the original expedition that had started out from Dodge.

The savages, learning of this through their scouts, despaired of winning. If a thousand of their best fighting men had suffered such tremendous losses at the hands of twenty-odd buffalo hunters, how could they hope to defeat five times that number and with more arriving constantly?

The hostiles retreated. General Miles was marching south to subdue the uprising. The desperate resistance of a handful of hide hunters had broken the spirit of the tribes and altered the immediate trend of history on the southwestern plains.

The majority of the hostiles came in and surrendered to the military authorities and agreed to live upon reservations. Quanah, with a few faithful followers, retired to the fastnesses of the mountains, gazing regretfully out across the plains where the hide hunters carried on the swift extermination of the great southwestern buffalo herds. Those herds were doomed from the instant that Quanah's forces lost the desperate battle of Adobe Walls.



CHAPTER XVII

As he rode south across the Arkansas a few miles from Dodge, Coleman saw numerous dark specks on the prairies to the south of him. But they were cows, those specks, not buffalo. Already the cattlemen had availed themselves of the opportunity to range their cows on this northern fringe of the Indian lands, confident that it soon would be thrown open to them legally. A few intrepid settlers, knowing what the victory of the hide hunters at Adobe Walls presaged, had moved south of the Arkansas and squatted on homesteads, then, despite the provisions of the treaty of Medicine Lodge, claimed the protection of the soldiers against the depredations of the savages. Settlers and cattlemen alike knew that frontier sentiment was overwhelmingly behind them—and that government could not for long hold out against the solid sentiment of those of its subjects who were most intimately concerned. Opening of the land to settlement was but the matter of a short while now. Meanwhile, those who squatted on lands of their choice in what still was considered Indian country would be in a position to retain their holdings by squatters' rights until such time as they could make legal entry.

It behooved Coleman to ride far down to the south and west to make one final survey of the lands he had selected for the site of his future domain. He would pick the spot for the ranch buildings and mark out the ground, then send in a crew to erect there a sod house of half a dozen rooms, later to be replaced by fine log buildings when he had leisure for their construction. Those first buildings must be supplemented by a sod or adobe corral adjoining, its walls six feet high and three feet thick, to be used for defensive purposes if necessary. Future Indian attacks in that quarter, however, would be few, he thought. Already, discouraged bands of red men were surrendering in wholesale fashion to be placed on a reservation over toward Fort Sill. Quanah Parker's band of Comanches was about the only hostile group in the vicinity that had not yet agreed to follow the white man's road.

Coleman would send a crew down there to be erecting the buildings while he was meeting Sue Carrolton in Dodge and arranging to move down to the spot with her and her younger charges and several wagonloads of equipment and supplies. Already he had contracted with cattlemen who were to drive a herd of two thousand head of young she-stock up the long trail from Texas and deliver them on the ranch the following spring. He and Sue would hold the home site under squatters' rights. Then, as soon as the country was opened for entry, he'd cover thirty-odd thousand acres of grazing and hay lands adjoining the homestead with his land script. His mind's eye traveled ahead joyously to the time when he would be settled there with Sue; but his physical vision centered upon a four-mule wagon in the immediate foreground as he rode up over the southern bank of the Arkansas River.

The big freight wagon was loaded to the top and piled high in a central peak of bleached white bones.

"How you making out, Pete?" Coleman greeted the driver.

"Fine. I'm gatherin' and haulin' in a two-ton load twice a day. The other boys is doin' almost as well. Our pile is growing turrible big along the tracks. Do you reckon they'll buy 'em all?"

"They'll buy them," Coleman assured him confidently. "You boys haul them in and pile 'em along the tracks like I told you—all you can haul. I'll market them when I get back."

"All right. You know," the man returned. "We'll haul in all the bones the railroad kin haul off if you'll only sell 'em."

Coleman turned in his saddle and watched the teamster drive on with the freight wagon piled high with buffalo bones.

In common with the other hide hunters of the Cimarron and Canadian country, Coleman had freighted his hides to Dodge City during the period when the soldiers had marched into the Indian country immediately following the battle of Adobe Walls.

The hide hunters, this time three hundred strong, had set forth again from Dodge to finish their campaign against the herds. From every point along the line of the Santa Fe Railroad, even as far east as Wichita, other hundreds of hide hunters were outfitting and marching south into the Indian country to work on the southern herds.

Coleman had not returned with this second and more formidable invasion of the hide hunters. Their very teeming numbers would cut down the opportunities of every outfit. The distance over which the hides must be freighted, the excessively high cost of supplies in the far-off haunts of the remaining herds all tended to render the cost of hide hunting prohibitive, paring the net returns down to a very slender margin of profit.

So Coleman had turned his hand to other business. From infancy, he had wrested a livelihood from the shaggy legion while it lived. Now he found that he still could secure good returns from the shaggy legion that had died. Eastern buyers clamored for buffalo bones. The plains were covered with them from end to end. Coleman had engaged five men to work on shares. To each he furnished a wagon and four mules, thus utilizing his old hide-hunting outfit. The men were to collect the bleached bones from the prairies, freight them to the railroad tracks and pile them there, receiving fifty per cent of the gross returns for their labor. Somehow, having known the shaggy legion when it had roamed in living magnificence, Coleman had little heart to engage first-hand in picking that same departed legion's bleached white bones. Temporarily, to find use for his outfit, he had delegated that task to others.

Off to the south of him, he knew full well, the buffalo guns of the hide hunters were never silent between dawn and dark. A few months more and the herds of Comanche land, save for a few fugitive bands scattered here and there, would have passed to the great beyond on the trail of the herds that once had roamed in untold millions between the Arkansas and the Platte.

He saw a bone-picker's wagon a mile west of him, another some distance to the east. First, he reflected, the mountain men and the great days of the beaver had come and gone; then the robe traders had held sway throughout the West. Following the decline of the robe trade the great wolfing campaign had engaged every hunter's interest. Then, with incredible rapidity, the hide hunters had swept the shaggy legion from the plains. And now, the length of the western railroads, the bone-pickers toiled at their work of gathering millions of pounds of dry white bones.

For the first fifteen miles or so south of the Arkansas Coleman could look ahead and see swarms of scattered brown specks on the prairies—and even more numerous white spots. The white objects were the bleached skeletons of buffalo scattered on every side in untold thousands for as far as the eye could reach. The brown specks were cattle grazing there where once the buffalo had grazed.

Coleman camped that night at a prairie spring forty miles out of Dodge, picketing Fleabit and the pack horse that transported his bed, war sack and a few supplies. When he broke camp next morning the skies were low and gray. The air bit at the nostrils uncomfortably and stung the eyes. Within the hour the storm clouds were racing close overhead and the wind, thrusting before it a fine frozen mist that was almost sleet, drove the cold into the bones of all who were caught unprotected.

"Ponies, it sure enough looks like we're in for a ripsnortin' blizzard," Coleman said. "We all had better look round for some spot to hole up in."

Such havens of refuge were exceedingly scarce on the level prairies. As the storm increased in fury, Coleman inspected several sags in the landscape but failed to discover a bank sufficiently high and straight to serve as a windbreak. Round noon he veered from his direct course to follow a draw to its head. In a sharp bend he found a bank some ten feet high on the upwind side. Close under it, he placed saddle, pack saddle and equipment. He picketed Fleabit and the pack horse on short ropes. The horses, heads drooping, tails against the bank, stood almost motionless as the raging wind carried the ice particles over them. Occasionally one of the horses shook itself violently to free its coat of the frozen dust that the backlash of the wind sifted down from above.

Coleman, seated with his back to the bank, smoking his pipe, listened to the rising screech of the wind and prepared to lose track of time. The storm might pass in a few hours or it might rage for several days with unabated fury. Whatever the length of its duration, he would weather it out here. He put on dry moccasins and wrapped his legs in buffalo robes. When the upper portions of his body began to chill from inactivity, he drew a robe, Indian fashion, close beneath his chin. There was but little snow, merely hurtling ice particles, driven like bird shot before the screeching gale. The most of it was propelled on beyond him. Some sifted down across his robe-swathed legs. The ponies stood there motionless save for an occasional stamp or vigorous shake.

"Looks like a three-day norther," Coleman said shortly after nightfall, listening to the sustained screech of the storm. "Sure has got all the ear-marks."

He stretched himself along the base of the cut-bank, securely encased in buffalo robes. It was gray dawn when he waked. The storm had passed.

The sun rose on a cold, frost-ridden landscape. The sky showed first steel-gray, then rose, then flawless blue. There was a dead calm, the wind having died toward sunup.

"Just a bluff," Coleman declared. "Stirred up a ruckus and spent her breath in a day and a night. Unless," he added speculatively, eyeing the white cloud banks that haunted the horizon, "she decided to blow back on herself. She might at that. It wouldn't surprise me much."

Coleman rode on to the southwest through the clear air that stabbed at his lungs with every inhalation. The horses' breath resembled steam jets and tiny patterns of frost formed on the hair that fringed their smooth muzzles. Coleman covered twenty miles by ten o'clock. The snowfall had been so light that it had been sifted down into the short curly mat of the buffalo grass and the prairies still showed brown when gazing out across them. But there was sufficient snow packed round the roots of the grass to reveal a track if one rode sufficiently close to it.

Well over on his right, Coleman presently observed a compact chunk of snow the size of his hand tilting from the short grass; beyond it, he sighted another, then, a hundred yards farther on, a third.

"Hm," he murmured, reining Fleabit to the right. He found the tracks of several shod horses. The tilted chunks of hard snow, as he had suspected, consisted of the snow that balled up in the horses' shoes, only to be cast one after another as the packed mass was jarred loose from each foot in turn.

"Four horses—likely two riders, each leading a pack horse," Coleman sized matters up. "They must've weathered out the blow somewhere not far from me last night. The trail's four-five hours old."

The riders were heading in the same general direction that Coleman himself was taking. The trail, while discernible at no great distance from either side, was visible for fifty or a hundred yards ahead—a simple one to follow. Coleman had no reason for following it. Fleabit, however, with the gregarious instinct of horses, pricked up his ears and held steadily to the tracks left by his fellows. Coleman did not mind since the trail led true as a surveyor's line in the direction which Coleman wished to follow.

Toward nightfall the skies again turned leaden. There was a warm breath in the air but not a trace of wind, an unusual, and frequently an ominous, phenomenon on the prairies which throughout the year are subject to brisk breezes between spells of stiffish wind. Coleman had covered some fifty miles before he halted to make camp for the night.

Throughout the night there was a dead calm. Even the wild things seemed to have lost their voices, as if suspicious of this uncanny quiet. Not a wolf howled or a coyote voiced its soprano message.

"It'll be a southeaster this trip, not a norther," Coleman prophesied. At infrequent intervals a storm raging across the Gulf of Mexico swept up from the southeast across Texas and into Kansas. "Those're the storms that pile snow belly deep to a tall horse," Coleman reflected aloud. "Eat your fill to-night, ponies. May be tough pawin' to get a mouthful of feed for the next few days if we're treated to a southeaster."

He broke camp with the first streaks of dawn and rode hard and steadily hour after hour, anxious to reach the timbered creek bottom near the point of his intended future home before the storm broke. There would be shelter there for the horses, wood for a fire. A barely perceptible breeze pushed up from the southeast, bringing with it slight stinging showers that were half rain, half sleet. There were intermittent puffs of wind that snorted menacingly and passed on, the advance guards that gave warning of the shock troops of the storm, marching in solid battalions on behind.

It was late in the afternoon before Coleman rode over the rim of the bluffs and saw the leafless timber along the creek bottoms. It was beginning to snow now, the first flakes melting as they fell. A deer bounced away down the bottoms and a flock of turkeys raced in the same direction. Coleman observed that a sizable bunch of horses had used the bottoms at this point some days before—two weeks perhaps. It had been the site of a recent Indian encampment he thought probable. Still, only Quanah's band of Comanches remained off the reservation. At least there had been no news of any others leaving the haunts provided for them by the government. Such news invariably was flashed to every railroad point by telegraph. And Indians would not be apt to leave their reservations at this time of year; spring, summer or autumn, yes, but decidedly not in midwinter. If Quanah's band was in the habit of using this bottom as a camp ground it behooved a man to exercise great caution.

Coleman, therefore, examined the signs with minute attention to detail. He was first impressed by the fact that there was no evidence of the usual litter that marks the site of a vacated Indian encampment. There should be broken lodge poles, discarded moccasins and other equipment. Also, if the savages had been successful in hunting, there should be bits of antelope, deer, bear or buffalo hides scattered all about. If they had had no luck in their hunting they certainly would

have butchered a number of ponies; and they would have kindled numerous fires. Yet there was no such evidence. Perhaps the camp had been farther up or down the bottoms and the pony herd had been held here.

The snow was coming thicker now, blowing straight down the bottoms. Coleman repaired to the creek bank and sought for patches of ground free of grass that might reveal tracks left by the animals that had been pastured here some days before. It was unlikely that the sign had been left by mustangs, for the varying ages of the evidence revealed the fact that the animals had been held here for a considerable period. Coleman grunted with sudden enlightenment. A bare bank that sloped gently to the water's edge revealed the tracks of both shod mules and shod horses, weathered somewhat but still clear and distinct. Had a hide hunters' outfit camped here? Unlikely, so recently, for the buffalo had been exterminated hereabouts months before. And it had been a big outfit. At least, there had been a sizable bunch of horses and mules held here—and not a wagon track! It had not been a cavalry camp. Soldiers would have left ample evidence behind.

"It's a horse thieves' hangout," Coleman decided. "Can't be much of anything else on the face of it. And this would be right on the natural route between New Mexico and Wichita for them that was avoiding the trails."

Widespread hangings and shootings by posses of irate citizens had put a check upon the depredations of stock thieves between the Arkansas and the Platte. The predatory gentry had transferred their operations in the main to the more southerly country. There was no law in the Indian country save that imposed by the federal authorities, which was extremely sketchy even when not entirely nonexistent. Citizens encountering men herding stolen stock in the Indian country were most unlikely to do more than report their suspicions at the next opportunity. By the time action was brought about by the information, the stock had been herded to destination and marketed. So now the chief operations of the wild bunch consisted of stealing mules and horses in eastern New Mexico, mainly from the Mexicans, running them through the Indian country to Wichita and other south-central Kansas points and selling them. There was still a disposition on the part of the settlers to feel that anything stolen from the Mexicans was fair plunder, so few questions were asked. Not that the thieves hesitated to gather a bunch of stolen stock near Wichita and run it back to New Mexico to be marketed there. The rule worked both ways.

Coleman stood there frowning, as the snow, in an ever-increasing smother, bore down upon him. It was not here, to be sure, but some five miles farther up the bottoms that he intended to locate his home ranch buildings. But he did expect to cover this particular area with his land script as soon as the country was opened for entry. And it rankled to have his future holdings used as a station on the horse-thief route. Once he was located here he'd right soon put a stop to that, he decided. Those two men, then, whose tracks he had followed for miles the previous day, had been heading for this country. No doubt they were camped somewhere up or down these very bottoms within a few miles. They'd weather the storm out here too. Which way would they be—up the bottoms or down? When he had left their trail it was because he wished to bear slightly more to the west than the course they were then taking. He hadn't crossed their trail since. That would put them east of him. The bottoms led southeast. Therefore, if they had come this far, they would be somewhere up the bottoms.

At that instant Fleabit nickered. Coleman whirled swiftly. The two horses were facing up the bottoms, ears pricked forward alertly, their nostrils flared to the wind. The pack horse snorted to free his nostrils of snowflakes and nickered loudly. Coleman strained his ears to catch an answer. There was only the slither of the snow against the grass tops and the bare limbs of the trees. The wind had risen to the proportions of a small gale now. Being downwind from the strangers' horses, Fleabit had scented them. The horses upwind, of course, could not scent Coleman and his horses. He hoped that the wind had been sufficiently strong to prevent the sound of the nickering from reaching the ears of those other horses. If they had heard, inevitably they had nickered a return greeting—in which case, even now, the strangers would be upon the alert.

Coleman did not wish to take to the open prairies with this storm coming on. He wanted and intended, if possible, to camp in these sheltered bottoms. But if he was within a few miles of a crew of horse thieves the matter had best be investigated, and that at once. Night would soon clamp down. Already, dusk was setting in. Swiftly, selecting the sheltered overhang beneath the bluff where he still hoped to camp if possible, Coleman tied Fleabit, still saddled, to a tree, and attached the neck rope of the pack horse to the saddle horn. If necessary, he could return and be off in haste, taking all of his effects with him.

He headed into the teeth of the storm, moving swiftly but cautiously up the bottoms. The snow flung against his face with increasing weight. He could see scarcely fifty yards against it in the gathering dusk. Already it was thick underfoot, padding the sound of his footfalls so that he need not bother to exercise care in placing his feet. He glanced down to

estimate its depth. Over an inch had fallen. Suddenly he halted as abruptly as if recoiling from a snake. Slanting up from the white carpet of snow was a ten-inch length of willow stick. The end of it was frayed to paintbrush proportions. It had been cast away by some rider and had lodged with the heavy end in the grass before the snow started falling.

Coleman felt again that old shivering prickle along the spine, as if he were a dog bristling his roach at the evidence of an ancient and dangerous enemy. Cautiously, Coleman pressed forward again. He had covered a mile or so since leaving his horses. The snow stung his eyes as he strained them to peer upstream against the boiling white flood borne on the wind.

He came to another abrupt halt and stepped behind the trunk of a cottonwood to peer into the opening beyond it. He was conscious of having been halted by a definite sense of danger, though the source of it was by no means apparent. Not a sound had reached his ears. But no plainsman would disregard such obscure warnings.

Then he smelled horses, the slightest trace of that odor that marks a stable. That was it! Some faint ribbon of that scent had reached his nose before, insufficient to register upon his consciousness for what it was, but ample to warn the ancient instinctive levels of his mind, atrophied from ages of disuse since man had ceased to utilize his physical senses as the beasts did, becoming a reasoning creature instead. It had halted him. He could not see the horses. But he did see a score or more upright figures in the opening before him. Stumps, those were, where six-inch cottonwoods had been cut off a foot or two above the ground at some former time. The top of the nearest, freed temporarily of snow, appeared relatively fresh-cut.

The snowfall thinned suddenly, affording greater range of vision. Beyond the stumps Coleman saw four picketed horses. Then his eyes focussed on that low white mound. Instantly, he knew it for a dugout, a house of sorts built half underground. Whoever had fashioned it had excavated the earth to a depth of some four feet. He had cut the cottonwoods and erected three-foot walls above the edges of the excavation, roofed the structure over with cottonwood poles, then covered the whole of it with the loose earth previously removed. Now it was covered with snow. The one entrance was on the far side from Coleman so he had not observed the slight mound sooner.

Swiftly, he retraced his course toward his horses. Originally, he had determined to investigate merely to assure his own safety and with no intention of interfering in matters that were of no particular concern of his. But Flack, he felt certain, was among the occupants of that dugout. That one item altered the whole aspect of the matter. Otherwise, Coleman, after assuring himself of the strangers' whereabouts, would have moved somewhat farther away before making camp preparatory to weathering out the storm. Horse stealing in general was none of his affair. Flack, in particular, however, was most decidedly his affair.

Coleman's thoughts traveled back over the trail and he visualized again the wolf-torn remains of old Ike Williams, the mutilated bodies of Dick Conley and old Rapaho Gil. Somewhere upon the prairies, Sue Carrolton's father, too, had fallen victim to Flack's associates. It was probable, Coleman thought, that Flack himself had not participated in the actual killings, though he had been present when Williams and his fellow wolfers had been slain. Coleman's lips took on a scornful curl. Flack, the bully and the ruffian, always weakened when it came to facing a man with knife or gun. But he had surrounded himself with men who had no such hesitancy. A reckless, desperate lot, those who followed Flack's bidding. The man was as guilty as if his own hand had struck down the victims.

"The wild bunch downed four of my old-time friends," Coleman said as he reached the horses. "Including Bronson in Abilene, the unknown thief who took a Sharp bullet in the middle rather than give up, and that Wichita Brown and the party named Rock, which last pair we hung, I've counted four coos up to date. That's a scalp for a scalp, even up. But all that don't seem to count someway as long as Flack's still this side of hell."

Also the discovery that Flack had built a dugout to use as a horse-thief station on the very ground that Coleman had selected for his future home added to the latter's score against the ex-wagon boss. He knew what he must do. First he unsaddled Fleabit and removed pack and pack saddle from his led horse. He did not wish to tie them. If he failed to return, they would starve to death, tied to trees. Both had been faithful companions. If he did return, it would be with no necessity to ride away in haste. He hobbled the animals and left them to shift for themselves. Night had shut down by now. He removed several small objects from his war sack and stowed them in his shirt. He could see scarcely three feet ahead of him as he faced the lashing breath of the storm on his way back toward the dugout. There was some five or six inches of snow now and the air was a smother of flakes hurled before the wind.

His approach to the dugout was cautious in the extreme. He located the sloping runway that led to the single opening. Eddying snow had filled the floor of this approach to the depth of a foot. For a space of minutes Coleman stood there. It was fortunate that only the two men whose horses he had seen were domiciled in the dugout. No doubt Flack and one companion had taken charge of the mules and horses that had been held here—the sign of which had started Coleman's investigation—and marketed them near Wichita. Now they had returned to wait until the others could steal and assemble another herd and bring it on here from New Mexico. Same old plan that they had worked in the war road country between the Arkansas and the Platte, Coleman reflected.

He could not hear a sound from within. The fury of the wind and the grating hiss of snow shut out all other sounds. He advanced along the runway and stretched forth a hand so as not to collide with the door. His outstretched fingers came into contact with something soft and yielding. For one tense second he believed that he had touched a man standing there in the darkness. Then he realized the nature of the obstruction. There was no door. The occupants had fastened a buffalo robe across the narrow aperture to shut out the wind and snow. It lapped well over on either side and had been pegged there, the lower part of it banked with earth. Coleman's exploring left hand tested the robe, his right gripping his pistol butt.

The robe was securely pegged on either side. He might, of course, leap against it and tear it from its fastenings, catapulting himself into the dugout. That would give his enemies every advantage save that of surprise. He transferred his gun to his left hand and drew his knife with his right. The keen point met the stretched robe and perforated it. Coleman withdrew the blade, spread the tiny slit with his fingers and peered through. Then, for the first time, he discovered that there was a light in the interior of the dugout; a dim light, true, but sufficient nevertheless to relieve the gloom of it.

Slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, Coleman pressed his knife downward to enlarge that opening. When his efforts had accounted for a four-inch slit in the robe, he withdrew the knife again, spread the slit and applied his eye.

A rude table of split cottonwood poles had been fashioned near the far wall of the tiny dugout. A candle burned in the center of it. Seated on a bench on the far side of the table, his back against the earthen wall, his head even with the first logs of the upper wall, sat Flack, facing the doorway. At one end of the table, affording Coleman a profile view, sat Enders. The two men were playing cards in the candlelight.

Coleman saw Flack's whiskers move and knew that the man was speaking, but the roar of the storm in Coleman's ears prevented the sound of a single syllable from reaching him. There was but one feasible course, to cut that slit sufficiently long to permit the insertion of his head and shoulders at the instant he went into action. Holding his gun in his left hand, Coleman inserted the muzzle through the upper end of the tiny aperture. With his knife in his right hand, he slid its point through below the gun. Then with swift downward pressure, he threw his force upon the knife. The razor-keen blade sliced the robe cleanly the length of Coleman's reach. On the instant, he thrust his head and shoulders through.

Flack, facing the sudden apparition of a head and shoulders, behind a pair of hands, one holding a gun, the other a glittering knife, glared for a split second in superstitious horror, then screamed an oath of warning to Enders. Flack's first impulse upon seeing the threatening muzzle of a gun was to throw up his hands. Always he had found safety in that course. He followed that motion instinctively now, coincident with his cry to Enders.

That gentleman was of a different calibre entirely. With his first glance at the aperture, Enders flung himself sidewise from his seat, intent upon flattening himself upon the floor. He pulled his gun as he dived floorward and pulled the trigger before reaching the floor.

Coleman fired at the instant his head and arms cleared the aperture. His shot and that of Enders sounded as one, drowning Flack's cry of warning, all three being so nearly simultaneous as to occur within the first second after he had started to insert himself through the opening. Enders flattened upon the floor and lay still, his gun a foot or two doorward from his nerveless fingers. Coleman's shot had drilled his brain even as he fell.

Coleman's left hand was numb from some shock. Enders' bullet had struck the gun from Coleman's hand. There he crouched, head and shoulders thrust through the slit in the buffalo robe, facing Flack without a gun. Flack, seated behind the table on a bench, had lifted his hands slightly above his ears, the backs of them pressed against the first tier of logs in the dugout wall.

Even as he realized his predicament, and before Flack grasped the situation, Coleman's right hand described a half-arc.

The heavy knife flashed across the intervening distance. Its point passed between the bones of Flack's right wrist and pinned his hand solidly to the log. Even as the knife left his hand, Coleman lunged, tearing the robe from its pegs as he dived to retrieve Enders' gun.

He rose with it in his hand, the buffalo robe hanging about his middle as some improvised skirt. Any man with the courage to reach for his gun instead of elevating his hands at the first emergency could have killed Coleman with ease, swift as his own actions had been. But Flack's inherent fear of knife or gun had caused his own downfall. Within ten seconds from his first glimpse of Coleman's head coming through the slit in the robe, Flack had been pinned to the wall by Coleman's knife and was covered by his dead partner's gun in Coleman's hand.

"Don't shoot! I surrender!" Flack shouted. In his sudden fear and excitement, he was conscious of no pain in his wrist, scarcely realized, in fact, just what had happened. He now recognized Coleman in the flickering candlelight. Coleman, training the gun upon him, thrust his injured left hand inside his woolen hunting shirt. He extracted several objects and tossed them upon the table before Flack. There were three sticks, one end of each frayed brushlike, and a heavy turquoise and silver earring.

"I've packed those trinkets a long spell before my time come to count coos on you, Flack," he said.

"I never had any hand in that," Flack declared. "I never killed a man in my life. I swear it. Some of my friends have, I'll admit. But not me."

"I reckon it's the truth," Coleman said. "You're lacking the nerve to kill a man. It's some superstition in your measly soul, likely. But you prime others to do your killing for you, which is a damn sight worse."

Flack protested his innocence with a rising note of hysterical fear in his tones.

"You never killed a man up to now? Then you never will from now on out," Coleman said. "I'm about to pass sentence on you, Flack. Any message you want to leave?"

He shook his head impatiently at Flack's protestations. "No use. Not a chance in the world, Flack. I'm imposing justice on you here and now. You'll soon be yelping your way to the great beyond. Say what you want to say and do it quick before I count coos on you."

Flack broke into frenzied cursing. The gun at Coleman's side roared thunderingly in the dugout. Flack's head sagged forward. His back was flat against the wall as he sat. The knife still pinioned his right wrist to the log wall. Save for the small blue hole in the center of his forehead, one might imagine that he had fallen asleep as he sat there, his head having sagged forward on his chest.

"Old Rapaho Gil made that knife for me many a moon ago," Coleman said to the departed Flack. "If I was an Injun now, believing that every human romps on into the happy hunting ground in the same shape in which his mortal carcass is left behind in this world, I'd sure know that your right hand, pinned there the way it is, would be powerless to do much devilment on the other side o' the great divide. I'll just take a chance that the Injuns are right and leave it thataway."

Coleman blew out the candle, then went out and released the four horses from their picket ropes so that they might shift for themselves. Then he headed down the bottoms through the storm toward his camp.

CHAPTER XVIII

There was no law in the Indian country; which was, no doubt, the reason why, since the first white man set foot in America, every succeeding wilderness area that was the "Indian country" for that particular period and hence beyond the realm of the white man's law, drew to it a host of wild and reckless individuals to whom any restraint whatsoever was irksome in the extreme. Those who flocked in to share in the last big hide hunt were no exception. Lawlessness was rampant. Each man was a law unto himself so long as he could enforce it.

A hide-hunting outfit of Mexicans entered the country when already the buffalo were growing scarce. The Mexicans hunted Indian fashion, from horseback, racing after first one band, then after another, shooting from the saddle. Such tactics rendered it increasingly difficult for white hunters to make a stand and get in their deadly work with the Sharps. On several occasions, just as a sharpshooter was working into position, the Mexicans would appear and haze that particular band of buffalo out of the country. The hide hunters informed the Mexicans that no such tactics would be tolerated. The Mexicans insisted that there were no rules. They were then informed that if they persisted in acting like Indians, they would be mistaken for Indians and treated accordingly. Shortly thereafter, they hazed another sizable herd of buffalo clear out of the country just as the hide hunters were preparing to work on it. And shortly after that, a number of hide hunters shot all Mexicans from their saddles and left them where they fell.

It was the news of this last occurrence, coupled with persistent rumors of other lawless happenings, that caused the military authorities to dispatch Major Stone into the Indian country with a detachment of cavalry to suppress all such lawlessness. By the time the news had reached the authorities and they had acted and Stone had reached the country, the hide hunters had exterminated the herds. Only a few fugitive bands remained scattered in isolated parts. Hide hunting in the Southwest was numbered among things that were gone forever. Already the cowmen, with the little camp of Tacosa as the capital, were taking over the Staked Plains and the adjacent regions for their herds.

The big storm caught Major Stone's command. Stone selected a sheltered spot and went into camp. For three days and nights the storm raged without cessation. Then it broke. The skies cleared. But there was almost two feet of snow on the level. The cold clamped down. Winds piled the snow in the depressions. Eventually, traveling was feasible again and Stone ordered the return march to Dodge. It was late for cold weather. When the present cold snap lifted, spring would set in on the prairies.

Stone rode at the head of his command one day and came out upon a bluff. A timbered bottom spread out below him. Four horses were standing there and the snow revealed the fact that they had stayed in that vicinity ever since the storm. But there was no sign of life round the low-roofed dugout near the horses. As the command rode down, Major Stone ordered a sergeant to investigate the cabin.

The non-commissioned officer popped into the dugout and immediately popped out again. "Jumpin' Gees, sir, it's a dead man's camp for sure," he blurted.

Stone dismounted to investigate. The weather was still extremely cold. Enders, on the floor, and Flack, at the table, were frozen stiff where they had died. Stone's gaze riveted suddenly upon several objects on the table. Then his eyes traveled back to the red whiskers that adorned the face of the frozen man. He seemed to sit there with his head tilted forward as if to peer at the three chewed sticks and the turquoise and silver earring spread before him on the table.

The sergeant was fascinated by that upraised right hand, pinned to the log wall with a knife. "Looks like he was maybe holding that hand up to swear to the truth of something or other, Major," he suggested.

"Probably he was," Stone said grimly; "but evidently he swore to the wrong truth."

He swept the three sticks to the floor and crushed them underfoot. The knife and the earring he stowed away in his saddle bag to be added to his really remarkable collection of Indian finery and plains' trophies of every variety.

"Nothing to be learned here," he said shortly. "No doubt, being snowed in together, the men quarreled and shot each other. Detail some men to bury them, Sergeant."

As the command went into camp that night, Major Stone's thoughts were reaching out toward Coleman and wondering where in all that great expanse his friend might be.

And even as Stone wondered, Dodge City, the wildest camp on earth, was celebrating a wedding. That very evening, just at sundown, a preacher had married Breck Coleman and Sue Carrolton. It had been noised abroad that Coleman was quitting the ranks of the hide hunters to turn cowman. All hands celebrated the event. The town was full of hide hunters just returned from the big campaign against the southern herds. The cattlemen were fewer but such as were present were pressed into service for the fitting ceremonial conceived in the fertile brain of a hunter.

Solemnly, he bought a drink for all the cowmen present and asked them to drink the toast, "He's quitting us to join your ranks. A good hide hunter turned cow waddie. Here's to him."

A cowman bought a drink. "Here's hopin' he's as good a cowhand as he was a hunter," he toasted, and all hands drank.

Weddings were rare in Dodge. The crowd celebrated until sunup, the hide hunters presenting Coleman to the cowmen, the latter accepting him into their ranks.

And long before the revellers had waked the following day, almost, in fact, before they had retired, Coleman was preparing to depart. The cold snap still held but it would break soon. The knowledge that the Texas cowmen were pressing northward to occupy the Canadian, Cimarron and Staked Plains region with their herds caused Coleman to make all haste. He could not wait to send a crew to put up sod houses as he had planned. He'd take a crew with him now and superintend the work himself. Otherwise, if he should delay too long, he might find some other outfit in possession of his chosen site and holding it under squatter's rights.

He took the reins over four mules that were hitched to a light, three-seated spring wagon with flat covered top and open sides. At his side sat Sue, wrapped in a buffalo robe greatcoat, her eyes shining as she turned them to the south and west. In the rear seats the several younger Carroltons were warmly bundled, voicing their eagerness and excitement.

Behind were ranged four heavy freight wagons, each loaded to capacity with provisions, tools, equipment and supplies. The four teamsters signaled their readiness. Coleman cracked his whip and the procession started. He glanced down at the object that his bride held in her mittened hands.

"Whatever are you gripping that old iron shoe for, Sue, honey?" he queried.

She held it out laughingly for his inspection. "It's to nail over our door for good luck," she informed him.

"But it's horseshoes that they nail up for good luck," Coleman protested. "That there's a muleshoe."

"The Missouri mule made Missouri famous," Sue laughed. "And a muleshoe, not a horseshoe, is lucky for Missourians."

"Over the door she goes," Coleman acquiesced.

Coleman believed that he had thought of everything. Surely, he had overlooked no item. Those loads behind must include everything of importance. Yet, weeks later, it was to occur to him that he had not selected and registered a brand of his own. When his cows were delivered after the long trip up from Texas, the sight of Sue's lucky muleshoe nailed above the door was to give him an inspiration. He was to give orders that muleshoes were to be heated in lieu of any more formal brand, and the mark of them scorched upon all his cows. Years later, at least, that legend was current as to how the great Muleshoe Ranch had gained its name.

As Coleman lifted his gaze from the muleshoe in Sue's mittened hands an early-rising hide hunter hailed him from the street.

"Good luck," he called. "We'll send ye word when we locate the lost herd. We'll find her before many moons."

For just a space of minutes, instead of looking forward with high hopes to his future estate as owner of vast herds of cows, Coleman looked backward down the years with a sharp tug of regret for the vast herds of buffalo that were gone.

There was something majestic about the shaggy legion—majestic as opposed to the merely spectacular. A spectacular scene may grip for a time but it ceases to impress with repetition, tends to become commonplace with familiarity, while the truly majestic, if viewed every day throughout one's life, never fails to impress anew.

Those who spent the major portions of their lives among the buffalo herds felt the majesty of the shaggy legion. The herds were spectacular, true, but there was some element in the sight of tens of thousands of great brown bodies moving

across the plains that sunk deeper into one's consciousness. Those who saw the herds for the first time in their early youth knew the thrill of it. And when, in old age, the last herds were sighted, there was that same wild thrill. Only the magnificent, the majestic, could have sustained the interest throughout a lifetime of familiarity. All those who knew the shaggy legion felt it. And when the buffalo was gone, the old free untrammelled West was gone. For those who had known the herds, the old West passed with the buffalo.

Coleman felt it. He drove on past the great stacks of bones, hundreds of tons of them, piled along the tracks. He had just sold them to an eastern buyer. Hide hunters could view those bones and still delude themselves with the legend of the famous lost herd that would one day repopulate the plains. Coleman knew where the lost herd was. He was looking at it now.

Sue's hand slipped into his. He pressed it and resolutely turned his thoughts toward the future and great herds of cows. But after crossing the river he stole one backward glance at that great white blot along the tracks. That was the famous lost herd—a ghostly monument to the shaggy legion that had passed.

Transcriber's Note

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's errors have been addressed.

Page 18 onexpected changed to unexpected. (swift and unexpected)

Page 88 siezing changed to seizing. (each seizing a foot)

Page 146 villlage changed to village. (the new village)

Page 210 duplicate word 'in' removed. (in the Indian country)

Page 217 countrry changed to country. (the sleepest of country)

Page 278 twicet changed to twice. (twice a day)

[The end of *The Shaggy Legion* by Hal G. Evarts]