



COLORADO

WILLIAM
MACLEOD
RAINE

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COLORADO

BY

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINÉ

AUTHOR OF

JUDGE COLT, BONANZA,
BUCKY O'CONNOR, IRONHEART,
GUNSIGHT PASS, Etc.



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TO MYFATHER
WILLIAM RAINÉ
PIONEER AND BUILDER

“There he shall blaze a nation’s ways with hatchet and with brand
Till on his last-won wilderness an Empire’s outposts stand.”

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COLORADO

CHAPTER I

“DRAP THAT GUN!”

Along the well-rutted road, a bull outfit crept. The sun was sliding down toward the western hills. Its rays streamed in a silvery sheen across the desert mesquite. A cloud of fine yellow dust rose, stirred by the feet of hundreds of oxen. The yoked animals swayed forward patiently, laboriously. Behind them the yellow trail ribbon stretched many arid leagues. In front of them it wound its tortuous way for nearly a thousand miles.

That ribbon pointed to the land of gold. It led through flood and drought, to exposure and starvation, to possible attack by Indians or road agents. During the past decade, a quarter of a million people had travelled this trail in ox teams, in coaches, behind mules, and on horseback. Every mile of it had echoed the laughter of eager youth and the groans of despairing age. For this was the great Overland Trail.

In the train were twenty-five wagons, built in St. Louis by J. Murphy for crossing the plains. They were very large and strong. Each box was covered with two heavy canvas sheets. In addition to the bull whackers there were two night herders, a cavvy driver, an extra hand, the wagon master, and his assistant, thirty-two men in all, each armed with Colt's pistols and Mississippi Yagers. It was a Russell, Majors & Waddell outfit, one of many plying between the Missouri River and the gold diggings.

A young man on a claybank pony cantered along the wagon train. He was slender and berry brown. For costume he wore fringed buckskin trousers, a homespun hickory shirt, boots run down at the heel, and a dusty slouch hat.

One of the drivers, a lank Missourian, hailed him. “Boy, where we throw off at to-night?”

“Cottonwood Springs, I hear,” the rider answered.

“Hmp! Hope it's near. Our tails are shorely draggin'. Say, Tom, the bull boss was lookin' for you awhile ago. He's up ahead somewheres. Got back some whipped out.”

“Didn't get the horses, then?”

“No, sir. Neither hide nor hair.”

Tom Collins waved a hand in farewell and rode to the head of the train. The wagon master, colloquially called the bull boss, hailed him as he drew up. Sim Rivers was a long-bodied man about forty, slow but reliable. After the fashion of the times, he was heavily bearded.

“Rock along to the Springs, Tom, an' find us a good camp ground,” he gave instruction. “There's been a chance of pilgrims along this trail to-day an' yesterday. A lot of 'em are likely to be bunched up there thick as three in a bed. An' tell the station master about that bunch of stolen horses.”

“You didn't find 'em, then?”

“Lost the trail in the hills. Tell him how the Injuns jumped 'em in the night, Tom, an' how I got right after the lousy thieves.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tom swung his horse and was gone. He was a youth of few words. Life in the open, often alone, had made him taciturn.

He rode a sun-scorched plain beneath a brazen sky. The gray vegetation was heavy with

dust. A yellow powder filled every wrinkle of his clothes and sifted into his nostrils. His throat was parched. But the young fellow's heart was light. He was astride a good horse. The pungent odour of the sage wafted to him. Shy antelope slipped gracefully through the shining chaparral. Meadow larks flung out their joyous sudden songs. It was a good world for a man who felt the call of adventure in his blood.

Tom pulled up. His eyes had been caught by tracks in a sandy wash running into the road. He dismounted, dropped the bridle rein to the ground, and moved forward to investigate. A good many horses had swung off from the trail at this point. Some were shod, some not. They had crowded each other and blurred a good many of the tracks. Very likely those driving the animals had swung them around sharply at this point to take the draw leading to the bluff a quarter of a mile back from the road. It had been careless to leave the road just at this sand wash, if this really were the trail of the thieves. Probably, in the darkness, they had not recognized the bluff until almost past the draw.

He knew he was jumping to a conclusion not yet established by the evidence. The sign he had cut might have been left by a party of honest emigrants. But he did not for a moment believe it. These hoof marks had been made recently, and no sizeable outfit with horses had passed the bull train for three or four days.

A little glow of excitement quickened his blood. One of the stolen horses had had a hoof torn by the rocks. Tom had noticed this while driving the cavvy only the day before. His eyes fixed themselves now on this same ragged mark printed on the sand. Old Blaze had stamped it there.

What ought he to do? He might ride back to Rivers with news of his discovery. Or he might follow the thieves for a few miles and so, perhaps, obtain more definite information. He knew which he wanted to do, and after only a moment of hesitation, he decided to yield to his desire. Swinging to the saddle, he jogged up the wash toward the bluff.

Presently, another bit of evidence stared up at him. The riders following the stolen animals were mounted on shod horses. Therefore, they were not Indians. Probably they were members of the notorious Wilson gang against which Slade, division superintendent of the stage company, had been waging bitter warfare. Yet this did not agree with the story told by Shep Hods. Shep had been guarding the cavvy at the time of the night stampede, and he had said positively that the raiders were Indians.

Tom followed the draw to its head, then climbed a steep hillside to the bluff above. Here he picked up again the trail of the horses and verified his conclusion that the riders herding the bunch were upon mounts wearing shoes. He was puzzled. Of course, Hods might have been mistaken. But that was not likely, since he was a slow, methodical Arkansan whose indolent brain did not register snapshot impressions.

The country grew rougher. Its contour broke into hill waves. The sage was heavier, the brush denser.

Young Collins knew that it was time to turn back, but he wanted to carry with him as much information as possible. He promised himself that he would go only as far as the next brow, a promontory which jutted out above the surrounding country. The tracks he followed deflected to the left, swinging around the butte and into a small wooded cañon that ran back of it.

He had been a plainsman for years, and some sixth sense warned him that he was drawing close to the hiding place of the robbers. The whinny of a horse brought him up short. He slid from the saddle and grounded the reins, then moved forward cautiously into the gulch. The Colt was at his hip, the Yager in his hands. Almost noiselessly, with the utmost precaution, he

crept through the brakes into a sunny spot beyond. An aspen thicket ran back from the dry creek to the wall of the cañon. He stood crouched for a moment. Time to back-track, he told himself. He was here to spy out the land, not to force an issue. If he should be discovered, he would probably be shot down, after which the road agents would decamp.

Warily, he drew back toward the brakes. A twig snapped under his foot and startled him. His questioning eyes stabbed at the cottonwoods on his right, at the fallen boulders close to the creek bed, at the aspen thicket.

A voice, low and menacing, shocked him like the crash of a shot shattering the silence.

“Drap that gun!”

Tom looked around. On a boulder rested the barrel of a rifle, pointed straight at him. Back of the weapon was a man’s head. Chalky eyes watched him unblinkingly.

The young man did not argue the point. He was trapped. From his fingers the Yager slid to the ground.

“Unbuckle that belt!”

Again Tom obeyed. The Colt dropped beside the rifle.

“Move right ahead,” the voice ordered. “Keep yore hands up an’ go slow. . . . To the left now round the aspens. . . . Straight along the trail. . . . Don’t make a mistake, young fellow.”

Tom did not make a mistake. He knew that, if he failed to obey orders exactly, a bullet would come crashing through his back between the shoulder blades. The trail led into the aspens and to the door of a log hut just back of them.

“Knock on the door!”

Tom knocked.

There was a moment’s silence, then someone said hoarsely. “Come in.”

He pushed the door open and took a step forward. It seemed to Tom that his heart ceased beating. The room was filled with men, and the weapons of all of them were trained on him.

CHAPTER II

TRAPPED

It was as though his entrance had rung a bell for silence. The eyes focused on him were as steady as the guns. None of them for an instant wavered.

Then the tension lifted. Someone laughed a little, on a high false note of relief, at the same time dropping the barrel of his shotgun.

There were five men in the room, Tom saw, not counting the one who followed him inside and closed the door. The young man from the bull outfit had an odd feeling that the stage had been set for someone else. The wrong actor had answered the cue. They had been expecting somebody, and instead he had inopportunely blundered in. He could read surprise, even bewilderment, on their faces.

“Who in Mexico are you?” asked one.

He was a big man, broad of shoulders, heavily bearded. Long hair fell thick to the coat in black ringlets that began to show the frost of years. His cheek bones were high, his face harsh and imperious. At sight of him, Tom felt goose quills run down his spine. The fellow jolted in him some strange fugitive memory that would not take form. In some previous incarnation, perhaps, he had known and greatly feared this man.

“Found him crawlin’ outa the brakes,” explained his captor. “So I fotched him along.”

“Good for you, Dave.” Blackbeard turned his attention to the prisoner. “Did Slade send you here? How many come along with you?”

Tom could not tell what answer would best serve him. If he said he had friends near waiting for him, these men might fear to destroy him. On the other hand, if he told them he had come alone, he might perhaps persuade them that he had come by chance. He decided to tell the truth.

“I’m alone. No one with me.”

“How come you here?”

“Lookin’ for strayed stock,” he said. “We lost a bunch of horses we were takin’ to the next stage station.”

“We! Who d’you mean by we?” demanded the big man harshly.

“I’m with a Russell, Majors & Waddell bull outfit.”

“What made you ’low yore stock was here?” The black eyes of the man stabbed at Tom fiercely.

”I followed the trail a ways, then I lost it. Kinda stumbled up the gulch.”

Tom’s gaze met steadily that of his questioner. He knew that he was in danger, that the least slip might condemn him. If these men felt their own safety was at stake they would not hesitate to blot him out.

A thickset man of medium height wearing a deerskin hunting coat thrust a question at Tom. “When did you lose this stock? An’ how?”

“Last night. The cavvy got stampeded. The fellow on guard claimed he saw Injuns, but he was right scared. Our wagon boss figured the horses jest broke away.”

“An’ you plumb happened to drift right spang thisaway,” suggested a third man sourly. He had a pallid face, cold, washed-out eyes, and mustard-coloured hair.

“You might call that right funny, Holt,” agreed the big man with heavy irony. “The angels sorta wafted him here, I reckon.”

"I reckon they'll waft him away again, Mose, after we're through with him," the cold-eyed man returned cruelly.

Tom knew now who these men were. The big fellow, the one who seemed to be the leader, was Mose Wilson. He was at the head of a gang of outlaws who plagued the Trail, stealing horses from the stage company and money and supplies from the emigrants. Occasionally they murdered; more often they left poor settlers without supplies or stock to carry them to the promised land. It was against this gang that Slade was trying to protect the country in his official capacity as superintendent of the division. Tom had heard the names of several of them. There was Jim Holt, and there was Musgrove, and one Dave Pope. He discovered a moment later that the man in the deerskin coat was Musgrove.

"Looky here," that individual said, "we got other fish to fry. Dave better go back an' keep a lookout. We can settle then amongst us what to do with this pilgrim."

"Musgrove is right," Wilson agreed. "An' when the time comes, Dave, give us the signal."

Pope growled assent, with no enthusiasm. "He ain't a-comin', or, if he does come, he'll have a whole passle of gun toters with him. Slade ain't anybody's fool, not that I ever heerd tell of," he said, moving to the door.

"If he brings a bunch of his killers with him, we got to be all the more careful, an' that's likely what he'll do," Wilson growled. "Me, I never did like this fool notion, anyhow."

Musgrove, hard-eyed, looked his chief over coolly. "You would have liked it fine if it had a-been yore own idea, Mose."

The big black man glared at him. "Fellow, are you runnin' on me? Doncha do it. I been fed on raw meat."

"Sure, Mose," the other answered lightly. "You're a curly wolf from Bitter Creek. You bumped off a fellow in St. Joe onct, an' another on a river boat above New Orleans, an' you filled a bird with lead plums at—at—lemme see, that was at St. Louis, wasn't it?"

"No, sir. At Independence. An' he was a sheriff."

"Sure. How come I to forget that when I heard you tell it so often?" drawled Musgrove with obvious irony. He was watching the big man with a steady, unflinching regard. The thumb of his right hand hung hitched in the pocket of his hunting coat, not six inches from the butt of a derringer.

"I'll tell it again," boasted Wilson. "He come at me with a whole damn posse, an' I drapped him like he'd been a white-tail buck. Any remarks?"

"Why, no—no. I reckon not."

"Then what's all the talk about?" snorted Wilson.

"What's the matter with you two fellows?" Holt asked sulkily. "Cain't you-all lay off'n each other till we're through with Slade an' this kid? After that, you can wild up all you doggone please."

"You're talkin', Jim," another man spoke up, pouring himself a drink from a bottle. He was a fat little man on the roly-poly order, and to Tom he looked amiable and friendly. "Business first. Pleasure afterward, I say."

"All right, Fat," Musgrove agreed with a shrug. "Suits me. Shove that bottle north by west, will you?"

A long man with a big sandy moustache pushed the bottle toward Musgrove. He was a gross fellow, with red veins in his beefy cheeks. Tom had noticed that though he had been sampling the bottle sulkily and industriously his cold, protruding eyes had followed Musgrove and Wilson in their argument almost eagerly. There was something sinister and secret in his

gaze, as though he were hoping for some explosive development between them. This was apparently a house divided against itself.

"Obliged, Orton," said Musgrove, nodding at the long man as he poured a drink into a tin cup. "Suits me. Like Fat says, business first."

The prisoner, his eyes on Orton, had a feeling that the man was disappointed. What did the fellow want? Had he some private interest that would be served if these two men fell out?

Tom's senses were keyed to keen tension. He watched each man as he spoke. They were outlaws and bandits. Most of them, perhaps all of them, were killers. How far would they go in his own case? Would they think it necessary in order to play safe to put an end to him? Could he appeal to any one of them with any hope of success?

Even while his brain was busy, his eyes cast around the room and made a discovery. In one corner, flung together in a careless pile, were moccasins and breech clouts and Arapahoe head dresses. He knew now why Shep Hods had been deceived. The horse rustlers had dressed like Indians before setting out on their raid.

"Question is what to do with this here pilgrim," Fat said, coming back to the order of the day. "He come bustin' in without any by yore leave. He better stay here, don't you reckon?"

"Permanent," Wilson said harshly.

Tom felt as though someone were walking over his grave. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Maybe not," Musgrove differed. "What we got against him? Come to that, what's he got against us?"

The pallid-faced man Holt laughed, not pleasantly. "He jes' came to pay us a neighbourly visit, Mus thinks."

"He hasn't got a thing on us, not a thing. Look at it reasonable. He comes lookin' for a bunch of horses an' draps in here. Well, he ain't found any horses, has he?"

"No horses," agreed Holt. "But he found us. I reckon you're forgettin' the other business, Mus. Do you figure on lettin' him see it an' then turin' him loose to tell God knows who?"

Musgrove shook his head in warning. "What other business? No, Jim, we'll cache our young friend in the gulch an' turn him loose after a while."

"No sense to that," said the fat man mildly. "We don't know what he knows an' what he don't. Too bad, but we got to play safe. I got nothin' against this kid, but you know the old motto about dead men not gossipin'."

"You're speakin' right out in meeting, Fat. It'll be that way too," Wilson announced bluntly.

"You're the big auger, are you, Mose?" drawled Musgrove.

"Fellow, I'll burn powder quick," blustered Wilson. "Don't run on me if you aim to stay healthy."

"I've had guys get on the prod with me before, but I'm still doing business, big man. No need to get rambunctious with me, Mose. I'm from Texas."

"Well, Texas man, draw in yore horns. We're four to one here." Wilson snarled this out arrogantly.

"Hold yore horses, both of you," cut in Holt. "What's bitin' you two? All friends here, ain't we?"

"Maybe we are an' maybe we ain't," Musgrove said gently, stressing every syllable. "Mose seems to have notions."

"You're gettin' mighty tender-hearted all of a sudden, Mus," jeered Holt. "This bird comes here bellyachin' about the broomtails he claims to have lost an'——"

Musgrove shot a question straight at Tom. "Don't claim we've got 'em, do you?"

“No, sir. They strayed off.” Tom’s gaze met his steadily.

“Lost the trail quite a ways from here, eh?”

“Back three-four miles.”

“Never saw us before, did you? Wouldn’t know us again if you ever did happen to meet up with us?”

Tom shook his head. “I’m not lookin’ for trouble.”

“Well, I’ll say you done found plenty,” Fat said amiably. “We gotta stop him from talkin’, boys, looks like.”

The prisoner was standing in front of a window made of the smooth skin of an animal instead of glass. If he could plunge through it! But there was no chance. These men were dead shots, and they would plug him full of lead instantly. His hope of life depended upon Musgrove. The Texan was a hardy ruffian, and there seemed to be a streak of obstinacy in him. He might stick to his point against them all.

“Talkin’ about what, Fat?” Musgrove asked. “How he found us here huntin’ antelope?”

“We don’t know a thing about this fellow, where he comes from or who sent him,” the plump man expostulated.

“All we know is where he’s going,” Wilson added brutally.

“We got nothin’ but his own say-so. Now, ain’t that a frozen fact, Mus?” The placid voice of the round little man did not for an instant lose its friendliness. He might have been discussing the weather. “Way I look at it, why it’s us or him. I don’t aim to throw down on myself. Why take chances we don’t have to?”

“Chances! I been takin’ them all my life. So have you. All of you.” The Texan’s hard eyes swept over his associates scornfully. “If you wanted things so soft an’ safe, why didn’t you stay back in the States an’ raise corn? I reckon you was afraid a mule would kick you while you was ploughin’.”

The plump man flushed. The cold gray eye of the Texan chilled him. He did not want any trouble with Musgrove. There was about him the ominous quiet of the fighting breed. Fat was no coward, but there would be small profit in taking up this challenge.

As each man spoke, Tom looked at him. Excitement drummed in his veins. It was his life for which they fought. Presently, if the decision went against him, he would be horribly afraid, but just now he had no time for fear.

At that moment, while the issue was still in doubt, a voice from outside came to them, a voice hearty with the lustiness of robust life.

““Lo, Jinny girl,” it called.

The effect of that joyous shout was amazing.

“Slade,” snarled Wilson, and instantly forgot that Tom was alive. It was so with the others. They seemed to gather themselves together, wolflike, weapons ready to strike, all eyes focussed on the door about to be opened by the doomed man.

Tom saw his chance, the only one both for him and for that man outside walking lightly to his death. For, if they killed Slade, they must slay him too in order to close his lips. He whirled, dived head first for the window, his body as straight as that of one ready to split the water. The tight skin covering the window ripped like paper. A derringer barked.

As he struck the ground, before he rose lithely on all fours, Tom shouted a warning. He scuttled through the sage into the aspens, and as he ran he heard the roar of guns. Once in the thicket, he turned, looking back over his shoulder as he worked his way through the slim young saplings.

He saw a man, a blazing revolver in each hand, backing away from the cabin as he fired. The outlaws were in the open, close to the door, flame darting from their guns. One of them, Fat, dropped his shotgun and leaned back against the cabin wall. On his face was an odd baffled look. His body sagged along the logs and slid to the ground.

Tom crashed through the aspens. He was unarmed and could not fight. His aim was to reach his horse. Too late, he tried to stop.

A man knelt on one knee, taking deliberate aim at Slade. The man was Dave Pope. He heard Tom at the same instant that Tom saw him. Pope half rose, facing Tom, but the young man's body hurled him to the ground. The outlaw rolled over, dropping his weapon. It fell scarcely a foot from the spot where the young man's hand struck the leafy loam. Tom snatched up the rifle and was off long before Pope could gather himself together.

Young Collins reached the brakes. "I'm with you," he called to Slade, who was already drawing close to him. Hurriedly he fired at Wilson, just as the big man retreated into the house.

Slade's guns still roared. He backed into the brakes and flashed one look at Tom, a look of keen and searching scrutiny. The man's eyes flamed with the lust of hot battle.

"*Quien es?*?" he demanded.

"A friend. With a bull train of the company. They stampeded our horses an' I come lookin' for them."

The battle had died down. The bandits were drawing back into the cabin. The two men who had escaped moved into the cañon. Here Slade found his horse where he had left it.

"Did they get your mount?" he asked.

"I don't reckon so. I left it off the trail farther down."

"First off, we'll get it," Slade said with crisp decision.

The superintendent of the division was a lean-loined, dark-eyed man. He carried his weight with the light ease of an athlete, a hint of arrogance in his bearing. In age, he was probably in his late twenties. His lips were like a steel trap, his gray eyes cold and steely. Vigour and force showed in his clean-cut face. Whatever his faults, he went the way of the strong. Tom would have known that even if the man's name had not been flung far and wide over the frontier.

Tom recovered his horse, which was nibbling brush on the edge of the dry wash where he had dismounted.

"Young fellow, what's your name?" asked the older man.

"Tom Collins. I'm extra man with Rivers' outfit."

"Did these fellows steal your stock?"

"Yes, sir. Eight horses for the stage. We were takin' them to Cottonwood."

"Sure it was this bunch that took 'em?"

"They were dressed as Injuns. I saw the moccasins and headdresses in the cabin. While I was comin' up the gulch, I heard a horse nicker."

The stranger stroked for a moment his moustache, evidently in reflection. Presently he spoke.

"My name is Slade—Joseph A. Slade, superintendent of the division. You've heard of me?"

"Yes, sir."

Who in this Western country had not heard of Slade? He was a despot in his division, a terror to the bad men who infested this region. Even Indians on the warpath gave his locality a wide berth. Far and wide his reputation had been flung. Already the fictions that have made a legend of his name were beginning to accumulate. When Mark Twain met him a little later, on the humourist's way to Nevada, the superintendent was credited with having killed twenty-

eight men. Slade was held to be faithful to his trust, rigidly honest, and fearless, the very type of man to hold in check thieving Indians and lawless desperadoes. To a cheerful temperament were added wit, generosity, and a personal magnetism that tied his friends to him with ropes of steel. The evil qualities that later ruined his life and made him a menace to society were not yet dominant in him, or at least were generally held in check. Only when in liquor did he let these override his judgment. He was a killer, cold-blooded and remorseless, but he fought on the side of society in his earlier years. Tom had once heard an old-timer say that Slade had never killed anyone who did not need killing.

“I aim to get those horses,” the superintendent said. “How about you, young fellow? Will you go through?” He looked at his slim companion, lank as a shad, out of cold gray eyes used to appraising men. “If you are scared to tackle this, say so now. I don’t want anyone who will quit on the job.”

Tom grinned. “I’m some scared, but I’ll go through.”

Slade smiled, the warm and genial smile that made him friends in spite of the evil in the man. His hand fell approvingly on the shoulder of young Collins. “Fine, boy. I’m sure you will.”

“I reckon the horses are over thataway,” Tom said, pointing to the left. “Back of the head of the gulch.”

“If they are here at all, I know where they are,” Slade said. “I ought to know. That cabin was built by me. My wife and I used to live there. We keep it furnished, and once in a while we go there. These scalawags sent me a message saying she was here now waiting for me. I’ve been expecting her, so I came.” He flashed an apprehensive look at Tom. “She isn’t there? They haven’t got her prisoner?”

“Not in the cabin,” Tom replied.

“Just a trick to trap me,” Slade said. “I thought it funny she didn’t come on to Cottonwood if she had travelled this far. They would have got me too if it hadn’t been for your yell and the first shot at you. Soon as I heard ’em, I had my six-shooters out and was backing from the cabin. Good for you, boy.”

“I was savin’ my own bacon too,” Tom answered, a little embarrassed.

Already Slade’s mind had passed to the business on foot.

CHAPTER III

“ONE DOGGONE LITTLE BULLET”

“Listen, young fellow,” Slade began. “We’ll drift down the gulch and swing a wide circle. The stock is in a little park back of the cabin. There’s no telling what luck we’ll have. May have to fight our way in and out again. May get the cavvy slick as a whistle without a shot fired. Point is that, if I send you for reinforcements, this outfit will have lit out before you get back. It’s now or never.”

Tom nodded. “Yes, they won’t wait long before pullin’ out.”

They rode out of the gulch to the cow-backed hills beyond. Slade led the way, winding in and out among them with the certainty of one who knew every fold of the land waves. They travelled at a fast road gait. It would not do to have the horses winded before the scene of action was reached. Tom noticed that they were gradually climbing, and also that they were drawing back to the place where the little park must be situated.

“Close now,” Slade said. “The rim of the park is just ahead there.”

The two riders pushed through the brush to a rock rim and looked down into a green park. At the far end was an aspen grove. Here, beyond the park, lay the cabin where Tom had been a prisoner. He could not see it for the aspens, but he was sure of its location. A bunch of horses grazed in the valley. Not far from them sat a man on a rock. He carried a rifle. Even from this distance Tom recognized the long awkward figure. The man was Orton.

“Can’t get much closer without him seeing us,” Slade said. “We’ll hotfoot down there lickety split. Soon as he sees us, we’ll begin firing. He’ll probably cut for cover, even if we don’t hit him.”

The riders put their horses down the slope as fast as was safe. Glancing idly around, Orton caught sight of them. He let out one wild yell of dismay, flung a random shot toward them, and legged it for the aspens. Neither Slade nor Tom wasted ammunition on him. They galloped into the valley, one swinging to the right and the other to the left, until they had circled the remuda. Slade lifted the coyote yell to startle the horses and fired twice in the air.

A black stallion flung up his head, whinnied in alarm, and started the stampede toward the rim. At his heels flew the other horses. The two men flanked the runaways, one on each side, to direct their course.

They were half up the slope before they caught sight of the pursuit, a compact little group of riders emerging at a gallop from the aspens. A bullet struck the sand slide in front of Tom. Puffs of smoke from their guns showed that those below were firing as they rode.

It was rough and heavy going up the rocky slope. Tom’s claybank went up the loose shale like a cat, the shoulder muscles standing out as the pony reached for hoof holds. The business in hand so preoccupied his attention that Tom could not turn to see what the pursuers were doing. But he could hear the sound of shooting, sporadic and occasional.

The claybank clambered up the rock rim, and Tom swung round, silhouetted for a moment against the skyline. In one sweeping glance, he took in the situation. The five outlaws were still in the valley, just beginning to take the incline toward the rim. One of them fired at Tom as he stood there. The bullet cut a twig from a pine two feet from his head. Slade was driving his mount up the last rocky ascent, twenty or thirty feet below Tom. His right arm hung lax. The bridle rein was in his left hand. Plainly, he was wounded.

Tom raised his rifle, took careful aim, and fired. One of the horses in the valley went down,

flinging its rider from the saddle. A moment later Slade was beside him.

"You're hit," Tom said.

"Plugged through the arm. Get back from the rim, boy." Slade spoke curtly, incisively, while the horse's body heaved between his legs from the strain of the climb. "We got to hold 'em here a while, one of us. I'll stay. Head straight for the emigrant trail and your bull train. Bring help if I don't show up."

Tom slid from the saddle. He knew that Slade, wounded as he was in the shooting arm, could offer no adequate defence. "I'm stayin'," he said. "You light outa here pronto."

Without waiting to argue the case, he dropped to his knees and crept forward through the bushes. Four horsemen, not bunched, were riding the rocky shoulder straight toward him. For a fraction of a second Tom was nervous and unsteady. Then the panic passed. He was quite cool and sure of himself. He fired. Another horse lost its footing and sank down.

Not ten feet from him, a Colt's revolver barked. He looked around, to see Slade crouched behind a twisted pine.

"We'll stand 'em off here," the wounded superintendent said.

Already they had at least delayed the pursuit. The men below were slipping from their horses and taking cover behind boulders.

"Don't fool with the men. Pick off the horses," Slade ordered.

Tom loved horses. Every one he owned became his friend. It seemed horrible to shoot them down for no fault of their own. But lives were at stake. His first bullet struck one in the flank. The animal gave a cry of pain and galloped across the brow of the hill. The other two horses joined the flight.

"Good work," called Slade. "Now, boy, back to our own horses and follow the herd."

They flung themselves into their saddles and struck a gallop. Across the hills they could see the dust of the stampeded remuda.

"They're headed down. All we've got to do is to follow and round 'em up," Tom said. "How about yore arm? Is it pretty bad? Do you figure you can make it?"

"Make it? I've got to. But I ain't right happy with that arm. The blue whistler must have smashed a bone in my elbow. It's sure sending me plenty of notice where it's at."

"I could tie it up, if we stopped."

"No, sir. We'll keep going."

Tom looked back. "No sign of 'em yet. If we're lucky, those fellows back there will never catch us."

"If they're lucky, you mean. Some of 'em would sure go to sleep in smoke if they come too close."

They rode swiftly across the hills, drawing nearer to the band of horses. The animals had recovered from their fright and were grazing on bunch grass when the riders reached them. It proved to be no trouble to swing them into a draw and head the leaders toward the road.

"They're our horses all right," Slade said.

"We've picked up a bigger bunch than they stole," Tom replied. "But I reckon the company can use 'em."

"Good thing for Joe Slade you decided to follow their trail a while ago when you struck it. . . . How far back is the bull train?"

Tom noticed that the man was drooping in the saddle, that his shoulders were sagging and his voice tired.

"Not so far." Tom ranged alongside of him and unfastened from the saddle his canteen.

Slade took a drink.

“I’ll tie a wet handkerchief round yore arm,” Tom said.

He did so. The older man swayed a little in the saddle.

“Don’t you let me quit long as you can prod me with a goad,” the superintendent said. “If I play out, get up behind me and head for the bull outfit.”

“Rivers is right good with wounds. We’ll make it there, Mr. Slade.”

“Yep. Stay by me, boy.” Slade grinned, ruefully. “I’ve been shot up, se-ve-re-al times. Old Jules ordered a coffin for me one time, but I fooled him. It kinda annoys me that I’m feeling so puny. I never was so plumb tired of one little doggone bullet before. It hit my funny bone, I expect.”

They plodded on, Slade clinging to the horn as he drooped more and more. Tom rode knee to knee with him, one arm around the waist of the wounded man. The recovered horses jogged on in front of them.

They reached the road of the Overland Trail. In the distance, Tom could see a cloud of yellow dust made by a large outfit. Probably this was the bull train.

“We’re real close,” Tom said by way of comfort.

For answer, Slade lurched forward in the saddle.

Tom swung down and caught the body, propping it along the neck of the horse. He took the reins and moved forward, one arm steadying the limp figure in the saddle.

It seemed to him that they travelled miles. Sometimes he looked back to make sure they were not pursued.

The bull train drew near. A man cantered out from it toward him. He saw that it was Rivers.

“Found the horses, did you?” he called. Then, catching sight of the wounded man, he asked another question. “What’s wrong? Who you got there?”

“Mr. Slade,” answered Tom. “The Wilson gang shot him up. They stole the stock an’ we brought it back.”

“Slade!” exclaimed Rivers, astonished.

The wounded man raised his body with some effort. “They laid a trap to kill me. This boy here saved me. I’m feeling mighty trifling. You’ll have to put me on one of the wagons, Sim.”

Rivers lifted him from the saddle.

CHAPTER IV

TOM LOSES HIS KNIFE

Half an hour later, Tom was once more riding toward Cottonwood Springs. Rivers had given him explicit instructions to ride back to the outfit if he saw any sign of the road agents.

“Split the wind back thisaway hel-a-mile, Tom,” he said. “Don’t take any chances with those scalawags. They’d sure do you a meanness if they could. But I don’t reckon you’ll see them. It ain’t hardly reasonable that they would come close to the trail in open daylight so soon.”

Tom was of that opinion himself. It turned out he was right. At any rate, he reached Cottonwood unmolested.

He had been told to select a good camp ground close to water and grass. A stretch near the stream, about three hundred yards from the station, seemed to fill the requirements. A covered wagon outfit was camped near, but there was plenty of room for the bull train, too.

Young Collins rode up to the wagon. A red-bearded man appeared and looked at him in surly fashion without offering a greeting.

“Right hot to-day,” Tom said. “Skeeters bad at our camp last night. Green-headed flies troublin’ our stock some.”

The man stared at Tom, ignoring his friendly lead.

Tom tried again. “We’ll be neighbours to-night, looks like. My outfit is on the road headin’ this way. Jest pulled up to say ‘Hello!’ as I was passin’.”

“Yore outfit ain’t campin’ on this slope,” the man returned, a threat in his voice.

“Up there.” Tom indicated the place with a sweep of the hand. “Plenty of room for you an’ us too. We’ll not disturb you.”

“You can’t jump my feed ground, not without a fight,” the man growled.

Tom’s gaze took in the wide sweep of grass and then the little bunch of mules not far away.

“We don’t allow to do that,” he said. “But there’s plenty here for all of us, feed and water too.”

“Say, young fellow, don’t argue with me.” The man’s voice was heavy with menace. “I’m Buck Comstock, if you want to know, an’ I ain’t scared of any slit-eyed son of a sea cook this side of the River,^[1] or the yon side either. I’m a bad man to monkey with, an’ no pilgrim can run on me an’ make the raffle.”

Tom was careful not to let the growing resentment inside reach either voice or manner. He did not want to quarrel, and in any case every man working for the company had definite orders not to engage in fights. He spoke softly.

“I’m not tryin’ to run on you, Mr. Comstock. I’m mentionin’ that our outfit will camp on this slope to-night.”

Comstock’s face took on an ugly expression. He was a thickset man of medium height with heavy rounded shoulders. His eyes were small and black.

“If you come, come a-shootin’, for there will sure be sudden trouble.” The man’s sulky anger reached the point of explosion. “Say, don’t sit up there an’ tell me what you’ll do. Git down off’n that horse, an’ right now I’ll beat yore head off.”

It was characteristic of Tom that he grew cold instead of hot as anger stirred in him. “You want too much for a bit, Mr. Comstock,” he said. “Last fellow who beat me up drug me from the saddle.”

“Don’t you git heavy with me, young fellow, or I’ll show you.” Comstock took a step

toward him and stopped. He did not want to make any mistake. He had observed a brown hand sliding casually toward the butt of a revolver. On the face of it this stringy, gangling boy ought to be an easy subject to pick upon, but the steady eyes held a quiet resolution that was disconcerting. "Say, git down jest a minute an' I'll give you four bits. I'll give you a dollar."

"Cash on the barrel head?" asked Tom.

"I'll learn you to get funny with me. For half a plug of tobacco, I'd yank you down an' skin you alive."

Tom said no more. He sat motionless in the saddle for a few moments, waiting for the man to make his choice, and while he waited, his eyes were fixed steadily on the camper. Then, slowly, he swung his horse and rode to the station.

To the station boss he made a report on the theft and recovery of the horses and of the wounding of the superintendent. This done, he returned to the camp ground.

The man who had given his name as Buck Comstock hailed him and walked forward, a shotgun under his arm. Tom drew up, watching him carefully. If the fellow meant to make trouble, he did not intend to be caught by surprise.

"How big an outfit you-all got?" demanded Comstock.

The man on horseback told him.

"You tell yore boss if he camps here he's got to pay me for using my feed ground."

"How did it get to be yore ground?" asked Tom. "Looks to me like part of a million miles of open range."

Comstock swore violently. "I done told you onct not to git heavy with me. Tell him what I said. That's all you got to do. Understand?"

A faint satiric smile lit the eyes of the young man. "You'll get a chance to tell him yore own self, likely, when he drifts around. No need for an interpreter. You make yore own funeral oration."

"I'll sure tell him, by gum, what I think of him if he tries to jump my feed ground."

"Don't tell him out loud. He might hear you," advised Tom.

Comstock struggled inarticulately with a complexity of desires. He wanted to punish this impudent youth who refused to be browbeaten. He wanted it understood distinctly that he was a bad man of sorts. Yet all the cupidity of his dull mind made him eager to hold up the freight outfit for the camp ground.

"Who is this pilgrim that runs yore outfit?" he blustered. "He sure can't run over me. I'll make him climb a tree."

Tom dropped a bomb, very casually. "His name is Slade."

"Slade!" The man's jaw dropped.

"Joseph A. Slade."

The camper was taken aback. He stood open-mouthed while his slow brain tried to cope with this development. Slade! Slade the killer! He tried both to back-track and to save his face.

"I'm sure enough no man to go around lookin' for a fuss, but if someone brings one an' lays it on my lap, why I aim to take care of it. But in regards to Mr. Slade, I've always heard tell he's a right fair man, an' I won't make no holler if he wants to camp here."

"Won't make him climb a tree or anything?" asked Tom innocently.

Comstock glared at him. "I'd sure give six bits for a chanct to work you over, young fellow," he growled.

Tom laughed. He was not afraid of this man, and, in any case the superintendent's reputation protected him. There was something so implacable about Slade's vengeance when

he was aroused that desperadoes sidestepped an issue with him.

There was the historic case of Jules Reni, the story of which was known wherever frontiersmen gathered. Slade and Jules had quarrelled. The Frenchman, coming on the other unarmed, emptied the contents of a shotgun and a revolver into his body. With thirteen buckshot and bullets in his person, Slade was lifted into a bunk. He heard Jules give directions for burying him and sat up to gasp out that he would live to wear the Frenchman's ears on his watch chain. He did. After the superintendent's recovery months later, Jules returned to the division, from which he had been driven. He publicly threatened to kill his enemy at sight. Slade forestalled him. He had the man arrested, tied to a post, and held a prisoner. Upon his arrival, Slade shot him in cold blood.

Tom rode away to a distance of a hundred yards, dropped the bridle reins to the ground, and began to gather buffalo chips for fuel. Earlier campers had largely exhausted the supply. Tom took an ax from its place under the stirrup leather and, with a rifle in the other hand, strolled down to the stream. A drove of wild turkeys were roosting in the cottonwoods. He shot four and drew them. Then he chopped dead and down trees for the camp fire. The covered wagons were already drawing in to the camp ground before he had finished.

The ax across his shoulder, Tom walked toward the outfit. Shouts of men, the rumble of wheels, the bawling of cattle filled the air. Long whips cracked. Quick fires from the buffalo chips Tom had gathered were already sending up streamers of smoke.

With a yoke of oxen and a logging chain, Tom dragged to the camp the wood he had cut. As he returned to the camp, he noticed with some amusement that Comstock was on hand trying to ingratiate himself with Rivers.

"An' if there's anything I can do for you or Mr. Slade, why o' course——"

"Nothing," replied Rivers. "Mr. Slade is going to Denver to have his arm looked after. He'll take the stage to-morrow."

Tom heard no more. He was busy about his work and caught only so much of the conversation as he was passing.

It was dark long before supper was ready. After he had eaten, Tom stuffed the turkeys he had shot and, without picking the feathers from the birds, coated them with three inches of daubed mud. He scooped a place among the hot coals, dug away some dirt, put the turkeys in the hollow, covered them with ashes, and piled the fire above the spot. Left there all night, in the morning they would be baked to a delicious flavour.

Tom discovered that his hunting knife was missing. He remembered that he had used it among the cottonwoods after he had shot the turkeys, and in the darkness he walked down to get it. Since he was wearing moccasins, he made no sound as he moved.

A murmur of voices came to him. Tom opened his mouth to call, assuming that some of the teamsters had drifted down to the river. But he changed his mind about shouting out his presence. The mosquitoes were singing all about him in the willow bushes. This was a queer place to choose for a private conversation. He drew closer, along the edge of the willow fringe. Two men were crouched on the bank under a cottonwood. Their backs were toward him, but he recognized one of the voices. It was that of Buck Comstock. He could make out some of the words.

"... bust his arm..."

The other man made some comment. Tom could not hear what it was, nor did he get what followed. Presently there came a snatch once more in Comstock's heavy growl.

"... stage for Denver to-morrow..."

The other man laughed, an evil laugh. For the first time Tom made out something of what he said.

“ . . . start but never get there . . . ”

That was all. The men rose from where they sat and moved away, in the direction of the station. They separated, not far from Comstock’s wagon, the unknown man going on alone.

Presently Tom followed him. He wanted to see where he went and whom he met. After that, it would be time to report to Rivers what he had learned. The bull boss might dismiss it as unimportant, and very likely he would be right. But Tom was not ready yet to believe this. If he could get some more evidence, something to confirm the snatches of murmured talk, he would have a story Rivers might give attention to.

The stranger moved toward the station roadhouse. Something in his build or in his gait seemed familiar to Tom. The fellow was tall and awkward. He shambled as he walked. After a moment’s hesitation, Tom followed him into the drinking place.

Instantly, he wished he had been more discreet. For, as Tom stood in the doorway, the man who had preceded him turned and their eyes met.

The man was Orton, the fellow he had seen a few hours earlier with Mose Wilson.

[1] “The River,” as used by the emigrants of ’59, always meant the Missouri.

CHAPTER V

HOW DEER EYES THREW A STICK AT TOM

Orton's red-veined beefy face grew purple. He glared at Tom savagely. Not many men in this part of the country knew him, and he had not expected to be recognized.

The road agent was nonplussed. He could not safely follow his impulse, which was to force a quarrel on Tom and shoot him down: not here, in the stronghold of the enemy, with company servants probably within call. He smothered his rage, externally at least, and called on the bartender for a drink of rum.

Tom sat down on a bench, his back to a wall. They watched each other, the boy and the bandit, without appearing to do so. Except the keeper of the place, there was nobody else in the room. Tom was waiting only for a few minutes to pass before leaving. He did not want Orton to think that he was afraid to stay. Soon, now, he would stroll casually out, and as quickly as possible would get word to Rivers that the road agent was here intent on mischief.

The door opened. A girl walked in, a young Arapahoe Indian named Deer Eyes. She was the daughter of a scout known as Spit-in-the-Fire. Tom had seen her around her father's tepee both here and at Julesburg. The girl came in shyly, half a dozen young sage hens in her hand.

"Mr. Massie—he here?" she asked the bartender.

"Not right now. He's out with the bull outfit. Want to trade yore birds?"

She said she wanted to exchange them for powder and shot.

"Leave 'em here. He'll settle with Spit-in-the-Fire."

Orton's cold, protruding eyes had fastened on the girl the moment she entered the room. She was the most attractive Indian woman Tom had seen. Her brown skin was fine-textured, soft as satin. The eyes that lifted diffidently when she spoke were soft and liquid, doglike in their fidelity. Despite the slenderness of immaturity there was in her motions the promise of bodily enticement.

Her business finished, she flatfooted out of the place without again raising her eyes. Orton's gloating gaze had caught for a moment her fluttering glance, and Tom could have sworn that she was afraid of the man. Distinctly, this was none of Tom's business. An Indian girl was only a potential squaw. She was any man's game. Nobody else had any right to interfere any more than he would in the case of a horse trade. None the less, Tom was a little disturbed. There was something helpless and appealing about the girl. She seemed more a child than a woman.

Orton followed her from the room. The door had hardly closed before Tom was moving toward it. In the darkness, forty or fifty yards away, he saw Orton's long body and heard his voice.

"Hold on there, you Injun girl. I want to see you."

Tom drew closer. Again the voice of Orton, heavy and domineering, came to him. "It'll be like I say. My squaw, understand. From right damn now. Mine."

Then came that of the girl, tremulous and excited, in broken English: "Me heap hurry. Go damn queeck yes."

"You'll go when I give the word, savez? I like yore looks. My squaw. I'll pay cash on the barrel head to yore old man if his price is right."

The soft voice broke into pleadings, more in French than in English, for trappers from the north had been here before the gold hunters.

Abruptly the entreaties ended in a stifled gasp. There was the sound of shuffling feet. Tom took a dozen swift steps forward.

The moon came from behind a scudding cloud and showed him Deer Eyes struggling with the outlaw.

“Let go,” Tom shouted, and his fist drove at Orton’s cheek bone.

Startled, the big man released the girl. She slipped away from him. Orton was a man of one idea. He focussed his attention on this fool boy who had dared to interfere with him.

“You slit-eyed horse thief, I’ll beat yore head off right now,” he roared.

He proceeded to carry out his threat. His arms went like a flail as he rushed his victim. Never for a moment was Tom in the fight, if by courtesy this could be called one. His guard was beaten down by the long bone-and-flesh pistons strung with ropes of muscle. They battered at his face, flung him down, and dragged him to his feet again. Gnarled fists beat upon his mouth and cheeks. Heavy boots kicked his ribs when once more he sank down.

Orton came out of his fury to recollection of how much this youth knew against him. He jerked out a revolver to finish the job.

But he was too late. He heard voices, running footsteps. It was time to be gone. He thrust the six-shooter back into its scabbard and ran.

Tom came back from unconsciousness and found Spit-in-the-Fire bending over him.

“You hurt—seeck—me help,” the Indian said.

The beaten lad was weak, in pain, and nauseated. He tried to rise, but found it difficult. The scout put an arm around him. Tom stumbled forward, lurching like a drunkard. Presently, he found himself in front of a tepee. Deer Eyes, who had been hovering about, lifted the flap. He stooped and went in.

The girl made him lie on some buffalo robes, after which she sponged and bathed his swollen face and battered head. Very gently her soft hands ministered to him. The touch of the cold water stung his wounds, but there was healing in its freshness.

Spit-in-the-Fire returned and looked at him impassively. He grunted. His face told nothing, but, after he had gone, his daughter murmured to Tom a welcome. “He say you stay—no go.”

Tom did not argue the point. He did not want to move even a finger. It was better to lie there and let her wait on him. When he stirred, though ever so slightly and carefully, his aching flesh cried out in torment.

“I want to see Rivers,” he told her. “To-night. Right away.”

She tried to put him off as one would a child, but he was so insistent that she had her father send for the bull-train boss.

The young man had fallen into a kind of coma when Rivers appeared, but he aroused himself to tell what he had heard and what he guessed.

Rivers stroked his beard. “If they are aimin’ to hold up the stage with Slade as a passenger, they won’t have any luck. I’ll promise you that, Tom. It will sure be guarded.” The wagon master’s eyes flashed anger. “From what I can hear, this fellow Orton weighs fifty pounds more than you, boy. He’d better light out before we find him.”

Tom stayed two days as the guest of Spit-in-the-Fire. From Deer Eyes, he learned the story of her troubles. Both Orton and Mose Wilson wanted to buy her from her father as a squaw. Mose had served notice on him that he intended to have the girl regardless of what she wished.

Her young guest was sorry for her. She was gentle and kind. In the undemonstrative Indian fashion, she had capacity for much affection. But there was nothing he could do. He had no influence. Nobody in the community was of less importance than he—at least, no white man.

Three days later, Tom joined the wagon train on its way to Julesburg. Rivers made a good deal of him. He liked the young fellow, and he had been impressed by the fact that Slade had become interested in him.

“They didn’t tackle the stage,” he told Tom. “Maybe they have got a spotter somewhere. We were fixed to give ’em a warm reception if they had showed up. By the way, Tom, you ain’t to go through with us to Denver. Slade says for you to stay at Julesburg in the blacksmith shop till he sees you.”

A few days later, Spit-in-the-Fire set up his tepee at Julesburg. Tom saw a good deal of Deer Eyes. It seemed to him that he was always meeting her by chance. There was no personal vanity in his make-up, but it was impossible not to know that she was his for the taking. Her tongue was silent, but love looked out of her faithful eyes. They followed him as those of a dog do its master.

One day she brought him news. He had been away for the better part of a week. Some wagons had broken down on the trail, and he had driven out to mend them. He got back after dark, and before he had been ten minutes in his cabin, her low voice was calling him.

The news was disquieting. Taking advantage of Slade’s absence, the Wilson gang had come to town and was carrying things with a high hand. Orton and his chief had quarrelled about her. They had fought and been separated. It was understood that the truce between them was likely to be terminated at any moment.

Tom knew that if this outfit of bad men learned of his presence, he would be in great danger. The wise thing would be to slip quietly away. Mose was a killer. His followers were desperate outlaws who had a motive for wishing Tom out of the way. But young Collins did not want to be prudent at the expense of his self-respect.

Grown bold by the extremity of her fear, Deer Eyes told Tom what was in her mind. In the tribal language, she threw a stick at him, the equivalent of proposing marriage.

“I go with you,” she pleaded. “I cook for you. I work. I your squaw.”

Tom was very much embarrassed. His face flamed to a fiery red. Somehow, he managed to convey to her that he could not accept her offer.

She did not understand why. “You no like me?” she asked.

“Yes, I like you a lot, but I can’t marry you.”

“I good. I work for you. I give you papoose.”

There was no use trying to explain that he was white and she red. What effect could such an argument have when she knew twenty squaw men, some of them hunters and trappers of high repute? He took refuge in flat refusal expressed as gently as possible.

Yet he was sorry for her. She had nursed him when he was ill. Her devotion touched him. He understood the dread that preoccupied all her thoughts, and he sympathized with it. He knew it was all wrong that she should have no defence against the outrageous claims of such men as Wilson and Orton. If she had been a white girl, twenty men would have run to protect her. But an Injun was an Injun, a squaw girl only a squaw.

Whether she had a claim on him or not, Tom could not ignore the fact that she came to him as her only hope of escape. This troubled him. He began to find himself thinking about her. He had some money and a small bunch of horses. Why not buy her from her father and send her to the new town Auraria on Cherry Creek? Uncle Dick Wootten would take care of her. She could fit into his family of half-breeds and earn her keep. Maybe Mose Wilson and Orton would never find out what had become of her.

A man’s motives are never absolutely clear, even to himself. At odd moments, very likely

the enticement of her sex flared up in his brain, but if so, he trod down the thought. He wanted to help her. That was his basic intention. She had put her trust in him, and he could not desert her.

He went to her father's tepee and made a bargain. Six ponies was the price he paid for her.

CHAPTER VI

GUNS ROAR

During the next twenty-four hours, Tom heard a good deal about the Wilson gang. They were at the roadhouse drinking steadily and heavily. Sometimes their voices were raised in ribald song. Once, at least, there was a noisy outburst of anger. Several times they sallied into the main street of the little frontier town and paraded up and down, firing a few shots in wanton bravado.

They had it all their own way. Nobody cared to oppose them. The few company employees at Julesburg were not looking for trouble with so desperate a crew as this. Wilson himself was a vicious killer. Those with him were hard and reckless characters ready to appeal to the Colt at the drop of a hat. A wise man, no matter how brave, discreetly avoided any difficulty with such outlaws. Only one more wild and desperate than themselves would fling down a challenge to them. Tom knew one such man, but he was in Denver attending to a shattered elbow.

Rumours flew. One was that Wilson was threatening to burn the town before he left. Another was that he and Orton had quarrelled again, that only the interference of Musgrove had prevented the flash of six-shooters. This last proved to be a fact. Orton had withdrawn from the group at the roadhouse. He was drinking in solitude, and he had been heard to say that he would shoot Mose on sight.

Tom went warily. He never moved without a gun on his hip. The outlaws probably did not know that he was in town, but at any moment they might come on him. He guessed too that, though Orton and Wilson were quarrelling about the Indian girl, neither of them was aware of her presence in Julesburg. For neither of them had molested her.

On the afternoon of the second day of the outlaws' visit, Tom had occasion to see Massie, the station tender, about some wagon tires. Everything had been quiet in the roadhouse for some time. No doubt he could slip past the place unnoticed.

He was almost opposite the door when there came a sudden burst of song and a grating noise as though chairs were being pushed back. That song held him spellbound. His memory fastened on the last time it had come to him in that same loud, boisterous voice. The place St. Joe, ten years ago.

“I'll scrape the mountains clean, old girl;
I'll drain the rivers dry;
I'm off for California,
Susannah, don't you cry.”

Tom's heart seemed to drop into his stomach. He was back in his childhood, back in the days when the timbre of that voice, jubilant and cruel, was wont to shake the courage from his forlorn little soul. The past had stretched across the years, across hundreds of miles of dusty desert, to lay its hand upon the present. He had hoped for this day, yet now it had come he found himself weak and trembling. The old instinct to cower before his master laid hold of him.

Out of the building men came, treading on each other's heels, four of them. Tom had eyes for only one, the first, Mose Wilson. In spite of the long flowing beard, in spite of the added weight, the coarser look, the boy knew him instantly. Mose Wilson was Dr. Moses Shipley, medicine faker, bully, brawler, the man whose slave he had been, the man who had murdered his best friend Abner Leeds. The fellow's figure had lost its grace, his step its lightness of tread. Time and dissipation and evil life had taken their toll of his good looks. None the less, the

slovenly leader of road agents was a grosser, older edition of the spruce, cheap dandy Moses Shipley.

The pallid-faced man Holt nudged his chief. "Look who's here, Mose."

Wilson caught sight of Tom and let out a yell of triumph. His gun flashed in the sunlight. Even before the roar of it, while Tom's six-shooter was sweeping up to the level, the young man knew that a third party had flung himself into the battle.

Orton had come out of a sod house and was running forward, dragging out his Colt as he did so. Wilson's back was toward him.

The flash and roar of guns! Lances of fire marking the swift terrible track of death! A startled sobbing oath! Thick crouched figures, hideous faces stamped with hate!

It seemed to Tom that the guns would blaze forever, but in reality the tri-cornered duel could have lasted only a few seconds. Afterward, when he had time to think of it, Tom knew that the coming of Orton had saved him. Twice Wilson's six-shooter crashed bullets at Tom. Twice the young man answered the challenge. They were too far for accurate aim. The killer moved closer, with the long, crouched step of the panther intent on its kill.

A shout from the man Dave Pope warned Wilson. "Look out behind!" The big man whirled, catlike in his swiftness.

Already Orton's gun was belching fire. But he was running and his shots went wild. Wilson threw down on him, quickly, accurately. His aim was rapid but not hurried.

His first shot brought the long man down, the weapon clattering from his hand. Orton glared at his foe. From his throat there came a startled oath that was half a sob. He started to crawl toward the weapon just out of reach. Deliberately, Wilson fired again. Orton's arm dropped laxly, his head fell forward, and he collapsed. The killer took no chances. He moved toward the other, his eyes never lifting from that limp huddled figure, and at close range sent a bullet into the body.

Wilson had momentarily forgotten Tom, but he remembered him now. He turned, pulling out a second gun.

The young fellow was no longer in sight. He had ducked behind an adobe building and was legging it for safety. There were four of the outlaws and only one of him. That was the plea he used later to excuse himself to himself. But he knew, whether he admitted it or not, that it was a renewal of his childhood panic that had sent him flying from the master whose whip had so often set him screaming.

Wilson's face was a mirror of his emotions. He was exhilarant with the triumphant lust of the kill. He would have been completely satisfied if he could have added two notches to his gun instead of one. But one was better than none. This young fellow, Collins or whatever he called himself, would find it his turn if they ever met again.

His companions congratulated Wilson fulsomely, all but Musgrove.

"You were that cool," Dave Pope said admiringly. "I never saw the beat. Steady as a rock, Mose."

"Bet yore boots! An' drapped him at the first shot. You're sure chief of this country." Holt added.

Pope came in with more praise, and Holt capped this with added encomiums.

Wilson boasted. "Try to take my girl, will he? Well, I done showed him. I'll show that boy too, soon as I get a chanct."

"*He'll never stop runnin',*" jeered Pope.

The killer lifted his head exultantly and sang the old song of the 'forty-niner, the melody

that ten years before had swept the country from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate.

“I’ll scrape the mountains clean, old girl;
I’ll drain the rivers dry;
I’m off for California,
Susannah, don’t you cry.”

It was the equivalent of the hunter’s old view-haloo after the kill.

CHAPTER VII

FLASHES OF MEMORY

The sight of this man Wilson, or Shipley, had carried Tom back ten years. In a series of pictures, which gradually connected themselves, his early life unrolled itself.

He was a waif to begin with, after his father and mother had died of yellow fever in New Orleans. He kept body and soul together by doing odd jobs around the wharves. Here Mose Shipley had picked him up and had taken him around the river country to help him in his exhibitions. For Shipley was a fake doctor, the proprietor of a nostrum known as the Indian Queen Tonic. He gave street entertainments during which he did card tricks and exhibited his skill with a pistol. Tom's part in this was to stand with hands outstretched against a board background while his master shot an outline of his body with bullets. The man was a dead shot, but he drank to excess. Tom often went to his post fearfully.

Even now, after this lapse of years, Tom could remember the man's patter to the crowd, or at least part of it.

"Friends, this sick-bed comforter, if used properly, is well intended to snatch you from the very jaws of grim death. The Indian Queen Tonic is a sovereign specific which will almost instantly cure all diseases, including lung and liver affections, rheumatism, gout, scrofula, humours, wens, tumours, stiff joints, ague, aches, coughs, hip and back troubles, and all female diseases. Why submit yourself and your dear ones to nostrums of nauseous contents which are but as chaff before the wind compared with my beneficent tonic?"

So it ran on, endlessly, for Shipley had a glib tongue and much effrontery. He had, in those days, the presence to back his claims. The street faker stood six feet two, with broad shoulders and lithe waist and loins. Coal black hair fell in heavy ringlets to his coat. Except for a drooping black moustache he was clean shaven. His clothes were of fine quality, the shirt of ruffled lawn, the vest above it elegantly flowered. He wore a black frock suit with a bell-crowned beaver hat of the latest New Orleans mode. With women, he counted himself irresistible.

In the course of their travels, the faker and his little white slave had come to St. Joseph. It was the year of the great migration, the spring when thousands upon thousands of covered wagons were waiting to start the trek across the plains to California. Their camp fires flashed from the willows and the cottonwoods that edged the hempfields.

At one of these camp fires, Tom was always welcome. Abner Leeds had become the friend of the small waif, and not only Abner but his sister Mary Gallup and his red-headed little daughter Virginia. To these the boy had given his heart wholly, though he had a shy, fierce pride and a quiet dignity that never allowed him to put this feeling into words. In a ten-year-old fashion, he was in love with the young widow Mary, who was so gay, so generous, so full of warm emotion. His admiration for Abner was unstinted, because the man walked fearlessly in clean strength through the dangers of life. As for six-year-old Jinny, he was the slave of her imperious wishes.

Abner Leeds was sorry for the little boy. It was in his mind to take him along to the Pacific Coast.

"This scalawag Shipley is a no-account bummer takin' in big money for this hogwash he calls Indian Queen Tonic. An' the way he beats up Tom is scandalous, Mary," the emigrant said.

His sister agreed. "But he's a bad man—always quarrelling and fighting. Don't have trouble

with him, Abner.”

“No, I won’t. Not if I can help it,” he promised.

At that very moment, Dr. Moses Shipley was emerging from a store a mile away with a new blacksnake whip in his hand. Behind him, a few paces in the rear, trotted a freckled barefoot youngster in a tailed coonskin cap and ragged buckskin breeches that had been cut for a large man. They had been made to fit the boy by the simple process of sheering off the lower part of the legs with a dull knife. The youngster was apparently lost in a pair of sacks that came as high as his armpits.

At sight of the whip, Tom’s heart sank. Experience had taught him that, sooner or later, a whip in the hand of his master meant a lashing for him.

Shipley’s light stride carried him up the street and to the left at the first turning. He stopped in front of a small frame building bearing the legend.

DOCTOR HOMER CORLISON
Hebrew Plaster Makes You Well

The fake doctor glanced through the window, caught sight of a small wrinkled man, and, without waiting to knock, pushed open the door and entered. He closed the door behind him.

The boy outside heard a startled exclamation followed by a shrill, frightened protest.

“What you doing here, Mose Shipley? Don’t you dass touch me. Don’t you.”

“You been advertising that my tonic is no good,” Shipley charged.

“You started it about the Hebrew Plaster yore own self. Keep away from me. Ouch! Oh, my God! You’re killin’ me.”

After that came the rapid shuffling of feet, the crash of an overturned chair, the swish of a whip through the air, and a shriek of terror-stricken pain. That scream was the first of many. The tortured victim begged and pleaded and grovelled.

When Shipley burst out of the room, his eyes gleaming with the cruel lust of satisfied malice, Tom was no longer to be seen. He had dodged round the corner and fled. It might be his turn next. One never could tell.

Tom’s feet carried him instinctively to the Leeds wagon. To Abner and his sister the boy told what had occurred. In the veins of Abner Leeds was the blood of a modern crusader. His temperament had made him an Abolitionist and a temperance reformer. Corlison meant nothing to him, but he resented hotly the big man’s bullying arrogance, especially in relation to Tom. He said little, far less than his sister, but there were in the flash of his gray eyes kindling anger and perhaps a crystallizing resolution.

Shipley and his blacksnake were, for a day or two, the talk of the town. Among the Argonauts waiting for the start to California were many rough characters, but the inhabitants of St. Joe itself were law-abiding citizens. The big ruffian swaggered up and down the streets under the impression that he was regarded as a public hero. He was not thin-skinned, and it took him some time to realize that, except for the low frequenters of the drinking places, he was being avoided. When this came home to him, he resented the fact. He was a *poseur* and liked to sun himself in the admiration of others.

Becoming sullen, he took refuge in liquor, went on one of his periodic sprees, started a fight, and was arrested and locked up. For several days he cooled his heels and accumulated venom in jail. When released, he was in a very ugly temper.

Sulkily, he returned to the cabin where he and his factotum slept. It was unfortunate for Tom that, an hour later, he dropped in to get for Virginia some horse chestnuts he had stored there. Abner waited for him outside.

“Come here,” ordered Shipley as soon as the boy had closed the door.

Tom’s heart sank. The room was dark, and Shipley had been lying in a dark corner. Tom had not known of his presence.

“I—I didn’t see you,” he quavered.

“Where you been?” demanded his master.

“D-down among the covered wagons.” Tom knew without being told that his day of judgment was at hand. He felt sick, as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay home an’ not go runnin’ down there?”

“Yessir, but you was away, an’——”

The blacksnake hung on a wall within reach, suspended by a loop from a peg. With what was almost one and the same lithe movement the ruffian had it down and the boy pinned by the scruff of his neck to the bed.

Tom let out one despairing yell before the lash twined around his shrinking flesh like a rope of fire. Abner Leeds heard that yell, raced for the cabin, and burst open the door.

“Stop it, you man of Belial,” he cried.

Amazed at this interruption, Shipley let his hand loosen on the boy’s neck. Tom twisted away and dodged back of Abner. He stood there, quivering and trembling, shaken with hysterical sobs while he clung to the coat of his preserver.

“What’s that?” rasped Shipley.

“Man, you’re a cruel brute to treat a child so. You’ve got to whop me or be whopped.”

The bully could not believe his eyes and ears. He was a large muscular man, a fighter notorious along the river for fifty miles. Abner Leeds, on the other hand, though broad of shoulder and well knit, lacked twenty pounds of his weight.

Shipley let out a roar of rage. “Hell’s hinges, I’ll eat you up,” he shouted.

Since then, in camp and on the trail, Tom had seen many hand-to-hand encounters, but of them all this one stood out as the most savage and relentless. Now, ten years later, some of the details were clear as though it had been last week.

They stood toe to toe, slogging hard, careless of defence, each trying to break down the other by the crushing impact of steady hammering. Shipley was heavier than Leeds, a better boxer, a more experienced fighter. Tom could see that, child though he was. Yet somehow, bruised and bleeding, his friend weathered the smashing attack and made Shipley fall back with a snarl of baffled rage. Leeds had built up his sinewy muscles, his fine shoulder development, by years of wood chopping and log rolling and rail splitting. Add to this a resolute will not to be beaten. Add, too, the fact that Shipley had weakened his resistance by years of dissipation.

Abner crowded the bully hard. Pantherlike, Shipley evaded him, sidestepped with catlike tread, and lashed out hard with a left that travelled like a streak of light. The blow flung Abner, reeling and dazed, against the wall of the cabin. He covered up, clinched, hung on desperately. Then, as his head cleared, he drove home heavy, short arm jolts under which the big man winced.

Shipley tried to break away. The short stiff jabs under the heart and in the stomach took all the fight out of him. He gasped for breath, his face splotchy. The will to win was no longer in him.

He reached for the bowie knife in the leg of his boot, but straightened up without it when Abner pumped in two hard blows to the midriff. Again he broke ground, clutching at the handle of the knife. He turned, a cornered wolf, bowie in hand.

Tom still remembered how that moment froze him. He could still see Abner catch up a three-legged stool and send it crashing down on the head of his foe.

The fight was over.

“Is he—dead?” Tom asked in a whisper staring at the huge figure sprawled on the floor.

Abner brought water and poured it upon the face of Shipley. The eyelids quivered, and the man opened his eyes.

“I’ll get you sure,” he promised Abner. “Soon, too.”

Tom went out with Abner into the pleasant sunlight. His heart was heavy. He knew Shipley. The man was shamed and humiliated. He would never hold up his head until he had had his revenge.

“I—I wisht I hadn’t hollered,” the boy gulped.

Tom never forgot Abner’s answer. “Don’t you blame yoreself, boy. A fellow has got to take what life brings him or be a yellow cur. If he walks straight an’ fears God nothing can hurt him. It’s what you make it, this world is; good if you’re good, bad if you’re not.”

“He’ll do you a meanness. I know him,” Tom said.

A smile broke through Abner’s distorted features. “He’ll have to hurry. We get off tomorrow, an’ you’re going with us, son.”

That night, going down to the river for water, Abner was shot in the back of the head by an assassin and died before his body struck the ground. Mose Shipley was not to be found in St. Joseph next day, nor was he ever seen there again. The manner of his disappearance remained a mystery.

The murder had altered the life of the three dependent upon Abner. Mary adopted Virginia, moved to Independence, and opened a boarding house there. Tom, thrown on his own resources, had lost sight of them after a few months.

But he had always remembered their friendliness and loved them for it, just as he had remembered and tried to follow Abner’s words.

“A fellow has got to take what life brings him or be a yellow cur. If he walks straight an’ fears God, nothing can hurt him.”

Yes, that was it. To walk straight and clean and not be a yellow cur. It was Tom’s religion that, if he did that, everything would be all right.

CHAPTER VIII

A RED-HEADED GIRL

Now, after ten years, Tom had met again the man who had done so much to blot the sunshine from his youth. It seemed almost as though some freakish destiny had taken in charge the current of their lives. Already, within two short weeks, they had been flung twice into sharp conflict, and Tom felt sure that this was only a beginning. The issue was joined between them. They would meet again and again, until one of them had been obliterated from the path of the other.

But which? Tom was not proud of his conduct. A moment of panic, a resurgence of childish fear, had set his feet flying from the man. It was no excuse to tell himself that there were four of the outlaws, because he had been thinking of only one of them. It was no excuse to say that he had run, not from a roaring gun, but from the memory of a red-hot whip lash.

Julesburg was but a frontier village. Wilson would soon find him. He must either kill or be killed, unless he preferred to fling a saddle on a horse and light out.

Massie came to Tom after nightfall. "Boy, you better hit the trail," he said. "That fellow Wilson is makin' his brags what-all he aims to do to you. He will, too, for he's a sure-enough wolf. I want a letter taken back to a bull train the other side of Cottonwood. Saddle up an' get out with it."

Tom did not ask how much of this was a friendly device on the part of the station keeper to get him out of the way of Wilson. Inside of fifteen minutes, he was in the saddle. Presently, the lights of the town were behind him.

His lonely ride did not disturb him. There was to come a time soon, within four years, when this whole country would be full of hostile Indians, when hundreds of emigrants would fall victims to their attacks. But as yet the Redskins were troublesome only as petty thieves. He was safer alone on the plains than in Julesburg with Wilson priming himself with drink for murder.

Gray morning sifted into the sky. He roused a small herd of buffaloes that had come down to the stream for water. The lumbering animals scurried for safety. When it grew lighter, he shot three quail and cooked them for breakfast. Having eaten, he slept for a few hours. It was well past midday when he passed Alkali Springs.

There was no hurry. Tom did not push his horse, and he gave it plenty of rest. Darkness had fallen before he gave the coyote yell and cantered into O'Fallon's. This was a large station and range house. The buildings spread over a good deal of ground. There were quarters for hostlers and extra help, a blacksmith shop, stables, a stage station, and a store where flour, tobacco, feed, and grain could be bought by emigrants.

An hostler came out from the stables. "Thought first off you was the stage. It's late. Wish old Baldy would bring it in on time. He's gettin' lazy, that old bird is. I don't blame him none. If I had a stake, I wouldn't be pluggin' away here. But, dawggone it, if shoe-strings was sellin' for six bits a mile, I couldn't buy one. It sure would be duck soup to be rich like old Commodore Vanderbilt. A fellow could read his title clear to a heap of good times. I'd light out for the diggings, but, shucks! I don't swallow all this talk about gold. If it's there, what are the yellow-bellies on the ground hollerin' their heads off for? When a rooster finds grain, he don't cluck for the hens to come."

Tom swung from the saddle without speech. What was the use of talking when this gabby

fellow had so much to say?

“Danged if there ain’t the stage now. Still an’ all, if I thought there was a chanct, I’d say by-by to this job. A fellow don’t git anywheres workin’ for wages. Don’t you know it?”

The stage rolled in. A man in buckskin trousers and dirty undershirt came out from the station and beat with a hammer a rusty triangle as a signal that supper was ready. A yellow dog howled dismally.

The hostler made comment. “I don’t see why that dog howls. He belongs with a freight outfit an’ don’t have to eat here.”

The cook turned viciously to the stableman. “If you don’t like the grub here why——”

“—Why, I’ve gotta eat it anyhow. You’re right, Johnnie. I’d ruther eat it than starve to death.”

The stage was disgorging its contents. The driver descended from his seat and stretched. A fat man in broadcloth rolled down from the place beside him. Two others lowered themselves from the roof. The inside passengers numbered six or seven. Two of them were ladies, and most of the others made themselves busy assisting the ladies out and carrying their small bundles to the station.

Tom watched the little procession. Women were as yet a novelty in this country. There were scarcely a dozen in the whole region. Probably these two were going to join their men folks at the new Cherry Creek goldfields. He could see that they wore poke bonnets. One of them, at least, was young. As they moved into the light, a young eager face turned toward Tom. The hair that fell in curls below the bonnet, was a dark red. For just the flash of a heartbeat, brown eyes with amber lights in them met the gray ones of Tom. Then the fat man waddled between them, full of unctuous politeness to the girl.

Baldy Brown drifted toward young Collins. “The boys are some excited, looks like. They hang on to the ladies like grim death to a nigger’s heel. That fat old jay bird, Price, don’t give ’em a minute’s peace. Betcha he proposes to both of ’em before he reaches Denver. He certainly has burnt his breeches behind him, as the old sayin’ is.”

“Him! Why, they wouldn’t look at him, would they?”

“I reckon not,” the stage driver assented. “Say, that fat old duck is liable to have appleplexey when he knows what I know. He’s arranged for to ride inside to the next station, an’ the ladies aim to be outside. He don’t know that. . . . I reckon they’re sisters. The oldest one is too young to be the other’s mother. She’s one lovely lady, the oldest, plump as a quail’s breast an’ right nice dispositioned. She’s gonna sit on the box next me. Me. I’d propose my own self, but shucks! I’m a married man, fur as I know, leastways if she ain’t diseased since I left the states. She’s a right pleasant lady to be away from, referrin’ to Mrs. Brown.”

“Betcha they get lots of proposals,” Tom said.

“Them ladies? Boy, hush, they’ll git a million apiece. They’re high-grade ore, I want to tell you right now. Kinda surprising two lone women like them leavin’ God’s country to come out here. Different with men. Natural for them to roll around. I always did claim the best buffaloes are on the edge of the herd, sniffin’ the breeze ahead of the others. The best an’ the worst too. There’s some right ornery sons of guns out here, sure as hell’s hot.”

“Mebbe their men folks are out at the diggings already,” Tom suggested, recurring to the question of the day.

“No, they ain’t. These here ladies are playin’ a lone hand. One of ’em told me so. Ain’t that sand for you?” Bally was silent a moment, then ruminated aloud. “Expect I better padlock my fool tongue when I git that lady on the box with me. Onct in Texas I kinda married a Mrs. Brown

Number Two. If I was to git spliced again, it would be trigamy, don't you s'pose, Slim?"

"The law is some particular about how many women a man marries," Tom admitted.

"Well, I don't reckon she'd have me, anyway," Baldy said ruefully. "S'long, boy. I got to wash up for supper an' kinda keep an eye on that fat duck, Price. Far as these here ladies go, he won't git over the first hill, that bird won't."

With which prediction the garrulous driver passed into the station.

CHAPTER IX

THE MESSAGE OF THE BUFFALO SKULL

Tom was a minor employee of the transportation company. He did not eat with the passengers just arrived on the stage, but at a second table reserved for some of the less important help. After he had finished supper, he wandered outside.

A little group of the passengers were chatting together in the common room. Through the window Tom could see them. The two ladies were the centre of the group. Unobserved, he watched them. The younger of the two was a girl, hardly more than seventeen. As the young fellow's eyes rested on her, there took place in his being some strange chemical change. He did not understand why his pulses stilled, then crashed to a swift clamour of the blood. He did not know what caused the ache that oppressed his heart when he looked at her. Never had he seen anyone so compact of loveliness, so vividly expressive. The slender throat carried the small head like the stem of a rose. Her exquisite youth was charming.

The elder of the ladies turned, and he was startled by unexpected recognition. Her face, still youthful, was lovely in its modelling. He remembered the smile, the poise of the head. This was Mary Gallup. The younger one, the girl with the brown eyes and the red-brown hair, must be Virginia Leeds, the little Jinnie that he had so often led by the hand on the small adventures of her childish life. The blood in his veins raced with excitement. His memory had always cherished them as the great figures in his childhood, the friends who had amazingly offered to share their happiness with the little waif enslaved by Shipley.

It was characteristic of Tom that he did not step forward and tell them who he was. He was only a bull whacker, an extra man with a freight outfit. Very likely they would not want to know him. The last thing in the world he desired was to be presumptuous, to base a claim for acquaintanceship upon the fact that they had already given him largesse of their kindness. Tom did not definitely decide that he would not introduce himself. He merely postponed the issue. Perhaps he might meet them casually, in which event he could tell them who he was, dropping the information as though it were of no importance.

At break of day, he rode away toward Cottonwood, long before the stage passengers were out of bed. Sometimes he followed the well-rutted trail. Sometimes he took short cuts through the sage. It was close to noon when he met an advance rider from the bull train he had been sent to meet. Tom gave the letter to the man and turned to take the long ride back to Julesburg.

At O'Fallon's, he saddled a fresh mount. He was travelling faster than he would have done had it not been for the stage in front of him. His intention was to catch up with it before the coach reached Julesburg in order that he might see again Virginia Leeds. Otherwise, she would go on to Denver and pass out of his range of vision.

The hostler at O'Fallon's, judiciously pumped, gave him information. "The li'l fat man was plumb disappointed, looked like. Baldy had the two ladies on top with him, an' the fat duck had swapped for an inside seat. Baldy forgot to tell him he was swappin' with the ladies when he made the trade."

"How long since the stage left?" asked Tom.

"'Bout two-three hours. Mighty nice-lookin' ladies. The older one talked to me whilst I was hookin' up the horses. Say, either one of 'em could hang their poke bonnet up in my wickiup any time they say the word. If I had a stake——But what's the use in bringin' that up?"

Tom took the road. Four miles beyond the station, it came on to rain mistily. He put on a

slicker and continued on his way. At Alkali Springs, the station tender told him the stage was less than half an hour ahead of him.

The trail ran through alkali flats, then began to rise. It dipped up and down, gradually climbing. The character of the soil was changing to a reddish disintegrated sandstone. At the top of one of these rises, Tom found a whitened buffalo skull perched on two rocks in the middle of the trail. For hundreds of miles, thousands of skulls, skeletons, and old bones had been bleaching in the sunlight along the trail. But this one had evidently been placed there as a sign.

Tom swung from the saddle and picked up the skull. On the forehead had been scratched a message.

Look out for trubel. I seen the Wilson gang camped near Twin Buttes last nite.

The note was not signed, but Tom had no doubt some honest man had left it as a warning. The ground beneath the skull was wet. Evidently the bleached head had been put here since the rain started, and probably after the stage had passed.

What was Wilson doing here? Had he heard where Tom had gone and followed him? Not likely. It would not be worth his while. A more plausible guess was that he and his outfit were lying in wait to rob either an eastbound or a westbound stage. Those who travelled to the goldfields in this way nearly all carried money with them. They were the aristocrats of the emigrants. On the other hand, the coaches going back to civilization often conveyed shipments of gold dust amounting to a good many thousand dollars in value.

Theoretically, this was none of Tom's business. He had not been employed by the company as a shotgun messenger. But he took his duties seriously. He worked for Russell, Majors & Waddell. Their interests were his. Moreover, in this case, personal feeling quickened his concern. Two women who had befriended him were on the stage ahead. If it were attacked, and if any defence were offered they would be endangered.

He gave his horse the spur. Perhaps he might reach the stage in time to give Baldy warning.

Fast though he rode, his thoughts travelled faster. His errand was a dangerous one. The country through which he passed was covered with brush. At any moment, as he swung around a bend in the road or topped a rise, he might run into the outlaws. Tom did not harbour any illusions as to what would take place in that case. He would be shot down instantly.

But it did not occur to him to avoid the risk by returning to Alkali Springs for help. That would be a loss of valuable time, and he knew that, if there were going to be an attack on the coach it would be soon. In front of him, not far distant now, was the Concord stage lumbering toward Julesburg. His job was to get to it before Wilson and his outlaws did.

The galloping horse laboured up a stiff rise to the divide. Tom's eyes swept the road ahead and picked up the stage. It was in a cut, just beyond a draw where cottonwoods grew. One glance was enough. He had come too late. The stage had been robbed, and within the past five minutes. A group of riders were vanishing in the cottonwoods. One armed man remained. He was on horseback. With his weapon he covered a huddled bunch of passengers standing against the wall of the cut, their hands in the air. Even as Tom looked, the outlaw turned and rode after his companions.

Tom galloped forward. A panic of fear began to sweep through him. He was looking for the two women passengers—and he could not see them.

CHAPTER X

“ALL OF US PLUMB PEACEABLE”

Through fragrant chaparral thickets bursting into bloom, the wagon trail ran. It broke away from following the stream to circle in and out among cow-backed hills.

Virginia and her aunt rode on top of the stage. It was an Abbott-Downing coach, named from its place of manufacture at Concord, New Hampshire. The vehicle was a product of its time, built to suit the conditions it must meet. The wheels were heavy and wide-tired, and the body was slung on stout leather braces to give resilience. Leather curtains protected the inside passengers from wind and rain. At the rear was the boot. Here the baggage was carried, not more than twenty-five pounds to a passenger. Sometimes the mail sacks were also stowed here. To cross the plains even by stage was a trying trip. Virginia had swallowed much dust, had been baked by many suns, and beaten by divers winds. But by some miracle of feminine dexterity she managed to appear fresh and clean. Her cheeks bloomed with health, yet her complexion was creamlike in its delicacy. Both she and her aunt were good travelers, enduring smilingly discomfort and even hardship.

Indeed, the great desert captivated her imagination. She loved the golden dawn, the fiery sunset. There were different colour tones for every hour of the day, but they were always fitting ones. After the sun had plunged down, a great ball of fire, beyond the western horizon, came the darkness of night, until moonlight drenched the landscape with magic.

Yet she was glad too to be nearing the end of their journey. Soon they would be at Julesburg, and after Julesburg—the Cherry Creek settlements.

“Country greenin’ up some,” Baldy said by way of making conversation. “Gidap there, you Clay—this ain’t no hearse.”

“Yes, it’s lovely,” Mrs. Gallup said. “The rains have laid the dust some.”

The coach had reached the summit of a hill. Below them was a long gentle slope ending in a cutbank. Baldy, with desire to impress the lady by his side, swung the long whip lash expertly so that it snapped close to the ear of the off leader. The horses broke to a gallop, and the body of the Concord swayed on the leather braces. As the stage plunged down, it lurched wildly.

For a quarter of a mile Baldy held the horses to racing pace, then drew them to a jog trot as they neared the cutbank.

A shot rang out. Masked men appeared, one from above the road on the cutbank, a second from a draw in the cottonwoods, still a third from the brush beyond the dugway.

“Pull ’em up, Baldy,” a hoarse voice ordered.

What Baldy’s intentions may have been did not develop. He was leaning forward, either to urge the horses on or draw back on the reins. Another explosion sounded. The driver slumped down in his seat, drawing in the reins spasmodically as he did so. A fourth outlaw ran out from the chaparral and seized the bridle of the nearest lead animal. It reared, eyes frenzied with fear. The other horses also were plunging wildly. The bandit released his hold and jumped back to escape being trodden down.

Simultaneously, another shot boomed out. The near wheeler dropped in its tracks. The stage bumped forward a dozen yards and stopped, the wheels blocked by the body of the dead horse.

To the startled passengers, it seemed that rifles pointed at them from all directions.

“Everybody out,” shouted a big man roughly, with an oath. “No shenanigan, or we’ll pump

you-all full of lead.”

Baldy, hit in the shoulder, spoke for his charges.

“Ladies on board, boys. No need to get on the prod. All of us plumb peaceable.”

“You better be,” the leader snarled. “Tumble down.”

Yet, a moment later, when Mary Gallup started to descend, he came forward with a raffish bow and lifted her to the ground from the bottom step. He performed the same service for her niece.

“Don’t be afraid, ladies. Wouldn’t harm you for the world,” he assured them. “You’re sure enough safe with us. Eh, boys?” He leered at them with what was meant to be a smile of gallantry.

Another of the outlaws attended strictly to business. Mary noticed that the hair beneath his slouch hat was mustard-colour.

“Line up against this bank,” he directed curtly. “Step along, now. We ain’t got all day. Keep yore hands up. You, Fatty, move along.”

Fatty, alias Price, whimpered his alarm. “Don’t shoot me, gents. I got a wife an’ children in St. Louis. For God’s sake, don’t!” His soft flesh shook like a jelly as he moved forward.

A road agent stepped in front of the passengers and relieved them of their valuables, dropping pocket-books, loose change, and watches into a sack he carried. Along with these went also the derringers, revolvers, and bowie knives they had.

When the collector shoved his weapon into the fat stomach of Price and jocosely suggested sending him to Kingdom Come, the victim of the pleasantry almost collapsed.

“Don’t! Don’t!” he begged. “I—I ain’t prepared. I haven’t—lived right.”

He dropped in ludicrous terror to his knees.

One of the road agents devoted himself to the mail, ripping open all the letters that looked as though they might contain money. Most of the passengers had with them a considerable sum in cash. On the whole, the amount taken just about paid for the investment, as one of the robbers humorously remarked.

The two women were not asked to surrender their valuables.

The big ruffian who had taken them into his especial care assured them that he would not for an instant think of robbing them.

“Lovely ladies like you-all are as safe as if you was in God’s pocket,” he told them with a smirk. “Fact is, I’m kinda consarned about leaving you here with this busted outfit. I aim to take you along with us an’ see you’re took care of right. Give you a personal escort to Julesburg—or whatever’s the best place for you to go. Tha’s the kind of a man I am.”

“Oh, no! We won’t trouble you. Some wagons will come along and pick us up,” Mrs. Gallup said quickly.

“No trouble a-tall. It’s always been my aim to please the ladies, an’ I make my brags that a right smart lot of them have been partial to me.”

“But we want to stay here, with the coach. We don’t want to take you out of your way.”

“Pleased to escort you. Maybe you don’t know who I am. Me, I’m Mose Wilson himself.” He spoke as though he were announcing himself as President Buchanan.

“All ready,” sang out one of the bandits.

“Cut loose two of the stage horses,” Mose ordered. “I’m gonna ride a ways with these ladies. Can’t leave ’em stranded here.”

One of the outlaws protested, but Wilson overruled him. He rode down too the pleadings of the women themselves.

"It ain't gonna harm you a mite to have me look out for you till you reach a stage station," he told them. "Anyhow, I'm some sot, an' I aim to have my way."

Wounded though he was, Baldy spoke out his thought. "Fellow, if you hurt a hair of these ladies' heads, we'll hunt you down like a wolf. If you know what's good for you, you'll leave 'em right here with me."

The big masked man strode toward him and thrust a weapon against his breast.

"Claim you've got anything to say?" he asked savagely.

Baldy knew that never in a gusty lifetime had he been closer to death than he was at that moment, but the essential manhood in him refused to be intimidated. He felt that if he backtracked now he would be forever shamed. Steadily, he looked the big road agent in the eyes.

"I've said my piece, fellow, an' it goes as it lays. These are nice ladies, an' if you do them any meanness, you'll sure be sorry for it before a week's up. You won't git any mercy when you're cornered."

For a moment the masked face, as much of it as was visible, showed contorted with passion.

Mary Gallup stepped forward. "Don't hurt him," she cried.

After what seemed a long minute of doubt, the outlaw lowered his six-shooter with a snarl of rage. It was possible for him to go too far. He knew that. The frontier was none too particular in the matter of killings. A man settled his personal difficulties from the holster. But Baldy was wounded, defenceless, and popular, a combination not to be trifled with. Better let the man go, especially since it was no advantage to kill him. There were too many witnesses here, anyhow.

"It don't matter what an old donker like you thinks," Wilson growled. Then, turning to one of his companions, "Fix up a kinda saddle on them horses outa the mail sacks. I'll ride one, an' you take another, Dave. We'll give our mounts to the ladies."

"We better leave the ladies here, Mose, don't you reckon?" the other man objected in a low voice.

The leader turned on him angrily. "Fellow, it's my say-so. They ain't going with you but with me. Meet you at the old hang-out in a coupla days. Soon as we've gone, you fellows light out."

One of the passengers, a big Missourian, had a word to say and said it.

"You cain't take these ladies with you, Mister, an' you know it. Wouldn't be right. I ain't aimin' to rile you, but——"

Wilson, furious, flung a wild shot toward the man. He did not intend to kill him, but he was quite willing to wound. The bullet missed the Missourian by a hair's breadth and dug into the cutband behind him.

Five minutes later, Wilson, riding between the two women, disappeared into the chaparral.

Virginia's breath was coming in ragged sobs. This man terrified her, not so much because he was a ruffian and a killer as because of the approving regard he turned upon her.

Her aunt spoke to the girl, evenly and calmly. "Don't be afraid, dear. He dare not harm you. If he did, he'd be dragged by the neck to the nearest trees as soon as he's caught."

Though she said it confidently, no assurance made her heart easy. The fellow was bad. She knew that. How reckless he was, she could not be certain.

Their captor snarled at the older woman. "Don't you be too sure about that. I can be druv jest so far. 'F I was you, I'd talk mighty pretty. Me, I'm Mose Wilson."

CHAPTER XI

TOM'S LUCK STANDS UP

As Tom galloped forward, he took in the details of the scene. Baldy lay propped against one of the wheels of the coach, his feet wide apart, his hands on the ground supporting him. The fat man, Price, had sat down, back against the cutbank. His face was a sickly green. The big Missourian was "cussing" fervently. Another of the passengers bemoaned his losses; while a fourth exulted because most of his wealth, sewed inside the coat lining, had escaped the observation of the road agents.

"Where are the ladies?" Tom asked Baldy, coming straight to what was in his mind.

"Mose he took 'em with him."

"Which way?"

"He headed toward the buttes thataway."

"How many men with him?"

"Nary a one. I don' know what his game is. He claimed he was takin' the ladies to Julesburg. Course we kicked. But all the good it did us."

"You hurt bad, Baldy?"

"Shoulder. Bleedin' some. Reckon I'm lucky at that. You better git help, Slim, an' light out after Mose an' the ladies. They collected our guns, or some of the boys would trail after you afoot. Not that that would do any good either. I feel mighty triflin'. You'll have to work this out among yoreselves."

Price lifted his voice. "Lordy, Lordy, why did I ever leave St. Louis?" he moaned.

"You shot too?" asked Tom.

Baldy looked at the stout man in disgust. "Hell, no! Jes' gun shy. No sand in his craw." The stage driver waxed feebly indignant. "An' him makin' up to the ladies, claimin' he was single, whilst he had a wife an' steen children in St. Louis."

Tom cut into these nonessentials. "I'm not waitin' for help, Baldy. I'll take the trail after Wilson while it's hot. Get word to the next station soon as you can."

He rode into the brush and struck a rapid gait, paying no attention to the trail. A few hundred yards in front of him was a sand waste, and the tracks could be picked up there probably with no difficulty. Wilson could not have more than ten minutes start. If he should be lucky, he would catch sight of the three riders presently, in which case there would be no need to track them.

In the sand stretch, it was impossible to miss the tracks. He could see that the outlaw was covering ground at a jog trot. The man had no reason to fear immediate pursuit. No doubt he expected to reach water after a time and so frustrate any posse which might follow.

Tom rode at a gallop straight toward a ridge that ran parallel to the Overland Trail. From the summit, his eyes swept the valley ahead. Wilson and his captives were mounting a slope less than half a mile from him.

The young man had no plan of campaign other than to fight it out with the bandit and rescue the women. Wilson was evidently heading for one of his hang-outs in the hills. It was, of course, a piece of sheer folly for him to take with him these captives, but it was the sort of idiocy of which Tom knew the man capable. The fellow was incredibly vain. He believed himself irresistible with women. Absurd though it seemed, his idea might be that, given a little time, they would come under the spell of his charm.

There was a fringe of thicker brush to the right, and Tom followed this. He wanted to remain unobserved as long as possible. As he emerged from this into the open he saw Wilson turn and look back. He was not sure, but he believed the fellow had caught sight of him. At any rate, he stood there between the two women silhouetted against the skyline, a big figure astride a roan horse that looked familiar.

The outlaw took his time. Why hurry when his victim was flying up the slope to destruction as fast as he could drive his horse? Even while he slowly raised the rifle to take aim, Wilson marvelled at the foolhardiness of this man. Riding at that pace, he could not fire with any hope of success. The road agent, a dead shot, could pick him off to a certainty. He took a long, steady aim.

A quirt sang through the air. The cruel sting of it fell like a lash of fire across the rump of the roan. Instantly the animal plunged forward with a wild leap. A bullet was flung skyward. With an oath, Wilson tried to rein in his mount. Curbed, the roan reared high, landed on all four feet, humped its back in another upward bound, and struck hard on stiff legs. Wilson sagged on its back, clutching at the mane to save himself. He had no saddle, no stirrups to aid in giving equipoise. Before he could get set, the affrighted horse went twisting sideways into the air. The rider shot like a rocket from its back. He lay among the rocks, bruised, the breath driven from his body. Forty feet from him was the rifle, where it had fallen. The roan was flying along the shoulder of the hill to escape its fears.

Already the two women were riding straight for Tom. He wheeled behind them and followed at a gallop down the slope. Wilson still had his rifle. He might at any moment send a bullet ping-pong down after them. Not till they were far out of range did the three slacken pace.

“You saved my life, one of you,” Tom said at last.

“That was auntie,” the girl cried. “He can’t—get us now, can he?”

“No chance. He’s lost his horse. Unless we run into some of the rest of the gang, we’re all right.”

“They went another way,” Mrs. Gallup said.

“Then we’ll head for the road, toward Julesburg.”

For a few minutes, they rode without further speech. Virginia, overstrung emotionally, wept quietly. Her aunt began to talk, cheerfully, to woo the girl from her distress.

“Young man, you saved us from the attentions of that ruffian. Whatever he wanted with us, I’m glad to be quit of him. We thank you, both of us.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Tom replied, embarrassed. “I reckon you saved yore own selves, anyhow. It was right foolish of me to come bustin’ up the hill thataway.”

“You’re certainly right. I don’t know how many close calls you’ve had, but you never had a nearer shave than just now. But your pluck saved us. We won’t forget it, will we, Virginia?”

“N-never,” the girl sobbed.

Mary Gallup mentioned their names and asked for his.

“Why, you know it, ma’am, though naturally you don’t recognize me. I’m Tom Collins, an’ ten years ago, in St. Joe, you-all were right good to me. I sure have never forgot it.”

“And you knew us at once?”

“Yes, ma’am, I knew you soon as I saw you at the station last night. I didn’t know Miss—Miss Virginia.”

“You knew us—and didn’t come up and tell us,” Mrs. Gallup reproached.

“I didn’t rightly know whether you’d want to meet me again, me being nobody in particular.”

“What do you mean, nobody in particular? You’re our friend Tom Collins, aren’t you?” she asked indignantly.

“Yes, ma’am, if you say so. But I’m only an extra man with the company. Just grew up any which way. No education or manners.”

Virginia spoke demurely. Apparently, she had recovered from her touch of hysteria. “Good enough to save us from that villain, Mr. Collins, but not good enough for us to know?”

“I didn’t know how you’d feel,” he apologized happily.

“You’re not very complimentary to us, Tom,” Mrs. Gallup charged. “Do your friends usually turn their backs on you?”

“No, ma’am. I didn’t want to presume.” Then, to Virginia, gently: “You don’t need to keep lookin’ back, miss. No way he can catch up with us. I don’t reckon the rest of his gang would molest you, anyhow.”

An hour later, they reached the great road along which flowed the life that was to build an empire in the West. Before they had followed it a mile, they heard the trampling of many feet and the jingle of bridles. Around the bend rode to meet them a company of United States cavalry.

The officer in charge halted his command. He was a good-looking wasp-waisted lieutenant from West Point. The bow he gave the ladies had served him well at many a dance. Tom observed that, at sight of Virginia, his eyes brightened.

He told Mrs. Gallup that he was Lieutenant Manners, and very much at the service of her party.

“I never was so glad to meet an army officer in my life,” Mrs. Gallup told him promptly. “We’ve just had a terrible experience with a gang of road agents. If it hadn’t been for this young man, we would still be captives of one of them.”

The officer heard the story as they rode back toward the stage. More than once his eyes rested approvingly upon Virginia’s slender figure. For nearly a year, he had been on the frontier, and it had been long since he had seen two women as attractive as these. Outside of the wives of squaw men, he had looked upon just three women in the last six months. One had been fat and homely, one fifty-seven. The third was a bride. Manners hoped that, if these two were married, their husbands were a thousand miles away. He was a very decent chap, but he hungered for smiles a little more than polite. He longed to make love to a pretty girl on a shady porch in the dark of the moon. He panted for romance, instead of dust, desert, alkali, and salt pork.

“It’s like good news from home to hear your name,” he told the girl gallantly, with the soft drawl of the Southland. “Virginia is my native state, and since I can’t go home, it’s mighty nice to see so fair a colour bearer wear the flag of it.”

Virginia blushed. She was not used to compliments like this.

They reached the stage and at once grew busy. With most of his command, Manners departed to comb the hills for the outlaws. Mary Gallup was the pioneer woman, intent on service. From the boot of the coach, she took her carpetbag, found in it a white petticoat, and tore strips from the garment. Tom brought water in a bucket, and she bathed and bound Baldy’s wound.

Price attempted to insinuate himself once more into the position of voluntary guardian of the ladies. The big Missourian stopped that at once. The frontier, which tries the soul of men, passes stern verdict on those who flinch.

“You get busy an’ help haul that dead horse into the brush,” he ordered. “No need for you

to get brash now after the way you acted a while ago.”

Mr. Price attempted to be dignified. “I was sick,” he explained. “Something I ate, I reckon.”

“Work will be good for you, then. Take that hind leg an’ pull.”

The stout man did so. Sweat poured from his face. The “boiled” shirt became limp and wet, the broadcloth trousers stained with clay. He puffed like a porpoise, and the untrained muscles went dead in his arms.

“This is an outrage,” he protested to Tom, mopping his face. “The company employees should do this. I’ll demand a refund of my fare.”

Baldy agreed. “I sure would. You need yore money for yore wife an’ them children you was tellin’ Mose Wilson about.”

Tom laughed. The pomposity of Mr. Price was a punctured bladder.

CHAPTER XII

LIEUTENANT RANDOLPH MANNERS
IS SHOCKED

Tom took the stage in to Julesburg. Baldy Brown was a passenger, and a very restless one. The fever had mounted in his blood during the long trip, and a good deal of the time he was out of his head.

The early morning sunlight streamed across the gray sage when Tom drew up the tired horses in front of the station at Julesburg. All night the coach had swayed and rocked along the road, followed by a detachment of troopers. Few of the passengers had been able to obtain any sleep. The seats were so crowded that if one snatched a few winks of slumber he was sure to be roused by the elbow or the shoulder of the next-door neighbour.

Tired and weary were those who tumbled out of the Concord. One at least was in much worse case. Mary walked beside the wounded man and supported him. Lieutenant Manners was on the other side of him.

"Some gaunted outfit, looks like," Massie commented to Tom. "How come you to be drivin'?" What's wrong with Baldy?"

"Stage hold-up. Baldy got shot."

"Hmp! The Wilson gang, eh?"

"I reckon, but we ain't right sure. They were masked. One of 'em claimed he was Mose, but that might have been done on purpose to shift suspicion."

Baldy swayed an uncertain course toward the house. For some time, his unbalanced fancy had moved him to song. In a quavering, high voice, he now attempted a snatch of "Natchez under the Hill."

"Yes, that's fine," Mary told him. "Now, I wouldn't sing any more just now. Kinda let down a little bit."

"You won't leave me, then?" he begged. "I ain't got ary wife to look after me here, ma'am. What wives I got, if any, are back in the States."

"I'll see you're looked after," she promised.

"The robbers get much?" Massie asked Tom.

Young Collins told the story from beginning to end in five short sentences. He made nothing of the danger he had been in, nor did Massie ask him to expand the tale. It was taken for granted that plainsmen faced peril without comment.

"Yore luck sure stood up fine."

"Yep." Tom yawned. He tried to remember how long it had been since he had slept. "Reckon I'll drift in for some ham an' eggs, then hit the hay."

He was dead on his feet for sleep. His eyes closed the instant he fell into the bunk.

It was late in the afternoon before he awakened. After washing and dressing, he went to the station for food. At a little distance, he saw Mrs. Gallup and Virginia with Lieutenant Manners. They bloomed like peonies. Sleep and fresh clothing had done wonders for them.

Tom did not join them. As he saw it, his little hour of sunshine was past. Why should it not be? He was only a dusty, sun-burned bull whacker, an extra man with a freight outfit. There was no man in the goldfields who would not gladly know these dainty, charming women. They had a right to look for the best. Yet it was with pardonable envy that Tom observed the gay lieutenant making himself agreeable to them. Manners was by inheritance and training a gentleman. He knew how to make small talk, how to entertain ladies. All Tom could do was to

twist his old hat in his hands and wish he knew what to talk about.

It had been different, of course, during the emergency. He had known what to say then, because circumstances had forced his hand. That had been no time for talk, except for curt commands and a few words of reassurance. Very likely they had thought him bossy. Well, it did not matter what they thought. He had no intention of presuming on the fact that Virginia had turned to him when she was afraid, or on his old friendship for them, to push in where it would be an embarrassment for them. So far as these ladies were concerned, he was out of luck.

Tom passed into the station and ate a hearty dinner of antelope steak, corn bread, and coffee. One or two of the passengers fell into talk with him, after which he called on Baldy.

The stage driver was already on the mend. His fever had gone down and he was eating light food.

“Massie dug the bullet out. I’ll be back on the job in a day or two. What’s one li’l bullet among one husky guy like me?”

Through the window, Tom could see Manners and the ladies. It was clear they were having a good time. The young lieutenant was a likable youth, boyish and pink cheeked, and the assurance of superior caste, his by inheritance and training, were neutralized by the warmth of his smile and a certain lightfooted eagerness of manner not wholly to be restrained by the obligations of his position. With these ladies, he put his best foot forward.

He walked about the little village with them. The station had been built at the upper crossing of the South Platte opposite the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek. Logs for the houses had been drifted a hundred miles down the river, and of these the stores, the stables, the bunkhouses, the outhouses, and the station itself had been built. The buildings were flat-topped, roofed by poles covered with sagebrush, over which had been stretched gunny sacks. A six-inch layer of dirt held these in place and kept out most of the water when it rained.

Not counting the station buildings, there were, perhaps, eight or ten other shacks in the place. These were occupied by squaw men who trapped, hunted, or freighted. The half-breed children came out shyly to look at the strange phenomenon of white women, but when Mary and Virginia attempted to talk with them they broke and fled helter-skelter.

Perhaps because they wanted to escape from the memory of the horrors they had faced, the young women had dressed themselves with more care than usual. They wore chintz gowns, the sleeves wide at bottom, showing undersleeves to match the lace chemisettes. The skirts had long, full folds, lying all close together above and expanding with a gentle swaying motion as the young women moved. Mary wore a cashmere shawl, drawn above one shoulder and under the other to break the uniformity. Her niece carried a deep cape reaching almost to the knees.

The young lieutenant walking beside them was captivated by their charm, their good looks, their style. It was so women dressed in God’s Country. Their clothes might have come straight from *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. It was warm, and as Virginia walked, she carried her hat, swinging it by the ribbons. To Randolph Manners, she seemed to move as though feather-footed, and the rhythm of her progress down the dusty road held a sweet significance. All the glory of the sun was reflected in her bronze hair, which was arranged in a coiffure of ringlets, as was fitting for a young girl of the period.

“So you’re going alone to the goldfields to make your fortunes,” the West Pointer said, recurring to the theme for the third time. It was a subject he could not let alone. The fact both shocked and fascinated him. Their adventure was unwomanly, but it was tremendously exciting. At this time, the feminist had not been discovered. Ladies did not go into the business world, except in rare cases as school-teachers.

“Yes,” Mrs. Gallup said, and smiled at him. She knew how the thought of it outraged his sense of the proper thing.

Her smile was charming. She was thirty-two, in the full flowerage of her best years. Life flowed deeply in her. It was impossible to think of her as unwomanly, for she breathed the very aura of sex. But he had been brought up in the romantic school of the period, especially strong in the South, which held that woman was somehow a superior creature, fine and fragile, not to be soiled by contact with the coarse realities of life. He thought of his mother and his sisters, and he knew that they would consider these women *déclassé*. Yet he could not accept such a judgment. He wanted to tell these two sweet creatures that they were making a mistake, that they could not mix in the world of men without losing the bloom of their God-given inheritance. He wanted to convince Mrs. Gallup that, on account of her niece, she ought not to do this scandalous thing.

Haltingly, for fear of giving offense, he skirted the dangerous theme. She could not know what she was doing. It was impossible for her to realize, without actual contact, the condition of society in the gold diggings.

She listened understandingly. Pretty clearly she guessed his background and the extent to which it had impregnated his thinking. For herself, she had been brought up in a different school. She had been born and bred in that pioneer life where women share the hardships with their men. Therefore, she did not combat his arguments. Instead, she sketched the story of their lives. It seemed good to her that this young man should know exactly their social status. For it was already plain he had eyes only for Virginia, that her loveliness had touched his fancy. Mary did not intend to let her chick be made unhappy if she could prevent it.

She told of her grandfather, who had gone to the Northwest with Lewis and Clark in the early years of the century, of his life as a trapper, of his return, his marriage, and his westward trek to Illinois. She spoke of her father and her own early life, of its hardships, its privations, and its self-reliance.

“We made our own furniture, after we had built our own log cabin out of the forest logs chinked with mud. Mother spun our clothes. Father made our shoes. The only hat I had was a coonskin cap. Except in winter, we children went barefoot. We walked two miles over a muddy corduroy road to a schoolhouse that had at first oiled paper for windows. When I married, we moved on to the frontier, my husband and I, to St. Joe on the river. We have no slaves. We did everything for ourselves. He caught a fever and died. I was left alone at twenty-one. My brother died when Virginia was almost a baby. Since then, we’ve managed somehow. She had had good schooling in St. Louis. But we come of pioneer blood. We are doing nothing my people would not expect of me if they were alive to-day.”

Virginia was a little uncomfortable. She liked this boyish officer, and he was manifestly different from most of the men she had known. He had distinction, and he wore his uniform as though it were the insignia of his own gallantry. Was it necessary for her aunt to stress so much the difference between him and them? After all she had been to Miss Pinney’s finishing school and was graduated from it. Virginia felt shy with him, and from that shyness plucked an emotion that deepened the apple-blossom tint in her cheeks to that of a Killarney rose.

Disarmed but not convinced, Manners still was disturbed.

“If you only had a brother with you, someone to stand between you and——”

“—and the attentions of so many men who get worried because we are lone women,” Mrs. Gallup finished for him with a smile. “Really, Lieutenant, Virginia will be protected by every man in the settlement. No harm can come to her from lack of consideration.”

“Still, if that outlaw who took you away yesterday——”

“Would it have been different if we had had a brother along?”

“I reckon not,” he admitted. “Just the same, I don’t like it. That’s the way I feel, Mrs. Gallup.”

Virginia’s soft eyes, for one fleeting fraction of a second, thanked him for his concern for them.

In his heart, always susceptible to the charms of attractive women, a burst of song lifted. Her hair, that seemed just now a tawny gold, was so thick and heavy. Her eyes were so quick with life, and her skin was as tenderly colourful as a rose leaf. She looked so imperishably young, and she carried her youth like a banner.

“This is no country for women,” he said. “It’s too rough and hard, even when they have relatives to protect them.”

“The only answer to that is that we are here, and have no relatives, and must make the best of it,” Mary Gallup replied.

A girl of about Virginia’s age was coming up the road toward them. She was an Indian, and she wore moccasins and furs. She walked in the heavy, flatfooted fashion of her race. No hat covered the shining black hair, which was parted in the middle, braided, and reached to her waist. The girl was soft-eyed and very comely.

After she had passed, Virginia asked the officer who she was.

“I don’t know her native name. It is translated Deer Eyes. She is a daughter of Spit-in-the-Fire, one of our scouts. Some man with a freight outfit is to marry her, I’m told. He has outbid some other ruffian. Her father wants six ponies for her.”

“Is he going to sell her, that pretty thing?” asked Virginia, scandalized.

Manners shrugged his shoulders. “It’s their custom. She probably won’t mind. They think it is an honour to be the wife of a squaw man.”

“Do many white men marry Indians?” asked Mrs. Gallup.

“The old-timers do, the hunters and trappers and scouts, and some of the more shiftless ones that drift in. This country has plenty of no-account men. You’ll find that out soon enough.”

There came to them the sound of a horn.

“The supper call,” Manners explained. “We’d better get back to the station.”

CHAPTER XIII

TOM ANSWERS A QUESTION

Virginia wondered a little that Tom Collins did not come to pay his respects to her and her aunt. He had brought them in worn out and haggard from lack of sleep. It would be only common courtesy for him to ask if they had quite recovered.

But she had not much time to think of Tom. This young lieutenant who had dropped from heaven into her rather arid life took most of her attention and her thoughts. There was something thrilling about him. He was the knight in shining armour who had ridden up to rescue her from danger. No doubt this last was rather unfair to Tom, but that young man could not by any stretch of imagination be conceived of as a knight in shining armour. He was as steady and reliable as old dog Tray, but he did not exactly fit into a picture of romance.

After dinner, Virginia excused herself to go to her room for a handkerchief. She sat down by the window for a minute to look out into the lovely night and dream. A fine full moon rode high in the heavens, and countless stars looked down. In the distance, she could see the gleam of silver on the sage.

Two men came around the corner of the house. They stopped, while one of them stuffed his pipe bowl with tobacco.

One asked the other a question. "Who is this Slim Collins that went after Mose an' brought the women back?"

"Oh, a young sprout workin' for the company. He's the fellow that has bought Deer Eyes from Spit-in-the-Fire for a squaw."

"Hmp! Cain't blame him. A fellow sure gits lonesome out in this neck of the woods. Got sand in his craw, looks like."

"Yep. Rode hell-a-mile straight for Mose, if it was Mose. Tha's what I hear."

The men passed on, leaving Virginia alone with her thoughts.

The thing she had heard shocked her. It produced in her a feeling of almost physical uncleanness, as though she had been dragged in the mire. Tom Collins a squaw man, a trafficker in a young girl's virtue, one of those ne'er-do-wells who are willing to sink to the level of a lower race! Lieutenant Manners had referred to men of his stamp as shiftless and no-account, and she felt that the description was not harsh enough. Such men must be vile, degenerate. She pushed the thought of them from her.

But in swift reaction her mind repudiated the charge. Tom could not be one of these. Before her eyes there rose his clean brown face in refutation. He was forceful and valiant. He had been the friend of her father as well as of herself. She had been ready, even eager, to renew that relationship. Surely, he was not one to go into a left-hand marriage of this sort, the degrading purchase of a woman whom he would discard later when it became convenient. She could not believe it. She would have her aunt tell him what story was afloat so that he might have a chance to stamp it out.

In the darkness, she blushed at having held for an instant such a thought of him. She blamed herself for disloyalty. The candid look in his fine gray-blue eyes was a certificate of cleanness. It was unthinkable.

Later, that evening, after they were alone in their room together, Virginia told her aunt what she had heard.

Mary Gallup did not instantly dismiss the idea as preposterous. She had had too much

experience in the world. Men did strange things when they were swept away by passion or desire. Moreover, she had heard more than once the saying that there was no God west of the Missouri. Out here in the wilds, the characters of men were searched by the opportunities for evil. They were far away from all the restraining influences of home and family. Nobody would hold them to account for what they did. They deteriorated, hundreds of them, drowning their consciences in the dissipations of frontier life. Tom might be one of these. The marks of it were not written on his face as yet. But he was young. It took time for sin to stamp its effects on the human countenance.

And, after all, it was not a crime, in some circumstances it might not even be wrong, for a white man to marry an Indian girl. If he were actually wed to her, was it not a question of good taste rather than of morals? One who held himself in the proper respect could not do it, for such a marriage implied living in squalor and dirt. It had been ten years since she had known Tom, and then he had been only a little boy. Perhaps he had taken the colour of his mind from those who had let go their hold on the finer things of life.

"I'll find out if it's true, Jinnie," said Mary Gallup. "Very likely it isn't."

"Oh, I do hope it isn't," Virginia broke out. Then, loyally. "And I know it can't be."

Her aunt smiled at her, a little mockingly, a little wistfully. Virginia was the sort of person who is bound to get hurt because, in spirit, she went out so eagerly to meet life. She was ardent. When she gave her liking and her faith, she did not hold reserves.

Mary went to Lieutenant Manners for information. That young man was embarrassed. He was very careful what he talked about to ladies, and he saw now that it would have been better not to have mentioned squaw men.

"I know only what I have heard, Mrs. Gallup," he said a little stiffly. "If you wish, I will verify my information."

"If you would, please." Mary's pleasant smile was apt to get her what she wanted. "This young man used to play with Virginia when she was a very little girl. If he is undesirable, I don't want them to renew their friendship."

"I can understand that. I'll find out for sure," he promised.

The report of the lieutenant, when he made it an hour later, was not favourable to young Collins.

"There's a fellow out here called Mose Wilson, a very bad lot," he explained. "You've heard of him, perhaps met him. This man decided he wanted the girl Deer Eyes. But he is a bully and wouldn't pay what her father asked. His idea was that the scout would have to take his terms, because if he didn't, probably he would lose the girl and get nothing for her. So this Wilson served notice he would pay three ponies for her, no more. Then he rode away on some of his nefarious affairs. Young Collins had taken a fancy to the girl, so he nips in and offers six ponies for the girl. Spit-in-the-Fire accepts the offer, and that's how the matter stands. But Wilson is known as a killer. So it is expected he will make trouble."

Mary did not accept this report as final. She was not mealy-mouthed, and she did not want to believe evil of Tom Collins if she could help it. She meant to go direct to him to hear his own version of the story.

To her inquiries, the station agent said that he had seen young Collins last at the men's bunkhouse. "But he's a right limber young fellow, mighty active on his feet, an' he's liable to be fur, fur away from there by now. Pleased to hunt him up for you, ma'am."

"Think I'll just stroll out and see if I can find him, but thank you, just the same," she said.

Tom was in front of the bunkhouse sewing a patch on a buckskin shirt. At sight of Mrs.

Gallup, he blushed and tried to hide the shirt under a gunny sack.

She laughed. "I'll mend it for you, if you want to bring it to the house."

The young man was a little shocked. He felt he had been caught in an indelicate situation. Those were prudish times, and he knew nothing about women. "No, ma'am, thank you. It's—it's done."

"Then come and take a walk with me. I want to talk."

He rose, a little shyly.

"Unless you are too busy," she added.

"No, ma'am. Doing nothing at all. Jus' listenin' to the grass grow, as you might say."

They walked together, the awkward, gangling boy and the serene, sweet-faced woman. She talked and he listened, except for monosyllabic replies. Her talk ran on old times. It was friendly and familiar, designed to relieve him of his shyness. She reminded him of the little incidents of that winter and spring of '49-'50. She wanted to know if he remembered her whips and syllabubs.

At which speech flowed out of him to the extent of two sentences. For him, it was eloquence.

"I sure do, ma'am. Never did eat such puddings."

"When you and little Jinnie got at one, there wasn't much left, usually. You tried to be polite and not eat much, but I think boys are hollow to their toes."

"Yes, ma'am," he assented.

"And now you are a young man, and she is almost ready to be a woman. Two-three years now, or less, and I'll lose my little girl. . . . What about *you*, Tom?" She looked directly at him. "Are you thinking of getting married?"

He flushed, embarrassed. "No, ma'am. No. I'm nothing but extra hand with a bull train. An', anyhow, I never see any women folks."

Mary answered quietly. "You see Deer Eyes, I am told."

The look he flashed at her showed consternation. He had nothing to say. She waited for him to speak, then cornered him with a question.

"Don't you?"

"Why, I—I——"

His faltering reply died away.

Ruthlessly she pushed on. "There's a story that you have bought her from her father for six ponies."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his throat. He stood convicted—convicted, at least, of dumbness. His brain was a blank. He did not know what to say, how to explain the tangle into which his simplicity had drawn him.

Again she waited for him to speak, inexorable as a judge with a criminal before him. And he could not speak. He did not know how to make clear his motives to her.

"Isn't it true?" she asked at last.

The perspiration was on his forehead. His reply came almost in a whisper. "Yes, ma'am."

"But not to marry her, you say."

"No, ma'am, I reckon not."

Her eyes grew chill. "Why, then?"

It was agony for him, in his shyness, to discuss such a subject with a lady. He might at any moment say something he ought not to.

"That fellow, Mose Wilson, ma'am, he's one of the biggest skunks that ever landed with

both feet in the territory. He's a road agent an' a horse thief. This li'l' girl, this Deer Eyes, why, she——"

He stuck there. After all, how could he explain it so that he would be believed? He was confronted by cold facts. Nobody but an idiot would have done the thing he had done for the fool reason that he had.

"Yes?" she said.

"Why, she—she come to me——"

"It's a little hard to explain, isn't it?" she said, and her voice had a cold edge of scorn. "You need not trouble to explain it to me, then. After all, I am a stranger and I have no business to ask. I think I'll walk back to the house. No, I won't trouble you to go with me."

Mary Gallup waited a moment, still hoping for some denial. But none came. She turned on her heel and went up the road, leaving him there.

Tom stood where she had left him, his heart heavy with despair. He had found his friends, and he had lost them again. He had been cast off as unworthy. That he was the victim of a misunderstanding, he knew, but he did not see how he could explain it. He had fumblingly tried, and he had failed.

The custom of the times was against freedom of speech between men and women. A subject such as this could not be discussed. Mary Gallup had broken through the barrier, since he was, after all, only a boy. But Tom had not been able to meet her halfway, and his shyness had been interpreted as guilt.

Next day, Tom saw them leave for Denver on the stage. Lieutenant Manners and a guard of soldiers rode beside the coach.

CHAPTER XIV

DENVER

Virginia was aquiver with excitement. She had reached the journey's end, the land of golden promise. Before her, in the rare, clear air, rose the smoke from the Cherry Creek settlements, from Auraria and Denver, the rival villages that jostled each other and fought for supremacy. The perilous seven-hundred-mile drive across the plains was accomplished. Its dangers lay behind them. Her hopes were still to be realized.

The stage swayed forward, leaving in its wake a cloud of yellow dust. It lurched across an undulating prairie of sage, cactus, and tumbleweed. To the right ran the winding river, shallow, wide, and sandy. The careening coach topped a rise and descended into Larimer Street, the road passing through a populous prairie-dog town.

It was a raw and desolate metropolis that Virginia saw. On the near side of the creek, some shacks of hewn pine logs straggled here and there in what by courtesy might be called streets. This was Denver. Across the stream was another scattered group, Auraria. As they drew closer, the girl saw that many of the houses were still roofless. Most of them had no doors, unless a draped gunny sack may be so called. Glass windows were so rare as to be notable. The chimneys were built of sticks of wood piled up like a child's corn-cob house and chinked with mud.

As the stage approached the centre of the village, Virginia noticed the colourful variety of its inhabitants. There were Mexicans in serapes, Arapaho braves strutting in front of flatfooted squaws carrying papooses; there were half-breed trappers, and white men of many kinds. Most of these last were dressed in the rough garb of miners, but others were carefully costumed in the distinctive clothes of professional gamblers or business men still clinging to the customs of "God's Country."

But if the town itself was disappointing, its setting was magnificent. Virginia had seen her first glimpse of mountains yesterday, and all day she had been rolling closer to them. It seemed to her now as though a ten-minute walk would take her into them across the folds of hills that intervened. She did not know that in this clear, untempered light a distance of twenty miles telescoped to one. Beneath the bluest of skies the sun was setting in a mountain crotch. The range stretched for hundreds of miles, white and blue against the skyline. The great peaks, Long's and Grey's, and far to the south, Pike's, rose like sentinels on guard.

Even as she looked, the sifted gold that filled the hollows of the hills began to change in tint. It was as though purple lakes had been poured into the draws and gorges. The details faded. Before the stage drew up at the Elephant Corral, the glory of the sun's exit was dying from the sky.

The streets were filled with men. It seemed to Virginia that there were hundreds of them. Men everywhere, no women. As they descended from the stage, the two ladies knew that scores of eyes were fastened on them, watching every movement they made. White women were still a curiosity at the diggings, though from now on their numbers would rapidly increase.

As they entered the Denver House, a young man in uniform came forward quickly to meet them. It was Lieutenant Manners. He had reached town earlier in the day with his troop.

Both Virginia and her aunt were glad to see him. Among all these strange faces, a familiar friendly one was a welcome sight.

"I've saved a room for you," he explained. "It's the best in the house, as far as possible

from the noise of the saloon. You'll hear shouting and music and maybe once in a while shooting, but you need not worry at all. Nobody would hurt you. Just pay no attention to it."

"I suppose the shooting is a kind of exuberant humour," Mrs. Gallup said.

There was a suggestion of reserve in the young man's answer. "Something like that," he agreed. It was unnecessary to explain that the shooting was usually the culmination of a difference of opinion. She would learn the camp customs soon enough.

The officer arranged to eat supper with them in an hour. At the expiration of that time, they appeared. A bath and fresh clothes had done much for them.

"We hadn't really expected ever to get clean again," Mary Gallup told the West Pointer. "The way that dust sifts in."

While they ate, Manners told them all about the town. The feeling between Auraria and Denver was very bitter and was the occasion of a good many cutting and shooting affairs, though this last he omitted to mention. Uncle Dick Wootten, the old scout, had the first store at Auraria, and his place was the gathering centre of that town. The new town had gone its rival one better by building the Denver House. This was considered palatial, relatively speaking. Its size was thirty-six by one hundred and thirty feet. The saloon, known as Denver Hall, occupied the whole width of the lower floor. The earth was sprinkled twice daily to keep down the dust. Gaming was universal, the lieutenant explained, and, in the course of a night, hundreds of men poured in and out of the place to stake their gold dust on the turn of a card.

During the evening, the officer walked out with them to see the place. A gorgeous moon was in the sky, and ten thousand stars. Virginia thought she had never seen such a night. There were light clouds, and sometimes the moon hid itself for a few minutes behind them. Beyond the foothills, where the sky came down to meet the earth, she could trace the faint outline of the mountains.

The streets were filled with surging men, with covered wagons camped beside the road, with ox caravans just reaching town after a forced march. Along Cherry Creek and farther down along the Platte, hundreds of camp fires gleamed among the cottonwoods. In the evening, after darkness had blotted out the garish details of the raw camp, there was something that caught the imagination in the courage of this young vitality that had overflowed from the safety of a settled civilization to conquer a new and unknown world. It thrilled her pulses, all this exuberant life expressing itself so recklessly. The pioneer blood in her answered to the call of this parched land.

On the way back to the hotel, Mary Gallup stopped and lifted her finger for silence. "I thought I heard a baby cry," she said.

A low wail came from a cabin close to them.

"That's McGaa's place," the young man said. "He's a—a—married to an Indian woman. This baby is the first child born in the town. He's quite a public character already."

"I'm going to see that baby to-morrow," Mary announced.

In this men's world, in which there seemed no place for a woman, the sound of a baby crying was reassuring. It suggested that the normal activities of life would in time catch up with even a gold rush. The sight of so many rough, bearded men, nearly all in boots and buckskin trousers and flannel shirts and garnished with revolvers, had been a little disturbing. Maybe she had been precipitate in bringing Virginia here. Maybe it was not a safe place for a young girl. But that puny little cry lifted into the night restored her confidence. Wherever babies were, women might safely stay.

Mary Gallup kept the promise she had made. She was a born mother, though she had no

babies of her own. Not only did she and Virginia see the McGaa baby, but they passed the lodges of the Arapahoes on the edge of the village and inspected the papooses while they were themselves stared at by the Indian mothers. They stopped at Uncle Dick Wootten's store to make some trifling purchase. The famous old scout was pointed out to them by Lieutenant Manners, who had appointed himself official guide to the ladies.

Wootten was a bearded patriarch in fringed buckskin. He sat in front of the store, one run-down heel of a boot hooked in the rung of a real chair. It was one of the few chairs in Auraria, and Uncle Dick liked to exhibit it casually but proudly as an evidence of his progressive spirit. He was smoking a corncob pipe, the while he talked with a very striking-looking man in the costume of the wilderness.

"That's James P. Beckwourth," the young officer whispered to Virginia.

"And who is he?"

"The most famous Indian fighter alive except Kit Carson. He is half Negro, they say, but for years he was head chief of the Crows and made that tribe feared by all its enemies. Won all its wars for it. He is fearless in battle, I've been told. Bears a charmed life. He's been wounded twenty times."

Beckwourth was a splendidly built man with long black hair, the complexion of a Mexican, and the eyes of an Indian. He had an easy recklessness of manner, but his face expressed character and keenness.

A couple of children clung close to him, while their dark eyes shyly studied the half-clad infants of Uncle Dick, who were playing stagecoach with many crackings of imaginary whips.

"I saw a squaw skinning a puppy for dinner at one of the lodges we passed. Are they so wretchedly poor as that?" asked Virginia.

"The Arapahoes are poor enough, and they are great beggars. But that puppy is no proof of their poverty. It will be a great feast. They are always stealing dogs to put in the pot."

"I don't believe I'd like to board with them," Virginia said, "even if I wasn't afraid."

"You needn't fear these Arapahoes. They are tame enough. But you are right about eating with them. They are very dirty and have no sense of sanitation. I have had to eat with them in the line of duty, but I didn't like it."

Lieutenant Manners escorted his guests back across the bridge into Denver. Great masses of wild-cherry bushes clustered along the banks of the creek and gave the stream its name.

Mary Gallup looked out into the desert of cactus. She thought she saw some shining antelope in the distance.

"We might walk up Cherry Creek a little way," she said. "I'd like to see the mountains from the hill."

Virginia nodded eager assent. "Oh, yes, let's. I don't want to go back to our stuffy little room yet. It's so hot there, and we can hear all the noises from the gambling hall."

"I was going to suggest walking farther myself," Manners agreed. "There isn't much for a lady to do or see in the camp. I was afraid you would regret coming."

"But we don't regret it at all," Virginia insisted. "We just like it—heaps, and we're going to make our fortunes. That has nothing to do with us wanting to take a walk, has it?"

They followed the creek. Virginia walked with the light tread of abounding life. It expressed itself in her carefree laugh, in the colour mounting to her cheeks, in the grace of her motions. The lieutenant thought he had never seen a more charming girl. She was in essence a lady, and so was her aunt, regardless of their antecedents and their position in life. He wished his mother could meet them, could see them in this environment of crude roughness. Surely she would

agree with him that . . .

His surface talk had nothing to do with his musings. He talked of indifferent subjects.

“We are on the duelling ground^[2] now,” he explained to them. “The principals stand just below us, and the crowd watching are up on the hill here.”

“Jiminy! Do they have duels?” Virginia exclaimed.

“All the advantages of modern civilization,” he said with a laugh. “Two subjects seem to cause most of the differences of opinion.” He bowed, in his gay way. “No, not the fair sex. We haven’t had any to quarrel about. Most of the disputes are about slavery or else about the merits of Auraria and Denver.”

They walked back to the town and entered it along F Street. Lost among the saloons was a little bookstore housed in a shack made of the boxes in which the wares had come. On exhibition were the works of Dickens, of Dumas, of G. P. R. James. Virginia noticed Miss Leslie’s Cook Book. There were, too, newspapers from St. Louis, St. Joseph, Cincinnati, and other points. Prominently displayed among these was a more or less recent copy of Horace Greeley’s New York *Tribune*.

They moved down Blake Street, one of the leading business thoroughfares. Some of the stores were in log cabins, but others were displayed in tents or even wagons. Two out of every three signs they passed advertised a saloon or a gambling house.

The talk that drifted to them was of mining developments, of the camps at Black Hawk and Central City and Boulder, and of the new discoveries at Fairplay and California Gulch. Virginia caught echoes of reports of fabulous finds, but already she knew that the gossip of town bummers must be discounted. There was gold in the hills, plenty of it, but not everybody who had bought a pick and shovel would find it.

^[2] The old duelling ground was on the east side of Cherry Creek, just below where the present Broadway crosses it.

CHAPTER XV

TOM HEARS AN OLD SONG

From a short distance, Tom had watched the stage leave Julesburg carrying as passengers Mrs. Gallup and Virginia. Good wishes were shouted. The driver's long whip snaked out. The horses plunged forward. Along the yellow trail ribbon which stretched to the horizon, the Concord rocked and swayed.

Tom's heart was heavy within him. Neither of the ladies had looked his way. Perhaps they had not seen him, though he had been standing close to them as they had passed to the coach. For that matter it was of no importance whether they had or had not recognized him. The fact that stood out was that they had gone out of his life, definitely, finally, just after he had found them again.

He turned away, depressed and worried. His shoulders sagged. The blacksmith at the station was repairing some company wagons, and Tom was doing the required carpenter work. All day, as he plied hammer and saw, the undercurrent of his thoughts had to do with this misunderstanding that had driven his friends from him. If he had not been such a tongue-tied fool, if he had been able to explain the facts to Mrs. Gallup instead of stammering and blushing. . .

As he mulled over the situation, Tom knew he had done nothing wrong in regard to the Indian girl. He had lived a rough life, for the most part with men alone. The frontier towns where he had spent his short holidays had offered their temptations, but there was in him some quality of fastidiousness that had not let him yield to the inviting eyes of casual women. He had fought for Deer Eyes because she was a girl and helpless. Perhaps that had been foolish. She was only a squaw in the making. And squaws did not count. The ribald words and eyes of many men had told him that. He excused himself by remembering that he had not planned to defend her. It had been under the imperative urge of impulse.

If he could have explained this to Mrs. Gallup! If he could have done anything except stand there tongue-tied as though by guilt! If he had flamed out in anger! Now he would never see Virginia again, or if so, it would be as a stranger to whom he was denied approach.

As Tom one day walked to dinner a covered wagon drew up at the saloon. From the driver's seat a heavy-set, slouchy man descended. The man was Buck Comstock. He was tying his team to a hitch rack when Tom passed, and did not see the young man.

At once Tom went to Massie.

The station keeper stroked his beard dubiously. "Course, he's a scalawag. We know that. We know, too, that someone is slippin' Mose Wilson the news about the stage schedules. But we got no proof this Comstock is the man."

"I told you how I saw him talkin' with one of the gang down by the river that night."

Massie grinned. "A cat may talk to a king, as the old sayin' is. For that matter, I saw you talkin' to Mose himself one day jest before he took to shootin' at you, but I don't reckon you're one of his outfit. Come down to cases, we got no real proof that Mose is the fellow makin' us all this trouble on the line. Personally, I got no doubts, but that ain't proof."

"I was there with 'em when they ambushed Mr. Slade."

"Slade has been some careless where he made enemies, by what I hear. It don't follow because this gang wanted to kill him that they're stage robbers."

"I'll bet my boots this fellow Comstock is here on some mischief. It's funny, if he's a

genuine mover, that he don't move on to Cherry Creek with his old wagon. What's he stickin' around here for?"

"Slim, you ask questions I cain't answer. Point is that, long as this bird behaves himself, I've got no call to kick him outa Julesburg."

Tom returned to the blacksmith shop after he had eaten his dinner. But first he went to the bunkhouse and took from his roll of blankets a Colt's revolver. Probably he would not want it. Still, if he did need it, he would need it very much indeed.

From the blacksmith shop where he worked, he saw three men ride up to the station saloon and tie their horses at the rack. This was an incident not at all unusual, and it did not stay in his mind. While he shaped the whipsawed planks for a wagon floor, his thoughts dwelt bitterly on the friendship he had lost.

An hour later, he became aware of men moving down the street in noisy talk. One of them broke into song.

"I'll scrape the mountains clean, old girl;
I'll drain the rivers dry;
I'm off for California,
Susannah, don't you cry."

Instantly, Tom dropped the ax he was using and picked up the Colt from where it lay.

"Don't tell 'em I'm here, Jim," he said, and slipped behind a pile of whipsawed planks.

The men did not enter the blacksmith shop. They stood at the door and looked in.

"What's become of Slade?" demanded a heavy, jubilant voice. "Where's he hidin' out at?"

The blacksmith knew this was Mose Wilson. His voice attempted to placate the outlaw. "They say he's in Denver. Went to get his arm fixed up after he was shot."

"He'd better stay there—better take to the brush. Tell him Mose Wilson says so. I shot him up onct. Next time——"

The blacksmith murmured something inaudible in the nature of assent.

"If he 'lows because he killed poor Fat that he's got me scared, I'll sure show him up," the big bully boasted. "Feels his oats, that slit-eyed son-of-a-gun, because he shot up the Frenchman Jules after his men had tied the parley-voo to a post. I'll learn him before I'm through that I ain't ever been curried."

"Sure, Mose. You're as good a man as he is any day," flattered one of those with him. But for the benefit of the third member of the party his eyelid lay dead on his cheek an instant.

"Better. Better than he ever was, even if he has got folks buffaloes. What's he ever done to justify the reputation he's got? Only time we ever did meet, I'm the one that shot him up, not him me."

The third man laughed. "You have yore bullet marked, Mose? We was all pluggin' at him."

"You claimin' you're the one that shot him, Musgrove?" demanded Wilson angrily.

"No, I ain't. What's more, I don't ever want to shoot at him, not if I can sidestep Mr. Slade. Nobody but a chuckleheaded rabbit would throw up his hat an' yell because Joe Slade had jumped him. You mix with him, Mose, if you want to. Different here. I'm figurin' I've trespassed on his range long enough. I'm thinkin' of headin' for Cherry Creek anyhow. Pickings pretty good there now."

"You always was white-livered, Musgrove," Wilson retorted.

"Don't say that too often, Mose," warned the other. "But if you mean I've got a lot of respect for my neck, you're sure right. A lady palmist onct told me she saw a noose dangling

before me. I aim to duck it long as I can.”^[3]

Wilson’s harsh voice overrode him. “You’d better go to the States, Musgrove. I’d never figure you from Texas, an’ you sure don’t belong here. The other side of the river. That’s the place for you.”

“Was that the place I belonged when I stood off them lousy Injuns up Plum Creek when you was down an’ hollerin’ for help?” Musgrove asked gently, his cold eyes fixed on Wilson.

Quarrelling among themselves, they moved back up the road and returned to the drinking *tendejon*.

Two hours later, the stage from Denver rolled in. From the seat beside the driver, a man descended, his right arm in a sling. He helped a woman out of the coach. The man was Slade. His companion was a striking-looking woman, young, tall, graceful. Her eyes and hair were black. Those who knew Virginia Slade sensed in her an ardent, reckless temperament. She was a devoted wife, passionately in love with her husband even to that last day when the light of his life flickered out in tragic shame. Few men could ride and shoot better than she.

Tom Collins, who had been lurking inconspicuously in the background, ran forward to warn his chief.

“They’re here—the Wilson outfit,” he called to the superintendent.

Slade wasted no words. Crisply his curt question leaped out. “How many of ’em?”

“Three—four countin’ Comstock.”

At that precise moment, Wilson and his associates swaggered out of the drinking place. They had come to enjoy the event of the day, the arrival of the stage and its passengers.

Mose was two or three steps in front of his men, straddling forward in the cocksure manner he affected. Suddenly, he stopped in his stride. He had caught sight of Slade.

For a moment, they stood looking at each other, the two killers. Neither reached for a gun. That would be practically a declaration of immediate hostilities.

Of the two, Slade was the smaller, the slighter. His shooting arm was useless. Moreover, Wilson was a domineering ruffian, accustomed to insisting on holding first place in any company he might choose to frequent. But under the chill menace of Slade’s steady gaze he seemed to shrink.

“What you doing here?” demanded the superintendent.

“Why, we’re here because we’re here,” blustered the road agent. That arm in a sling gave him reassurance. Moreover, in front of his men, after having blustered about what he would do, he could not give way without a protest.

“Get out,” ordered Slade. Then, as though he read the thoughts of the other, “I can shoot with either hand.”

Wilson would have given a good deal to know if that was true. With his enemy helpless before him, it would be a pity to let the man go. On the other hand, he had a wholesome fear of Slade.

Virginia Slade drew from her husband’s holster one of his revolvers. Her black eyes flashed hatred at the outlaw.

“You murderer!” she spat at him.

The road agent wished he were not standing in front of Dave Pope and Musgrove. He could not look at them and gather courage or perhaps discretion from their eyes. There grew on him a desire to get away without an appeal to arms. For he saw that, in addition to the two Slades, he was opposed by Tom Collins. The young fellow stood beside the others, quietly waiting. But, if guns smoked, his too would be in action.

“I’m not aimin’ to have a rookus with you, Slade,” the outlaw growled. “I didn’t come lookin’ for trouble. Fact is, I got a li’l’ private business with an Injun, Spit-in-the-Fire.”

“Then finish it—and get out. I won’t have you on my reservation. Understand?”

“Fair enough. But no use gettin’ on the peck. I was leavin’ anyway, right soon.”

“See you do—and the rest of your gang.”

“Suits me fine, Mr. Slade,” Musgrove said. He laughed, bowing toward the young woman. “When a lady buys chips in a game, count me out.”

“Then light out,” Slade ordered harshly. “The whole bunch of you. Comstock too. I won’t put up with your kind of gentry on my division. Stay around, and you’ll either go to sleep in smoke or do a dance in the air.”

Wilson backed away and disappeared into the drinking place. The other road agents followed him.

Tom walked with the Slades into the station.

The superintendent laughed. “Glad he didn’t call my bluff. I’d rather shoot it out with that fellow when my right arm is working. If you’re quite through with that gun, Jinny, I’ll take it back again.”

“I ought to have shot him,” she said, her bosom rising and falling fast with indignation. “After him laying a trap to murder you.”

“Don’t be so bloodthirsty, Jinnie,” her husband advised lightly. “One of these days, we’ll put Mr. Wilson and his outfit out of business, but we’ll choose our time and not his.”

“I expect he’s here to get Spit-in-the-Fire’s girl,” Mrs. Slade guessed. “It’s a shame, too, for she likes him as well as she does a rattler.”

The superintendent shrugged his shoulders. “None of our business. Maybe she’ll hate him enough to put poison in his stew.” He turned to Tom, his voice grown businesslike. “What about this stage hold-up? Are you or anyone else sure it was this fellow’s gang that did it?”

“Not sure,” Tom admitted. “I got there after it was over. I expect Mrs. Gallup and her niece could identify him, but they’re not here.”

“I talked with them. They said you saved them from the fellow. They told me about how they used to know you when you was little.”

“Yes.”

“But there was something—I didn’t quite get what it was—something they didn’t like about you. The other lady asked me about you, what kind of a boy you are. I gave you a good send-off.”

“I’m much obliged,” Tom murmured.

“Have you been raisin’ hell some way I haven’t heard of?”

Tom flushed. “I’m right quiet-dispositioned,” he said.

[3] Musgrove was hanged by vigilantes, some years later, at the end of the Larimer Street bridge in Denver.

CHAPTER XVI

A GLOOMY KNIGHT ERRANT

To Tom Collins, standing in the heavy shadows of the bunkhouse after supper, came Deer Eyes in her noiseless, flatfoot fashion. She stood close to him, shawl-wrapped, eyes lifted to his submissively. It was for her to tell him the news. It was for him to take whatever action he thought fitting.

“He here—that man—he say me go with him—soon—damn quick.”

“When?” asked the young man.

She indicated daybreak with a gesture.

Swiftly, decisively, he made up his mind. If she had come to him two weeks earlier with this news, he would have hesitated, might perhaps have evaded the issue. But the equation had changed. He had met again his ancient enemy, and this girl had become a symbol. She was the bone of contention between him and the man Wilson. He must save her now, regardless of any quixotic impulse, because she was a pawn in the deadly game he meant to play with the outlaw. In saving her, he would frustrate his opponent.

Tom felt his youth a handicap, because it meant inexperience. What was the best way to proceed?

He could meet the man face to face, claim ownership of Deer Eyes as the purchaser of her marriage right, and so call for a show-down. Or he could steal away with her to the gold diggings and leave her with Uncle Dick Wootten, as he had planned. The first course would settle the matter one way or another for all time. Either he or Wilson would be buried in Boot Hill before the sun set again.

But it had its disadvantages. A strict rule of the company was that none of its employees should engage in brawls. Alexander Majors was a religious man, and he exacted a pledge of his men not to fight or drink or swear. The men joked about this promise a great deal, for the language of the bull whacker and the mule skinner was generally explosive and the throat always dry. Tom considered that his guarantee was binding. He could not go looking for trouble while employed by the company.

Other and more potent considerations weighed against this course. Wilson was a dead shot and would probably win in any encounter between them. In this case, the girl would be lost. It would be better first to get her to safety.

There was a third way to settle the affair. Tom could lie in wait and shoot his enemy from ambush. Very likely he could do this with complete safety. Nobody but Deer Eyes would particularly suspect him, and she would never open her lips. This would have been Wilson's own way of solving the difficulty, but it was characteristic of Tom that he rejected it at once. If he must kill, the only method possible for one of his mental make-up was to do it openly, to take his fighting chance of winning through.

It did not occur to him to appeal to Slade. He knew well enough what the superintendent's point of view would be. Deer Eyes was a squaw and therefore not worth breaking a lance for.

“Meet me back of the corral in an hour,” Tom told the girl. “Bring what clothing you'll need.”

She left without comment, disappearing as silently as she had come.

Tom went to the superintendent.

“Mr. Slade, can I get off for a few days?” he asked.

“What for?”

“I want to go to the diggings.”

“To spend your money, to get drunk and gamble, I suppose?”

“No, sir.”

“What for, then?”

There was no use beating about the bush. Slade would hear very soon that he had left with Deer Eyes. Why try to cover up the fact? Tom told his reason for wishing to go.

Slade’s keen cold eyes studied him. “You’ve bought her, and this Wilson or whatever he calls himself is taking her away from you. That it?”

“Yes and no.” Tom reddened beneath the tan, then plunged on with his explanation. “I bought her for a wife from Spit-in-the-Fire. That’s right, sir. But I wasn’t aimin’ to—I wasn’t aimin’——”

“Spit it out,” ordered his chief curtly.

“I just wanted to save her from Wilson. She—she nursed me when I was laid up. She’s down to the blanket, as you might say, an’ she’s kinda put it up to me.”

Slade cut in harshly. “Don’t lie to me, boy. You don’t want Wilson to have her because you want her yourself. Isn’t that it?”

“No, sir. Nothing like that.”

“Then why did you give old Spit-in-the-Fire six ponies for her? I’ve heard the story—how she threw a stick at you and how you went to her father.”

“Did you hear about Orton, sir?”

“How he got in Wilson’s way and was killed? Of course. Everyone knows that.”

“I didn’t mean that. We had trouble, an’ he beat me up. I saw him abusing this girl an’ interfered. That’s how the whole thing started. He gave me an awful whalin’. For days I could hardly move. Deer Eyes took me to their tepee an’ nursed me an’ fed me. I figure I got to stand by her now.”

In spite of his experience of men, Slade was impressed. He could understand a generous impulse. Sometimes he had one himself. Yet he had no doubt, no matter what the boy thought now, that the Indian girl would become his squaw in time if he won the campaign against Wilson. In any case, whatever his motives might be or whatever the result, the boy was within his rights.

Slade regarded him curiously. Young Collins was game. But courage alone would not avail him against one as wily and as expert in man extermination as Wilson.

“I reckon you know this Wilson is about as safe to monkey with as a room filled with rattlesnakes,” he suggested.

“I know all about him. He murdered my best friend ten years ago.”

“Can you prove that?” demanded Slade.

“No, sir. But it’s a fact. Those two ladies that went through to Denver on the stage know it. He was the father of the younger. It was at St. Joe, when the big California rush was on.”

“You mean this Wilson is that young lady’s father?”

“No, sir. He killed her father, Shipley did. That’s what Wilson called himself then. You can write to the mayor of St. Joe and ask him. It wasn’t proved, but we all knew he did it. Shot him from behind.”

There was a story current that Slade himself had come West because he had killed a man. Many on the frontier were there for hidden reasons under assumed names. It was considered an unfriendly act to inquire about the past of any man.

“Well, let that go,” Slade counselled. “Not your business. Not mine. About this Denver trip, go if you like. I reckon you’re not asking me to help you out. You’re playing your own hand.”

“I reckon to play it, sir.”

“I could kick this fellow out of Julesburg and let you get away with the girl. But that wouldn’t settle anything. Not permanently. He’ll find out where the girl is, and if I know him, he’ll camp on your trail. No, boy. You’d better not start at all, or you’d better figure on going through to a finish. You’re only a kid. I advise you to stay out of it.”

“I can’t do that.”

“All right. When he meets up with you, what then? Are you ready for that?”

“I’ll have to figure out what I’ll do when the time comes.”

“All right. I’ll give you one piece of advice. Shoot first and keep shooting till he’s dead. And don’t forget he shot your friend *in the back*.” Slade turned to a question of ways and means. “When are you going? And how?”

“Right away. On horseback. We’ll take a pack saddle with grub.”

“All right. I’m wishing you good luck. You’ll need it.”

Tom roped and saddled and packed. The stableman and the storekeeper had orders direct from Slade to let him have whatever he wanted in supplies. Within the time he had set, the young man was ready to leave.

He found the Indian girl waiting for him back of the corral. She had with her a small bundle wrapped in a large red handkerchief.

They mounted and took the road. Silently, knee to knee, they jogged into the night. The hoofs of the horses clicked off the miles, and still they rode without speech. The young man was filled with moody thoughts. What he was doing had to be done, but he did not like it at all. He could foresee complications. Though he had tried to make Deer Eyes understand his motives, he was not sure she did not expect to stay with him as his squaw. Such a solution would seem to her natural. Why else should he buy her marriage? It might be difficult to get rid of her without brutality. Moreover, there was another angle to the enterprise. He was going to Denver, hard on the heels of Virginia and her aunt. If they should see him, or hear that he was there with Deer Eyes, they would naturally infer that he was flaunting his shame in their faces.

He was a gloomy knight errant, not in the least keyed up spiritually to the part.

CHAPTER XVII

AT F STREET AND LARIMER

The trip to Denver was devoid of striking incident. Tom's plan was to do most of the travelling at night and to camp, not too close to the road, during the daytime. Probably, Mose Wilson would discover very soon that Deer Eyes was gone. He would make inquiries and no doubt would set out in pursuit.

Day was breaking when Tom turned up Horsetail Creek for a mile or more and made the first camp. He flung a line into the stream, using grasshoppers as bait, and landed four or five trout averaging half a pound. These Deer Eyes broiled for breakfast. After they had eaten, both of them slept till afternoon. While he was getting the horses Tom raised a pair of prairie chickens, and, a moment later, a dozen more. He shot two, and his companion stewed them for supper.

They struck the road again and followed it along the river through the night. Morning found them in a level prairie country. In the distance, they could see the serrated line of the snow-clad Rockies, Long's Peak standing out like a rampart above the others.

As they were making camp, a band of hunting Utes rode into view. They came at once to the two travellers, making peace signs as they approached.

Tom watched them closely at first, keeping his rifle ready for instant use. But he soon saw that they were not hostile. Through Deer Eyes, he learned that they had met three men riding toward Denver not more than twenty minutes since. From the description, Tom judged that one of them was Mose Wilson. The pursuers could not have missed him more than five minutes, young Collins estimated. If he had stuck to the road another half hour, as he had thought of doing, no doubt they would have overtaken him and Deer Eyes. In which event, he would probably by now have been lying dead on the road and Deer Eyes would have been riding with Wilson and his party toward one of the shebangs where they were wont to rendezvous. Tom drew a long breath of relief.

The Utes hung around and were fed. Tom watched with some anxiety the disappearance of his supplies. He could, of course, live on the country as a last resource, but he would have preferred to keep some of his beans and dried fruit rather than to rely on game entirely.

It embarrassed Tom to find that the Indians assumed Deer Eyes was his squaw. He knew this would become a general opinion if he were seen much with her. There had been a curious ironic smile on Slade's face when the subject had been mentioned. The young man tried to explain the situation to the hunters, but he could see when he had finished that they did not understand what he was trying to get across to them.

His visitors proposed a buffalo hunt. This fell in with Tom's views very well. He did not want to follow too closely the trail of his enemy. Moreover, now that his food store had been raided, he could use fresh meat.

A herd of buffalo had been seen feeding to the right of the trail, and the hunters rode in a wide circuit in order to come on the herd with the wind in the proper direction. The Utes were armed with bows and arrows. They were close upon the herd before an old bull sniffed the air, pawed up the ground, and bellowed notice of their approach. The hunters galloped up while the big herd was getting in motion and ranged alongside the lumbering animals, driving the arrows deep into their bodies. Tom hunted with his rifle. He selected a fat young bull. Even when mortally wounded, the buffalo ran some distance, coughed up blood, and plunged to the ground as though it had lost its footing. The young man killed three.

There was feasting that night at the Ute camp, in which Tom joined for a time. When he returned to his own camp, Deer Eyes was asleep. Tom lay awake for a few minutes, staring into the starry sky. He was making a disturbing discovery about himself. It was easy enough at Julesburg, with the eyes of his small world on him, to think of the girl as a member of an inferior race. But it was not so easy, with her lying opposite him, a warm, soft, pretty young creature, alone with him in the night, his for the taking, to consider her in such a way. She had made no move toward him after that first gesture, which implied surrender of her will to his wishes. None the less, he knew that she considered she belonged to him. He was her lord and master. As he said, so it would be. For her there would be nothing wrong, nothing disgraceful, in the left-hand marriage of the squaw man. The legal forms of the white meant nothing to her. In spite of himself, Tom's blood quickened. She had become an individual for him. No longer was she a potential squaw, but a woman, young and desirable. No wonder his pulses strummed.

He must get her to Denver and turn her over to Dick Wootten. That was his last conscious thought before falling asleep. The Indian drums were still beating. Once, in the night, he wakened and heard them on the hilltop.

It was early when he rose.

"We'll slip away quietly," he told the girl.

They breakfasted, then roped, saddled, and packed. Quietly, they worked their way through the sage to the trail. He did not want to wait to say good-bye to the Utes. They were like children, and it was quite possible they might detain him for another hunt or refuse to let him go until all the buffalo meat had been eaten.

It was close to dusk when Tom and his charge followed the pack animal into Denver. At F Street they were stopped for a minute or two by an emigrant train moving toward the river. While they sat their horses and waited, Tom's glance swept the crowded street. The place was a town of shacks, a whistling post in the desert. It was raw and garish and unsightly. Its inhabitants were a law to themselves. None the less, the boy's heart leaped to the turbulent life that flowed up and down the dusty roads. Set in the crystal clarity of that pure air, with the eternal mountains for background, a critic might have found the town an incongruous eyesore. But not Tom. He saw it as magnificently young and daring, even though he did not vision it as America in the making. To be a part of it thrilled him.

The young man's drifting eyes stopped, held by a group of four. Two of them were Virginia and her aunt. Beside Mrs. Gallup stood a well-built pleasant-faced man of about forty. Virginia was laughing up into the face of her escort, Lieutenant Manners, and at something he said the warm colour irradiated her eager face.

Emotion electrified Tom's pulses. He watched the girl hungrily.

The emigrant train passed. The group of massed people shifted. Virginia looked up, and her gaze fell on Tom. All the pretty laughter fled her face. She had been struck instantly out of gaiety. For her eyes had taken in the pack horse, the Indian girl, even the faint trusting smile that, by unhappy chance, Deer Eyes had turned on her lord. Seeing this, she had, of course, drawn inferences.

Tom felt the condemnation of guilt which sometimes sits heavily upon the innocent. His heart died within him.

Someone in the jam behind yelled to Tom to move on. He touched his horse with the spur. Virginia's face was lost in the crowd.

But he took it with him, and with it racing impressions that flashed like pictures which moved swiftly—of the beauty, young and vital, she carried like a banner, of the glorious red hair

framing a soft and shining oval that miraculously caught and broke lights, reflecting them in starry flashes as a breeze-rippled lake does the sunshine. That face was a cameo of sweet virginity. The fine-textured skin, soft as satin, had a clarity just touched by the faintest breath of colour. Then, when glad emotion swept her, it was as though a burst of song flamed in her cheeks. So it had been when she was listening to the young West Pointer.

The drumming of the horses' hoofs as they crossed the Cherry Creek bridge into Auraria beat a dead march in his heart. In another moment, he guessed, if the crowd had not hidden her, he would have seen in her stern young face the scorn of one who does not understand vileness and will not condone it. She would judge him, as the young do, without mercy.

The odd thing was that he had no strong sustaining sense of injustice, no flaming anger at the wrong done him. If he were not guilty, he had escaped by no great margin of safety, and, anyhow, he was still a boy and easily put in the wrong, so that, when public opinion blamed him, he could only admit to himself the folly of having given it the chance.

Tom drew up in front of the Wootten store and dismounted. As usual, Uncle Dick sat in front, his chair tilted against the wall, a corncob pipe in his mouth.

"How?" he greeted Tom in Indian fashion, and Tom echoed the word.

Uncle Dick unhooked his heel from a rung of the chair and rose leisurely. "We been kinda lookin' for you, Slim," he said. "Friends of yours been inquiren' real anxious where you was at."

"Friends!" repeated Tom.

"They didn't ezactly say they was friends." The old scout's eyes rested with a gleam of humour on Deer Eyes. "I don't recollect they used that word. Fellow called Mose Wilson made the talk for them."

"Yes. I know him."

"Blood in his eye. Claims you done him dirt. Says he's a he-wolf an' it's his night to howl."

"Where is he?"

"Around somewheres." Uncle Dick waved his hand Denverward. "Acrost the creek there. Sleepin', likely. He's a night buzzard, that bird. If I was you, I'd lie low—light out for a spell. Gregory Gulch, say. Or clear acrost the range to Taos. Most usually I don't horn in, but this time—well, that's my advice."

"He means to make trouble?"

"Looks thataway, boy. But if you was to roll yore tail for parts unbeknownst——"

"Can't do that."

"Sure you can. Hit the trail this mawnin', you an' her both."

"No," Tom differed. "I'm stayin' here."

Uncle Dick shook his head. "It's a nice long open trail for a getaway."

"I brought the girl here. I'm going through with it."

"Take her along, like I said."

Tom moved a little closer, out of hearing of the girl. He lowered his voice. "No, I couldn't. It's a long story, Uncle Dick."

"Spill it, boy. No, wait a minute. Here's Jim Beckwourth. Tell him too."

The young man told his story, as far as it related to Deer Eyes. The girl sat humped on the horse, waiting for him to give orders to dismount or ride. She did not understand him, but she knew that these men were coming to some decision about her. Her own desires would not be considered by them. She would have to do whatever they decided. It did not matter in the least that she wanted to be his faithful squaw, to wait on him in sickness or in health, that she ached to lay the gift of her life at his feet for him to do with what he would. The feelings in her bosom

did not count with them.

Beckwourth and Wootten listened to what Tom told them. It was a queer story, but they believed it. They had lived as trappers, far from the habitations of men, and both of them had known just such quixotic actions as this. The half-breed Beckwourth would have done it himself if such a fancy had come into his head. He was a reckless, fearless fighting man. Danger was the breath of life to his nostrils.

“I reckon we can take this girl up at the house,” he said. “Lady Beckwourth needs some help. We’ll go right over and see her.”

Mrs. Beckwourth was a comely young woman of the same tribe as Deer Eyes. Her husband was very fond of her and of the little breeds that had come as a result of their union. His title “Lady” was a private pet name used to express his esteem for her. She made Deer Eyes welcome.

But the girl’s eyes followed Tom wistfully as he rode away. She knew he was going out of her life.

CHAPTER XVIII

A HIGH HAT ENTERS AND EXITS

Tom rode across the bridge from Auraria to Denver and turned into the Elephant Corral. This adjoined the Denver House and was one of the busiest spots in the town. A wagon train had just arrived from the Missouri and was filing into the corral. The long whips of the drivers curled out over the backs of the oxen and snapped as sharply as the crackling expletives with which they accompanied their orders.

They were bearded, dusty Missourians, long, lank, ill-kempt frontiersmen. While Tom awaited his turn, a smaller train of covered wagons moved down Blake Street and swung toward the corral. The man who appeared to be in charge of this called to Tom. He wanted to know if there was room for him to enter.

Tom's eyes opened wide with surprise. He had never before seen a bull whacker arrayed as was this man. He wore a tailor-made frock coat and trousers of black broadcloth. The sun glistened on a shiny black "plug" hat and on a stiff "boiled" shirt. Evidently, he had stopped very recently to repair the ravages of travel, for he was as immaculate, as free of the alkali dust of the desert, as though he had just stepped from the hands of a valet.

Young Collins moved closer, so as to be heard above the bawling of the cattle and the staccato shouts of the drivers. His surprise increased, for this kid-gloved bull whacker addressed him urbanely in a language he did not understand. It appeared to be English, but Tom called only a few facts out of the flowers of fancy. There was something about his Odyssey and Scylla and Charybdis and a happy arrival at Ithaca, all of which meant exactly nothing to the young man. Whereupon the new arrival mentioned that his name was O. J. Goldrick, just in from Fort Union, New Mexico, and that his Homeric references were not to be taken literally.

Mr. Goldrick was a young man, perhaps twenty-six, and Tom liked his looks, even though he seemed an odd fish to be so far from his native waters, which turned out to be County Sligo, Ireland. He was a university man, and the evidences of it clung to him through all the dangers and hardships he had endured. Yet, through his pedantic formality there broke the sunshine of warm human friendliness.

In speaking to him, Tom instinctively used the title professor. It fitted so well that, to the day of his death, the appellation stuck. Mr. Goldrick was to earn his niche in the history of Colorado, not only as a schoolteacher but as a citizen and editor. The exuberant young territory became proud of him and counted his classical knowledge an asset. His ability to "sling talk" was humorously appreciated. Through him Achilles and Hector became to young Denver as real as Heenan and Sayers. Their fight was just as epic as the more recent international fray, though in some obscure way there was mixed up in it a lady whose first name was Helen, one who was "clad in the beauty of a thousand stars," according to Mr. Goldrick's poetic description.

After they had taken care of their stock, Tom Collins and Goldrick drifted into the street together. As they walked up G Street, the professor's attire attracted much attention. One drunken bummer stopped the two young men. He wanted to bet an ounce of gold dust that he could put three holes through the silk hat at fifty yards with his revolver without once missing.

The Irishman bristled with offended dignity. "Sir, I am not acquainted with you, nor do I desire to know you," he said, and pushed past the molester.

Tom began to be embarrassed at all this attention. He pointed to a sign upon which was printed the legend, "Meals—One Dollar."

"Me, I'm hungry. How about you, Professor?"

Goldrick's answer took the form of a poetical quotation, delivered in a slightly declamatory manner.

"He may live without books—what is knowledge but grieving?
He may live without hope—what is hope but deceiving?
He may live without love—what is passion but pining?
But where is the man that can live without dining?"

Taking this for an assent, Tom led the way into the restaurant. They found a small table in a corner. It was past the usual eating time, so that the place was not crowded. Across the room sat two men, one of whom Tom recognized. He was the fat man Price who had been on the stage during the Indian attack. In front of him, a mining map lay open. Fluently and loudly, he was explaining to his vis-à-vis why the Never Say Die mine was certain to prove a bonanza. He wore the rough clothes of the country.

Tom and his guest ordered antelope steak, fried potatoes, and coffee. While waiting for their food, the young men gathered information about each other. Goldrick, it appeared, had come West as a private tutor, but had abandoned his position to better himself. He could listen as well as talk, and to his own surprise Tom found himself telling this stranger the story of his life.

Abruptly, he broke off, for into the room had poured an irruption of men. There were four of them, and they moved noisily to a table and dragged chairs out for themselves. The first of the men was Mose Wilson. The second was Buck Comstock, the third Musgrove, and the last Wilson's yes-man Dave.

For the moment they were busy with their own concerns, but Tom knew that presently they would get through ordering and would look around. Wilson would recognize him. That would mean trouble.

If there had been a chance to escape unobserved, Tom would have taken it, but he could not leave without walking directly past the table at which the ruffians sat.

"What's wrong?" asked Goldrick, observing the look on his companion's face.

Mr. Price was still talking continuously and loudly. He had that obvious type of vanity that likes to be noticed. The other group also contributed to the confusion. Tom took advantage of this to make an explanation quietly.

"That man—the big one with the beard and the long hair—is the fellow who murdered my friend at St. Joe. He has come here to run down me an' the Injun girl. I reckon hell will pop right soon. Take yore hat an' light out."

"What will you do?" asked Goldrick.

"I'll make out some way."

"Why should I go? They have nothing against me."

"Except that you're with me. That may be enough. They won't wait to ask questions onct a rookus starts. Better go while there's time."

Goldrick had turned pale, but his voice did not falter. "I'm going to stay here."

"No sense to that. You're not in this," Tom protested.

The man from Sligo was no fighting man, but neither was he a coward. "I'm not doing them any harm. I'll not run away."

Out of the medley of voices, one lifted harshly. "Stop that clatter, you over there."
It was Wilson speaking, to Price. The fat man turned redder, broke off, and stammered at a question.

"Pardon me, sir, are you addressing——?"

"Padlock yore mouth, you bag of wind," ordered Wilson.

Price opened his lips to reply, but words died away in his throat. He stared at Wilson, and his face grew patchy. Voice, bulk, and manner fitted the leader of the stage robbers.

"Whoopee!" Musgrove gave a shout of glee and pointed at the silk hat hanging from the prong of an antler serving as a hat rack.

The sight of it was like a red rag to a bull, a provocation irresistible.

"It's the deadly walapalooza," said Musgrove. "Look out! It's swellin' up an' gettin' ready to strike."

Wilson's gun was the first in action. A bullet crashed through the crown of the hat. A second struck the rim and lifted the headpiece from the prong. It rolled out to the floor. Four guns were in action now. There was a fusillade of shots. The beaver danced toward the door, lifted by the shock of the bullets. In their eagerness to get at this shining mark, the outlaws jostled each other gleefully. They pushed and clawed, shouting exhortations at each other.

Before the shooting had died down, the room was filled with smoke. So heavy was it that the hat could no longer be seen through the haze. Musgrove ripped the oil paper from a window casing to let in air. Gradually, the cloud lifted, drifting slowly toward the ceiling and settling there in heavy strata.

"What son of a Mexican was wearin' that dofunny, anyhow?" demanded Comstock.

Goldrick rose, pale but very erect. "That hat is mine, gentlemen," he said with dignity. "I protest against this as an outrage, and I shall invoke the law to protect me against such flagrant and overbearing treatment."

The eyes of Mose Wilson lit with the lust of bullying. Here was game made for him to order. It would be safe and extremely pleasant to badger this tenderfoot.

"Got objections, have you?" he jeered.

"I most certainly have. In a law-abiding country, which I trust this is, such a——"

"Who the hell are you?" roared Wilson.

"My name is Goldrick, sir."

"Goldbrick! A card sharp, I reckon."

"I said Goldrick. I am a teacher by profession."

"Hmp! Teacher, eh? Where from?"

"From County Sligo, Ireland."

"Well, Mr. Goldbrick, from County Sligo or whatever you call it, we're real glad to see you, an' I reckon we'll entertain you real hospitable. Can you sling a lively leg? Hit the high spots with yore heels? S'pose you try."

A bullet crashed into the floor six inches from Goldrick's foot.

The County Sligo man was frightened. He had just seen the bullets of these men rip to pieces his hat. It might be his turn next. This was a wild country, and he knew they were a bad lot. One at least was a killer and had little respect for human life. But though he was afraid, Goldrick's eyes did not waver from those of Wilson.

"I protest against——"

Wilson's overbearing voice rode him down. "You do, eh? Think you can come here to Denver an' dude this country, do you? Think you can come amongst he-men an' wear didoes

like them you got on? Not none. You better hit the back trail for the river, I reckon. I got a mind right now to——”

Wilson did not finish his sentence, but he moved forward slowly, the smoking revolver still in his hand. His manner was menacing. Tom did not think he meant to shoot, but it was likely he would man-handle the little Irishman. It would be like the fellow, for instance, to throw him through the window, perhaps to maim him for life. Tom's hand lifted to the table. His fingers caressed something that brought Wilson to an abrupt halt.

It was the last thing in the world the man had expected. He had not even taken a good look at the young fellow with Goldrick, but had taken for granted that he was negligible. The bully's jaw dropped ludicrously. For he was taken completely off guard.

“Keep your distance,” Tom advised quietly.

Comstock gave a yell of recognition. “It's the guy that got heavy with me at Cottonwood.” He ranged himself beside Wilson, ready for action. He stood with feet apart, head low on his rounded shoulders, the small black eyes gimleted on Tom. “I came mighty near bustin' him wide open then. What's yore name, young feller?”

Tom did not answer. He sat back of the table, alert and watchful. Soon, now, he thought, the attack would come. In an instant, guns might be crashing once more.

“I know his name,” Wilson cried angrily.

Yet both Wilson and Comstock hesitated. Caution restrained them. The very audacity of this young fellow's defiance seemed to imply that he had backing. Already the door of the restaurant had been cautiously opened from outside. Men were peering in. Two or three had even been pushed into the room. Were any of these by any chance friends of these young men? Moreover, another consideration occurred to the two desperadoes. They had been firing, wildly and indiscriminately, at the hat, each of them eager to hit it as many times as possible. Neither of them knew how many bullets he had sent from his weapon. If the guns were empty, it would be suicide to start hostilities.

Wilson parleyed, to gain time. “Know who I am, young squirt?” he growled. It was, of course, a rhetorical question.

The youngster's answer flashed back instantly. “You're Mose Shipley, the murderer of Abner Leeds.”

He had not meant to say it. The words had seemed to leap out of him of their own volition. He was aghast at his imprudence.

But the effect of the words on the man accused was far greater. It was as though a voice from the dead had charged him, had come out of his buried past to condemn him. He glared at Tom, a hint of panic in the cruel eyes.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Never mind.”

“It's a lie,” burst from Wilson in belated denial. “I never did it. There's no evidence. I defy you to prove it. Who saw me do it? No one. I wasn't even in St. Joe when he was killed.”

“You mean you lit out soon as you had killed him—had shot him in the back. You hadn't told anybody you were going. What was your hurry? Why d'you change your name. Why couldn't you be found?”

More men had edged into the room by this time. They lined one side of it. None of them spoke. It came to the big bully that they were like a jury listening to him and this young stranger. He knew the law of this frontier country, not an inexorable but a spasmodic one, that people's courts might at a moment's notice be summoned to deal swift, rough justice. If, for a

minute, it had been in his mind to shoot down this boy, he dismissed the thought from him now. For the charge that had been hurled at him was in the nature of an indictment already. He dared not add to the count another murder committed before the eyes of the very men who might try him.

For a moment, the room was charged with tense apprehension, the very breathing of its occupants suspended. None moved or spoke. It was like the high spot of a play for which some invisible stage manager has rung a bell for silence. Afterward, Tom recalled what curious nonessentials flowed through his mind even while all his forces concentrated on the two armed men facing him. He saw the fat body of Price diving under a table. He noticed a yellow dog stroll forward and nose a plate of food with indolent sniffs. Yet all the time he saw nothing but Wilson and Comstock, their smoking guns. All the time his brain was focussed on reading their intentions. If they meant to shoot, he must beat them to it.

Then Wilson laughed. The note of it was false, but the meaning of it was plain. He had decided not to follow his impulse toward murder. He waved away the difficulty with a grandiose gesture.

“I’ll settle with you, young fellow, some other time. You’re nothing, just a damn fool tumbleweed blown in from nowhere. You don’t mean a thing to me. All I say is you better get outa town. I don’t stand for such talk from any slit-eyed son-of-a-gun I could stomp out in two jumps. Understand? Hit the trail. To-night. An’ keep going when you start.”

“When I’m right ready, I’ll go,” Tom answered steadily.

Wilson exploded in a violent oath, then turned and strode out of the room, followed by his associates. The yellow dog got in his way and, with one vicious kick, he lifted it yelping through the doorway. A moment, and he had followed it.

A buzz of voices filled the restaurant with questions, answers, exclamations, explanations. Mr. Price emerged from underneath a table and began to tell how it had happened. From the doorway, a man came forward with a little whoop of congratulation. The man was Baldy Brown the stage driver.

“Scat my cats, boy, you sure are the original li’l trouble hunter, an’ you lookin’ all the time like butter wouldn’t melt in yore mouth. I’ll be doggoned if I ever meet up with you but you’re either runnin’ into it or out of it.” Baldy thumped Tom on the back gleefully. “But I’ll sure say you said yore li’l piece right out in meetin’, Slim. Me, I was lookin’ to see those two birds plug you through. But you always was lucky. Remember that time the rattlesnake bit you an’ died of it?”

Tom did not recollect the incident, since it had never taken place. He grinned and introduced Goldrick.

“I didn’t start this, Baldy. I’m a peaceable citizen,” he explained. “It was Mr. Goldrick’s hat.”

Someone brought forward the shattered remnants of the beaver. It was a sorry sight. Tom handed it to its owner gravely.

“I don’t reckon you can hardly wear it now, Professor,” he said.

“I have another in my luggage,” the man from County Sligo assured him.

“You’ll sure be a temptation to the boys when you wear it,” Baldy told him.

Mr. Price made oration. “Gentlemen, there is too much lawlessness in this community. Good citizens should band together and put an end to such disgraceful episodes as we have seen enacted here to-day. The fair name of our community, of this new commonwealth soon to be added to the sisterhood of states——”

Baldy interrupted the exhortation to civic righteousness. “If it ain’t the li’l fire-eater popped

right outa the box again, an' me figurin' the road agents had trimmed yore hair, Mr. Price, that time you saved the stagecoach. Well, well! You never can tell what you'll meet up with."

Tom invited Baldy to stay and eat with them. "We got steak an' potatoes comin' up, if some other curly wolf don't start to howl first."

"Don't care if I do," Baldy accepted, drawing up a chair.

"How come you here, old-timer? Have you quit runnin' to Cottonwood? An' how's yore shoulder?"

"Been transferred. Gonna drive outa Virginia Dale or else to the diggings by way of Mt. Vernon Cañon. But about this Mose Wilson. You want to look out for him, Slim. He's a sure-enough bad hombre. It kinda took him in the wind this time—what you said, an' us being here to listen. He laid off'n you because he got to seein' a noose dangling before his eyes."

"I reckon," Tom admitted.

"But he'll have it in for you, especially when he knows you're the white-haired boy that robbed him of the squaw-girl he had picked. He don't know it yet, but when he does—gentlemen, hush!"

"No need you tryin' to scare me. I'm scared enough already," Tom told his friend with a grin.

"Seems to me sometimes you're the doggonedest idjit I ever did see. Like now, an' like that time you invited Orton for no reason a-tall to beat yore head off. Now this bummer. Hasn't he got enough against you already without you claimin' he's a murderer before a houseful of citizens?"

"It kinda boiled outa me, Baldy, an' you said your own self that it floored him, so he decided not to shoot."

"Hmp! Well, you look out, boy. Stay in nights, an' be mighty careful who walks behind you." The stage driver evidently thought he had said enough, for he dropped the subject. "I'm glad I got here in time for the duel. This sure is a right up an' comin' community, wouldn't you say?"

"What duel?" asked Tom; and at the same time Goldrick, "Did you say a duel?"

"Where you been keepin' yoreselves, gents? Have'nt you heard that two of our leading citizens are aimin' to fill each other full of slugs?"

Goldrick's eyes gleamed. This was an interesting sidelight on the social status of the diggings. "Do you mean a duello according to the code?"

"Y'betcha. An A 1 duel with all the trimmings, a genuwine all-wool-an'-a-yard-wide First Family affair introducin' Mr. McClure an' Mr. Whitsitt. Colts at ten yards. Everybody invited. Come early an' avoid the rush."

"But the police—the authorities?" asked Goldrick.

Baldy tapped with his fingers the butt of the revolver he carried. "Right now, every man is his own sheriff, Professor. Like Tom here was a li'l while ago."

"Indeed!"

The stage driver lowered his voice a trifle and spoke to Tom. "Son, you seen anything of them ladies I brought out on my stage?"

"They're here," Tom answered briefly.

"Seen 'em?"

"As I came in."

The old fellow tilted his head toward Price. "That fat ol' jay bird still pesterin' them, you reckon?"

“Don’t know.”

“Hmp! Like I done told you, betcha he’s stuck on the first hill. Here comes yore grub, boys. Hop to it. Don’t wait for me.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE THREE-CARD-MONTE MAN

Young Collins intended to profit by Baldy's advice, even though he did not mean to follow it wholly. He had lived on the frontier long enough to know that dangers often vanish when confronted boldly. His best policy was to be wary, but to show no sign of being disturbed by Wilson's threat. Any evidence of weakness would be fatal.

Therefore, without demur, he accepted Beckwourth's suggestion, made later in the evening, that they stroll down and take in the night life of the towns together. Before they started, the ex-Crow chief put a question to him point-blank.

"You loaded for bear, boy?"

Tom nodded.

That was all. No other reference was made to any possible peril, but Tom knew from it that the older man had heard of what had occurred in the restaurant. The youngster was grateful for the support offered by Beckwourth's presence. Not only was it an assurance that the breed believed him right; it meant a tacit but public endorsement of his cause. His friend would not interfere in any quarrel between him and Mose Wilson, but he would protect him against odds and would enforce fair play as far as possible. The boyish heart of the Missourian warmed to this fearless and unexpected backing. It was not likely that the bummers would attack him in the company of so redoubtable a fighter as Beckwourth. For, though the latter was not of the bad-man type, his record was filled with daring adventure and hair-breadth escapes. His face expressed the spirit of the man. Its devil-may-care recklessness was not an invitation for any bully to impose upon him.

As they crossed the bridge into Denver, the two men could look down Cherry Creek to the Platte. Hundreds of tents and covered wagons lined the banks of both streams. In the darkness, these could not be seen, but scores of camp fires gleamed among the cottonwoods. The population was a continuously shifting one. Many immigrants arrived each day, and many left for the diggings at the gold camps. Another wave of travel beat back from the hills. It was made up of dissatisfied miners who had sold their tools and superfluous provisions and were heading back for "the States." The two men sauntered up F Street and along Larimer. They were in no hurry, and the life outside was as interesting as that inside the gambling halls and saloons which offered the only amusement in the town.

The thoroughfares surged with humanity. On either side of the road were one-story frame buildings devoted to games of chance. Some of these resorts were more pretentious, notably the Criterion and Denver Hall.

Into the latter, Tom and his companion drifted. The dirt floor had been well sprinkled to keep down the dust from hundreds of moving feet. A long bar ran part way down one side of the room. This was lined with customers drinking and smoking. Hundreds of roughly dressed men moved to and fro, wandering from one gaming table to another. Others sat steadily in one place, intent on the game before them, whether it was faro, roulette, Mexican monte, or poker.

One group stood in front of a man on a box behind a raised table. The patter of his sing-song monologue came to Tom, and he recognized the voice before he caught sight of Mose Wilson's bearded face.

"Here y'are, gents. This ace of hearts is the winning card. Watch it. Keep yore eye on it as I shuffle. Here it is now—now here. I lay all three cards face down on the table. Which one is it?"

Point it out the first time, an' I lose, you win. Right here it is, see. Now watch again." He shuffled the three cards once more. "I take no bets from paupers, children, or cripples. The ace of hearts, gents. A square game. The hand is quicker than the eye. Tha's my proposition. The ace of hearts, gents. If you pick it first time you win. Who'll go me twenty?"

A man shuffled forward. "Go you once," he growled.

Tom, on the outskirts of the group, stood on tiptoe. The man was Buck Comstock. He was, Tom guessed at once, a capper. Comstock slapped down a twenty-dollar gold piece, and the three-card-monte man covered it with another. The capper picked the ace, pocketed the money, and swaggered through the crowd boasting how easy it had been.

"My friend, you won. You're a stranger to me, but no hard feelings. Next time I'll win—maybe. Who else wants easy money?" asked Wilson.

He continued to deal the cards. One interested tenderfoot edged a little closer. The dealer marked him for his prey without ever letting his eyes rest on him. The patter ran on without ceasing.

Tom watched the tenderfoot and could almost read his thoughts. This game looks simple. The dealer has, evidently without noticing it, turned up slightly one corner of the ace. Now is the time to bet. The tenderfoot tosses out a gold piece. He points to the card with the raised corner, but alas! it is not the ace. Puzzled and chagrined, he retreats, aware that somehow he had been tricked and that the hand is quicker than the eye.

"The ace, gents. The ace is the card. This is a game of fun, skill, an' amusement. Here it is now. Point the ace out the first time an'——"

The card sharp's fluent patter broke off abruptly. His cold, shifting eyes, on the lookout for victims, had fallen upon and recognized Tom. A kind of muscular spasm contorted his face. As the light winks out at the snuffing of a candle, so the wheedling heartiness went out of this man's countenance. So swift was the change that those about the table caught it instantly, read danger in the savage glare, and found immediate business elsewhere. It was a crowd used to unexpected fireworks, and it fanned away from the three-card-monte man's vicinity.

Tom remained, and Beckwourth; also Buck Comstock and Wilson's handy man Dave.

"I know who you are," Wilson roared. "You're the bumner who tried to rob me of my squaw girl. Where is she? Tell me that before I let daylight through you. Spit it out."

Beckwourth spoke. "Just a moment, Mr. Wilson. No, I wouldn't reach for that gun yet. Deer Eyes is a relative of my wife. She is at my house. She's going to stay there until she wants to leave."

The card sharp had descended heavily from the rostrum. He stood at the edge of it, pulled up short by the challenge of the older man. He knew Beckwourth. Everybody in this country knew him. In addition to unflinching courage, the breed had a wide influence that ramified both among the tribes and the old settlers. It was possible for him to make existence exceedingly hazardous for one who, like Wilson, was often on the dodge. The outlaw's hiding places were known to a few trappers and to some Indians, the very people over whom Beckwourth had a prestige that was in some cases almost authority.

"I got no quarrel with you, Mr. Beckwourth," he said huskily. "In regards to Deer Eyes, I'll talk that over with you. I'll do fair an' square by the girl. If this—this bumner hadn't set her against me——"

"Call me by my name," the young man cut in. "Tom Collins, who used to be your slave when you lived back East, the child you beat an' tortured like the cruel hound you are."

Wilson's eyes grew wide with astonishment. "So that's who you are, a common street rat I

picked up outa the muck of an Arkansas swamp.”

“That’s who I am. No, keep your hands in front of you, unless you want me to drill holes in you. An’ listen. You were a cowardly murderer then. You’re a horse thief an’ a killer now. If you ever had a chance you’d shoot me as I would a rattler. I know that. All right. I’ll be there when you try. Which will it be—now or later?”

One of the proprietors came hurriedly forward. “Gentlemen—gentlemen, not here. If you please. Not in this house. Go outside first. There’s all outdoors to settle yore troubles in. Not here, please.”

“To-morrow,” roared Wilson. “I’ll get you to-morrow sure as you’re a foot high.”

He backed away, snarling, as far as the bar, then turned and strode out of the house.

“Get out right away—out the back door. Go to yore room—an’ stay there till morning. He’ll get you in the back, if he can,” Beckwourth told young Collins. “An’ if you go out to-morrow, go lookin’ for trouble.”

Tom thanked his friend with a look and turned to follow his advice. He passed into the starry night, took a quick look around, then started on the run for the bridge. His blankets he had left outside Wootten’s store. He intended to sleep out on the prairie, far from any chance of a visitation from Wilson or his friends.

Half an hour later, he unrolled his blankets beneath the stars, a mile from any house.

CHAPTER XX

ACCORDING TO THE CODE

It would be easy to set in too high a light the lawlessness of the young town Denver and the gold diggings in general. The great majority of the citizens were law-abiding. Many were of the best class, steady, reliable, indomitably courageous. To say that they were of pioneer quality tells the story.

But the settlers were young and high-spirited. The restraints of church and home had been entirely lifted. There were few women in the community to temper its wildness. Therefore, liberty had become licence.

Add to this that a gold rush always brings on the surface of the wave a scum of humanity eager to make the most of the unsettled conditions, to prey upon the immigrants before the forces of law and order become crystallized. These were a small minority, but at first they were an active, clamant group, claiming dominance by the sheer impudence of effrontery. Denver had its Chuckaluck Todd, its Buckskin Bill, its Tom Clemo, its Jim Gordon, its William Young, and its Charley Harrison. Most of these were killers, and all of them were thugs or ruffians. To this fraternity of vice Mose Wilson's gang of outlaws had come as a temporary accession.

During the late months of '59 and the spring and summer of '60 the lawless element rode roughshod, held in check only by sporadic uprisings of the people. Judge Colt ruled. Judge Lynch was soon to take command for a brief time. Judge Law would assert itself as soon as the Anglo-Saxon instinct for law and order crystallized. For a brief time the vicious ran rampant, in Denver, as in most other frontier communities, but the period of their reign was short.

The duel belonged to another day and another age, but it still persisted, in spite of general disapproval. In San Francisco, this very year, almost within a month, Senator Broderick had been killed by David S. Terry, Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court. The bitter feeling between the advocates and opponents of slavery was responsible for more of these personal encounters than any other single cause. Usually, the hot-blooded Southerner was the aggressor.

Along with Goldrick and Baldy Brown, young Collins walked out to the duelling ground next afternoon. A steady stream of people were moving in the same direction. Some were on foot, some on horseback or on mules, and a few drove. It was considered a gala affair, second only to a hanging in public interest. Tom was not so absorbed by the proceedings, however, as to forget for a moment that his life had been threatened and might at any moment be attempted. He kept a weather eye open for his enemies and easily located them. Mose Wilson's gang and the toughs of the town were gathered together in a ribald group not approached by sedate and respectable citizens. They did a good deal of loud talking and laughing. Wilson was conspicuous among them on account of his height and long hair. In every gesture and movement he swaggered.

McClure^[4] and his second Moore, accompanied by a doctor and several friends, drove up and dismounted. A minute or two later Whitsill and his second Lawrence, together with a small group of well-wishers, reached the duelling grounds. Moore and Lawrence at once approached each other, saluted formally, and withdrew a short distance to settle the details of the meeting.

The seconds tossed a coin for choice of position, though there was no advantage to either party, since neither faced the declining sun. The weapons were Colt's revolvers, navy size, at ten paces. One shot only was to be allowed, and it was to be fired between the words "One—

two—three,” to be pronounced by one of the seconds.

Moore loaded the weapons and paced the distance, placing each principal. Lawrence stood back from the line of fire, halfway between the two.

“Are you ready, gentlemen?” he asked.

Tom’s mouth went dry. He had seen men killed, but he had never seen life attempted in this deliberate, formal fashion. He found himself moistening his lips.

“Ready,” Whitsill answered, and a moment later McClure echoed the word. Both spoke in voices clear and firm.

“One—two—three!”

Simultaneously, the revolvers sounded. Both combatants held their positions for a moment, then McClure recoiled a step.

“I’m hit,” he said in a low voice to his second.

Moore started toward him. “Badly?” he asked.

McClure’s left hand covered his right groin. “Here, Jack,” he said, and his body swayed.

His second caught the wounded man and lowered him to the ground. An examination showed that the ball had travelled obliquely downward.

Men crowded forward, as they always do when someone has been hurt. Among these were Tom’s companions. He himself stood back on the outskirts of the crowd. His attention was focussed on his enemy. He did not want to be taken at disadvantage.

A man left the group of bummers and moved toward Tom. The man was Musgrove. He handed Tom a sealed envelope.

“For me?” the young man asked, accepting it with reluctance.

“For you an’ no other, young feller.” Musgrove grinned expansively, derisively.

Tom ripped open the envelope and read what was written on the paper within. His eyes opened with sheer astonishment. It was a challenge to a duel, and it was signed “Doctor Moses Wilson.”

His honor as a Southern Gentleman having been impuned and his reputation malisously attacked, Doctor Wilson gives the lie to the foul aspersions of the low scoundrel caling himself Thomas Collins and hereby challenges him to mortal combat on the field of honer, same to ocur at earliest possible convenience on the dueling grounds of Denver City, Jefferson Territory.^[5]

Even though there was no mistaking the meaning Tom could hardly believe that the words on the paper meant what they seemed to say.

[4] McClure survived and became a year later the first postmaster of Denver City.

[5] Originally, Colorado was a part of Kansas Territory. As the Pike’s Peak country took on local pride, the settlers demanded separation from Kansas. Many names were suggested for the new district, but the one accepted was Jefferson Territory. When Congress voted on the new territory, the name was changed to Colorado.

CHAPTER XXI

WITH SAWED-OFF SHOTGUNS

The whole thing was ridiculous, of course. Tom realized that. It was absurd to talk of a formal duel between Wilson and himself. Neither of them was a gentleman in a technical sense. They did not belong to the class which indulged in the luxury of duels. Even the ill-spelled cartel itself was an incongruity.

Yet Tom did not at once reject the idea as impossible. He stood looking at the paper, pretending to be reading it, while his mind dealt with the fragmentary thoughts that raced through his brain. What were the motives that had prompted the sending of the challenge? What was the best way to treat it? To whom should he go for advice?

Musgrove's grin still persisted when Tom looked up. The man's expression was not unfriendly, though sarcastic, as has been mentioned.

"You'll have to excuse me not being in a plug hat an' Prince Albert," he apologized. "I didn't know in time Mose was gonna set up for a gentleman."

It occurred to Tom to try out this man. He might get from him some hint of his principal's state of mind. His feeling was that Musgrove was an individual and not merely an echo of Wilson. He very likely had his own point of view.

"Kinda sudden," Tom said. "I don't hardly know what to do with this." The young man grinned wryly. "I'm a bull whacker, an' I ain't fought any duels yet. But I'm gettin' up in the world, as you might say."

Musgrove gave him advice, not in his official capacity. "Boy, light out. Sudden an' onannounced. Mose aims to kill you. He's a dead shot with a six-shooter."

"Yes," agreed the youngster. "I know. I used to be his target. He can shoot the spots out of a card at thirty yards. . . . Where can I find you this afternoon, Mr. Musgrove?"

"You don' want to find me. What you need to find is a fast horse. Course, it's none of my business. I'm handin' you advice free gratis, an' Mose wouldn't thank me for it."

"Much obliged, Mr. Musgrove. It's right friendly of you. I know he aims to kill me—if he can. But I don't reckon I'll run away. I don' know yet what I'll do. But s'pose I want to see you to-morrow mornin'?"

"Why, I'll be at the Criterion after eleven o'clock. I don't rise right early."

"Maybe I'll send a friend to see you."

"Better send yore friend for a horse, boy. But don't say I told you. I don't want any run-in with Mose. What am I to tell him, anyhow?"

"Tell him he'll hear from me to-morrow morning."

"Hmp! Write him from California Gulch, then, an' say, 'Good-bye.' I'm tellin' you he's more dangerous to you than a whole passle of Kiowas on the warpath."

After Musgrove had gone, Tom walked back to town with Baldy Brown and Goldrick. His mind was busy with the problem before him, so that he took little part in the conversation. They had reached the first houses before he made any contribution to the talk.

"It's the first duel I ever did see, an' I reckon it will be the last. I can understand why fellows go gunnin' for each other when they have a rumpus. That's one thing. But to go out an' stand up to be plugged at in cold blood—well, I'm glad I'm no gentleman," Baldy said.

Mr. Goldrick contributed information. "The duel is an anachronism. It dates——"

"A which?" asked Baldy.

“An anachronism, a reversion to the past chronologically incorrect, as, for example, when Shakespeare makes Hector quote Aristotle, who lived many centuries after the assumed period of the Trojan chief.”

“Help! Help!” gasped Baldy.

“The duel probably had its foundation in trial by combat, an institution of feudal times. One knight, accusing another of wrong, challenged him to mortal combat. If the challenged party was victor he was adjudged innocent, since it was presumed that God would defend the right. But as feudalism declined and modern civilization developed——”

“Betcha you’re right, Professor. Sounds reasonable to me. You sure handle them big words good an’ don’t let ’em get tangled up in the traces. What you think, Slim?”

“I think it’s a plumb fool business, this duelling, but as for you never seeing another, Baldy, why I ain’t so darned sure. To-morrow, or maybe the next day——”

The old stage driver stopped abruptly. “What’s eatin’ you, boy?”

Tom handed him the letter received from Wilson. “I can be a gentleman any time I’ve a mind to,” he said with a rueful smile.

Baldy read, his eyes popping out. “Lordy, if this don’t beat the Dutch! What in Texas has got into that scalawag anyhow?”

“He wants to be in the fashion, don’t you reckon?” Tom passed the challenge to Goldrick to read.

“What you aim to do, Boy?” Baldy wanted to know.

“Can’t tell yet. Gonna talk it over with Beckwourth first.”

“It would be plain murder,” Baldy blurted out. “The fellow is a dead shot. I’ve seen him give exhibitions. There ain’t his beat, or his equal, for that matter, in this whole Western country. He aims to kill you in such a way so as he can get shet of consequences.”

“That’s his idea,” admitted Tom.

Goldrick handed the letter back. “I’d appeal to the law, have him bound over to keep the peace.”

“Law, shucks!” Baldy derided. “There’s no law west of the River yet, except what is made to suit the occasion. This slick bummer figures he can duck a people’s court this way. So he can too, if you walk into his trap, Slim.”

“I reckon you’re right, Baldy.”

“Question is, what to do, then. If you called a meetin’ of yore friends, maybe you could run the bummer outa town.”

“An’ maybe I couldn’t. All the gang from the Criterion would line up with him. No, sir, I haven’t got that many friends.”

“Would it be any use to explain to him that you’re not looking for trouble of any sort and that you do not mean him any harm?” asked Goldrick.

“It would set him rarin’ to get at Slim. That’s the kind Mose likes to pick on. No, sir. The boy has got to fight or light out, onless Wilson can be driven out, an’ I don’t reckon he can.”

From of old, Tom understood the mind of his enemy. He knew it with the instinctive certainty that had come of a child’s fears. One of the outstanding traits of the man was vanity. He liked to sun himself before an admiring world. He liked to pose and strut and domineer. The fellow was no longer a second-class dandy. He had sloughed his fine clothes with his graceful figure. He was a heavy slovenly ruffian. But vanity never dies. It feeds on such food as it can get. Here was an opportunity both to seize the spotlight on the stage and to satisfy without much risk his hatred. He could kill, and he could kill with éclat. To shoot his man in a duel would

give the fellow standing, at least in his own mind. Of course, the whole thing was absurd. Tom saw that. But it was exactly the sort of cock-a-doodle-doo affair that would appeal to Wilson.

Tom carried his problem to Beckwourth, who got the point without undue explanation.

"It's the very high-falutin' sort of thing he'd do," agreed Beckwourth. "But you'll have to fool him. It would be suicide to fight a duel with him."

"On his terms," agreed Tom.

"Meanin' what?"

"Everybody has been talkin' about duels the last day or two. I've been gettin' educated. The fellow challenged has the choice of weapons."

"Not thinkin' about carving him with a bowie, are you?"

"Not much," agreed Tom. He weighed less than one hundred and thirty pounds and his enemy around two hundred.

"What, then?"

"How about a sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot at twenty yards?"

Beckwourth looked at him with amazement. He wanted to be sure first that the young fellow was not joking. Certainly Collins looked serious enough.

"Why, you would both be plumb full of lead right sudden. It would sure finish Mr. Mose Wilson. But how about Slim Collins?"

"Me too—if we fought."

"I've known this Wilson, or Shipley, or whatever he calls himself, ever since I was so high." Tom measured a short distance from the ground with his hand. "Many a time he has whaled me till I couldn't stand. He's a bully—wants the best of it every time. I don't say he's exactly a coward, but I do say he won't go through to a finish when it's a case of cold nerve."

Sparks of excitement danced in Beckwourth's reckless eyes. "Boy, if you've got the sand in yore craw to play yore hand thataway——"

"I've got to have the sand. There's no other way out—none that I'll take. I can't bushwhack him from ambush, an' I'll not run away."

"Public sentiment would back you if you shot him without warning. He threatened yore life publicly. A dozen men heard him. He's a bad citizen, known to be a bummer and a killer, thought to be a horse thief. There would be no complaint from decent folks if you bumped him off."

"I can't do it, not by layin' for him. No use talkin'."

"An' you ain't willin' to slide out?"

"No. A fellow can't run away an' hold up his head afterward, can he?"

"Some could. Depends on circumstances."

"Well, I couldn't."

"Nothing left but to fight him, then. Don't fool yoreself, Slim." The man's keen shining eyes probed into his young friend. "If you make this bluff about the sawed-off shotguns an' he calls it—what then?"

"I'd go through. I'd have to."

"You mean you'd stand up there before him twenty yards away, an' let that bummer fill you full of slugs?"

"I wouldn't run away," Tom answered doggedly. "He's aimin' to kill me anyhow. Musgrove told me so, an' I knew it before. Why not fix it so he hasn't any advantage over me? But I don't figure it will come to that. He knows he can shoot a Colt quicker an' straighter than most anybody else in the world. If he can badger me into standin' up before him with one, he'd have just what he wants. But with a sawed-off shotgun I'm just as good a man as he is. Chances are

I'd get him, even if he did get me. Well, he'll never risk it."

"How do you know he wouldn't?"

"I saw him licked in a fight once by a man not so strong as he is an' not so good with his maulers. The other man outgamed him. I saw Slade back him down at Julesburg the other day."

"You're not Joe Slade," Beckwourth said drily.

This remark seemed to Tom a valid criticism that summed up all the objections to the proposed plan. It was certain that, if Slade had offered to meet Wilson with such a deadly weapon as the sawed-off shotgun at short range, the outlaw would have stayed not on the order of his running. But Slade was Slade, whereas Tom was only a gangling boy. In spite of his prophecy to Beckwourth that Wilson would run out of such an encounter, Tom knew that the man might try to outbluff his bluff. He had flung out this challenge boldly and no doubt was strutting among his admirers like a turkey cock. To have to turn tail before a mere boy would be a terrible humiliation. He might prefer to bully his way through in the hope that his adversary would weaken.

"No, I'm not Slade," Tom admitted. "Well, if you don't like my plan, let's hear one that is better. I'm not unreasonable."

Beckwourth laughed, clapping his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Son, I haven't said I don't like it. But we have to look at it from all sides. You figure he won't go through with it. Maybeso you're right. I'd bet myself he'd sneak away, if he knew you like I do. But we got to remember he's already declared himself. He's come out in the open. If he backs down now, it would be a plain crawl, an' he knows his crowd would figure it that way. He'll pretty near have to stick."

"He won't stick if he thinks there's a good chance of gettin' killed. I know him," Tom insisted.

There was that in Tom's plan that seized mightily on the imagination of his friend. It was daring to the verge of foolhardiness. It was filled with unexpected drama. It had a neat, sardonic irony that made for grim amusement, since the builder of the trap would find himself caught in its teeth.

"Let 'er go, boy. I'm with you every step of the trail. Once, when I was with the Crows, I saw a case kinda similar. One big buck all het up with his own importance challenged a quiet, small fellow whose squaw he wanted. The one he challenged jumped at it. Sure, he said, with tomahawks, their left wrists lashed together. The big buck couldn't face it. He cut his own throat the night before they were to meet."

"Wilson won't do that."

"How do you go at this business, then?"

"I reckon I send him a letter sayin' I will an' naming weapons. Wouldn't that be the way of it?"

"I reckon."

"I'll get Professor Goldrick to write the letter for me. He knows the proper words to use. Then I'll get someone to take the letter."

"Good enough. How would Baldy Brown do to take the letter? He'd do it for you, I think."

"I'll try him," Tom said.

He was disappointed. It had been in his mind to ask Beckwourth himself to act as his second, but perhaps the scout did not want to embroil himself with this group of desperate men. As for Baldy, Tom was not at all sure he would act for him. The stage driver would think it all foolishness. He had passed his dictum on the custom of duelling and announced that he

was no gentleman and therefore not bound by idiotic traditions about honour. Tom did not know whom else he could get.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CURLY WOLF HOWLS

Goldrick declared himself at once. He disapproved of dueling *in toto*, he said, and preferred to have nothing to do with the matter. If there was any other way in which he could serve, why, of course——

“I don’t know where this Toto place is,” Tom replied, “but I’m against it in Denver an’ every other place. Also, I’d sure like to have nothing to do with it. If you’ll persuade the other fellow to give up the idee, it will certainly be welcome news to me. But I’m drug into this, an’ I got to go through. All I’m askin’ of you, Professor, is to help me fix up a letter to this bummer. If you’d kinda ride herd on the grammar an’ rope the long words for me, I expect I’d make out.”

“I misunderstood you, sir. My impression was that you desired me to act as your second. I would have conscientious objections to that. But I am very much at your service if I can assist in editing a letter.”

Goldrick did more than edit the letter. He drafted it, rewrote it, and finally copied it in neat chirography. Before he turned it over to Tom, he discharged himself of all responsibility for consequences.

“I am merely your secretary for the nonce, Mr. Collins,” he explained. “I do not indorse anything written here. You understand that?”

Tom thanked him and put the letter in his pocket. Now that he had it written, he did not know how to get it delivered. Uncle Dick Wootten would not act for him. He was sure of that. The old scout would think the whole thing foolishness. Baldy would probably feel the same. Tom thought of Lieutenant Manners. He would know all about such things, probably, but very likely his official position would keep him from mixing in the thing, even if he wanted to do so. And Tom knew that Manners would feel it beneath him to involve himself in a quarrel between a bummer and a bull whacker.

He was in a quandary. Uncertain how to proceed, he stood in front of the Apollo Theatre and read the poster for the evening’s performance. He noted that Mdlle Hayden and her Sisters would appear for the entertainment of the city in their World-Renowned Acts which had been applauded by Presidents and Princes. While still reading the announcement, a voice hailed him. Joseph A. Slade was coming down the street.

“So you got here all right, young fellow,” Slade said, shaking hands with him. “I wasn’t so sure about you. That bummer Wilson and his friends took out after you. They were headed for here, I was told.”

“They’re here,” Tom said.

“You haven’t met him yet, then?”

“Yes, I’ve met him. If you’d like to hear the story sir, we could go into one of these gin mills while I tell it. I’d rather not stand around too much in the open.”

They dropped into the nearest saloon and took seats. Slade ordered rum. Tom took a cigar and put it in his pocket. The young fellow told the story of what had occurred since leaving Julesburg. He passed over to Slade the challenge and his answer.

The man tamer read the letters and gave a yelp of delight. “Hell an’ high water! You’ve sure turned the screws on this four-flusher, boy.”

“Do you think so? He may figure I’m no more dangerous than a brush rabbit.”

“Not Mose Wilson. He’ll bluff, maybe, but he’ll not go through. He’ll crawfish first. The

fellow is yellow.”

“I hope so,” Tom admitted frankly. “I’d hate to have him turn me into a lead mine.”

“Who is going to be your second?” asked Slade.

“I don’t know. Unless Baldy will.”

“Boy, I’ll take your letter. We’ll let this bummer know you’ve got friends.”

Tom’s face lit. “Will you, Mr. Slade? O’ course I’d rather have you than anyone else. If you take my answer, Wilson will figure maybe there’s something to it.”

“I’ll send word to Uncle Dick’s store how it works out. Likely I won’t have any news till tomorrow.”

Young Collins watched him go. Slade walked with the firm easy tread of a man perfectly sure of himself. He radiated confidence. Tom knew that he was in good hands. His cause had found the buttress of a strong support. Of all the men he knew, he would have chosen Joseph A. Slade first to back him.

Slade drifted over to the Criterion. The place was beginning to fill after the midday lull. Presently, the stage company superintendent caught sight of Musgrove bucking the tiger. He ranged up beside him.

“Mr. Musgrove, I’d like to see you a moment,” he said.

Musgrove cashed in his chips and walked out of the hall with the other. He wondered what Slade wanted with him. Perhaps the superintendent was going to call him to account for the attack upon him at the cabin. It might be in Slade’s mind to shoot him down outside. Public opinion would sustain him. It would be like the man to exact summary vengeance that way.

The outlaw walked warily. He was quick on the draw himself, and he did not intend to be caught napping.

Slade handed him the letter Goldrick had written for Tom.

The eyes of the other man opened. This was a horse of quite a different colour. Not so good for Wilson if Slade was declaring himself in and calling for cards.

“I told that boy to light out,” Musgrove said lamely.

“Yes, he told me,” the superintendent said drily. “You take that letter to Wilson. I’ll be here this evening after supper.”

Musgrove was due for a still greater surprise when Wilson opened the envelope and read what was written within. The face of the challenger registered blank amazement.

“Goddlemighty!” he rasped out. “Did that kid give you this?”

Musgrove handed him another pleasant surprise package. “No, Slade gave it to me.”

“Slade! Is he here?”

“Y’betcha! Backin’ this kid, looks like.” Musgrove gave the information with distinct pleasure. He was fed up with Mose Wilson’s overbearing ways, and he did not object to seeing someone take a fall out of him.

Wilson thrust the letter into the hands of Musgrove. “Read it. This is some of Joe Slade’s work. Think I don’t know? He put the kid up to it. Bluffin’. That’s what they are. I’ll show ’em up.”

“Sawed-off shotguns loaded with buckshot,” Musgrove repeated. “Why, there won’t either of you have a chance. At twenty yards, this says. Lordy? You’ll both be deader than stuck shotes.”

“Tryin’ to scare me,” roared the other. “Think I don’t know? That kid! Why, I’ve whopped him fifty times till he couldn’t hardly yelp any more. Him try to make me crawfish. No, sir. It’s Joe Slade. That’s who it is. I’ll show him.”

Musgrove's face was properly noncommittal. "Aimin' to call his bluff, are you?"

"Goddlemighty! I'll show him. He can't run on me, not Joe Slade or anyone like him. As fer that slab-sided kid, I'll sure make him climb a tree."

"Meanin' that you'll fight him the way he says?" Musgrove asked, chewing his tobacco cud equably.

"Fight him any way, any time, any place. You're damn whistlin'. I'll show Joe Slade he don't know sic' 'em if he thinks he can get biggity with Mose Wilson. I'm the best gunman ever came into these diggings. If Slade thinks because he's a killer he has got me buffaloeed, you can grab it from me that he's a million miles wrong. Me, I'm some killer too, an', by gar! where I am at I am chief. I take the middle of the road, you understand."

"You are sure a curly wolf," agreed Musgrove, not batting an eye. "Now about this boy's proposition——"

Mose was working himself up into a furious rage. He broke into the other's sentence, scarcely aware that he was talking. It was necessary for him to blow off steam or explode.

"Slade never seen the day he could scare me, I'll have you know. I've sent better men than him to Boot Hill, an' I will again. From where I come from, there was bad men, plenty of 'em, but none like Mose Wilson. Me, I'll go through from hell to breakfast. That's me. Tryin' to scare me with a scatter gun. Hmp! Gimme any kind of gun, don't care what it is, I'm the quickest on the draw an' the straightest shooter this side of the river. Or the other side either, by gum."

"Then you aim to take up Collins' proposition?"

"Don't push on the reins, Musgrove. I'll not stand for it. . . . Yes, sir, I'm a killer from 'way back."

Musgrove leaned against the bar, his back to it and his heel hooked on the rail. Since Wilson had "a running off at the mouth," as his auditor put it to himself, he supposed there was nothing to do but listen. He took a shot at a crack in the door, using tobacco juice as ammunition, and scored a hundred per cent. hit. A fragment of conversation between two miners drifted to him. "Came to me straight. Three of 'em cleaned up a quart of gold in a week at California Gulch, mostly in small nuggets." Meanwhile, Wilson continued to rave.

Presently, Musgrove straightened himself and stretched. "Well, I'll drift. Good show at the Apollo. Thought I'd take it in to-night. See you later."

Wilson stretched out a hand to stop him. The killer was beside himself with rage, and he was almost ready to turn it loose on the handiest victim. "Damn you, Texas man, you stay where you're at till I'm through. Understand? You come out here inside a Conestoga an' claim you're a bad man. Bad, hell!"

Musgrove looked at him out of chill, hard eyes. "Don't get on the prod with me, Mose. I'm makin' no claims I can't back, but you're sure right when you call me a Texas man."

He spoke quietly enough, but voice and manner pulled Wilson up short. He was going too far, and he knew it. To quarrel with Musgrove was no part of his programme.

He struggled with his temper till he had control of his voice. "'S all right. I don't aim to rile you. Not none. In regards to this Collins bird, why, I'll fight him any damn way he likes. Y'betcha! He's bluffin' fur as that goes, an' he'll never go through."

"Maybeso. But he don't have the earmarks of a four-flusher, not to me."

"He'll go to sleep in smoke, sure as Pike's Peak ain't a hole in the ground. Fix up a letter tellin' him I'll be there two ways from the ace to-morrow mornin'. Say about twelve."

They got pen, ink, and paper from the bartender and sat down at a table to compose a reply. It was a laborious business, for neither of them was used to writing. Eventually, the note was

finished, and Musgrove set out to deliver it.

Mose Wilson sat morosely at the table where they had been working. He ordered gin, and after that more gin. Left alone, with no chance to talk himself into an angry assurance, he began to have qualms about what he had done. This kid Collins—he was nothing, nothing at all. So Wilson assured himself. Probably by morning he would be hard to find. When he read the message Musgrove handed him, he would be frightened to death. Still—Slade was back of him. Maybe the fool boy would stick it out. The ruffian began to think it was bad medicine he had prepared. Naturally, as a means of getting Dutch courage, he continued to drink more gin.

CHAPTER XXIII

TOM TELLS A STORY

Already rumours were flying over Denver and Auraria that a second duel was fomenting. Before Tom had received Wilson's reply half an hour, the story was all over the place. Lieutenant Manners picked it up on the street and carried it to the cabin where Mrs. Gallup and her niece were living.

"It's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of," he said by way of comment. "People of that class of life have no business aping their betters by fighting duels; and, in the second place, to fight with such weapons is barbarous and savage."

Mary Gallup was interested in the fact rather than his opinion of it.

"Is it about this Indian girl they are fighting, the one Tom brought with him to Denver?" she asked.

"I suppose so. There is something else back of it too. The young fellow accused him of a murder committed years ago. It may be true enough. Wilson is a bad *hombre*."

"But isn't it awf-ly dangerous, to fight that way, so close, with these scatter guns?" Virginia asked, much frightened and distressed. "Won't one of them be killed, maybe?"

"It's suicide," Manners answered. "Nothing less. If I had any authority I would arrest them both."

"If you only would," the girl begged, white to the lips.

"I can't. It's outside my province."

"This Wilson! He's such a notorious bad man," Mrs. Gallup pleaded.

"Yes. He's a suspected stage robber and horse thief. We feel sure of that. To my own knowledge he has killed one man, one of his own associates, a fellow called Orton. Very likely he has killed others. It's a bad business. But one can't touch pitch without being defiled. If young Collins had gone straight, he would not have become involved with the ruffian."

"I don't care what Tom has done. He mustn't do this foolish, awful thing. It's a sin against God. I won't stand by and see it done, not if I can prevent it."

"I don't like it myself," Manners admitted. "The fellow is a dead shot, they say. This Wilson, I mean. The boy ought never to have let the man fasten a quarrel on him. It was his own fault, of course. Even then, he had a chance to run away, I hear. But he's stubborn. He wouldn't go. I don't know what he's thinking of to choose shotguns loaded with buckshot. But there's nothing we can do about it."

"Oh, there must be. We can't—we can't——" Virginia's voice broke. She felt her heart a wash of tears.

For there had come to her the vision of a young man, almost a boy, riding up the hill to what looked like almost certain death. It had been the most recklessly gallant action she had ever seen. This boy had saved them. It did not matter what he had done since. That hour could not be blotted out. Then, capriciously, her memory jumped the years. She was a child, her hand in that of a small boy. They were trudging up a long hill to the house of her aunt. And the boy, she knew it with the sure instinct of an infant, was her devoted slave as well as her squire.

"Of course there is something to be done," Mary Gallup said decisively. "If you will bring Tom here and let me talk with him. . ."

Manners was annoyed, both at himself and at them. He should not have told them of the impending duel. He blamed himself for not realizing that they might take it this way. The trouble

was that he did not understand them well enough to know in advance what their reactions would be to any given situation. He had been brought up among women who never moved out of their tradition of what was proper for a lady. They were sweet and gentle and helpless outside of their own sphere. Independence was not becoming. To interfere in the quarrels of men was unthinkable.

“I don’t believe that would be best,” he said, a little stiffly.

“I’m sure it would,” Virginia broke in. “If Aunt Mary could talk with him, he would not do it.”

Manners held himself straight as a ramrod. He resented their point of view. Why should he mix in an affair between a ruffianly thief and a squaw man who prodded oxen for a living? He was an officer and a gentleman, and it was not fitting that he put himself on an equality with them. Randolph Manners was very young and not yet any too sure of himself. Moreover, this was no occasion for women, friends of his, to let themselves become involved in. This last he tried to explain. It was not a lady’s business. People would talk. Better not give tongues a chance to wag.

Mary Gallup brushed through his halting verbiage.

“I don’t know what you mean about a lady’s place, Lieutenant. Should a woman not try to save the life of a poor boy if she can—especially when he has fought for her, when she has known him from a child?”

Manners had an uncomfortable sense of having been put unjustly in the wrong. It did not change his opinion, but he was not acute enough in dialectics to sustain his position. He attempted, failed, and surrendered not very gracefully.

“I’ll see this Collins for you,” he said coldly.

“Please do,” Mrs. Gallup said, without appearing to notice his disapproval. “And don’t send him here, please. He might not come. Bring him yourself.” She gave him the warm friendly smile with which wise women disarm hostility.

The lieutenant departed on his mission. He made a tour of the gambling houses, inquiring for Collins as he did so. The young man was not well known, though his name was on everybody’s lips. Uncle Dick Wootten said he had seen him with Joseph Slade half an hour earlier. They had talked of going to the show at the Apollo.

They were in the Criterion at the time. As Manners started to leave the house, he caught sight of Mose Wilson and his *fidus Achates* Dave. They were sitting at a small table in one corner of the room. Mose had his back to the wall. He always sat in such a position that nobody could get at him from the rear. A man could not live as he did without making enemies, he realized. Beckwourth was sitting opposite him and appeared to be talking confidentially. His voice was low and his head close.

Lieutenant Manners found Tom at the Apollo with Slade. He had paid his dollar, but he was not enjoying the entertainment.

The theatre was the upper story of a popular saloon, and the noise of clinking glasses, of clicking billiard balls, of sudden raucous voices lifted to those above. The body of the theatre held about three hundred and fifty seats. The room had no ceiling and was not plastered. A dozen guttering candles illuminated the place.

For this night, the bill was *La Tour de Nesle*, and the performance was better than might have been expected. But the audience, exclusively masculine, refused to take it seriously.

When Gaultier asked in agony concerning his murdered relative, “Where, O where is my

brother?" various voices offered suggestions.

"I done seen him all tanked up down at the Criterion," one huge red-shirted miner announced.

Later, Queen Marguerite declared herself lost, with a gesture of despair. "Don't you worry, ma'am, I'll sure stay with you till you get outa the chaparral," one young fellow promised gallantly.

Manners made his way down the aisle and beckoned to Tom.

Young Collins joined him, and the officer delivered his message. Tom's heart was lifted by it. He called Slade out and told him he was wanted.

"I think I'd better go," Tom said to his companion.

Slade laid a hand on his shoulder affectionately. "Always go when the ladies call you, my boy," he said with a smile.

As the two walked up the dusty street, Tom asked the lieutenant a question diffidently.

"Do you know what they want with me, sir?"

"I was asked to bring you. I was not entrusted with any other message," the officer replied.

Tom felt a stiffness of manner, almost an unfriendliness, in this handsome young West Pointer. He was sorry, because he admired Lieutenant Manners extremely. The officer had all the charm of personality that comes of education and the aristocratic inheritance. The young plainsman did not resent his aloofness. Tom was modest. He had not, he felt, very much to offer. As far as he was educated at all, it had been in the school of hard knocks. Like Topsy, he had just "growed up." His parents he had never known. It had been Mose Wilson's policy, while he was a little fellow, to impress upon him that he was poor white trash. Therefore he was unduly humble as to his merits. It was Lieutenant Manners's privilege, if he chose, to be distant.

Not that Tom admitted social inferiority in his dealings with men. He stood on his own feet. He was a Westerner, and he looked every man in the eye, acknowledging none as master. None the less, he acknowledged the right of Manners to choose his own friends. He was no fool. He recognized that family and education and training make a difference. Naturally, Virginia and her aunt would like this young soldier who wore so lightly the air of a young prince.

What Mrs. Gallup wanted with him, he could not guess. As he waited with Manners outside the house, after the lieutenant had knocked, he felt both shy and doubtful. Tom had been nervous and worried ever since Musgrove had brought Mose Wilson's acceptance of the terms he had proposed. While sitting with Slade at the theatre, his imagination had been busy with what the morrow was to bring forth. Had he, like Wilson, dug a trap for himself from which he could not escape? Would he never see another sunset? After to-morrow, would he never again be able to walk up and down in a glad world as other men could do? He understood now how a condemned murderer must feel while waiting for the execution.

But the summons from Mary Gallup had for the moment driven the fears from his heart. They would come trooping back later, but just now he had something else to think of.

Mrs. Gallup opened the door to let them in. Tom was struck again, as he had always been, by the vitality of the gracious life which overflowed in her. It was not only that she was tall, full-bosomed, and sweet-faced; rather that her generous spirit expressed itself through a glowing personality. Behind her Tom saw Virginia standing, slender and girlish, in her eyes a fear-filled expression he was always to remember.

"Will you sit down, Tom?" Mrs. Gallup said, after she had shaken hands.

The boy sat on the edge of a chair, awkwardly, turning in his hands the dusty hat he had

declined to relinquish to his hostess.

The cabin was a poor enough place, much like the others in the camp. It consisted of a single room about twelve feet square. The cracks between the logs were chinked with wood and were plastered with mud. There were three chairs of elders fresh from the hills, the bark still on them. The table was of the same material. The flat roof of baked mud upon a layer of split logs and grass was the ceiling. Wooden hinges held the door, and the floor was of hard smooth earth. The mattress lay on slats stretched between two logs.

Nevertheless, somehow the wretched place had an air of comfort, even of home. Coffee sacks covered the ground. A buffalo robe hung on one wall. Antimacassars draped the backs of the chairs. The quilt on the bed was neat and scrupulously clean. Some books were in evidence, and two or three daguerreotypes. One of these was a photograph of Abner Leeds.

Mary Gallup bridged the first few moments with casual talk. Her manner ignored any difference that had come between them. He was, it implied, a friend whom they had not met for a few days.

“We’re having right nice weather,” Tom said by way of contributing to the conversation. “No, ma’am, I ain’t quit the company, not exactly. I kinda got a leave of absence from Mr. Slade, on private business.” The young man blushed, remembering the nature of the business and the attitude of this lady to it.

She did not accept the opening he had inadvertently given. Instead, she went straight to the thing in her mind.

“Tom, what’s this we hear about you and that man Wilson?” she asked. “I mean about a duel.”

He was not wholly unprepared for this, but the attack left him fumbling for words. “Why, ma’am, I—I been drug into it, as you might say. I’m right peaceable. But this fellow, why, he _____,”

“Yes, I understand that. He’s bad, a ruffian and a killer. But, dear boy, isn’t that the very reason why you should avoid him?”

Her voice had a note of tenderness that brought a lump into the young fellow’s throat. A little friendliness from her went a long way with him.

“Honest, Mrs. Gallup, I tried to duck this Wilson. I ain’t lookin’ for trouble. It got pushed on me, looks like.”

She did not discuss that. “Now, Tom, look at this right. Duelling is a sin against God. You know that. There’s a commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Can you go up to the throne of God perhaps with blood on your hands—blood shed wilfully?”

“It won’t be wilful, ma’am. If you’ll show me any decent way to get outa this thing, why I’ll sure thank you. I’ve looked every which way, an’ I can’t find it.”

“You can slip out of town and disappear for a time, can’t you?”

“Yes,” breathed Virginia, almost in a whisper.

The boy looked at her, hopelessly, then again at her aunt. More than anything in the world, he wanted to do what they wished. But he could not do that. He could not run away under fire. If he did, he would be forever a marked man, one who had a stain on his name that never could be wiped out.

Beads of perspiration stood on Tom’s forehead. “I can’t do that. No man could. It has gone too far.” He appealed to Manners. “You tell ’em I can’t back out now.”

Mrs. Gallup forestalled the officer’s answer. She rose and put a hand on the shoulder of the harassed youth. “Two wrongs do not make a right, Tom. Don’t you see that? Even if you have

been led into an error, you must not persist in it out of false pride. It would be too awful.”

“I don’t want to go on,” he said miserably. “I’m where I got to. Lieutenant Manners will tell you so.”

“Nobody can tell me that it is right to murder or to throw away the life God has given you. You mustn’t do it.” She was pleading with him as though he had been her own son.

“I can’t run away now. I just can’t,” he defended. “If I could I would. Honest, I would.”

Mary held her hand out toward Virginia. The girl came forward and took it. “We’re asking you, Tom—the two oldest friends you have in the world—not to do this horrible thing. If you can’t run away, make an apology to the man. Just a formal one. He would be forced to accept it.”

“Do you know who he is?” Tom blurted out.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m told you accused him of killing someone. No doubt he did it. Never mind. Be brave enough to retract what you said, no matter what anyone may say.”

“This Wilson—he’s Mose Shipley.”

Mrs. Gallup was for the moment struck dumb. The possibility of this had never occurred to her.

“He knows who I am,” the young fellow went on. “He aims to kill me. One of his gang told me so himself. He’d shoot me down from behind, the way he did—the way he has done other men. I figured this way I might bluff him out. At heart he’s not game. I know that.”

“But—how do you know he’s Shipley? Are you sure?” she asked. The shock had made her faint and sick.

“Sure. I knew it before I even saw him. Heard him singin’ that ol’ Susannah song. You know the one, ma’am. They used to sing it in St. Joe during the first rush. ‘I’m off for California.’ He usta sing that a lot in the old days. I’ve heard him manys the time when he came home drunk at night. Right away, I knew his voice again. This was down at Julesburg, the other day. When he an’ his friends came outa the station, I saw it was Shipley all right.”

“You’re quite sure?”

“Certain sure. He’s raised a beard, an’ he’s heavier an’ slouchier. But he’s Mose Shipley. I’d know him anywheres.”

“Did he know you?”

Tom could see that both aunt and niece were shaken by this news. It was as though some dreadful thing that had been buried had risen out of the past to confront them.

“No, ma’am. I was only a li’l fellow when he saw me last.”

“But he knows now who you are?”

“I told him last night.”

“You quarrelled before that, then? Please tell me all about it. Was it over this Indian girl?”

“She comes into it.” Tom took a mental hurdle and plunged. “I reckon I better tell you the whole story.”

“I wish you would,” Mrs. Gallup said.

Lieutenant Manners stirred uneasily. He made as though to intervene, but Virginia looked at him, and in that look he found a bar to action.

Tom told his story, beginning at the time he first saw Deer Eyes. He sketched in a few sentences his encounter with Orton, the care with which she had nursed him, her need of a friend. He recounted the facts about her and Wilson, or Shipley.

“She was scared of him—horribly scared of him. No use her going to her father. I don’t reckon he could have stopped it, anyhow. No use takin’ it up with Mr. Slade. She was only a

squaw, anyhow. So she came to me. Well, ma'am, what could I do? She'd nursed me, like I said."

Virginia's starry eyes met his. She was listening breathlessly. Mary Gallup too was intent on every word he uttered.

"I slipped outa Julesburg with her an' brought her to Denver. She's stayin' with Lady Beckwourth," the boy continued. "But it wasn't about her this Wilson, or Shipley, had the first rumpus with me yesterday." He went on to tell the incident of the Professor and the silk hat, playing down his own part in it, and the later developments that had led to the present situation.

Mrs. Gallup gave him both hands. Her eyes were warm with that eager friendly good will for which there is no other name than love.

"I might have known it," she cried, all in a glow. "If I had had faith enough. Forgive me, Tom."

Virginia said nothing, but her eyes were little wells of tears. She had found again the friend that was lost.

CHAPTER XXIV

LIEUTENANT MANNERS AT A DISADVANTAGE

Tom was very happy at finding his friends again. A warm glow coursed through his veins. He wished he knew some way to express to them his gratitude for their immediate acceptance of his story.

Unfortunately, the only way just now open was one he could not follow. He listened to Mrs. Gallup patiently, heard all her arguments against the duel, and clung doggedly to his ground.

"It's not that I want to fight him," he explained more than once. "It would suit me fine if he would call it off. But I'm tied up in a sack. I got to go through. No other way. Lieutenant Manners will tell you so."

But Lieutenant Manners stood in a corner and sulked. He was not going to be drawn into this. It was all very well for these ladies to be kind to the orphan boy they had befriended, but he could see no need of stressing their interest so much. Virginia, to be sure, did not say much, but he could see that she was absorbed by the drama of this lad's fate.

In the end, Mrs. Gallup gave up. She realized that nothing she could say would move Tom.

"Promise me one thing," she said. "Promise me that you'll go home to-night and stay there, that you won't expose yourself foolishly until the time set for the duel."

"I'll promise that," Tom agreed promptly. He was eager to go as far as he could in pleasing his friends.

"You are not staying at the Denver House, are you?"

"No. Fact is, I'm campin' out on the prairie."

"Well, be careful, please. This man Shipley would not stop at murdering you, if he could."

"Oh, do be careful," Virginia added in a low voice.

"I'll sure not throw down on myself," Tom promised. Her words set a fire burning in his veins. He wanted to thank them both, but did not know how. He shook hands with them both, bowed to Manners, and departed.

Mrs. Gallup turned at once to Manners. She was very pale.

"I've got to see this man Shipley to-night. Can you get him to talk with me?"

"No, Mrs. Gallup, I can't. The fellow is a ruffian of the worst type. I'm not going to have you soiled by meeting such a man, not if I can help it." The lieutenant was flushing, but his voice had a note of crisp refusal. He had gone just as far as he was going with this nonsense.

Mary did not argue with him. She had more important business on hand. "Will you find Mr. Brett for me, then?"

"If you insist on it," he said, sullenly. "But I wish you would listen to me and keep out of this, Mrs. Gallup."

"I can't do that," she replied. "Will you get Mr. Brett at once please?"

"I'll get him." He fumbled for a way to say what was in his mind without offence. "I think you're making a mistake, Mrs. Gallup. You've already gone far enough—too far. This isn't a business for a lady. You don't understand. If you did——"

"I think I do."

"No, Mrs. Gallup, you don't. This fellow Wilson is a ruffian. You ought never to meet such a man. The bloom of womanhood——"

She smiled. "But that's a difference in point of view, Lieutenant. You are of an old, aristocratic family. We are of pioneer stock. Always we have come to close grips with hard and

cruel facts. The women you know haven't had to do this. We live in wholly different conditions."

"I know. You shouldn't be out here at all, you and Miss Virginia."

"But that's nonsense. We have to make a living, and as soon as our bakeshop is started, we'll do famously."

"Bakeshop!" he echoed.

"Yes. We're going to sell bread and cakes and pies."

His heart sank. He was honestly very fond of Virginia, but her aunt made it hard for him.

"Do you mean—a regular shop? You'll sell to everybody?"

"To everybody who will buy."

Virginia spoke up, a spark of resentment in her eye. "We hope you'll sample our wares, Lieutenant, and give us your patronage," she said, with a curtsy.

He felt the edge of the remark. "I'm quite sure they will be very good," he said.

Again he felt he had been put in the wrong unjustly. It was all very well for Mrs. Gallup to smile. None the less, he stood his ground in his mind. The fine flower of womanhood could not retain its perfect bloom if it came in contact with every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Some women had to work, of course, but the only occupation fit for such a girl as Virginia was to be queen of her husband's home and heart. He was at war with himself. The warm youth of him wanted to hold her close and protect her from the world. His brain told him it would never do, unless she could give up the ideas that seemed so fundamentally a part of her.

As soon as he had gone on his errand, Virginia turned to her aunt with a little flare of feminine bitterness. "Why does he spend so much of his time with us if he thinks we're not ladies?" she flung out.

Mrs. Gallup suspected that the girl's fancy had fastened on this handsome lad. She sympathized with her niece. It was hard for her. Yet, though she had gone such a little way on the road of life, it was necessary for her to face facts.

"He's a nice boy, one of the finest I know," she said gently. "You mustn't blame him because his ideas are different from ours. It's the way he has been brought up."

"He thinks it's a disgrace for a woman to work. As though we could help it." Tears were stinging the girl's eyes.

Her aunt let an arm slip for a moment round Virginia's shoulders in a little pressure of affection. "It's because he likes you so well, dear, that he cares. He is fighting against his traditions and his training. It isn't an easy situation for him, either."

"It's a funny way to like me," the girl demurred with spirit. "To make me feel inferior all the time."

"Not all the time," Mary corrected. "It's just occasionally. Usually, he's a dear, sweet boy, very kind and considerate to us."

"Oh, kind!" Virginia scoffed. "He's kind enough. But he's so stiff and proper when he rides his high horse. You'd think a girl had to live in a glass cage to protect herself. His kind of women never cooked a biscuit or swept a floor."

Mrs. Gallup nodded appreciation. "It disturbs him that you have to live the way you do and among the people you do. I suppose his mind goes back to plantation life, with all that means—its ease and luxury and restraints."

"I should think he'd know he couldn't make us over. If he wants to know us, he'll have to take us as we are."

"Yes," agreed Mary. "He'll see that finally, but he is trying not to see it." Her swift smile

flashed. "And it happens that he wants to know one of us very much."

Virginia blushed. "Because I'm the only girl here, and he's the sort that likes girls. If there were others in town——"

The aunt's eyes rested fondly on the soft, lovely, vivid young creature. "If there were a hundred others in town, he'd come to see you, Jinnie dear."

"When he forgets that he's Randolph Manners he is the nicest boy ever," Virginia conceded.

It was, perhaps, ten minutes later that the officer returned with Brett. He was the man who had been with Mrs. Gallup when Tom and the Indian girl had seen them as they entered Denver. George Brett was a strong, well-built man with honest gray eyes and a mouth that suggested an appreciation of humour. The hair around his temples was graying, but his movements told that he was in the prime of manhood, vigorous and forceful.

Mrs. Gallup explained what she wanted. He considered a moment before he answered.

"You are not going to see this Wilson alone?" he said.

"No. That won't be necessary. I'd rather you and Lieutenant Manners would be present, if you will."

"That would be better," he admitted.

Her eyes met his fairly. "I understand there is danger for you if you do this, Mr. Brett. Not at the time, but afterward. He'll owe us all a grudge, and if he ever gets the chance to take it out on you——"

Brett shrugged. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Of course, I'm not sure I can get him to come, but I'll do my best."

"I know you will," Mrs. Gallup said gratefully.

CHAPTER XXV

BECKWOURTH TAKES A HAND

Wilson was far from being a happy man. He had let himself get caught in a trap, and he could see no way out unless young Collins weakened. Of course the boy would lose his nerve now that his bluff had been called. Mose told himself so a dozen times. It was not reasonable to suppose that he would stand up there and let Wilson pump a dozen buckshot into his heart or his stomach. No man could be such a darned fool as that. It just was not in human nature.

But suppose Collins went through. Wilson could not escape that possibility. He sat there at the table where he and Musgrove had composed and written the acceptance to his opponent's terms, and he drank gloomily to drown his apprehension. What an idiot he had been! Under the spur of his own bad temper, he had worked himself into the fury that had betrayed him.

Collins would weaken. No doubt of that. But what was to be done if he did not? Mose ground his teeth in impotent rage. It would not be safe now to shoot this Collins in the dark, unless he hit the trail at once for parts unknown. He would be suspected, tried by a people's court, convicted on presumptive evidence, and hanged. Even if he lit out, he would be followed and perhaps captured. His own associates would not hide him, might even give him up; for they were hardy ruffians and demanded, above all, gameness in their leader. Already Musgrove was breaking away from him. He could see that.

It looked as though he would have to go through or sneak away before the time set for the duel. Unless, of course, Collins lost his nerve. And that was bound to happen.

His man Dave bolstered up this opinion, and though the man's confidence heartened Wilson, at the same time it angered him. Dave could be cheerful about it. That was easy. It was not he that had to stand up to the scatter gun. Mose cursed both him and Musgrove. Unreasonably, he blamed them for having let him get into this. He cursed the world at large.

After supper, Wilson and his satellites made a tour of the saloons and gambling houses. The bully knew that he was the focus of all eyes. This flattered him, even though he knew that most of those watching would be glad to see him killed. He swaggered, boasting lustily. It would never do to let them guess he had any doubts.

Those who spoke to him treated him with great respect. They did not know how shaken he was behind this brave front.

Presently, he found himself in the Criterion seated at a table opposite Beckwourth.

The ex-Crow chief's lead was not reassuring. "You're sure a gamer man than I am, Wilson," he said with a smile. "I give you best. Me, I'd hate to stand up to this fellow Collins with a scatter gun in his hands. My guess would be that he is sudden death."

Wilson's heart turned over inside him.

"What makes you say so?" he demanded irritably. "He's nothin' but a kid playin' smart. I'll show him."

"That's sure the way to feel about it," Beckwourth admitted. "No use gettin' scared just because he's a bad *hombre* to face. There's always a chance yore luck will stand up an' you'll get through alive. I'd hate to have to take it, like I said already, but I'm for any man that's got the guts to go up against sure death."

"Nothin' to that. Nothin' a-tall. How do you figure this kid such a world beater? Why, I've taken the hide off'n him twenty times, an' I'd ought to know." Mose was exasperated, but much more he was worried and harassed.

“Clear grit. That’s how I size him up. Say, one thing you want to be careful of. Some of the boys think you’ll get scared an’ fire before the signal. If you do, they’re figurin’ on a necktie party right there. I told ’em ‘No chance,’ that you was game.”

Mose was drinking steadily, but somehow his throat and mouth were dry. He had to swallow an ache before he could answer, “Bet yore boots I’m game.”

“Yes, sir,” Beckwourth went on. “Take a fellow like Collins, with those cold, steady gray eyes, an’ you can ’most always tell he’s dangerous. Still, there’s no tellin’. You might get him too. I wouldn’t be surprised if it happens thataway. I’ve heard several bets.”

“What—what are they bettin’?” asked Mose hoarsely.

“Three to one Collins kills you. Even money both of you are buried inside of a week. I kinda like that last bet myself. You’re no rabbit yore own self, I been tellin’ the boys. You got a reputation as a killer. I won’t take that three to one bet on Collins. I been askin’ for two to one.”

“You’re tryin’ to scare me.”

“Scare you!” Beckwourth showed innocent surprise. “I’d have a lot of luck scarin’ a wolf like you. No, I thought I’d just say a cheerful word as I was passing.”

Dave spoke up. “Mose don’t need any cheerful words. He’s got this bird where he wants him. We don’t give a billy-be-damn what they’re bettin’. He’s going to sleep in smoke, this Collins. Y’betcha! This ol’ horned toad Mose is a sure-enough wolf, an’ this ornery town will know it right soon. He’s hot as a ginger mill to get at this cock-eyed son-of-a-gun, an’ when he’s finished with him, the guy will be deader ’n a Chinaman.”

Beckwourth tugged at his moustache. “Maybeso. I’d give six bits to know how it will come out. You never can tell.”

The ex-Crow chief had said enough, and he knew it. He harked away from the subject to more casual ones. “Met a fellow to-day just back from the Gregory Diggings. He struck the colour an’ claims he has got a good thing. More than twenty sluices operatin’ there, an’ more building.”

“Wonder how a good gambling house would go there,” Dave mused aloud. “I been thinkin’ of going in with one.”

“Don’t know. They are a law an’ order crowd. Gave a young fellow thirty lashes last week for stealing.”

“I’ve heard it ain’t a wild camp. Fellow gouged another with a bowie in an argument an’ they hanged him. . . . Say, what about South Boulder Creek?” asked Dave.

“Uncle Dick came down, the other day. He says the only thing that has been took outa there yet is a drunk that fell in. I’ve a notion Tarryall Gulch is good. That South Park country is rich with ore. I’ve drifted around there quite a bit. Lots of antelope, elk, mountain sheep, wild turkeys, an’ grouse there. Some buffalo, too. An’ all the fish a fellow wants. A mighty easy country to live in.”

“I dunno what you got to back yore notion that this Collins is a bad man with a gun,” Wilson broke out. “What’s he ever done folks should pick him to beat me? Spit it out. Where’s his record, if any? I’m the best an’ quickest shot west of the River—or east either, come to that. I’ve got notches on my gun, five of ’em, if you want to know, Mr. Beckwourth.”

“Any notches on yore scatter gun?” Beckwourth asked.

Mose understood the inference. He did not need to have it driven home that skill would not count here. It would be a question of luck and cold nerve.

“No, sir, he’s a busted flush,” Wilson insisted, hammering with his fist on the table.

Beckwourth knew his work was done. The fellow was badly worried, much more so since he

had talked with him. The scout rose and nodded good-bye.

“See you here to-morrow night maybe,” he said. “I’m headin’ for home now.”

Had there been the slightest possible hesitation before the word “maybe”? Wilson was not sure. His nerves were jumpy, and he might be imagining things. To-morrow night! Before then, they might be digging a grave for him. Mose felt a cold chill shudder down his spine. What a fool he had been to let himself in for this. Beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. He continued to drink, but there was no comfort in the rum. It did not give him courage. It did not even make him drunk.

He got up and wandered over to Denver Hall with Dave. From habit, he still swaggered, still boasted. But the bottom had gone out of his heart. It was hard to act the part of a rakehell with that weight of lead inside him. The place roared with tides of lusty life. Men in buckskin with long fringes! Men in boots and woollen shirts of checkered hues! Men of unkempt locks and shaggy beards! Nearly all of them with bowies and revolvers hanging from their belts. In the midst of this raw, rough vitality, Wilson felt as though stricken with illness.

He was standing before a faro table when a man spoke to him.

“This Mr. Wilson?”

Mose turned and looked the man up and down. He saw a strong, well-built man about forty.

“Who are you? Whad you want?” demanded the bully.

“My name is Brett—George Brett. A lady would like to see you, Mr. Wilson.”

“What lady?” The killer was instantly alive with suspicion. This might be a plot to get him out and ambush him. He had once got his man that way himself.

“A Mrs. Gallup. I think she used to know you long ago, but I am not sure about that. She asked me to tell you that she has something it is important you hear at once.”

“What is it?”

“She didn’t tell me. I gathered it was some warning as to danger. It is very necessary for you to hear it to-night, she told me.”

“Say, fellow, do I look like a tenderfoot?”

“I’m giving you a message,” Brett replied stiffly. “Take it or leave it, Mr. Wilson.”

“Don’t get heavy with me, mister,” growled Wilson.

Brett flashed to anger, real or assumed. “There is no occasion to bully me, sir. I came from a lady. As I understand it, she has information that may save your life. If you don’t wish to see her, that, of course, ends the matter.” He turned on his heel as though to leave.

It was a good stroke, well conceived. Wilson dared not let the matter drop so. He was full of apprehensions and ready to snatch at any way out.

“How do I know it ain’t a trap to bushwhack me?” he shrilled.

The other man looked at him coldly. “If you think so, better not go.”

“Where’s this woman at?”

“Mrs. Gallup is at her home, about three blocks from here.”

“Why can’t she come here, if she wants to see me so bad?”

“She didn’t tell me she wanted to see you that badly. She may have overheard something. If you’re not interested, that ends the matter. Good-evening, sir.”

“I dunno who you are,” the bad man said sulkily.

Brett’s level eyes met his steadily. “I am a law-abiding citizen. If it were worth while, I could give references.”

“Tell you one thing, fellow. If I go, I’m takin’ a coupla friends along. See?”

“As you please about that.”

“An’ I’m choosin’ the way we go.”

“Why not?”

“An’ you’re walkin’ on my left. If anyone makes a play at me, why, it’ll be twelve o’clock for you, mister.”

“You’re doing a lot of worrying for nothing,” Brett said coldly.

“Maybeso. You’ll find I’m wagon boss on this trip.”

Brett lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

CHAPTER XXVI

MOSE WILSON FINDS AN EXCUSE

Wilson took with him Buck Comstock and Dave. Brett walked on the left of Mose, and the killer's right hand rested on the butt of his revolver. The party left by the back door of the Denver and turned to the left, following close to the bank of the creek. It moved warily, keeping in the shadow of the bushes.

"Keep yore eyes skinned, fellows," Mose warned. "If you see anyone lying low, go to foggin'. I'll take care of this pilgrim here first off."

For several hundred yards, they moved along Cherry Creek, then swung to the left in a wide circle.

"Where's this house at from here?" Wilson asked of his guide.

"It is back from the creek some distance. We've been going all around Robin Hood's barn to get there," replied Brett.

"Keep yore shirt on, fellow. All you gotta do is point out this house when we get there. I'll do the rest."

Presently, Brett showed Wilson the house. They approached from the rear as quietly as possible.

"If this is a trap, fellow, Lord help you," Mose murmured, whispering his threat in the ear of his guide. "I'll git you sure." His revolver was out, the barrel pressing against the ribs of Brett.

Comstock knocked on the door. It was opened by Mary Gallup. Brett spoke.

"Mr. Wilson is here, Mrs. Gallup," he said.

She moved back and said, "Come in." A sudden shrinking at sight of Wilson went over her and left her for the moment weak. She leaned against the table for support.

Wilson's glance swept the room. His mouth was a thin, cruel slit in a hard, forbidding face. His eyes took in Mrs. Gallup, Virginia, and Lieutenant Manners. They came to rest on the officer. The young man was in uniform. This was reassuring. In a manner of speaking, he represented law and safety. Mose stepped with catlike liteness to one side of the door in order to be out of range from any sharp-shooter on the prairie.

"Come in, you fellows. . . . Shut the door," he ordered.

They came in, closing the door behind them.

The sight of these ruffians was appalling to Virginia. One of them had murdered her father. The knowledge of this took her by the throat and obstructed breathing. She could not take her fascinated eyes from Mose Wilson. She was sure he was the stage rider who had ridden with them. It was horrible to have to look at him, into the shallow shifting eyes, shining with fear and suspicion. Yet she could not lift her gaze from him. Coming across the plains, she had once seen a bird paralyzed by a rattlesnake as it slid forward, its head weaving slightly from side to side. Virginia was for the moment that bird.

Mose made sure the window was screened by a curtain before he spoke to Mrs. Gallup.

"Well, ma'am, I'm here," he said harshly. Then his eyes dilated. He recognized her and felt a quick spasm of fear.

Mary did not ask him to sit down. She did not sit herself. It seemed to her that to breathe the same air as this creature was poisonous. She must do what must be done and get rid of him as quickly as possible.

"I sent for you—about this duel."

“What about it?” he demanded.

“It must not be. You must stop it.”

It was evident to Wilson that she was labouring under some repressed emotion. His vanity jumped to what seemed to him the most plausible explanation of it. She had fallen in love with him, even though she probably would not admit it to herself. Why not? He had had his conquests with women, a good many of them. There is a type which offers adulation to the male who is a handsome, masterful brute. Mose had been good-looking once, in a coarse, flamboyant way. He still considered himself so. What more natural than that this fine, full-blooded woman had sent for him because she could not bear the thought of danger to him?

Yet he was still wary. He was not sure.

“Howcome you are buyin’ chips to sit in, ma’am?” he asked.

“It’s plain murder. I won’t have it.”

Even while he complacently twirled his moustache with the fingers of his left hand, his brain was busy with thoughts of safety. Was there a way she could protect him from this danger and still save his face? If there was, he did not see it.

He blustered. “This slit-eyed pilgrim Collins aims to scare me out. He’s runnin’ a sandy, but it won’t work. I’m there both ways from the ace, ma’am, as I reckon you know.”

“Perhaps I’d better tell you who I am,” she said. But she did not tell him at once. A wave of nausea engulfed her. How could she stand here and talk quietly with the murderer of her dear brother?

“I’m some curious,” he admitted. “I was sure taken a heap with you when we last met up.” He had not till now removed his big hat, but he swept it off with a raffish bow. “Pleased to death to meet you again, lady. Say the word, an’ I’ll do for you whatever I can. Mose Wilson’s word is as good as another man’s bond. Ask my friends here.”

“Your name was Shipley when I heard of you before.” She paused, struggled for words, then spoke them in a low clear voice. “I am the sister of Abner Leeds. This is his daughter.”

The shot of a pistol could scarcely have startled him more. The shock came out of a clear sky, in the full tide of his self-satisfaction. He had slid the Colt back into its scabbard. Now his hand twitched toward it convulsively. He crouched. His eyes narrowed, shifted toward Brett, and then toward Manners, as he drew back to the wall.

“What’s the game?”

His voice was a hissing whisper. It held fear, anger, and above all the threat of the wild beast ready to leap.

“Go slow,” advised Brett quickly. “We’re not shooting this out.”

The killer’s fear relaxed, but not his wariness. He saw that neither of this woman’s friends had reached for a gun. No need to shoot yet. Time enough if they made a move to get him.

“Onload yore lil’ piece. Tell it quick,” he snarled. “Whad you want with me?”

“Mrs. Gallup has told you,” Brett said. “She wants this duel stopped.”

Wilson spoke, out of the corner of his mouth. “She can speak for herself, can’t she? An’ listen. All of you. Run on me, an’ it’ll be hotter ’n hell with the blower on right here an’ right now.”

“Don’t get excited, Mr. Wilson. I didn’t bring you here for any fireworks,” Brett replied.

“Lucky for you. I’m sudden death to fool pilgrims who try to beat me to the draw. I’ve got birds like that planted in all the Boot Hills west of the River. Start anything, fellow, an’ I’ll be there.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you ever since I met you that we’re law-abiding citizens and not

desperadoes. This gentleman is Lieutenant Manners of the United States Army. These ladies have come from the East. If you'd get it out of your head that we employ the tactics of ruffians _____"

"Meanin' me, maybe."

"Meaning bad men in general. Now, if you'll give Mrs. Gallup a minute and listen to what she has to say, the business will be finished quicker."

"I'll listen," the gunman growled. "An' it had better please me, what she says. I'm a bad man to rile."

"Don't threaten Mrs. Gallup, sir," ordered Manners crisply. "I can find authority to take care of you, if necessary."

"What for, Mr. Officer? I ain't breakin' any U. S. laws."

Manners flushed. "I'm not accountable to you, sir, for my actions," he replied stiffly.

"We ain't gettin' anywheres, Mose," said the man Dave to his chief. "You're gettin' off on the wrong foot. This is no trap to dry gulch you. Better listen to the lady's proposition."

"I'm listenin'," Mose answered sulkily. "I been sayin' so all along, but they keep bellyachin' about one thing an' another."

Mary Gallup looked straight into his shallow, shifty eyes.

"It does not take long to say what I want to say. It's just this. I swear before Heaven that, if you go on with this duel and kill Tom Collins, I'll have you arrested and tried by a people's court for the murder of my brother and for robbing the stage. You'll be taken in charge before you leave the duelling grounds."

"I didn't kill yore brother. It's a lie."

Mrs. Gallup stopped by a gesture the impetuous movement of Manners to call the fellow to account for his words.

"You were thrashed by him. You made threats. You disappeared before his body was found. You changed your name and fled to the West. Since then you have killed men several times. You boasted of it a minute ago. You are a suspected horse thief and stage robber. What chance would you have before a people's court after you had just murdered this boy Collins?"

Mose looked at her, eyes furious with baffled hatred. It was true what she said. He knew that the sentiment of the Cherry Creek settlements was for law and order, in spite of the minority of desperadoes who infested the place. Moreover, he had been so overbearing that he doubted whether the worst element of the place would make any effort to save him. If he should be haled before a people's court, his shrift would be very short.

"He's been hidin' behind yore skirts, has he—this Collins?" he jeered.

"No, sir, he has not. He intends to kill you to-morrow. Good riddance, too." The young West Pointer snapped his words out scornfully.

"Now, go," Mrs. Gallup ordered. "At once. I can't breathe the same air as you."

"I'm gettin' a rotten deal," protested Wilson sourly. "Goddlemighty, I——"

"Did you hear Mrs. Gallup?" Manners moved forward. He spoke quietly, with assurance. "She told you to leave. You will go, sir. Now."

The killer's eyes narrowed. "I'm going, young fellow. But don't you git high-heeled with me. It ain't supposed to be safe."

"Don't try to bluff me, man," the youngster flung out. "I'm the army, in the absence of a superior officer. For two bits, I'd arrest you and look up your record. Don't argue with me. Get out."

Buck Comstock spoke, for the first time since he had come into the room. He had no

intention of coming into conflict with the United States Army or of inviting the investigation of a people's court merely to humour Mose Wilson.

"Do as you like, Mose," he said abruptly. "Me, I'm not lookin' for trouble. What this young fellow says goes with me. I'm sayin' good-bye."

Dave assented, promptly and forcefully. One of the fool habits of vigilance committees, or people's courts if one preferred to call them that, was that they did not always stop with the case in hand. They had a way of starting clean-ups that extended to friends and associates of the immediately guilty party. He did more than agree with Comstock. He opened the door and walked out.

Buck followed him.

"I ain't scared of any of you," Mose made declaration savagely. "You've run in a fixed deck on me. I'm going now, but one o' these days——"

"Yes, one of these days?" asked Manners, following the man as he backed toward the door.

"Why, it'll be different."

Mose backed into the side of the doorway, cursed, and slid out into the night.

It was characteristic of him that he began to blame his companions for having deserted him. They answered his berating in kind, and they went away quarrelling.

None the less, Mose was pleased in his heart at what had occurred. He could back down now gracefully. With the shadows of the government and a people's court moving toward him, he could not be expected to proceed with the duel. He would storm and threaten for awhile before his companions to save his face, then slip away quietly during the night. Not even the most foolhardy desperado could expect him to do anything else.

CHAPTER XXVII

DEER EYES TRIES AGAIN

Tom slept, but brokenly. Usually, after the manner of healthy youth, he lost consciousness as soon as his head touched the pillow. But to-night his imagination was too active. He stared up into the sky, which was like a velvet canopy studded richly with gems. The stars had in the clear night, come very close to earth.

His thoughts were confused and fragmentary. Now they were with his recent experiences, now with the immediate future. He went over his difficulties with Wilson, the reconciliation with his old friends, the talks with Beckwourth and Slade. He wondered if his psychology in making the fight more dangerous had been a mistake, though psychology was not the word he used, since it was not in his vocabulary. He saw in flashes pictures of the morrow—of the gathering carefree groups on the slope above the duelling ground, of the deliberate, cruel preparations of the seconds, of the dreadful moment when he would stand opposite his enemy, waiting for the signal. It was wrong. It was all wrong. He knew that. But he could not see how he had been to blame. Even if he could have brought himself to run away, forfeiting the good opinion of his friends, the issue would have been merely postponed. When they came together again, and it was inevitable that in this sparsely settled country they would meet, the killer would have been more overbearing. No, he had done right, if there was any right in such a confusion of wrongs.

At last he dropped asleep to bad dreams, woke, slept again in snatches, and so came at last to a morning with a sky of clouds flaming in reflection from the coming sun. The riot of colour faded and the clouds vanished. By the time that Tom dropped into Uncle Dick's store, the sky was an expanse of unflecked blue.

Two or three men were lounging about the place. They greeted Tom with a respect quite unusual. To-day he was not an extra man with one of the Russell, Majors & Waddell outfits. He was a leading man in a drama more thrilling and entertaining than any offered at the Apollo theatre. The interest in him was tremendously enhanced, he knew, because most of those whose eyes turned to him did not expect that he would be alive when the sun set. He was a man condemned, and as such everything he said or did was noteworthy.

Uncle Dick gave him the almost universal greeting, the "How?" of the Indians, and Tom answered with the same word. The shrewd eyes of the old scout took in the young fellow's manner of cool unconcern. Certainly, he gave no evidence of collapse under the strain of the ordeal he must be enduring.

"You're lookin' peart as a chipmunk, this mo'ning, son," he said. "If you feel like you look _____"

"The condemned man slept well an' ate a hearty breakfast," Tom answered, grinning. "He walked to the scaffold with a firm tread."

"Tha's the way to talk. Don't weaken, Slim, an' I'll dance at yore weddin' yet."

"Not mine, Uncle Dick. I ain't a marryin' man."

"Hmp! Wonder how many good men have said that before they promised 'I will'?" Wootten did not again refer to the subject uppermost in both their minds. His instinct was the same as that of the sheriff who does not discuss ropes with the man he is about to hang. "Well, it's a sure enough good day, wouldn't you say? This Indian summer is great. I don't hardly ever recollect a better fall. We'll have an open winter this year. The rattlers ain't holed up yet, an' that's a plumb sure sign."

“Like to write a letter, Uncle Dick,” Tom said, moving back to the rude desk where the old scout kept his simple accounts.

“Bet yore boots. Shove all them papers off to one side. By gum, I gotta sell this store or get a bookkeeper, one. It’s got so I can’t chalk up on a slate any more what fellows owe me.”

Tom found on the desk paper, ink, and a quill pen. He whittled a point slowly, trying to think what he would say. He wanted to write to Mrs. Gallup, to let her know, and through her Virginia, how much it had meant to him to know them. He knew he could not put on paper what was in his heart. He was a man’s man. Full of an overflowing emotion, he shunned sentimentality as a Christian ought to avoid sin.

After several attempts he gave up all circuitous approaches and plunged directly into what he had to say.

DEAR MRS. GALLUP:

Nobody was ever better to a poor boy than you and your family was at St. Joe. Same way here last night. I want you should know I appreciate how mighty fine you have all been to me. If I have bad luck please say good-bye to Miss Virginia for me.

I am

Very respectfully,

TOM COLLINS.

He addressed the letter to Mrs. Gallup and put the envelope in his pocket. If he were still alive, he intended to destroy it after the duel.

Beckwourth came into the store, caught sight of Tom, and approached.

“How?”

“How?”

He slipped an arm under one of Tom’s. “Come out to the corral with me, Slim.”

Outside the store, he continued. “Had a pow-wow with Wilson, last night. He made heap much talk, but, boy, he’s a scared gunman. I left him sweatin’ blood.”

“I ain’t right comfortable my own self,” Tom said with a wry smile.

“Figure you can go through?” the scout asked, watching him keenly.

“I reckon.”

“Maybe you won’t have to.”

Tom looked at him quickly.

“Where’s Wilson this mornin’?” Beckwourth asked.

“Why, I don’t know. I’ll see him soon enough. Expect he’s sleepin’ off a drunk.”

“Where at? Not at the hotel. That’s not all. I guessed he might have lit out an’ went round to the Elephant Corral. Late last night, Wilson an’ his crew got their horses an’ hit the trail, probably for one of their shebangs in the hills.”

A great wave of relief swept over Tom. He told himself it was probably a trick, one of Mose Wilson’s cheap attempts at dramatic effect. Very likely he and his outfit would come riding on to the duelling grounds at the last moment, after having left everybody in suspense. That would be like Mose. No, he must not let himself believe that the danger was past. Otherwise, if he had to brace himself again, he might break down. None the less, he was tremendously comforted.

“I reckon he’ll be there,” Tom said. “He’s gone too far, don’t you reckon, to quit now?”

“He’s gone too far to get back here. No, sir. You guessed him right the first time. No sand in his craw.”

This was too good to be true, but when Tom left the scout he was in better spirits.

Deer Eyes ran out to meet him as he passed the house.

“You fight?” she asked him. “With that Mose Wilson?”

“Yes,” he told her.

“No. He keel you. I go. I be his squaw.”

“No use,” Tom said. “It’s gone too far. You couldn’t stop it now.”

Deer Eyes made a proposal shyly. “You go ’way with me—queeck.”

Tom pretended to misunderstand her. “Can’t do that. Got to stay here an’ see it out.”

Her soft brown eyes pleaded with him. “Deer Eyes be good squaw.” After a moment she added: “Maybe have li’l’ papoose for Tom.”

This was too plain speech to ignore. Tom knew he was flushing with embarrassment. “No—no. I am white. You are Injun. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Uncle Dick—he marry Injun,” she protested. “Lady Beckwourth—she Injun. Heap many whites have Injun squaws.” She held up the fingers of both hands to indicate numbers.

“I can’t do it,” Tom cried, distressed because he must humiliate her.

“No like Deer Eyes?” she asked with wistful archness.

“Yes. I like you very much, but——”

The sentence died out. What was the use of telling her that his thoughts were full of another girl, since there was not a chance in the world that the other girl would ever look at him? His explanation would only complicate the matter in her mind. To her, he was one of the lords of creation, and it would not occur to her that anyone would hesitate to marry him if he said the word.

“Deer Eyes, she like you too.”

He knew there was no kindness in deceiving her. Therefore he pronounced sentence in plain words.

“Deer Eyes marry Injun; Tom marry white girl, if he ever marries. Tom not marry Injun.” He shook his head decisively to emphasize this.

She pulled the shawl closer over her head, turned away, and flatfooted back into the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“KINDA HARD TO FIND, THIS NICE
MORNIN’”

Tom crossed Cherry Creek to Denver accompanied by Wootten. He kept his eyes wide open. Mose Wilson was not dependable. He might be lying in wait for him behind some building or in the shrubbery along the creek.

“Gotta see Dave Moffat about a shipment from St. Louis we ordered together,” the old scout said, by way of explanation.

Tom guessed that Wootten was really going as a guard. It was strange, and at the same time heartwarming. Tom had not realized he had friends who would do so much for him. He could see now how they were watching to see he was not made the victim of foul play.

On the bridge, they met a well-dressed man whom Wootten introduced to young Collins as W. N. Byers, editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*.

Byers looked at the boy in surprise. He had heard of the impending duel, but had not expected to see such a youth engaged in so desperate an affair.

“I suppose you don’t want advice,” the editor said quietly.

“Advise the other man,” Tom answered with a smile. “I’ll let loose of the b’ar if it will let loose of me.”

“You are quite right, Mr. Collins. I was going to advise you to refuse to fight. The duel is _____”

“—a relic of barbarism, Mr. Byers,” Tom interrupted. “I’ll say ‘Amen!’ to that. Show me a way out, an’ I’ll not fight.”

“You know my way. I’ve announced in the paper that I won’t fight duels. We should stand for law and order against these bummers who run wild. It is not a high type of courage to fight a duel in spite of conscientious scruples because one is afraid to be thought a coward.”

“I don’t claim it is, Mr. Byers. But what else can I do? You’ve been assaulted and attacked. I notice you’re still right here editing yore paper an’ yore office over there is an armoury, I’m told. You keep right on fightin’ for a decent town. You don’t let these bummers run over you.”^[6]

“I do my duty as a good citizen, young man.”

“Well, I’m tryin’ to do mine. I’m no bummer. I don’t fight or quarrel. Nor I don’t drink either. But I’ve been druv into this, same as you have into stackin’ guns an’ sawed-off shotguns in yore office. By all accounts, you are a peaceable man too, but a fellow can be pushed just so far.”

Byers said no more. There was nothing more to be said.

Tom presently discovered that he was in the hands of his friends. Baldy Brown had borrowed a Concord and four horses from the company, and the old driver held the lines himself. Tom was ushered into the coach and was followed by Slade, Beckwourth, a doctor, and Uncle Dick Wootten. A place had been offered to Goldrick, but the Professor could not reconcile it with his conscience to aid and abet a duel. He did not blame Tom at all, but public approbation was another matter.

Baldy drove out to the duelling grounds, and the party dismounted. Already several hundred spectators were lined up along the slope above the creek.

“No sign of Mose Wilson’s party,” Beckwourth said. “I’ve got coupla bets Mose has taken to the mesquite an’ won’t show up. I’ll collect, too.”

Tom sincerely hoped he would. He had a queer sensation of lightness in the head and

weakness in the knees. It seemed to him due to high nerve tension rather than fear, but he could not be sure. His throat was dry as a lime kiln. Moreover, he was embarrassed by the battery of eyes focussed on him. A modest youth, he had never courted public attention. This was the first time he had ever been given any. His sense of the absurdity of all this formality made him appear to himself an object of ridicule. He had read in a newspaper, two or three days ago, an account of the affair between Broderick and Terry. That had been altogether different. It was tragic that so brilliant a man as the California senator-elect had been hounded to his death on account of a hastily spoken word, but at least the setting had been worthy and the participants distinguished citizens. A duel between Mose Wilson and Tom Collins was nothing less than ridiculous.

The young man could see a trickle of late arrivals hurrying forward along the path from Denver. He lifted his eyes above the squalid little town, past the foothills, to the mountains rising clean and sharp against the skyline. A deep breath whistled from his lungs. Was he through with all this beautiful world, with the mountains he loved? Was there not something in the Bible which Mrs. Gallup had given him years ago—something about strength coming from the hills? Well, it was true. Surely no other town in all the country had such a splendid background as this little Cherry Creek settlement.

Tom became aware that Slade was looking at his watch, not for the first time in the past few minutes.

“He’s late. Don’t believe he’s coming,” the superintendent said. “I’ll give him five minutes more. If he’s not here then, I’ll take my man off the field.”

The young duellist felt the beating of his heart against the arm that hung close to it. His gaze followed the path that led downward. A little group of men were moving along it. How many were there in it—three or four? Wilson and his friends, of course. Tom’s heart seemed to turn over and drop.

Baldy made a remark to him, and he gave the surface attention of his mind to what the stage driver was saying. “Kinda hard to find this nice mornin’, Mr. Mose Wilson an’ his friends, don’t you reckon? Looks like you done made him climb a tree.”

Tom caught a snatch of a sentence from someone on the hillside, a remark carried to him by the breeze. “Betcha Wilson don’t show up. Give you three to one. He’d rather be a live coyote than a dead lion, that lobo.”

Again Tom’s eyes drifted to the path. The approaching men were strangers. Somewhere in Tom a pæan of joy bugled.

Once more Slade looked at his watch. He moved a few steps toward the spectators, then made an announcement.

“No duel to-day, gentlemen. The other party has defaulted. Couldn’t face the scatter gun. Good enough. We’ve sent one yelping yellow dog to cover.”

From a group of toughs there came a murmur, perhaps of protest.

Slade walked closer to them. “Anybody not satisfied? We’re here to give full value, both my friend Collins and I. If Mose Wilson has a representative here who would like to take his place, I’ll be glad personally to accommodate him.”

One of the bummers, a gambler from the Criterion, laughed a refusal of this offer. “You’ve taken us wrong, Mr. Slade. Our kick is at Wilson. We’re right disgusted, after him braggin’ what-all he would do. I expect he lit out without sayin’ good-bye to his enemies. He hadn’t any friends to yell ‘*Adiós!*’ at. No, sir. We’re much obliged, but there ain’t a complaint among us.”

Tom and his friends got into the Concord again and Baldy drove them back to town. They

got out at Denver Hall and proceeded directly to the bar. Slade invited everybody within sound of his voice to drink to Tom's success. Baldy and Beckwourth followed in turn. The proprietor announced that the next one was on the house. To Tom, it looked as though this was the start of a wild night.

He looked for a chance to get away from his friends. It came at last, in the form of a note from Mary Gallup inviting him to eat supper with her and Virginia. As he slipped out of the hall, he caught a glimpse of Slade standing on a table that had been dragged forward. A little man was playing on a fiddle "Great Big Tater in the Sandy Land," and Slade was thumping time with an empty bottle on the anatomy of an unwilling tenderfoot pressed into service. Judging from the howls of the tenderfoot, the stage superintendent was becoming rough. Tom had heard that Slade, when in drink, became an overbearing ruffian. The youngster hoped he was not going to start on a spree now. In a way, he would be responsible. But, of course, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"He'll be higher than a cat's back in another hour," Tom told himself. "Then he's liable to shoot up the joint, by what I've been told. Wish he'd leave now, but, shucks! he won't. He'll stay right there. Drink is sure bad medicine."

Tom had left his roll of bedding and his carpetbag at Wootten's store. He reclaimed the latter, got a towel and soap, and went down to the Platte. He went up the river till he found a quiet spot among some cottonwoods. Here he took a bath and donned his best suit, after he had scrubbed his face till it shone.

He was not satisfied with his appearance. His hands were rough and chapped. He felt awkward in his store clothes. But at last he was forced to go as he was.

[6] The *Rocky Mountain News* fought from the first for law and order against the bad men and "bummers" who infested Denver. The office was fired upon. W. N. Byers, editor and proprietor, was seized by the ruffians he opposed, hustled into a saloon, and saved by their leader. The house in which he lived was burned. He continued to stand for law. Though often threatened, he lived to see the criminal parasites of the young town driven out and punished.—W. M. R.

CHAPTER XXIX

A SHOT IN THE DARK

Mary Gallup and Virginia greeted Tom so warmly that a glow of pleasure ran through his blood. He was grateful beyond measure for the kindness of these women. His modesty could find no merit in himself deserving of such friendship. It was, of course, because he had met so few women that he found their hospitality so inspiring. He had lived among men, roughly. He had never known a mother or a sister.

In this gentle atmosphere of kindness, he felt himself expanding. He was happy here. These women were of that large number who are born homemakers. Shack though it was, this place held comfort and peace. It was the abode of love. The chatter of these women, their bursts of gaiety, their friendly raillery, appealed to that side of him which was hungry for the gentler side of life.

To see Mary Gallup making biscuits, sleeves rolled to the elbows of her firm, well-fleshed arms, was to be conscious of a personality rich and generous and exciting. To see Virginia flitting to and fro as she set the table, a creature radiant with youth and fluent with grace, made for fancies he had never before dared to allow himself. He put her in a home, in his home, singing little joy songs as she moved about her work, and at once began to blush furiously at his own presumption.

She would be sixteen coming grass. Or was it seventeen? Tom could not be sure. Soon, now, some man would march into her life and take it into his keeping. At that thought, his spirits fell. Would it be the young officer Randolph Manners? Or some other adventurous cavalier from the East or South? Whoever the man would be, Tom did not need to argue with himself to be convinced that it would not be Tom Collins. He was too plain, too humdrum, too ignorant to win the love of so lovely a girl. He had ambition. He knew his own value in certain respects. But his merits were of the old dog Tray, trusty and true, brand. There was no glamour about them. So he felt.

And such food. Biscuits light and flaky that melted in the mouth. Chicken fried as no company outfit cook ever succeeded in doing. Baked potatoes hot and mealy. Wedges of apple pie that called for more. Except in the days of his starved boyhood, Tom had never enjoyed a meal so much.

After the dishes were washed, Mary Gallup seated herself at the melodeon, one of three or four that had been brought across the plains to the Cherry Creek settlements, and she and Virginia sang old songs—"Dixie" and "Old Dan Tucker" and "Annie Laurie."

Tom left early. He did not want to outstay his welcome. As he walked back to the centre of the town, he recalled amazingly that he had talked of his experiences much more than was his custom, and that they had seemed interested. Perhaps it was only politeness. He was a little ashamed of having been so garrulous. Had they thought he was boasting? he wondered.

He crossed to G Street and walked down it toward the shadows of some buildings. In the darkness, a figure moved. A voice roared a curse at him. There was a flash of light. Simultaneously a bolt of lightning crashed into his shoulder. He knew he had been shot.

As Tom's Colt came out, he heard a shout behind him. He was hazily aware of other shots, of voices, of his knees weakening under him. Someone crouched over his body, wrenched the weapon from his slack grasp, and was firing it in the direction of the houses.

Tom must have slipped into unconsciousness. When he came to again, an arm was

supporting his head and a face was looking into his. It was the face of Lieutenant Manners.

“Someone—waylaid me,” Tom murmured.

“Yes. Where are you hit?”

“Shoulder. See who it was?”

“No. Too dark. Can you walk?”

“I reckon.”

Assisted by Manners, Tom rose to his feet. The lieutenant slipped an arm around the wounded man’s waist. In his right hand, the officer held Tom’s Colt.

“Better look out,” Tom suggested weakly. “They may be—layin’ for me—still.”

“They’ve gone. I saw them run. I heard their horses galloping.”

The two men walked toward the lights of the town, moving slowly. Manners supported Tom. They reached and entered the nearest saloon. Tom sat down heavily in a chair.

“What’s eatin’ him?” the bartender asked.

“Been shot. Some brandy, please,” Manners said.

Tom drank some of the brandy. He slumped in the chair, leaning against the wall. Feebly he grinned up at his rescuer.

“I’m gonna make it all right. No thanks to Mose Wilson. Hadn’t been for you he’d sure have got me—stayed right there till he’d pumped me full of lead. You scared him off.”

“He didn’t know I was alone. Thought he’d better light out while the trail was open. Better not talk.”

Tom nodded. “I’m sure much obliged.” He felt this was inadequate, but he did not know how to put his thanks into words. Perhaps, later, he could do better, when he did not feel so weedy, so light that a puff of wind could blow him away.

The soldier turned to the men crowding about them. “Someone get a doctor. And make room, please. We’ll let him lie on the floor.”

“I’m all right,” Tom protested, with no energy.

They made a pillow of a coat.

“Get water someone—and a towel,” Manners ordered.

He bared the wound, sponged it, and used the towel to staunch the blood. Presently, a doctor came into the saloon. After giving treatment, he ordered the patient removed to a hotel.

Inside of an hour, everybody in Denver and Auraria knew that Mose Wilson had struck at his enemy in the dark and had been prevented from murdering him only by the West Pointer’s timely arrival. If Manners, unarmed, had not plunged forward into the firing zone, Tom would to a certainty have been killed.

Why Randolph Manners had jumped so recklessly into a fray that was none of his, he never knew. The best explanation he could give himself was that it was some fool boyish impulse for adventure. He had not known who was attacked or who was attacking. Such battles were common enough. The code of the West—and he subscribed to it heartily—was that outsiders had no place in such private feuds. Usually, the participants belonged to the rough, wild element of the community, and the best citizens let the turbulent melodrama work itself out without interference.

Privately, Randolph Manners thought he had been rather a fool. Yet he would have been less than human if he had not enjoyed, even though with some embarrassment, the applause and admiration of the Cherry Creek settlements. He was still almost a boy, and he liked being a hero, even though he waved aside plaudits with apparent impatience.

What gratified him most was the effect of the incident on Virginia Leeds. He had been aware

for some little time that there was conflict between their points of view. This irritated him. He belonged to the romantic school which worships woman as an angel but expects her to accept the superior judgments of man. Virginia's independence troubled him. She was not enough the clinging vine. He had not wholly approved her, even though he had not been able to stay away. Now, there was a change in her attitude. He could see it in the softness of her eyes, could feel it in the gentleness of her manner. He had become her hero.

No longer did he object to her interest in the recovery of young Collins. It pleased him that Mrs. Gallup should nurse him back to health. For these manifestations were in a sense the seal of public approval stamped on Manners's championship of the wounded boy.

Once, after Tom was well on the way to recovery, Virginia put into words her admiration of what Manners had done. The two young people had ridden out to Beckwourth's ranch on the Golden road and were returning. They rode in the golden glow of an Indian summer that filled the earth with splendour.

Her soft deep eyes met those of the lieutenant as she spoke, a little shyly and yet quite steadily. "I never knew anything finer—never heard of anything braver." For a moment, memory brought her another picture, of a young man facing a raised rifle to save her. But she put it from her as irrelevant. She was concerned just now with another case.

The young man coloured and looked very handsome as he blushed. He rode well, and in his trim uniform was a very pattern of gallant romance.

Manners depreciated what he had done. He could afford to do so, since modesty enhanced the merits of his achievement.

"If you had had a gun, even then it would have been brave, against this ruffian who is a dead shot and against his companions. But without a weapon at all——"

"You forget," he interrupted, smilingly. "I didn't know it was Mose Wilson blazing away at Collins. I didn't even know it was Collins."

"All you knew was that somebody was wounded and in peril," she countered warmly. "I'll never speak of it again, very likely, but just this once. . ."

She was so vivid, the youth in her such a streaming banner of splendour, that he glowed in eager response. He had been doubtful and unsure, but now he flung away dull caution. Life was something to be taken hold of with both hands, firmly, impulsively.

He drew up his horse and hers.

Inquiringly, she looked up at him and, before he spoke, knew that the hour was upon her. Her heart gave a queer little jump. Excitement strummed through her veins. She was deliciously afraid.

"Miss Virginia, I love you," he said. "I reckon you know that. I would like for to marry you."

The simple way in which he said it pleased her. It seemed to wipe out the differences between them that had troubled her. What did it matter about his antecedents or hers? They were alone together, in a world wonderful. Youth was theirs—and love. Was anything else important?

She did not answer in words, but her light body swayed ever so little toward him. His arm went around her shoulders, and he drew her nearer. Their lips met.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GOLD DIGGINGS

Tom recovered rapidly. A healthy, outdoor, vigorous life and the reserve of stamina it had built in him contributed to this. Soon he was making experimental little excursions in his room to the window and back. A few days more, and he could dress himself, creep out into the sunshine, and enjoy its pleasant warmth. The hearty appetite of youth came back, and it was no longer necessary for Mary Gallup to bring or send him by Virginia custards and whips to tempt him to eat.

He did not see very much of Virginia, not nearly as much as he wished. But she was in his thoughts a great deal, reverently rather than familiarly. The slim daintiness of the girl, her sweet, shy virginity, the unknown quantity of mystery that haloed her sex when allied with youth and beauty, all contributed to lift her in his mind from the commonplace of reality.

The sight of her tripping down the street in her long three-quarter-circle cape, its quilted lining of blue silk showing as her little feet peeped out beneath her chintz gown, set a triphammer beating in his heart. Surely, he thought, God must be pleased at His work in creating this innocent maiden, in giving to her chaste soul a lodging house so fair and fresh and sweet.

Mrs. Gallup broke the news to him of Virginia's engagement to Randolph Manners. She had stopped, one pleasant afternoon, on her way from Moffat's bookstore, to leave him one of G. P. R. James's novels, and she tried to make the telling of the news as casual as possible. For his dumb adoration had been made plain to her by Tom's eloquent eyes, and she knew that he would flinch at even a suggestion of sympathy. It was better not to let him know that she had read his feeling.

Tom took the blow stoically. He could even smile as he expressed the hope that they would be very happy, and he did not know that the smile was so faint that it gave him away. After all, he had expected this. What else could one look for, except that two such Heaven-endowed young human creatures would gravitate toward each other?

Mary Gallup had her doubts about this engagement, but she did not tell Tom so. She was trying hard to be fair to Manners, to put Virginia's happiness above her own wishes and her persistent fears. The young soldier would transplant her niece to an alien life, one wholly foreign to her habits of mind. Virginia might be happy in it, but she would have to sink or at least profoundly modify the individuality that made her what she was. The older woman knew, though Virginia did not, that from the hour of her marriage she would be lost to the aunt who had been father and mother and older sister to her. Mrs. Gallup believed, even apart from the selfishness of love, that Virginia would do far, far better to marry Tom Collins. And she shrewdly guessed that, if Tom had known how to dress up his merits showily, the young Westerner would have had a chance. But, of course, it was too late now.

After Mrs. Gallup had gone, Tom remained externally a stoic. He said "How?" to acquaintances as they passed. He agreed with a bearded miner whom he did not know that it was probably Mose Wilson who had shot him and that a necktie party with Mose at the end of the rope would be good for the community. He "jollied" with Baldy Brown, who pretended to believe that Tom was a bloodthirsty ruffian always looking for trouble.

"Have any bummers for breakfast this mornin', Slim?" the stage driver asked.

"Not this mornin', Baldy. I'm still kinda puny. Gimme time."

Baldy shook his head. "You ain't livin' up to what's expected of you. This town is gettin'

plumb tame. Reverent Fisher was tellin' yesterday that religion sure is comin' thisaway. The last two men he buried died in their bunks. Up till then, four of the defuncts was shot, one was gouged by a bowie, two got hanged, an' one had d.t. Out of a total of twelve. Well, I'm for peace my own self, even if I have to fight for it when the other fellow has got me cornered an' I can't run away."

"Why, you old ripsnorter, you're always totin' a chip on yore shoulder. You ain't foolin' me any. I know you."

"No, sir. Nothin' to that. I done settled down, an' I'm thinkin' of gettin' married, only I'm too much married already. There's a widow up at Buckskin Joe. She keeps a boarding house. I stay there when I'm at the other end of my run. Boy, she sure makes the eatin'est hot bread."

Baldy was now holding the reins between Denver and the new mining camp at South Park.

"What's the chance of a job up thataway?" Tom asked.

"Well, I dunno. I'll look around, if you're figurin' on leavin' the company."

Tom had not thought of it till this moment, but impulsively he made up his mind to do so. He felt, as he put it to himself, lower than a snake's tail in a wagon rut. Mrs. Gallup's news had been a blow. It is true that he had not let himself hope. But it is one thing to love without any conscious expectation of success. It is another to know that the loved one had given her heart to another. Tom tried to think that he was glad for Virginia. Young Manners was a fine fellow, educated, well to do, of good family. What more could he ask for her? And surely it would be churlish of him to grudge the girl to the man who had run barehanded into danger to save his life.

After a spree so wild that it had been memorable even in the new camp, Slade had returned to the work of his division. Tom wrote him that he was leaving the company to go to the diggings. It was not that Tom was dissatisfied with the treatment he had received. He could not bring himself to go back to the routine of the life. The gold camps would at least offer variety.

Tom decided to try the Gregory Diggings first. He called on Mrs. Gallup and Virginia to say good-bye. The girl was out riding with Manners. Tom was glad of it, even though he longed to see her. There was no need to yield to the weakness in himself that cried out for the sight of her. She was not for him. The sooner he could forget her the better.

Mary Gallup said good-bye to him with some emotion. She wished he were not going, even while she recognized that it was better for him to leave. His departure symbolized for her the approach of the dreaded change. Tom was accepting defeat. She too would have to face a tragic parting. Her only comfort was that it would not be immediate, for Manners had been ordered back to Leavenworth, and he did not want to marry until his family had been duly notified and had met and accepted the bride to be. In the spring, Virginia was to travel back to his old home, and there the wedding would take place. Nothing had been said yet about Mary going with her, but the older woman knew that she would be quietly edged out of the life of her niece. The Mannenses would think it best to remould her by changing wholly the influences that had made her. Virginia would much have preferred to be married in Denver, but already the pressure of her fiancé's social ideas were dominating her.

Tom left next morning for the diggings, driving a pack horse in front of him. He crossed the Platte on the ferry, taking his turn in a long line of covered wagons and supply trains. The road led up to the high lands north of the river and out toward the foothills. Compared to the green prairies of Kansas, this was an arid enough country, but it had a golden beauty, neither bleak nor austere, that lifted his soul. Before him stretched the front range back of the foothills, and behind this the white peaks rose clear and cold, a serrated barrier that hitherto had defied the

settler.

The wiry grass on either side of the road was brown, but Tom knew that it was a nutritious diet for horses and cattle. It seemed a far cry to that day, but perhaps some time, after the destruction of the buffalo, great herds of cattle might roam the whole region between the Rockies and the Missouri. The bison was doomed. He knew that. Already the vast hordes were becoming smaller. This was the chief reason of the unrest of the Indians. But old-timers told him the sooner the buffalo was exterminated the better it would be, for the tribes would be a menace as long as they could raid at will, able to depend upon that animal for food, fuel, clothing, and other necessities.

He passed several ranches where cattle and horses were guarded for their owners, most of whom were at the diggings. By day, these grazed the plains, herded by boys. At night, they were corralled as a protection against cattle thieves, who infested the country as they did most frontier districts, until law became established.

If Tom had not known better, he would have guessed the mountains lay only a mile or two from Denver, so rarefied was the clear atmosphere. In reality they were nearer twenty miles. He made straight for an outjutting spur known as Table Mountain, which rose from the valley a truncated cone for five or six hundred feet.

Back of this lay Clear Creek cañon. The gulch trail was swarming with men on foot, on horseback, or driving mules, oxen, or burros. So steep did the road become that descending wagons dragged down as brakes trees with branches uncut.

From the summit, two hours later, Tom looked back at the plains which stretched to the far horizon. Table Mountain seemed hardly to rise above the surrounding level. The valley of the Platte wound toward Denver, marked by a line of silvery water and dark cottonwood.

In front of him stretched the piled mountains, here bare and rock-scarred, there clad with pine and spruce and aspen. As he got higher, the little parks grew brilliant with the last survivors of the autumn flowers.

Tom camped that night under the stars, but was up at daybreak. After a hurried breakfast, he took the trail again, and before noon dropped down a mountain trail into the valley where the Gregory Diggings had been located.

For miles, cabins and tents were scattered along the gulch. Tom tied his animals and visited the prospects that were being worked. Apparently, no gold was to be found in the stream bed, for the miners were washing the disintegrated quartz found in the crevices and arroyos of the side hills. One old man told Tom that an hour before he had washed a panful of dirt that had yielded more than fifteen dollars' worth of gold dust. He showed the boy a small sackful of nuggets he had accumulated.

A good many sluices were operating. The dirt was shovelled into these long troughs, a stream of water poured through them, and the earth washed away from the heavier metal. Incidentally, Tom learned that the lumber for these sluices, whipsawed by hand, cost as high as two hundred and fifty dollars a thousand feet. He stored this fact in his memory.

Later, he brought it into the light and considered it. For he soon discovered that, though most of the miners were excited by dreams of wealth, they were actually producing comparatively little gold. The best claims had been taken early, and already it was apparent that only on the surface were these placer diggings. It would take machinery to reduce the quartz. Yet there were five or six thousand people in the Gregory Diggings, with more pouring in daily. There would be an increasing demand for lumber.

Tom went into partnership with a husky young fellow from Illinois to supply material for the

sluices. It was hard work, but they made astonishingly good wages.

The life of the gold camp was rough but not wild. Bad men and bummers were not made welcome, and they found it more profitable to fleece the tenderfoot and the returned miner at Denver rather than to move to the diggings. The great majority of the miners were honest, hard-working men, and they administered rough justice to those who violated the rules of the camp. There were no prisons. Theft was punished by the lash, or else the heads of the offenders were shaved and the culprits driven out of camp. Lynching was very rare.

For some weeks, Tom and his partner whipsawed lumber. The setting up of a small movable sawmill by an enterprising New Yorker reduced the price of lumber to such an extent that there was no longer any profit in the cumbersome method employed by Tom.

For some days, they were at loose ends. Neither of the partners wanted to take up a claim at the Gregory Diggings, for it was becoming increasingly clear that mining here was to be a quartz rather than a placer proposition. They talked it all over and decided to go to Tarryall and try their luck there. The camp at a distance is always so much more alluring than the one close at hand.

“Just a shot in the dark,” Marlow said. “Might as well take a look at it. Come Christmas, we’ll go back to Denver.”

The evening before they pulled up stakes, an old fellow rode up to their tent. At the first glance, it was apparent he could be classed a character. His reddish gray hair and whiskers streamed to the breezes. He stood six foot three in moccasins and was so thin that he seemed all bone and sinew. He rode an old cayuse pony, with saddle and bridle that could both have been labelled antiques. Attached to the saddle were a pair of elkskin hobbles and an old Hawkins rifle. A shabby coonskin cap, with the tail hanging down in the rear, was perched jauntily on his head. His buckskin trousers were so shrunken and shredded at the bottom that they reached only a short way below the knees, exposing thin shanks from which the bones protruded. A ragged blue army overcoat gave the finishing touch to his costume. The name he gave was Buckskin Bob.

“Wall, I reckon I’ll ’light an’ camp with you boys to-night if you-all air agreeable,” he said. “I’m a trapper haided for South Park.”

“You’re welcome,” Tom told him. “Supper ready in ten minutes.”

Their guest had lived most of his life in the wilds, and yet, strangely enough, he was a garrulous old fellow. He knew or had known Kit Carson, Colonel St. Vrain, and the Bents, and had a derisive contempt for the horde of newcomers pouring in. Buckskin Bob had fought with and against Indians, and he had learned to respect the natives’ rights. He and his kind had coöperated with the tribes. The settlers now coming in had different interests. The sooner the Indians were cleared out, the better for the whites. As they callously put it, a good Indian was a dead Indian.

Before he turned in for the night, the old trapper proposed they join him for a few weeks.

“I kinda taken a fancy to you fellows,” he said. “Won’t be much money in it, lessen you stay out all winter. But, hell, you kin go back to the States and brag you trapped with Buckskin Bob.”

The two young men talked it over after he had fallen asleep. They decided to accept his offer. The days of the old trappers were about past. It would be worth while to try out the life as an experience. Besides, they had been making good money. They could afford to “take a whirl” at something else, as Marlow put it.

They packed across the divide into South Park. Buckskin Bob was a source of continued

interest and amusement to them. His opinions had been nurtured in solitude and upon such bases of fact as he had been able to pick up from those he met. For he was illiterate and could not read.

“This yere Abe Lincoln they air talkin’ about had orta be hung up to a cottonwood tree, an’ if the States was what they usta be, he shore would be. Why, he ain’t nothin’ but a nigger lover, what I can hear,” the old fellow sputtered.

“Abe is all right,” Marlow protested. “I’ve heard him talk, and he’s mighty smart and has a lot of horse sense. You don’t want to believe all you hear about him, dad.”

“Son, any feller that goes around stirrin’ up the niggers to massacre the whites like this Lincoln does——”

“Nothing to that,” insisted Marlow. “You’re always shouting for General Jackson, dad. Well, Abe is as honest as Old Hickory. I don’t claim he’s as great a man, but I do say he’s no fool fanatic like some claim he is.”

“Hmp! I’m old an’ I’m sot,” snorted the trapper. “I got my own idees, an’ I stick to ’era like a b’ar to a bee tree. An’ this yere John Brown too what has just been raisin’ Cain at Harper’s Ferry. Why, he’s a rip-roarin’ black Republican an’ always was.”

“I don’t say Brown hasn’t gone too far. Fact is, I think he has. But Abe Lincoln is different,” Marlow said.

The snows were late in coming, and game was shy. Day after day, they visited their traps and found them empty.

“Gonna be a open winter,” the old trapper grumbled. “All signs p’int thataway. You-all air outa luck.”

By the middle of December the two younger members of the firm were ready to quit. They told Buckskin Bob so.

“Can’t blame you,” the old fellow agreed as they were leaving. “Maybe I’ll drift down to Denver my own self. ’Bout time I was gettin’ married again. Reckon I’ll not take a squaw this time. White women air comin’ in thick as pine cones. Wall, see you later.”

The travellers trailed down into South Park, crossed it, struck the Platte, and followed the river as far as they could. When the cañon grew too narrow for a trail, they climbed out across the divide to Turkey Creek. Past the red rocks, they dropped down to the plains, and reached Denver on the morning of the fourth day.

CHAPTER XXXI

“WHY DON’T YOU HAVE SOME SPUNK”

Tom and his friend found Denver already greatly changed. They had left it a camp. They returned to find it a town. The place had taken on an aspect of permanency. Better stores and dwellings were being built. A sawmill and a brick yard were in operation, and frame and brick buildings were replacing the mud-roofed log cabins. Two theatres were running day and night, a church was going up, and the children were attending school. The population had more than doubled.

The dispute between Denver and Auraria was less acute, since it had become apparent that there was room for both and that the rival towns would some day merge into one. Already there was talk of an election for town officials.

One observable change was that government money had disappeared. Debts were paid mostly by gold dust carried in small buckskin bags, and every store and saloon kept scales for weighing this. The express company and some of the more responsible merchants had issued “shin plasters,” which were practically promises to pay on sight. One firm had even minted five, ten, and twenty-dollar gold pieces.

But though the town had achieved self-consciousness, it was still recklessly boyish. Gambling and drinking were the rule rather than the exception. As nearly all liquor was doctored by vile substitutions, much devilry persisted. Shootings and gougings were of weekly, if not daily, occurrence. Judging by the morning paper, which was still damp from the press, Tom gathered that the conflict between good citizens and bummers had become more bitter.

The exuberant vitality of the town proved that its prospects were good. In the course of a ten-minute walk, Tom met “Sydney ducks” from Australia, cockneys from London, precise New Englanders, soft-spoken Southerners, as well as Mexicans, Negroes, and Indians. Business appeared to be booming. Thousands of town lots were staked out, and many of them were changing hands. A vendor of vegetables was hawking his wares. A milkman was going the round of his customers, and an iceman was delivering huge blocks at the saloons. After all, Tom reflected, Denver was not so far out of the world. The nearest telegraph station was only five hundred miles away.

“She sure is jumpin’ forward fast,” Tom said to his partner.

They strolled down G Street and passed an assay office where he could see within pouches of shining gold dust and glittering nuggets. Below the corner of Blake Street, at the postal windows of the express office, stretched a double file of residents expectantly looking for mail from home.

At Cheeseman’s drug store, Tom stopped to buy some medicine for his pack horse. The package was being wrapped when a voice hailed him, a cheerful voice of warm, rich timbre.

“Why, Tom Collins, where did *you* fall from?”

Tom turned to see Virginia and her aunt. He answered Mrs. Gallup as he stepped forward to shake hands. “From the roof of the world. I’ve been trappin’ in the mountains the other side of South Park.”

“All alone?” Virginia asked.

“With my pardner Max Marlow. May I introduce him?”

Marlow was a well-set-up man with broad, muscular shoulders, a brown-eyed, likable young fellow, whose laugh came easily. He was dressed in fringed buckskin breeches, beaded

buckskin hunting shirt, and a close-fitting beaver cap. At sight of Virginia, his eyes lit. It had been long since he had looked at a face so lovely as the one that smiled at him from beneath the poke bonnet.

The four of them walked out of the store together, Tom beside Mrs. Gallup, the other two in front.

"Tell me about yourself," Tom said. "What have you been doing? Of course, I haven't heard a word. Are you running the bakery you planned?"

"We call it 'Aunt Mary's Shop,' and we do very well with it. We could sell twice as much if we could cook it. And the prices we get are scandalous."

Tom's eyes were on the dainty, light-stepping figure in front of him. He caught the girl's profile as she turned to speak to Marlow, the delicate flushed colour of the soft young flesh. She was a magnet to his hungry eyes.

"I reckon Miss Jinnie will be going East right soon," he said, coming at once to the subject in his mind.

Mary Gallup's smile flashed happiness. "She isn't going."

"Not going. You mean—Oh, he's coming here."

"No. The engagement is broken off."

"Broken off?" His heart turned over.

"Jinnie thought she loved him, but, after he had gone, she found she didn't. I'm so glad. He rather fascinated her, but it would not have been a happy marriage. She is too—too used to freedom to be caged."

"Then—she isn't going to be married?"

Mary Gallup sparkled. "I won't say that. How can she help it, with every eligible unmarried man in camp proposing to her? I sometimes think they make for our house as soon as they get off the stage."

"They would," he agreed. "To see you or her one."

"Oh, me!" She shook her head gaily. "I just heal the wounds Jinnie makes."

"Not the way I've noticed it," he demurred.

It was odd. Tom had lost his shyness with her. She was no longer Lady Bountiful and he a tongue-tied recipient of her kindness. He was actually enjoying himself.

"I didn't know you ever noticed a woman, except as part of the landscape," she commented.

He ventured a question, greatly daring, "I suppose you didn't know—ever so many years ago—how foolish a ragged li'l boy named Tom used to be about you?"

"I knew he liked me," she said, blushing a little.

"He was plumb scared for fear you'd go an' get married before he was grown up," Tom laughed, tolerantly, at the little ragamuffin he used to be.

"Well, I've waited," she challenged gaily.

"Yes, ma'am, but not for me," he said shrewdly.

"Who for, then?"

"I don't know." There came to him a flash of divination. "But I'll bet *you* do."

She flashed at him the look a woman gives her equal, not the one she gives a boy. "How do you come to know so much, sir? What have you heard?"

"Not a thing." He stopped in his stride. "Who is the lucky man, ma'am?"

Again the colour dyed her cheeks. "I didn't say—"

"Sho! You're sayin' it right now, mighty eloquent."

"I am not, Tom Collins," she denied.

“Who?” he asked again.

“Give you three guesses.”

“Do I know him?”

“Yes.”

“Lemme see.” Tom found he actually dared tease her. “Not our fat friend Price.”

She shook her head vigorously. “No, thank you.”

“Baldy Brown kinda mentioned it, but he’s married quite some already.”

“Then it can’t be Baldy, can it?”

“Is he a leading citizen?”

“He’s my leading citizen.”

“Then I guess Mr. Brett.”

She was surprised. “What made you think of him?”

“I noticed a thing or two before I left.”

“Well, you’re right.” Then, a little diffidently, “Do you like him?”

“I’d say he was a fine man, what little I’ve seen of him?”

“I’m glad you think so. He is. I want you to be friends.”

“If we ain’t, it won’t be my fault,” Tom said stoutly. “He’s gettin’ the sweetest an’ the finest lady west of the River.”

She flashed her white-toothed smile at him. “That’s a lot of territory. It takes in Virginia.”

“I said west of the Missouri,” he defended, pretending to misunderstand.

“Yes, I heard you. And I mentioned Jinnie.”

This was different. Tom lost his newly acquired boldness.

“Is she—is she kinda interested in anyone else since she an’ the lieutenant quit?”

Mrs. Gallup’s answer was a point-blank challenge to his courage. “Why don’t you ask her?”

The colour poured into his face beneath the tan. “I don’t reckon it’s any of my business.”

“Of course, if you feel that way,” she countered.

“How else could I feel? She’s the sweetest young lady ever was, an’ I’m only the common run of the mill working man.”

“You think it is a disgrace to work?” she asked with mock politeness.

“No, ma’am, I don’t. But—sho! what’s the use of foolin’ myself?”

“Just what I think. Tom, you make me mad. You’re as good as any other man—better than most. Why don’t you talk to Jinnie the way you do to me? Why don’t you have some spunk? She’s only human, you know.”

Tom’s eyes rested on the girl he loved. She had turned a face bubbling with mirth to Marlow, and the young man’s laughter was ringing out. Youth, divine youth, trod in her light step. It spoke in her eager words. It danced out of her eyes.

“She’s—different,” he said.

“I love her more than anyone in the world. But, after all, she’s just a girl. She likes to dance and wear pretty clothes and be paid compliments. And she has the temper that goes with that red hair. If you are thinking of her as an angel——”

“I’m thinkin’ that I’d lie down an’ let her tromp on me, if she wanted to,” he said fervently.

“A lot of good that would do her,” Mary answered drily. “Do you suppose a girl likes a man better because she can use him for a door mat? I should think she would prefer a man who stood up on his feet and looked her in the eyes. Oh, Tom, I’ve no patience with you.”

“No, ma’am. I expect not. If she was like other young ladies——”

“Fiddle de dee! Quit thinking of her as a young lady. She’s just Jinnie, and she’s like a thousand other girls. The nicest in the world, I’ll admit that, because she’s mine, but just as foolish and as human as they all are. She’s dreaming about a prince around the corner, probably, but she’ll marry some nice boy. At least, I hope so. If you want to be that boy——”

He turned on her, startled. “Me, ma’am? You don’t reckon she’d look at me?”

“I am looking at you,” Mary said quietly, “and I am seeing a mighty nice-looking young man, clean, good as any I’ve ever known. Maybe Jinnie might see what I see.”

“I’m like I said, one of the common mill run. I just grew up any way, uneducated, without any advantages. Mose Shipley says he picked me outa the gutter. Maybeso. Nobody knows what kind of folks I come from.”

“You came of good stock. Anyone can see that. Anyhow, it’s just possible the girl who marries you might take you for yourself, Tom, and not for your folks.”

He went on, following his line of thought as though she had not spoken. “An’, Miss Jinnie, she can go back right to the Revolution an’ be proud of her ancestors. They are all fine people. You brought her up right, too. She’s been educated proper. She wouldn’t look at me, Mrs. Gallup.”

“You’ve never given her a chance, have you? Whenever you are around her, you spend your time trying to look like a door mat.” There was a touch of acid in her voice. “Modesty is all very well, but at times it ceases to be a virtue.”

He flushed. “Can’t you see how I figure it? She’d ought to marry someone who can give her all sorts of advantages like Lieutenant Manners could. I’m only a working man, and while I’d do my level best, it wouldn’t be so awful much.”

Mary Gallup lifted her hand in indignant protest. “You keep speaking of yourself as a working man, as though most folks aren’t. Her father was a working man—and his father—and his father before him. All pioneers, just as you are. I had rather a thousand times Jinnie married a man like you than one like Lieutenant Manners, though he is a mighty fine young fellow. There is no call for you to be so humble with Jinnie. You wouldn’t let that Mose Shipley stamp on you, would you? Nor anybody else. She’s the only one you are afraid of. It’s ridiculous. You fought your own way up. Everybody speaks well of you. Why don’t you go in and win her?”

Tom’s mind was a jumble of fragmentary emotions. He wanted to thank her for her kindness, for the hope that she had so unexpectedly given him. He wanted to explain to her why he was an impossible suitor, and at the same time inconsistently wanted her to encourage him not to give up.

“Trouble is, Mrs. Gallup, I never learned to play. Look at those young folks ahead. Laughing an’ having a good time. Why, I don’t know how to talk thataway to a young lady. My tongue’s tied, looks like. Don’t you reckon its because my bringin’ up made me such a solemn cuss?”

“That’s just what it is, Tom. But you are not naturally that way. Not with men, I have noticed. Just forget to be afraid, and go ahead.”

“Thank you, ma’am—a heap. You’re mighty good to me. I never dared hope. She’s so dainty, so kinda frail.”

“She’s the daughter of a pioneer, and the granddaughter of one, and she’s as strong as a hickory sapling,” the girl’s aunt said proudly.

“Yes’m, still——”

Mrs. Gallup broke in. “When you get to feeling sort of apologetic, Tom, just remember that the boy who rode up that hill to save us didn’t waste any time explaining or apologizing. He

just stepped in and did a man's work. Jinnie will never forget that."

"Psh! Anyone would have done that."

Her answer flashed swiftly back. "No," she denied. "And there is another side to it, Tom. Jinnie's side. Is it fair to her not to give her a chance to say how she feels?"

"Why, do you mean—you can't mean——"

"I'm not saying what I mean. I don't know anything for sure. Maybe she just thinks of you as a brother. Maybe that is all she could ever feel. But——"

"You must be 'way off, ma'am. Why, she never hardly speaks to me."

"I'm not promising anything. All I know is that she likes you very much—and that's all I am going to say. Haven't you the sand in your craw to take a 'No' from her, if it is to be 'No'?"

"I don't look at it this way. I just don't want to presume."

"It's never presumptuous for a decent man to love a woman. It's the greatest honour he can pay her."

As they started to cross the street, a wagon drawn by four sorry-looking horses came down the road. In it were several crates filled with turkeys.

"Turkeys!" Mrs. Gallup exclaimed. "Think of it. Turkeys away out here!"

That wagonload of turkeys was to be a landmark in the life of Denver. But how were Mrs. Gallup and Tom to guess that it would not only force an issue between the bummers and those who stood for law and order, but would have personal results for themselves of great importance?

Mrs. Gallup hailed the driver. "Are your turkeys for sale?"

The driver pulled up and dismounted. "Yes, ma'am. They's right good turks, too. I done raised them myself, in the San Luis valley. I brought them all the way here for the Christmas trade."

"How much?"

"Six bits a pound, ma'am." He forestalled objection by an explanation. "The coyotes and the wolves got most of my turks. I have to charge a right fancy price to break even."

The question of provisions in the Cherry Creek settlements was regulated by supply and demand, but was likely to be very capricious. Flour was just now dirt cheap, because a large amount of it had been left in Denver by disgusted gold seekers returning across the plains to their homes. Eggs were very high, but antelope meat was inexpensive. The purchasing power of money was much higher in those days than now, and Mrs. Gallup was taken aback at the price asked for the turkey.

"That's a good deal." She came to her characteristic quick decision. "But I will take one. Christmas only comes once a year."

Mrs. Gallup invited Tom and Marlow to join them for Christmas dinner.

Tom carried the turkey home for her and built a coop for it.

In Virginia's presence, Tom felt very self-conscious, as though in discussing her he had been taking her name in vain. When she talked to him, his replies were monosyllabic.

Alone with him once for a moment, the girl rallied him with demure gaiety. "Why don't you talk to me, Tom, like you do to Aunt Mary?" she asked.

With the memory of his recent conversation in mind, Tom flushed furiously. "I don't rightly know how to talk to young ladies, Miss Jinnie."

"Well, to begin with, don't call me 'Miss.'"

"No, ma'am."

"And don't call me 'ma'am.' I am just Jinnie. You act like I bite. I don't. I truly don't."

Her bright eyes challenged him. The tawny flecks in them matched her rich abundant hair. Little imps of mischief kicked up their heels beneath the shadow of her lashes.

“I expect I’m scared of you,” he admitted, smiling at her.

Who knows what craft or what innocence prompted her next remark? “Of course, I know you like Aunt Mary far better than you do me. Still, you can pretend——”

Then Tom showed gross ingratitude. He deserted the friend who had encouraged him, who had been kinder to him than anybody else in the world.

“But I don’t—I don’t,” he blurted out. “I don’t like her half as much—or a quarter. That is, I mean——”

Like many other women before and since, Virginia was afraid of what she had started. Her instinct was all for delay. Not here, not now, at least. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Max moving toward them from the house. She called to him, to protect herself—or Tom—or both of them.

“Have you come to help us?” she asked.

“Sure,” he called back. “That dumb pilgrim is probably botching his job. I’ll have to see he does it right.”

Automatically, Tom came back with an answer. “Don’t you go puttin’ on the lugs with me, boy.”

They fell into an argument about carpentry, and Virginia seized the opportunity to make excuse that she must see her aunt.

CHAPTER XXXII

OUT OF THE PAST

As the friends walked down town, Tom's silence and Max's volubility were full of the girl they had just left.

"You old scalawag, why didn't you ever tell me you knew a young lady like Miss Virginia?" Max demanded. "She's the prettiest girl I have seen since I left the States—and the sweetest."

Tom scarcely heard him.

Max went on, needing no encouragement. "And the brightest. She's just as sassy, in a nice way. You sure have got to get up early in the morning to get ahead of her."

Tom accepted this testimonial at its face value. He did not need anybody to sell Virginia's virtues to him. Indeed, it was only his surface mind that heard Max's enthusiastic commendations.

"Yes, she's mighty sweet," he said simply.

He was wondering what she had meant by egging him on to break the shy reserve that had padlocked his lips. Had she meant anything, except, perhaps, to taunt him for being a stick? And was she annoyed at him for the fool outburst he had started? Very likely. She had called to Max at once. No doubt that was meant as a reproof to him.

"It was real good of her aunt to ask me with you for Christmas dinner seeing she had never met me before," Max said gratefully. "I'll bet it is a good dinner, too."

"It will be a good dinner," Tom promised. "Turkey an' all the trimmings. You'll wonder how she could fix up such a dinner, 'way off here. She's a right fine cook, Mrs. Gallup is."

Tom's eyes picked up a sign in a window. It read:

DR. HOMER CORLISON

Hebrew Plaster Makes You Well

Tom stopped. Somewhere in his brain some nebulous memory had been evoked. Where had he seen that name, that sign before! Not recently. Must have been long before he hit Western territory. Yet surely——

The answer came to him in a flash. At St. Joe. In the old days. He knew exactly where—and when.

He saw, in memory, a ragged little boy trotting behind a large, light-stepping man, a dandy with long black pomaded curls, wearing a flowered vest and broadcloth and shining boots. In the hand of the man was a blacksnake whip. He stopped in front of a house, opened the door, and walked in. On the window of that house a sign had been hanging exactly like the one he was now looking at. The scene came back to Tom so vividly that he almost heard the scuffling of feet, the high-voiced protestations, and the screams of the tortured victim.

"What's up?" asked Max Marlow.

"Why, it's queer. This sign—I've seen it before—long ago."

"Mean you know this doctor?"

"I've seen him." Tom yielded to swift impulse. "I'm going in to see him now."

"Feel like you need a Hebrew Plaster to make you well, Tom?" his friend asked jocosely.

Tom was already knocking on the door. "Come along in, Max," he said.

Marlow followed him and found himself in a room which evidently served both as a bedroom and a laboratory.

A man was bending over the stove stirring a boiling pot from which rose a strong, pungent

odour. He put down the spoon, wiped his hands on a cloth, and came forward with an unctuous smile. He was a little old man, wrinkled like a last year's winter pippin. The eyes in his leathery face were cold and calculating. As he spoke, he continued to go through the motions of washing his hands.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

The impulse which had brought Tom thus far died within him. He did not know what to say. It was quite possible that this little medical faker might not want to be reminded of his St. Joseph experience. While Tom still hesitated, Corlison went on fluently. Words seemed to roll out of him as water out of a bottle.

"I trust, gentlemen, that through my humble instrumentality the means may be supplied of restoring your health. The Hebrew Plaster cures all diseases. It is an opodeldock so potent that illnesses disappear before it like vapour before the sun. Rheumatisms, agues, fevers, chills, all vanish completely. Lung and liver complaints, gout, humours, stiff joints, tumours are swiftly assuaged. I may add——"

Tom managed to get in a word. "Sorry, doc, but I haven't an ache to my back, me or my friend, neither."

"Ah! you are married, you have a wife, a family of precious angels sent from heaven to bless——"

"Wrong guess again, doc. No wife, no angel children. Both of us lone travellers through this vale of tears."

"But you have a sick friend," Corlison pleaded, "one who needs the relief of this boon to humanity, this sick-bed comforter, this——"

"Nary a sick friend, doc."

"Then you haven't come to buy Hebrew Plaster?"

"No, sir, I came in——"

Corlison threw up his hands in a violent gesture of despair that was amazing under the circumstances. "Knew it," he cried in a falsetto almost a scream. "Knew it all the time. Nobody wants any in this cursed country. The devil made the infernal place. No swamps. No chills or fever. Everybody so dash-dogged healthy that even the vile liquor they pour down their throats can't hurt 'em."

The eyes of the young men met in humorous appreciation. This promised to be good.

Corlison's tirade did not stop for an instant. A finger trembling with rage flung itself toward the window. "Go out to that cemetery there. What do they call it? Boot Hill. Why? Because nobody there died of a decent disease sent by Heaven. All of 'em murdered—shot up, gouged, hanged, suicided, scalped. Did any of 'em have the pleasure of suffering ill health before they were flung unprepared into another life? Did any one of them enjoy the blessings of the Hebrew Plaster after the God-sent castigation of osseous rheumatism, of a cirrhotic liver, of a wasting of the marrow which is the centre and circumference of the essence of perpetuity? None of 'em. None of 'em. Hurlled before their Maker without any of the consolations of lingering illness."

"That's right, doc. Most of 'em sure did cross the divide sudden," Tom agreed. "But I don't see what we can do about it now."

"It's a depraved community, young sir. The vices of the place, sir, come from its disgusting health." The quack doctor's anger died away as suddenly as it had gathered. Once more he went through the motions of washing his hands. "To what have I the honour of your visit, gentlemen?"

“I came in on a sorta impulse, doc,” Tom replied. “Didn’t you live once at St. Joe?”

“Yes, sir, I practised my profession of healing the sick there. Some years ago.”

“Ten years ago,” Tom suggested. “I was a li’l chap then. Do you recollect a fellow called Mose Shipley, who sold a hogwash he called the Indian Queen Tonic?”

The cold eyes of the quack took on life again. They flamed with hatred.

“Recollect him? I—I——”

Corlison sputtered to silence, then words like a volcanic eruption poured forth. “He was a double-dyed, drunken scalawag, an imposter of the worst type, a fiend in human shape, a defiler of virtue, a murderer who dwelt like a poisonous rattlesnake——”

“What I dropped in to mention was that this near reptile was poisoning the atmosphere of this depraved community recently.”

“Here. You mean he was here?”

“Here, doc. An’ he’s still all them dictionary words you slung out so eloquent.”

“Is he here now?”

“I reckon not. He had a li’l trouble an’ lit out. But seein’ as I was passin’, and remembering you wasn’t friendly with him, I took the liberty of tellin’ you so you would sidestep him if you ever meet. He calls himself Mose Wilson now.”

“If he returns, I shall denounce the fellow for a murderer.”

“No, doc. That wouldn’t be overly safe. Give him rope an’ let him hang himself. Well, I’ll be movin’ along. *Adiós*.”

Outside, Max put the question that had been simmering in his mind. “Now, maybe you will tell me what it’s all about.”

“Ever heard of this fellow Mose Wilson?”

“Sure. He’s the worst horse thief and bummer in the territory.”

“I won’t argue about that, Max. That fellow ruined my life when I was a child. He treated me like a slave an’ he usta whip me scandalous whenever he took a notion. He was a quack doctor when we lived in St. Joe. Well, this Corlison was a rival. They slung type at each other in the newspapers, and then Mose horsewhipped Corlison. I thought I’d better tell the little fellow. You can’t tell about Mose. He’s vindictive, and he might run on Corlison again.”

“Corlison is vindictive too,” Max replied. “Did you notice his eyes when you mentioned Mose?”

“So would you be if you’d taken the rawhiding he did from Mose. I’ll bet he’s carrying the scars yet.”

“Well, I’m for him,” Max flung out lightly. “I’m for anyone against Mose Wilson.”

“Me, too,” Tom nodded. “Soon as someone gets that fellow, the better it’ll suit me. I’d be mighty relieved to hear to-morrow that he’d been planted in some man’s Boot Hill.”

The friends had reached Denver Hall, and they dropped in to watch the gamblers. Most of the social life of the town centred in its saloons.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE BATTLE OF THE TURKEYS

Denver hailed that wagonload of turkeys as shipwrecked mariners do the approach of a rescue vessel. Sentiment finds a fertile soil in the hearts of those in far-flung exile from their homes. Those turkeys became a symbol. They stood for firesides, in Virginia, Massachusetts, Ohio, Georgia, and Mississippi. They carried the memory back to the days of happy boyhood before the itch for gold had filled them with the wanderlust. There was a rush to buy. Price made no difference. The rancher from the San Luis valley took in money so fast that he could hardly find time to weigh the gold dust.

Then, in the early December dusk, the bummers took a lawless hand. They rushed that wagonload of turkeys, brushed aside the salesman and the purchasers, tore open the coops, and vanished with the turkeys. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Horses had been stolen without redress. Road agents had held up stages and got away with the loot. Highway robbers had slugged and robbed citizens. Murders had been committed in broad daylight and the killers escaped justice. There had been sporadic punishment when the evidence was clear and the guilty ones could be found. But a people's court is cumbersome and is slow to act. The lawless element had taken advantage of this.

The raid upon the turkeys was accepted as a challenge by the law-abiding people. Many of the turkeys taken had been bought and paid for but not yet delivered. The theft had been a deliberate provocation, a flagrant defiance of the rights of the majority. Within an hour, handbills were printed and circulated calling for a citizens' meeting.

Denver became immediately a house divided against itself. The bummers drew together, just as the better element did. They had been carrying things with a high hand so long that they considered themselves immune. While the citizens' meeting was in session, they paraded up and down the streets, beating drums commandeered from the theatres and firing into the air.

The meeting was inconclusive. The more timid residents advised caution. The sounds of defiance from the streets were echoing in their ears. Bolder ones insisted that immediate action must be taken. Four of the raiders had been identified—Chuckaluck Todd, Bill Harvey, Tom Clemo, and Buck Comstock. It was argued by the more intrepid that signs of weakness at this time would be fatal. It would mean that the law-and-order group, by far the greater number, dared not defend their rights. In the parlance of the camp, the bummers had called for a show-down. The proposal of the more courageous leaders was to send a posse out and round up the four thieves who had been recognized.

While the meeting was still in session, a man rushed in with the news that one of the honest citizens had been fired at twice and another beaten outrageously. This made the issue more definite, but did not bring the opposing factions together.

Tom took no part in the debate. He was young, and the more responsible older men must decide on the best policy to pursue. Among those present were a good many of his friends. Beckwourth urged an immediate assertion of authority. Uncle Dick Wootten was of the same opinion, though he was no speaker and did not address the assembly. Goldrick acted as secretary and the newspaper editor Byers presided.

It was a turbulent night, one long to be remembered by the pioneers. Bands of both parties were up all night, and conflicts were narrowly averted more than once. Individual clashes were frequent. A blacksmith named Tom Pollock⁷¹ was attacked by a bummer, one McCarty, and the

blacksmith was forced to knock him down with a wagon spoke. Later, another tough fired at Pollock on Blake Street. Shots were interchanged, and the bad man was killed by Pollock.

The day was as filled with delirious action as the night had been. The wildest rumours became current. The town was going to be burned. The bummers were inciting the Arapahoes to attack the whites. Troops had been sent for to Leavenworth. Nothing was too improbable to believe.

It was close to noon when Tom was stopped by Corlison.

“He’s here,” the little man shouted excitedly.

“Who?” Tom asked.

“That Mose Shipley. I saw him. I saw him with the bummers down at the Criterion. He’s working them up to make trouble.”

“You sure?”

“Tell you I saw him with my own eyes. Him and his friends lined up at the bar and drinking. A big bunch of ’em, and Mose Wilson chief of the whole hell brew.” The little man patted with his hand the butt of the Colt strapped to his side. “I’m taking no chances. Back of this I am just as big a man as he is, and I won’t stand for any bullying.”

The little man’s bitter animosity would have been surprising to anybody who did not know, as Tom did, what had precipitated it.

“Mose Shipley has changed considerable,” Tom remarked. “He’s grown a big beard and his hair is turning gray. You might have been mistaken.”

The quack doctor’s eyes glittered vindictively. “Not me. I hate him too much. Besides, he’s got marks on him he can’t change—the second finger missing on his right hand, for instance.”

This was conclusive. Mose was back in town. Tom had often seen the hand with the missing finger. He had heard Mose boast that the other fellow had been buried after the trouble.

“That’s Mose, sure enough,” he admitted. “Probably he’ll start something when he’s all tanked up.”

“Hope so.”

“Don’t go near him,” advised Tom. “He’s dangerous when he’s got his skin full of liquor. And don’t forget that he’s sudden death behind a gun.”

Tom went looking for Beckwourth and found him at Uncle Dick’s store.

“Guess who is in town,” Tom said.

“My first guess is Mose Wilson. I’ve seen him,” the ex-Crow chief answered. “He’s priming himself for trouble, too. We’re not through with these scalawags yet, Tom.”

Beckwourth was right. Tom did not doubt it. There was a general uneasy feeling that a clash of some kind impended.

Denver was a moving arsenal that day. Even those citizens, like Tom, who did not habitually carry arms were girded with them now. Usually, the quiet citizen who did not look for trouble was not likely to be assaulted. He went about his business and was let alone. The revolver and the bowie knife were ordinarily used against each other by the lawless and the ne’er-do-wells. If it had been otherwise, the reckoning would not have been so long delayed. But to-day the line was sharply drawn between those who stood for order and those who were defiant of it. Even the most inoffensive family man did not feel safe to-day without a weapon. It was possible that he might be killed out of sheer wantonness.

The tenseness of the feeling made for caution. The more reckless of the bummers were warned by their leaders to be careful. The situation was too strained to allow of any flourishing of arms. The least conflict might precipitate a general clash, and this the bummers wished to

avoid as much as the honest citizens.

For they realized that, in the end, if the situation reached open warfare, the law-and-order forces would triumph. Therefore, men walked warily, usually in groups, ready for trouble but anxious not to start it.

The crisis came just after dark. Mose Wilson swaggered out of the Criterion with his shadow Dave at heel. During the day, he had steadily poured into himself drink after drink.

He had reached the state of obstinate drunkenness, and there had been growing in him a determination to call on Mrs. Gallup and bully her into fear. Often, since their meeting, he had thought of her, and always with resentment. She had given him the excuse to do what his fear had been driving him toward. None the less, he wanted to impress her. She was a woman and a handsome one. It goaded him that she had forced him to sing small. He would show her.

As the group passed Denver Hall, a young man crossed the street in front of them. To Mose Wilson's drunken fancy, the figure seemed familiar. He thought he recognized Tom Collins. He had flung away all discretion, all caution, with the whisky he had poured down his throat.

Instantly, his revolver flashed out. He fired twice. His victim went down into the road a crumpled heap. Mose ran forward.

"For God's sake, stop, Mose," screamed Dave.

There was no stopping the man's murderous mania. At a distance of ten yards, he pumped three more bullets into the huddled body.

His white-faced followers stood looking at each other aghast. They heard voices, footsteps approaching. They fled and left him to his fate.

Already a crowd was gathering. From Denver Hall, from every saloon, men were pouring.

The assassin sobered enough to know what he had done. He could not explain his crime. Waving his revolver to keep back those approaching, he turned and ran down the street toward Cherry Creek. He dived into the bushes. The pursuit crashed after him. He ran, dodging, through the bushes. With every passing minute, Wilson grew more sober and more frightened. He had killed without provocation, without giving the other man a chance. The rope of the people's court dangled before his tortured vision.

Up the creek he pushed, clinging to the fringe of bushes. He could hear the sound of galloping horses, the voices of men shouting to each other, and he knew that his escape had been cut off above. He turned, like a hunted wolf, and twisted back and forth in the shadow of the houses. More than once, he dodged into darkness just in time to escape pursuers.

The fellow was sober enough now. He knew that he was lost unless he could find some place of safety, for a time. The hunters were behind him and in front of him. He could hear their calls. A group of them were drawing nearer. He dodged around a house, in the shadow of which he had been lurking. In despair, he opened the door and crept inside.

[7] Pollock was a son-in-law of Major Chivington, the preacher who commanded the white troops in the massacre of Indians at Sand Creek. The ethics of this slaughter of natives is a controversial question never settled.

CHAPTER XXXIV

NEAR THE END OF THE ROPE

“Doc” Corlison had taken an active part in the pursuit of Mose Wilson. More than one of those who beat the bushes with him and combed the prairies on the edge of town wondered at the furious zeal of the little fellow. He was indefatigable in the search, and when he at last desisted he was thoroughly tired out.

Returning to his cabin, Corlison lit a cheroot, lay down on his bed, and smoked. He was far too excited to sleep. For ten years, he had dreamed of vengeance against this man Wilson, and it looked as though the day of it was at hand. The fellow had escaped for the moment, but without a horse he could not get far.

Corlison was not a neat man. He lay on the bed in his boots, and he brushed the ashes of the cheroot to the floor beside the bed. When he had finished his smoke, he put out the stub by pushing it against the floor, which was made of whipsawed pine.

He became aware presently that an edge of the charred tobacco was still alive. As he looked down at it, lazily postponing his intention to rise and stamp it out, he saw that it was smouldering above a pitchy streak in the wood.

At that moment, Corlison had the shock of his life. Out from under the bed came a hand. A moistened finger dabbed softly at the smoking ember. The finger belonged to a large hairy hand attached to a thick, muscular wrist. What riveted Corlison’s attention most, what set his heart to beating wildly, was a peculiarity in the hand. *The second finger was missing.*

Almost instantly, the hand was withdrawn again.

The man on the bed lay there without moving, but the rising excitement in him was so great that he was afraid his uninvited guest would hear the beating of his heart. Here, in this shack, hidden under the bed, lay the man all Denver was hunting. He, Corlison, had been keen as a bloodhound on the pursuit. But now, along with this trapped wild animal, his heart misgave him. He was no match for Shipley, and he realized it.

What should he do to cope with this emergency thrust on him? He did not think only of his own danger, though, in spite of himself, fear rose up and clutched at his throat. Here was the opportunity to score on his enemy. But how avail himself of it? Would it be better to jump up, get the drop on Mose, and order him to come out? He dared not do it. He had not the stark physical courage. The chances were that the fellow would come out shooting. The outlaw was a superb gunman. He would shoot Corlison down and make his escape.

Gradually, a plan came clear to Corlison. He yawned audibly, stretched himself, and yawned again. Slowly he sat up and put his feet to the ground. “Just like me, dawggone it! Forgot to get another cigar. I’ll have to drift down and get one.”

He spoke aloud, as though to himself, again stretched his arms lazily.

He picked up his hat, moved to the door, and stepped outside. He wanted to run, screaming in the darkness that the murderer was here. But he curbed the surge of hysteria. He did not permit himself undue haste, but walked at an even pace from the shack. Not until his footsteps were out of hearing did he begin to run. Flying down the street, he butted into someone walking in the opposite direction.

“You’re in a hurry, friend,” the assaulted party said good-naturedly. Then, in surprise, “Why, it’s Doc Corlison!”

The man was Tom Collins.

"I've got him! I've got him!" cried Corlison in shrill excitement.

"Got who?" Tom asked.

"That murderer, Mose Shipley."

"Got him! Where?"

"At my shack. He's under the bed, hiding there."

"By jinks! Slipped in till the first hunt is over, I reckon."

"That's it."

"He won't wait there now you have found him, will he?"

"He don't know I saw him. He thinks I'm getting a cigar."

Tom thought swiftly. It wouldn't do to run the risk of losing Wilson now he had been found. "You run for help. I'll watch he doesn't get away," he said.

Corlison assented. He disappeared in the direction of Denver Hall.

As he walked toward the shack, Tom debated with himself. Had he better wait outside, keeping an eye on the place? Or go boldly in and arrest the man? The latter would be a dangerous business. Mose might choose to shoot it out with him. The man would have nothing to gain and all to lose by surrendering. But Tom knew the man, understood from association of old his thought processes. If he were persuaded that the house was surrounded by his enemies, he would collapse in sheer funk. It would be like him to dodge a fighting finish, postponing an immediate end in the hope of being able to beg himself out of the noose.

And there was risk in delay. The fellow might slip out from the back window. He might already have left. If so, the sooner Tom found this out the better. He decided to go in.

He drew the Colt from its scabbard by his side and carefully tested the gun. Then, revolver in hand, he walked to the door of the cabin, opened it, and stepped inside. A guttering candle, stuck by its own tallow to a saucer, faintly lit the room.

Tom lost no time in finesse. His voice, crisp and harsh, rang out. There was the snap of command in it.

"There's fifty men around the house, Shipley. Come outa there, yore hands in front of you. And empty. No shenanigan. Quick, too."

There was a moment of silence, utter, complete. Tom waited, revolver poised. It was a moment of high tension. If the desperate man underneath the bed could summon sufficient courage, the room would instantly be filled with smoke.

Slowly, two hairy hands came into sight. A whining voice quavered for mercy.

"Don't you shoot, mister."

Mose Wilson emerged, creeping forward from under the bed.

"That'll do. Stop right there. Don't rise. Keep yore hands in front of you close to the floor."

The young man's staccato orders were cut off one from the other sharply.

The man looked up and recognized Tom. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"I was drunk when I did it," he pleaded abjectly. "I didn't aim to hurt him, but the fellow was reachin' for a gun. If you can fix it to let me go this time, Tom——"

"I can't," Tom said sharply.

"For old sake's sake, Tom. Why, I was a second father to you. I picked you outa the gutter and fed you and brought you up and looked after you. You wouldn't go back on me now, boy?" He made as though to creep to Tom's feet, lifting his hands for mercy.

"Don't move," Tom ordered. The man's cowardice filled him with disgust.

Mose droned on, fear in his quavering voice. "If I have ever done you any meanness, I am shorely sorry now. I like you, Tom, always did. From the time you were a little trick so high. Fix it

for me this one time, and I swear I will live decent from now on. Goddlemighty, boy! I ain't fitten to die. I got to have time to repent."

"You should have thought of that sooner. It's not my say-so. The people's court will have to decide."

"No, Tom, no," he wailed. "I've been bad. I've done wrong. Ain't I admittin' it? Gimme another chance, boy."

There came the sound of tramping feet, of voices.

Tom called to those outside, "I've got him here, boys."

They burst into the room, a dozen men, Corlison at their head.

"There he is! There he is!" the little man screamed pointing at Wilson. "Didn't I tell you I had got him here for you?"

Rough hands dragged the miserable culprit to his feet, searched him, bound him, the broken wretch whining entreaties. Corlison danced in front of him in a passion of excited triumph.

"Know who I am, Shipley? I'm Corlison, the man you abused back in St. Joe ten years ago. I swore then I'd get even. I waited a long time, but my day has come. When they hang you, I will be standing right there in the front row watching. You'll have old Doc Corlison to thank for it. Don't forget that."

They led the murderer away. He was first taken to Denver Hall under a heavy guard. In an incredibly short time, the news spread that he had been captured. From every direction men came running to the scene. The excitement was intense. Men shouted to hang him, not to wait for a trial. Someone called for a rope. One was brought and a loop flung around Wilson's neck. They pushed and shoved each other to get at him while the guards tried to keep the cowering wretch from their hands.

Good citizens intervened. Some semblance of order was reached. Speeches were made by Byers and others, insisting that the man must have a fair trial, that there be no lynching, no punishment without the hearing of evidence and due consideration to it.

The law-and-order citizens won. Shipley was led away under guard and locked up in a warehouse on the edge of Cherry Creek.

The town buzzed with excitement. Would the bummers attempt to rescue him? Would they fight against the verdict of the people's court? The temper of the town hardened. Already the unrecorded verdict was that the murderer must be hanged.

For the young fellow killed by Mose Wilson had been unarmed. He was an inoffensive lad in his teens, just arrived from St. Louis, the only son of a widow. No such flagrantly unnecessary killing had taken place since the birth of the settlement.

So high ran the feeling that, for the moment, the toughs lay low, afraid to precipitate decisive action. They drew closer together, sullen and watchful, ready to seize on any opportunity for interference that would be safe. Mose Wilson was not popular even with the roughs. He had been too high-handed and overbearing. But he was one of them. To desert him now without even an attempt to save him would be an acknowledgment of defeat, a recognition of the new era of law that was dawning. It was felt by all that the criminal element would make some effort to save him, some gesture of defiance of the town's anger.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW TRAIL

Like a prairie fire, the word swept through Denver next morning that Mose Wilson had escaped. He had been rescued by his friends. Two whipsawed planks had been ripped from the face of the warehouse on the side next the creek, and the ropes which bound the prisoner had been cut. The town talk was that one of the guards had been bribed and the other drugged with doped liquor.

There was evidence to show that Wilson was still in or near Denver. Evidently his friends had not run the risk of arousing suspicion by securing a horse for the outlaw. Probably he was lying in hiding until such time as his friends could get a mount to him.

As soon as the news of the escape got out, a citizens' meeting was called. The town was patrolled and searched by numerous armed posses, who visited every dwelling, shack, and tent in the place. Thugs and bummers stood aside while their habitations were turned upside down. They sulked, but they submitted. Even their triumphant derision was confined to the expression of their faces and did not reach words. For they knew it was no longer safe to trifle with these stern-eyed avengers.

Wilson was not in town. The result of the search showed that. The committee in charge of the pursuit at once flung out men on foot to comb the banks of the river and the creek and riders to scour the plains surrounding the town.

Since Tom had a horse, he was chosen as one of the latter. On his way out, he stopped for a moment to see Mrs. Gallup and Virginia. They were not at home. From a neighbour he learned that they had gone for a ride. Brett had found horses for them.

"Did Mr. Brett go with them?"

"No. Just the two of them."

This disturbed Tom. There were, of course, fifty chances to one that they would not meet Mose Wilson. Still, there was a possibility. Brett was not to blame. He had let them go before the news had got out of the murderer's escape. Very likely, foreseeing the possibility of trouble in town, he had been rather glad to see his friends ride away into the peaceful plains.

Tom set out immediately to find Brett, stopping only to buy a rope. He might need one in case he captured the fugitive. He made inquiries about Brett and was directed to the headquarters of the vigilance committee.

The older man was saddling a horse. He called to Tom.

"I want you, Collins."

"Where did Mrs. Gallup an' Miss Virginia go?" asked Tom.

"Toward the hills. I'm just a little worried, now we've found out that fellow isn't in town. He has to have a horse, and if he saw them——"

"Are you going to look for them?"

"Yes. Can you go, too?"

They started at once, fording the Platte and climbing the rise north of the river to the plateau beyond.

"Heading toward Golden past the twin lakes north of town, they said," explained Brett. "But they won't stick to the trail, probably, after they get out a ways."

"How far do they figure on going?"

"Thought they would be out all morning. A neighbour is looking after the bakery. They

have been talking of this ride for a week. I couldn't get the horses till to-day."

"Of course everthing is all right," Tom reassured himself aloud. "Even if he ran across them, he wouldn't dare do a thing to them."

"Not unless he has gone crazy."

"He'd be hunted down an' killed like a wolf."

True enough, but not convincing to his fears. For Mose Wilson was no disciplined logician. He was feral as a wolf. If the safety of the moment could be better secured by ferocity, he would kill first and gather fear for what he had done later.

From the edge of the watershed above the lakes, they looked down, sweeping the landscape with their eyes. They caught sight of a figure below them coming in their direction, the figure of a woman on foot, now moving with a little stumbling run, now slowing to a walk to gather breath for another rush.

The riders galloped down the slope. Tom recognized the woman, and he went limp in panic. She was Mary Gallup. What had become of the horses? Where was Virginia? He had no need to wait for the aunt's story. He knew. The chill of despair in his vitals gave authentic information.

To be on a horse, in the warm, wintry sunshine of this rare mile-high atmosphere, to see the blue-white mountains ahead running like a notched rampart for hundreds of miles, to feel the rhythmic motion of the canter: this was life, a gladsome thing, Virginia thought. She gave herself to it with girlish rapture.

The light breeze blew loose tendrils of her copper-red hair and spun them out in flying filaments. Her eyes were aglow, in part, perhaps, because she was a healthy, joyous young animal, in part because of the secret thoughts that stirred in her.

Her aunt pulled up. "There's a man waving to us."

"He wants something. Perhaps he is in trouble," Virginia answered.

They rode to him across the baked ground with its thin growth of dried grass and cactus. Something was wrong with him. His back was toward them. His head was bent. They were almost upon him before he straightened and turned. Too late they recognized him.

His hand caught by the bridle the horse Mrs. Gallup was riding. A big navy Colt's revolver pressed against her side.

"Get down!" he ordered.

Mary tried to steady her voice. It would never do to get panicky, to let the fear that clutched at her throat master her. "W-what do you want?" she asked.

"Do like I say," he growled.

She slid from the saddle.

Mose Wilson glowered at her from bloodshot, sullen eyes. She knew he was making up his mind what to do with her. Would it be safer to let her go—or—?

From his throat there came a furious snarl. His arm flung out and brushed her aside. "*Vamos!*" he cried.

He pulled his gross, heavy body to the saddle. To Virginia he said, catching at the bridle of her horse, "We'll light out."

Virginia gave a little cry of terror. It came to her that he meant to take her with him. "Oh, no—no!" she wailed, shrinking from him.

He jerked at the rein, driving his heels into the flanks of the animal he was astride. The horses moved.

Mary ran forward, catching at the empty stirrup. "Don't take her! Don't! Don't!"

His heavy fist swept down and struck her cheek. She staggered back. The horses broke into a canter. She ran after them, calling on him to stop, flinging out her hands as though to reach Virginia and drag her back.

Not till they had covered some distance did Virginia's terror find voice. "Where are you taking me?" she cried.

He did not answer. He kept urging the horses to greater speed. Fear rode his back. It had been with him all night and all day. His nerve had shaken under it. Now he kept looking back, scanning the plain to see if any pursuers were in sight. Fast as he could drive the animals, he was making for the hills. If he could reach them, could find refuge in some fold or pocket, he might lie for days on the dodge and at last slip away. One of the shebangs which his outfit used as a hang-out was in the front range. He wanted first to get there and find a man's saddle and food to tide him over.

Virginia, too, stole many looks backward. Her safety might come from that direction, just as his destruction might. What did he mean to do with her? Why had he brought her along? Why had he hampered his flight with her? She could not fathom his reason because she could not understand the craftiness of his foxlike mind or the feline quality in him that wanted to torture her as a cat does a mouse. He might run into pursuers, he thought. If so, he could perhaps use her as a hostage. His idea was vague. It might be that somehow he could negotiate with his enemies if he were driven to it—her safety for his own. At the worst, if he were pressed hard, he could protect himself from their fire by keeping her close to him.

It was Virginia's strong young eyes that first perceived the solitary rider in their rear. She saw him fully a quarter of an hour before her captor knew they were being followed. She dared not look back often lest she betray what she had found out. But one swift glance, as they deflected to the right, told her with a thrill of hope that he was gaining on them quickly.

Then Mose Wilson saw. "Goddlemighty!" he shrieked, and drove his heels into the sides of the horse.

Fast as they rode, the rider behind travelled faster. Mose began to look anxiously at the distance still to be crossed before he reached cover. He looked back at the avenger. Soon, now, he would be within striking distance.

Mose knew that the horseman following them must be carrying a rifle. The outlaw had only a revolver. He was outranged. His shield of defence must be the girl. He sobbed out an oath and dragged his revolver to the light. At the same time he reached for the reins of Virginia's horse and gathered them into his left hand with those of his own.

A voice carried on the breeze to them. It demanded that they halt. Virginia's heart beat a pæan of joy. The man riding to her rescue was Tom Collins—Tom, who had saved her from the road-agents, who had already once outgamed this ruffian and driven him away. He would rescue her once more. She knew it.

Mose Wilson made no answer to the call. They came to the edge of the plateau and dipped swiftly into the little valley nestling close to the front range. The two horses raced down the slope at breakneck speed toward a creek which ran through the valley. Before they reached it, Tom had topped the crest and was galloping after them. Every stride brought him closer.

The outlaw had given up all hope of reaching the shebang. He plunged through the creek, still clinging to the bridle of the other horse; then turned sharply to the right. He was making for a rugged park which opened just before him from the valley, a park filled with great red rocks twisted by erosion into amazing shapes and contours. If he could get to the shelter of those rocks, he would stand a chance. He was in a panic of fear. The fellow behind was close enough

to shoot now. Mose sweated terror.

He turned in the saddle and flung a wild shot at his pursuer. Tom did not answer the shot. His quirt sang against the flank of his horse. He must reach Mose before the murderer got to the shelter of the rocks.

Young Collins was at one disadvantage. He could not fire at Wilson while Virginia rode so close beside him. He had to get near, even though he sacrificed the advantage of longer range, even though he would bring himself under a fire he dared not return.

Again Mose swung round in the saddle and fired. He missed. The percentage of hits scored from a moving horse is very small.

The two animals in the lead clambered up a flat rock slope at the entrance of the park, the muscles of their legs standing out as they strained to take the grade. The girl's horse floundered for footing on the smooth steep surface, stumbled, almost went down. With a furious oath, Mose dragged it back to its feet.

But Virginia had found the opportunity she had been seeking. She had slid from the saddle and was flying across the red sandstone roof for the shelter of a fault in the rock, a great crevice which ran from top to bottom of it.

Wilson fired at her from a plunging horse. She dropped into the rock rift and disappeared.

Before the echo of Wilson's revolver had died away, Tom's rifle rang out in answer. The outlaw's horse fell, half rolled over, lay still, It had pinned down its rider's leg beneath the saddle.

Tom took one look at the trapped murderer, then leaped to the ground, ran to Virginia, and lowered himself into the crevice. His arm went round her shoulder. "You hurt?" he asked, his voice husky with feeling.

Even then, at the climax of the adventure from which they had not yet safely emerged, she could smile at him, a little wanly, perhaps.

"No, all right. And you?"

He nodded. "Stay here. Don't move till I come for you or call you."

"Must you go?" she begged. Her lips were trembling.

"I must go. Don't you worry. It'll be all right," he promised. He was sure of it. His heart was high. He had taken out that protective insurance of love against disaster and death.

Tom crept out of the rock crevice, went back to his horse, and secured the rope attached to the saddle. Slowly, watchfully, rifle in hand, he moved toward Wilson.

"I give up. You done got me," Mose cried. "Come an' get this damned horse off'n my foot."

Then, before Tom could answer, the ruffian's revolver flashed out twice. Sure shot though Mose was, he missed both times. For one thing, he was in a flurry of fear; for another, the position of his arm was awkward for firing.

Tom stepped behind a boulder and rested his rifle on it. "Drop that six-shooter. Quick, or I'll drill you through and through."

Mose hesitated. His body lay wholly exposed, not fifty feet from the rifle. There was nothing for it but to obey. He dropped the revolver and raised his hands, whining entreaties to be spared.

Tom moved up to him, never lifting his eyes from the man. He kicked the revolver out of Wilson's reach, then stooped and picked it up. The Colt he pressed against the back of the fellow's neck, then relieved him of a bowie knife and a second revolver. This done, Tom tied his hands securely behind his back.

"Pull your leg out when I lift," Tom told his prisoner. He eased up the body of the horse,

and Mose dragged out his foot.

Tom called to Virginia cheerfully, "All right. I've drawn his teeth."

The girl appeared, very pale.

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them were once more climbing the plateau, headed for Denver. Tom and Virginia were riding. Mose Wilson limped in front of them, around his neck a rope, the other end of which was tied to the young man's saddlehorn.

Mose Wilson's race was run. He was plodding with slouched shoulders and craven spirit toward the shameful end which awaited him on the morrow. Some miles from Denver, a posse met them, Brett at the head of it. This group of vigilantes took charge of the prisoner. It is enough to say that within twenty-four hours he was tried, convicted, and executed. In death, he was more valuable than in life, for he served notice to the awed criminals of Denver that the arm of the law was long enough to drag in any miscreant who violated law and order.

Once more Tom was a hero for a day. The town talked of his exploit, made much of him, and thanked him publicly for bringing this villain within reach of the law. All of which embarrassed Tom, for he was a plain youth without any heroics.

He said as much to Virginia that evening after the trial and execution. They had been downtown to buy a copy of *Godey's* for Mrs. Gallup.

She gave him a queer little look. "Everything you do for me is nothing, according to you, but I have a higher opinion of myself than that."

"Of yourself?" Tom said in surprise.

She spoke quietly, looking away at the vague black outline of the hills just visible in silhouette against the skyline. "Of course. You saved me again—and you call that nothing."

"I call that everything," he said with deep emphasis. "Everything in the world. I usta think I was an unlucky chap. Nothin' to that a-tall. I've had the best luck in the world. Nobody—nothing—can take it from me."

"Yes!" she said in a low voice. Then, after a moment, "Just what is this wonderful luck?"

"To have had the chance to help you. A hundred fellows would have jumped at it—the best men in Denver—but it came to me. If that's not luck, I wouldn't swap it for a partnership in Russell, Majors & Waddell."

She did not look at him. She looked up at a sky of stars, no one of which was shining more brightly than her eyes.

"It came to the best man," she murmured.

"No, not the best—a long ways from that, but——"

He stopped, on the brink of an avowal.

In that silence, pregnant with emotion, Tom thought he could hear his heart beating like a drum. What was this strange current that seemed to draw him to her as though she were a magnet?

"Jinnie—Jinnie," he murmured, and his hands went out to hers.

She gave a little cry that was half a sob and half a laugh. In another moment, she was in his arms.

They talked the universal lovers' language, which is wordless.

When at last Tom found speech, he expressed, falteringly, his amazement. "I—I can't get over it—that it should be me."

"Oh, Tom. It's always been you, I think," she cried softly.

His mind reverted to Randolph Manners, and so did hers. She answered the question he

had not voiced.

“No, it was you even then—but I didn’t know it. Always you from the first!”

They walked back to the house, hand in hand, along that long trail of life which they were to take together to the end.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

- Missing punctuation and misspelled words have been corrected.
- Printer's error in Author's name corrected from Mac Leod to MacLeod to reflect correct Scottish spelling.

[The end of *Colorado* by William MacLeod Raine]