

TEXAS MAN



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TEXAS MAN

BY

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING BOONE SIBLEY

BOONE SIBLEY was the issue of his ancestry and of the circumstances that nurtured him. No other time or place, no less elementary conditions of life, could have begot in him the peculiar individual force which sent him striding on his stark way through a pack of wolves snarling and snapping at him to drag him down. No civilization could have produced him but that frontier world of contrasts, at once so hard and so kind, so tragic and so indomitably gay. Only the strong survived. That Boone became notable in it connotes in him ruthless efficiency, deadly skill, and a nerve that never faltered.

He was born in Parker County, Texas, on the east bank of the Brazos. He first opened his eyes in a log cabin of one room, a cabin with a puncheon floor, a door of clapboards chinked with mud, and a stick-and-dirt chimney.

The furniture was as rough as the house. In the room were a home-made bench and stools, a table with a top the planks of which had been shaved by a drawing knife. His mother lay on a one-legged, bedstead, the side and end of which were mortised in the wall. The cooking utensils consisted of a three-legged skillet, a Dutch oven, a dinner pot, a tea kettle, an iron shovel, and some pot hooks. Dipped candles stuck in square blocks of wood, a hole bored to fit the end, lighted the house after dark.

For James and Callie Sibley were pioneers. Not at all for adventure, with no love of heroics, but merely in the hope of bettering their condition, they had pushed beyond the fringe of farthest settlement into the Indian country. They took their lives in their hands. The oxen yoked to their covered wagon trod the uncharted wilderness. His rifle shot the game that kept them alive. His ax chopped the trees for their cabin. She made his clothes and her own, even to

her husband's cap of deerskin with the hair side out.

One of Boone's earliest memories was walking with his mother to the nearest neighbour, more than a mile away, to borrow fire. Matches on the Brazos were almost unknown. In every house were a piece of punk and a flint rock.

Callie was a splendid type of the pioneer woman, deep-bosomed, active, the glow of health in her cheeks. There was nothing with which she could not cope. Beside her husband and a companion she fought Indians, a rifle in her hands. She could treat a wound as deftly as she baked bread. Boone remembered her as a woman of smiles, tender, firm, filled with courage, a worthy helpmate to such a man as his father.

In James Sibley was a quiet force that made for leadership. He was slow-spoken, gentle of voice, well-poised, influential because of his character. He would do, his neighbours said, "to ride the river with."

Another of the lad's early recollections had to do with two young women who stayed for a week or two at the Sibleys' house. Why they were there, who they were, he could not recall. But it was long before he could forgive them. They wanted to kiss him. He fled, resisted, fought to the bitter end, but was defeated ignominiously. It is possible that the genesis of his later attitude toward women may be found in this experience.

Boone was brought up in a world of work. His three older brothers built fences, herded cattle, or broke the prairie behind two yoke of oxen hitched to a turn plough. They carried rifles with them into the fields as a protection against the Comanches. While still in their early teens they helped their father stand off a bunch of ten roving raiders.

There were no girls in the family. Therefore it fell to Boone to help his mother. He was torn between conflicting impulses. His mother he loved devotedly, but while he churned, wiped dishes, or milked the cows the outraged manhood in his little body was in rebellion. This was woman's work. The shame of it abased him. He lived in continual dread lest some neighbour see him at his tasks and laugh at him.

On wash day the steaming clothes were dipped out of a boiler and put on a block made for the purpose. With a battling stick Boone beat the dirt out of them, one hand turning the sopping mass occasionally, the while his mother rubbed the garments after he had finished.

This was bad enough, but the quilting was almost more than he could bear. For weary hours he had to hand the threads through the harness of the loom. One day two young cowboys dropped in, caught him at it, and thoughtlessly made fun of him. They called him Miss Sallie.

Boone ran away that night. He took with him a big Sharp's rifle almost as long as himself. It was characteristic of the little fellow that he did not turn back toward Weatherford and civilization, but pushed north, hoping to get across the Brazos into the Palo Pinto country. An outfit of buffalo hunters were on the far side of the river. They had stopped at his father's place overnight, and one of them had asked Boone, as a joke, if he would go with them. He meant to join them now if he could.

The river was high for the time of year. The water was muddy and running fast. In the night it looked a fearsome adventure to attempt the crossing. He decided to ride farther up the stream on the lookout for a shallower place.

The boy had never been out alone so late at night. He had to steel his stout little heart against the fears that rose in him. The Indians might be all around him. Every clump of mesquite hid one or more, to his excited fancy. The whoop of a horn owl startled him. He pulled up, trembling with excitement. Boone knew that the Comanches, hunting horses at night, would keep in touch with each other by imitating these night birds. But he knew, too, that the sound of the horn owl carried no echo, that of the Indian's call did. He waited, unmoving, till the hoot rang out again. There was no echo. Once more he dared to breathe as he put his pony in motion.

The first gray light of day was sifting into the sky when he crossed a pecan bayou and came to a ford. Very tired and sleepy, he tied the pony and sat down on the edge of the stream to wait until it was lighter. His eyes closed, fluttered open, drooped again. He was awakened by the sun's rays streaming into his face.

Boone sat up, startled. He must have been asleep for hours. The paint pony stood patiently where he had left it.

Thoughts of his mother, of the home, of the friendly family, flooded the youngster's mind. He had to choke down a lump in his throat. For he was both heartsick and hungry. But he did not for an instant waver. He pulled himself into the saddle and put the pinto at the stream. As he rode down he noticed wheel tracks. Very recently a wagon had crossed, probably within the past twenty-four hours. This was encouraging. If a wagon had made the ford, he could do it on horseback.

The pony sank deeper into the current as it moved forward. The swift water rose to its belly. Presently the hoofs of the horse were swept from the ground, and it was swimming. In a moment Boone knew that his life was at hazard. The river must have risen during the night.

Pluckily the pinto breasted the waters. The stretch of swift, deep current was not wide, but, as the pony fought to make headway, the youngster knew

that the animal was not gaining. Its strength began to fail before the pressure of the pounding flood. The bank of the river in front of the boy seemed to slide up.

Boone heard a shout. The loop of a rope snaked forward and dropped over his shoulders. He felt himself snatched out of the saddle and swept away. The waters swirled above his head. He was under the surface, struggling for breath. With a jerk, the rope brought him up, dragged him into shallower water. Sputtering and gasping, he was hauled ashore.

For a few moments he must have been unconscious. Out of a haze a voice came to him. "Came mighty nigh not cuttin' it."

A second voice answered: "The little skeezicks stuck to his rifle like death to a nigger's heel."

The boy opened his eyes. A bearded man knelt beside him. He was loosening a wet rope from the little fellow's body. A younger man, wet to the waist, had hold of the other end of the rope. Beside him, staring down at Boone, was a long-legged red-headed little girl.

She shrilled out in a burst of excitement: "He's openin' his eyes, Pappy."

"Sure is, Til," the older man assented.

Gravely the boy looked from one to another. "Did Pinto make it?" he asked.

"Got out thirty-forty rods lower down. He's sure whipped out, though. Boy, how come you to tackle the river? Where are yore folks, anyhow?"

"He's the teentiest li'l' thing," the girl cried. She was not very large herself, perhaps seven or eight years old.

Boone looked at her resentfully. "I'm not," he denied flatly.

"How old are you?" asked her father.

"Eleven, comin' grass."

"Where you from?"

"From the yon side the river," Boone answered after a moment of deliberation. He had no intention of telling too much.

"Where was you aimin' to go?"

"To Wayne Lemley's buffalo camp."

The men stared at this amazing child. He had got up and was wringing water out of his coonskin cap.

"Not alone?" one of the men said.

Boone looked at him with dignity. "I'm not keerin' for company, seh."

“You’d go alone, right through the Injun country?”

“I aim to travel mostly at night.”

The older man scratched his sandy hair. “He sure whips me.”

His son grinned. “Looks like a motherless calf, but he surely has got spunk.” Of Boone he asked a question. “Is yore paw at this buffalo camp?”

“No, seh.”

“Who then?”

“I done told you. It’s Wayne Lemley’s camp.”

“Now, see here, boy, you got no business here all by yoreself. It ain’t safe. Where would you have been right now if I hadn’t snaked you outa the Brazos?”

“Maybe I would have got out with Pinto; maybe not. I’m right much obleeged to you.”

In so small a chap his imperturbability was surprising. His reserve repulsed all attacks upon his incapacity to look after himself.

The little girl offered a constructive suggestion. “Well, anyhow, he’ll eat breakfast with us, Pappy.”

The bearded man led the way to the covered wagon. “Come on, son. It’s ready now.”

“I’ve got yore company, seh,” Boone answered with quaint courtesy.

The breakfast consisted of coffee, flapjacks, and pemmican, but the boy would not eat until he had reclaimed and hopped the pinto. This done, he sat on his heels at the tail of the wagon and ate heartily. The child sat opposite and stared at him while he satisfied his hunger.

The camper introduced himself and family. “Our name is McLennon. My son’s name is Hugh. The little girl is Tilatha.”

“I’m Boone Sibley,” the guest responded.

“Where are yore folks?”

“Down the river a ways.”

“How come they to let you get so far from home?”

“I’m headin’ for the buffalo camp.”

“I heerd you the fust time, son. But I don’t reckon you better try it. If I was you I’d cut dirt for yore folks’ place. We’ll see you acrost the river.”

“I don’t aim to go acrost the river,” the boy said doggedly.

“Better run back, son. Have you got a father and a mother?”

“Yes, seh.”

“Had some trouble with them, maybe. They whopped you, likely.”

“No, seh. My father an’ mother are the best folks in the world,” Boone answered stoutly.

“Well, you go home to them. Cain’t have you runnin’ around thisaway.”

“He’s too li’l’, ain’t he, Pappy?” Tilatha volunteered complacently.

Boone looked at her and flushed. He had no use for girls anyhow. “I don’t reckon it’s none of yore business, is it?” he demanded.

Her eyes flashed. “You’re a nasty li’l’ boy. Tha’s what you are,” she countered swiftly.

“There—there. Don’t you get red-haided, Til,” her father chided. “I expect Boone is right. It ain’t yore put-in. Little girls had orta speak when they are spoke to.”

“He’s only a li’l’ boy,” she protested. “Only he thinks he’s so big.”

“Shet yore mouth, child,” McLennon chided. “Cain’t you-all behave like a little lady?”

She subsided externally, but her eyes flamed defiance at the boy. Later, when her father’s attention had been withdrawn for a moment, she spat her feeling out in words.

“’Bout so big,” she hissed, measuring a distance on her forefinger with the adjoining thumb.

Boone looked at her, then looked away. After all, she was only a girl. Why let himself get annoyed? He had, even at this age, a capacity for silence.

CHAPTER II

ACROSS THE PALO PINTO COUNTRY

BOONE did not have with him a cent, but he would not have been able to use money if he had had any. In the pioneer Southwest the settlers did not go in debt, but work and supplies were often used as a medium of exchange instead of coin. He was beyond the farthest settlement, and in this wilderness there was nothing to sell. To offer to pay for a meal or a night's lodging would have been an insult. These were courtesies due every chance comer.

After breakfast he rose and thanked his host, as one man to another. "Much obleeged, Mr. McLennon. I reckon I'll be joggin' on."

Father and son exchanged looks.

"No need to push on yore reins," the older man drawled. "You're aimin' to travel nights, you say. Rest yore saddle and stick around with us awhile. Our stock is some gaunted. Feed is good here. We won't break camp for a day or two."

The boy considered this. It would be safer to stay till dark. He might meet a band of Comanches, and that would not be so good. On the other hand, there was always the chance that his father or one of his brothers might arrive and ignominiously take him home. Already, no doubt, they were casting over the country on a search for him. If they should find his trail they might be here within a few hours.

"I'll shove on," he said.

McLennon shook his head. "Better not. We cut Injun sign yesterday. Maybe they're peaceable hunters and maybe they're not. Cain't ever tell. Give 'em a chance to get outa the neighbourhood."

"I'll watch keerful."

"No, son. Not for a while. If anything happened to you I couldn't forgive myself."

"There ain't anything gonna happen to me."

"Not as long as you stay here. The camp is yours. Make yoreself to home. You and Til can play together."

Boone flushed angrily. They intended to detain him. He saw that. He

resented this infringement on his individuality, but he knew that protest would be of no avail. It would be better to pretend to accept their decision, to assume that he was staying of his own free will. Unwittingly the mover had added to injury insult. Boone did not play with little girls. He wanted to say so, indignantly, but it seemed to him more dignified to ignore the suggestion.

He busied himself cleaning his rifle. This had to be done, anyhow, to avoid the chance of rust from the wetting it had received. Tilatha sat down on her heels and watched him. He paid no attention to her. Perhaps this did not please her. At any rate, she fired at him a verbal barb.

“Pap won’t let you go ’cause you’re so teeny.”

Boone squinted into the barrel of the gun. He was furious, but he did not want to give her the satisfaction of letting her know. Apparently, she was not on the map for him.

“My, you’ll get a nawful whoppin’ when yore pap comes,” she continued.

This was altogether likely, but Boone did not care to hear prophecies on that subject. He finished cleaning the rifle and started to go toward the wagon to return a borrowed rag. Tilatha pretended to think that he was trying to escape. She shrieked for her father.

“Pap—Pap, he’s fixin’ to run away.”

At once Boone lost what was left of his self-control. “Don’t you *ever* mind yore own doggone business?” he cried. “’F I was yore pop I’d sure drown you.”

“He’s swearin’ at me, Pap,” she screamed.

Hugh sauntered up. He was used to his sister’s little ways. “Shet up, Til, or I’ll wear you to a frazzle. Dad’s gone fishin’.”

“You won’t either. If you dass touch me——”

Hugh did not discuss the subject. He picked her up, deposited her in an empty flour barrel, put the lid on partially, and sat on it.

“You’ll stay right there till you quit yelpin’,” he informed her.

Miss Tilatha in turn threatened, wept, and promised amendment. When her brother thought her sufficiently subdued, he allowed her to return to society. She came back chastened and evidently rather proud of herself.

“I’m a nawful bad girl sometimes. Pap says I’m a limb,” she confided to Boone.

“What are you allowin’ to do at the buffalo camp?” Hugh asked the boy.

“Kill ’em, skin ’em, salt ’em down.”

Hugh suppressed a grin. This midget spoke as though he were of mature

age. Even on the frontier, where circumstances develop men young, Boone would hardly pass as an adult. Hugh himself was nineteen, and he did not consider that he had been grown up more than two years.

“Can you handle that cannon you carry?” he asked, pointing at the rifle.

“I’ve made out to kill two—three deer, an antelope, an’ se-ve-real turkeys with it,” Boone answered with dignity.

“Deer an’ turkeys ain’t buffalo.”

“No. Buffaloes are bigger an’ easier to hit.”

True to her sex, Tilatha made an about face shamelessly. “Bet yore boots Boone could kill a buffalo ’f he wanted to.”

“Little girls don’t bet their boots,” reproved Hugh.

Tilatha exonerated herself with characteristic logic. “I wasn’t bettin’ *my* boots. I was bettin’ *yore* boots.” She added, not without malice, “’N’ if you don’t stir yore stumps you’ll lose the mules, too. They’ve strayed clear over the hill.”

Her brother turned on his elbow and took one look. The mules were out of sight. It would not do to let them get too far away, for there was always the possibility that Indians might stampede them. He rose and moved away to drive back the straying animals.

Before he had gone a dozen yards Tilatha was whispering eagerly to Boone: “Now’s yore chance. Saddle up an’ ride lickety split.”

Boone looked at her, astonished. Less than half an hour ago she had been in battle drawn with him. Now she seemed to be on his side. He half suspected treachery, and yet . . .

“Hurry, slowpoke,” she urged. “Ain’t you got no sense a-tall?”

The boy rose to swift action. He caught the hobbled pony, brought it back to camp, and with difficulty got the heavy saddle on its back. One of the skirts was doubled under. He pulled this out and cinched the girths of the double-rigged saddle.

She watched him, a forefinger pressed against her lower lip. Now that he was going she had discovered that she did not want him to go.

“Oh, Boone, maybe the Injuns will get you,” she wailed.

“They will *not*,” he answered promptly, preparing to mount.

She sidled closer. “But they might. ’F I never see you again, Boone?”

The boy was not sentimentalizing the situation. He did not care whether he ever saw her or not. But since she had had a change of heart he did not want to be impolite.

“S’ long,” he said, reaching for the horn and the cantle.

She took advantage of his distraction to throw her arms tightly around his neck and kiss the nearest cheek. Furiously embarrassed, Boone pushed her from him, glared at her a fraction of a second, and dragged himself to the saddle seat. He dug his heels into the sides of the pony, and it started at a lope.

Tilatha flung after him her defiance. “You’re a nasty, horrid li’l’ boy, ’n’ I knew it all the time.”

He did not look back. The shame of what had taken place burned him up. To be kissed by a girl! Bah! What was the matter with them, anyhow? Why couldn’t they leave a fellow alone?

Boone caught sight of Quinn and veered to the right. He paid no attention to the camper’s shout for him to stop. The man tried to head him off, but the youngster put his pony at full speed. Quinn stopped running.

Out of sight, beyond the next rise, Boone began working away from the river. They might pursue him, and he wanted to be hidden deep among the land waves that rolled westward. All day he travelled, guiding his course by the sun. He went cautiously, watching for Indians. If he was seen by them, they might or might not kill him. But they would certainly take his pony, and to be left unhorsed on the plains might mean death, since, as a matter of course, they would rob him of his rifle.

Late in the afternoon he hid in a grape thicket and slept. When he awoke, the moon rode high in the heavens. He mounted and rode toward the river. It was necessary for him to find the wheel tracks at the lower ford so that he would know the direction taken by the buffalo hunters.

He was hungry, for he had not eaten since breakfast. The country was full of game both large and small, but he had been afraid to fire his rifle for fear of attracting attention.

Young as he was, there was no danger of his getting lost as long as he could see the sun by day and the stars at night. He was far more competent to look after himself alone on the plains than a tenderfoot of twice his age. He had been brought up in a school of hard experience which had no vacations.

When he reached the river, he turned down it and followed the bank to the ford. In the brush, a little way back from this, he dismounted, picketed the pony, and slept again. Not till daylight did he awake.

Boone picked up the wagon tracks of the hunters, but before he followed them he looked longingly across the river. He had backtracked almost to his home. The house and clearing were hidden in a hollow half a mile or more down stream. He could not see them, but their location was indicated by a banner of smoke rising in the clear morning air. His mother was probably

baking biscuits and frying ham. Almost he could sniff the aroma of her coffee.

It did not even occur to him that he might go back home. He had started for the buffalo camp and he meant to go there. The wagon tracks led westward, into the unknown wilds of Palo Pinto. Where they went, he too intended to go.

When he could endure hunger no longer, he shot a prairie hen. As soon as possible he got away from the place. He had travelled a couple of miles before he could consider eating it. To light a fire, even if he had had punk and flint with him, would have been dangerous. He ate the hen raw, much to his disgust. But he had to preserve his strength. How far he would have to travel before reaching the camp he did not know.

Late in the afternoon he began to see buffalo, at first in small bunches, later in larger ones. About dusk he saw smoke. Either the buffalo camp or a party of Indians lay just ahead of him. He waited in the brush, from a little elevation watching the camp as well as he could in the failing light for signs to tell him whether these were friends or foes. It was too dark to see whether there were wagons there.

A man moved away from the fire and crossed a small open space toward the horses. As he walked, his arms swung by his sides. Boone gave a small whoop of joy. Indians do not swing their arms when they walk. He rode straight into the camp, calling out his presence as he approached. Otherwise some startled hunter might drill him through with lead before he discovered who the stranger was.

Four rifles covered Boone while he drew near.

“Be keerful, stranger. Keep yore hands right where they’re at,” a man in fringed buckskin ordered. Then, in surprise, he added, “Dog my cats, it’s a kid—Jim Sibley’s young un! What in Texas are *you* doing here?”

The man was Wayne Lemley. He lowered his buffalo gun and waited for an explanation. The hunter felt a little sheepish. In spite of the watch always maintained, the camp had been taken unawares. If, instead of this boy, Kiowas or Comanches had got as close, there might by this time have been one outfit of hunters the less.

“I jest drapped in to hunt with you,” Boone explained.

They gathered around him, half a dozen bearded unkempt men, everybody in camp except the two on guard.

“Yore paw back there in the brush?” asked Lew Keener, a lank, grizzled old-timer who had been with Kirby Smith’s troops during the war.

“No, seh, he ain’t.”

“Who then?”

“I came alone.”

“Alone?”

Boone slid stiffly from the saddle. “Why, yes,” he said.

“Alone—from the yon side the river?” Lemley queried.

The small boy adjusted the “one-gallus” trousers, the legs of which had climbed during the long ride. “I done told you twice,” he said evenly. “Mr. Mattock axed me to come, didn’t he?”

Mattock tugged at his ragged red beard, almost too amazed for speech. He wore a leather hunting shirt reaching almost to his boots.

“By Ginney, I did ask the little tadpole—kinda funnin’ to pass the time, but Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat, I didn’t figure he’d fly to it thisaway, Wayne.”

Lemley was hard to convince. Somehow, he knew it was true, the little fellow was so serious and matter of fact. But that a child would travel for days alone through the Indian country was unbelievable.

“How come Jim Sibley to leave you start?” he demanded.

“He didn’t know I was comin’. I started at night.”

“But what for?”

“Like I said. To hunt with you-all.”

“You ran away from home to hunt with us?”

The little boy corrected gravely this method of stating the fact. “I didn’t exactly run away. I jest left.”

“Well, I’ll say you shore had nigger luck gettin’ through to us,” Keener commented.

Mattock took from the pocket of his shirt a plug of tobacco and bit off a generous portion. Chewing always helped cerebration for him.

“Something seldom about this kid,” he said, falling into a bit of local slang.

“What you aim to do with him, Wayne, now he’s wished himself on you?” asked Keener with a grin.

“I dunno. Reckon we’ll have to keep him here till his folks come for him or till we go back. Cain’t send him home. Take too long to close-herd him back across the river.”

“That’s its shape,” agreed another hunter, one who for obvious reasons went by the name of Peg Leg. “We’re not to blame because he came.”

Boone summarized the situation calmly. “Nothin’ to do but let me stay. I’ll work like the Watsons. You’ve got another hand. That’s all.”

“Hmp! What about yore folks?” Keener interjected.

“I won’t pester you-all to take me home. I’ll stay long as there’s a button on Jabe’s coat.”

“All right. That’s settled,” Lemley said grimly. “An’ to start you right I’m gonna tan yore hide proper for runnin’ away. You shag along with me back of that wagon, son, an’ take what’s comin’ to you.”

The boy shagged obediently to the spot named.

Lemley picked up a whip and followed him.

CHAPTER III

BOONE KILLS 'EM AND SKINS 'EM

BOONE was the handy lad about camp. He hopped horses, helped hitch the teams, flunkied for the cook, and did odd jobs. The hunters called him Pocket Change and made him the victim of their harmless jokes. But they watched over him, curbed his adventurous spirit, and would have protected him with their lives. The pioneer settlers of the Western frontier were fearless, independent, and generous. Each was a personality in his own right, but all accepted the common code of hospitality and friendliness, of standing by each other in trouble, of going the limit to help a neighbour. As an old-timer put it once, there were mighty few cutbacks in the herd.

The lad was a willing worker and soon became popular in the camp. He did cheerfully whatever task was assigned him, and he was so self-contained that the men did not realize what a surge of homesickness sometimes swept over him. It was chiefly at night, when he was in bed under a buffalo robe, that the lonesome child in him was uppermost and cried out for his mother's arms and her warm smile of understanding sympathy.

Sometimes the boy rode out with the men and helped skin the dead buffaloes. He held the reins while the hides were loaded into the wagon to be brought to the camp, and later he joined those who pegged down the pelts to sun-dry on a knoll. Under the direction of the old Confederate soldier Keener, who had taken a fancy to him, he spent days scraping away drying bits of flesh still clinging to the hides. The smell from the improvised drying yard rose to heaven, but Boone became used to it in time so that he was scarcely aware of it.

He was eager to go hunting with the others, but there was less danger in camp, and Lemley left him with those detailed to guard it. Strict instructions were given him never to wander away into the shinnery in the sandhills. Plenty of prairie chickens fed among the oak bushes, but there was always the chance that Comanches or Kiowas might be lurking there waiting for an opportunity to drive away the stock or to jump the camp.

From listening to so many stories by the hunters, Boone knew just how the buffaloes were killed. Early in the morning the men would take their big fifty Sharp's rifle, loaded with long shells carrying one hundred and ten grains of powder, and ride toward the feeding ground. They approached on the

windward side of the herd, keeping out of sight and dismounting a quarter of a mile or more away. From this point they crept closer, picked out a victim, and shot it just back of the fore shoulder from such an angle that the ball would penetrate the lungs.

The report of the gun would frighten the herd and the leaders would start a run. A bullet would kick up the dirt in front of them and turn the moving mass. This would be repeated. Presently the herd began to mill round and round, after which the animals could be shot at leisure.

Boone's chance came one day. A stampeded herd came thundering past the camp, shaking the earth with the impact of their tread. The boy seized his rifle and ran out to a small rise. The sight was one to inspire awe. There were thousands upon thousands of the bison. They were packed close, and their backs lifted and fell like the waves of an undulating sea. The sheer momentum of their rush would have swept into kindling the frame walls of a house had there been one in their path.

"Golly, they're comin' lickety brindle," the boy called to Keener.

They were scarcely a hundred yards from him. He knelt, took aim, and fired. Five times he shot before the herd had passed. When the roar of their charge had died away, he saw that two bulls were down, a third was staggering and coughing as it stumbled in the wake of its fellows.

For once Boone lost his unmoved manner. He had killed bison, three of them. They were bulls, to be sure, and the hides of bulls were less valuable than those of cows, but that was of small importance to him now. He was a buffalo hunter at last.

He shouted to Keener: "Lookee! Lookee what I did!"

The old Arkansan came up from the camp grinning. He had slain his thousands, but he understood the thrill of the boy's first kill.

"Bully, boy! You sure went to 'em all spraddled out," he said by way of congratulation. "Yore old Sharp's bites as well as barks, son."

"I'm gonna skin 'em myself," Boone said.

This he did, with the exception of some help in turning the animals. Before night he had the hides pegged out on the drying ground.

Boone could hardly wait for the hunters to get home to learn what he had done. He did not intend to tell them himself. He meant to listen while Keener and the other two guards retailed the story.

But to his surprise none of them mentioned what had taken place. They smoked their pipes around the camp fire and chatted about anything else except the buffaloes he had killed.

After a time he could stand it no longer. He offered them a lead. "A whoppin' big herd came rarin' past here to-day on a stampede," the boy suggested.

"A herd of jackrabbits?" asked Mattock politely.

"No, seh. A herd of buffaloes."

"Three of 'em drapped dead clost to camp," one of the guards said.

"Got tired runnin' likely," Peg Leg guessed.

"They didn't either," Boone protested indignantly. "I shot 'em."

Lemley spoke to Keener, nodding his head toward Boone. "Gets notions sometimes, I've noticed. When he shoots a quail he thinks it's a turkey. Did he shoot something to-day?"

"Three polecats," answered the old soldier gravely. "He was right proud of 'em. Cut up the hams an' hung 'em on a tree, an' stretched the hides out on the dryin' ground. He aims to take 'em home for keepsakes."

"He knows better, 'cause he helped me skin 'em," the boy denied.

"Well, they're out on the ground all pegged out proper. The moon's riz. What say we go look at 'em!" Keener proposed.

They trooped out, half a dozen of them, and inspected the hides.

"That's right, polecats," Peg Leg announced after one look at them.

Boone could have wept with chagrin, but he did not. He perceived that this was a conspiracy of alleged humour to minimize his achievement.

"How many thousand head did you-all say was in that herd of polecats, Boone?" asked Mattock.

Boone took refuge in dignified silence. He knew they would banter him until they got tired of the subject. Probably he had been a little too set-up about what he had done. This was his punishment. Or maybe they were doing it because it amused them. He never could tell in advance what would and what would not make them laugh.

Next morning the boy won his reward. Lemley said to him after breakfast, "Want to slap a saddle on that broomtail of yours, Boone, an' come along with us to shoot some more polecats?"

The shining eyes of the boy were answer enough. He could scarcely eat his breakfast. Long before the others were ready, he sat Pinto, the old Sharp's in hand, waiting impatiently for the start.

CHAPTER IV

JUMPED!

DAY or night the guard at the buffalo camp was never relaxed. The fact that no Comanches or Kiowas had been seen was no evidence that they were not watching the hunters from the cap rock or the brakes. Men never left the wagons, even to go as far as the drying grounds, without carrying their rifles as a matter of course. They had their revolvers strapped on while they sat at supper. Weapons were within reach as they slept.

One morning Boone returned from the creek with a barrel of water on a lizard.^[1] Keener walked beside him as a guard. The boy drove the mule to the end of the wagon where the cooking was done.

[1] A lizard was a fork of a tree used as a sled to haul stones or water. When employed for the latter purpose, a crosspiece held the barrel and four standards kept it from tipping over.

Lemley called to him after he had unhitched: "How'd you like to go home, son?"

The boy's heart leaped. Every night now he had to remember that he was a man to keep from crying himself to sleep. He longed passionately to see his mother. His conscience reproached him for having left her in the way he had. He knew now, by some intuition denied him at the time, how much she must have suffered, how greatly she must have feared for his safety.

"I'd be right glad to go, seh," he said in a quiet voice that belied the tumult in his breast.

"I'm sending back two of the wagons to-morrow loaded with hides. You can go along if you like."

"I sure would." Boone's lips trembled. He felt a surge of emotion well up in him. In order that nobody might see the quick tears spring to his eyes, he stooped, took off one boot, and pretended to shake out of it a pebble.

Lemley strolled closer. "Son, don't ever do a thing like that again—runnin' away from home, I mean. You'll never know how you've torn yore mother's

heart. I wouldn't give a barrel of shucks for a boy who is not good to his mother. Mrs. Sibley is a fine woman, one of the very best. I hope yore father will whop you proper when you get back, an' if I know Jim Sibley, he'll do his duty."

"Yes, seh, I reckon he will," Boone agreed.

"You're not an ornery boy, Boone. You work an' you do what you're told. You're not sassy. That's why I don't want you to grow up ugly as galvanized sin."

"I—I aim to be good to my mother," Boone said, a catch in his voice.

"Well, see you do." Lemley desisted from further preaching. "Better not ride yore pinto to-day. You'll be using him pretty hard for two-three days."

The wagon outfit started for the river at dawn. Three men went with it, in addition to Boone.

"I don't reckon you'll have any trouble with Injuns," Lemley said to Keener, who was in charge of the party. "We haven't seen hide or hair of any since we've been out. But you want to be watchin' all the time."

The old Confederate nodded. "I ain't forgettin' the old scout's advice, 'When you see Injun sign, be keerful; when you don't see any, be more keerful.' No, sir, I don't aim to throw down on myself."

"Push on the reins right lively an' you had ought to reach the river late to-night. Well, I wish you luck. So long, Boone. Tell yore father I gave you a good blacksnakin', an' maybe he'll go easier on you."

The wagons moved away across the prairie, one following the other closely. Keener led the way on horseback, both to keep a lookout against attack and to pick the best road for the teams. Boone also was in the saddle. He was not in the least worried about Indians. He had heard about their atrocities all his life, but he had never seen first-hand evidence of these. Probably there were no Kiowas or Comanches within a hundred miles.

Keener did not stop the party to eat at noon. He wanted to get across the Brazos as soon as possible. They made good time until the middle of the afternoon, when the trail became very rough and jolty. Both drivers complained that their loads were slipping.

To carry hides a long distance it was necessary to fold the hides, hair side in, before they became flint dry, to load with the legs lapping in the wagon, and to tie the whole down with ropes. These hides had become too dry to fold and had been piled into the wagon flat.

The old soldier called a consultation. It was decided to hold the loads down with boom poles. About a mile to the left of the wagons ran a creek lined with

cottonwoods.

“The kid an’ I will ride over to the creek an’ cut some poles,” Keener said. “We’ll take a single tree and chain with us to drag ’em back. While we’re gone you two had better reload the wagons.”

Boone rode with Keener to the creek. They had to drop down through a hackberry thicket to its banks out of sight of the wagons. The ex-Confederate swung from the saddle, laid his rifle against a log, and chopped down a couple of springy poles.

The sound of a shot reached them, of a second, then of half a dozen.

Boone never forgot the sight of Keener’s face. He looked as though Death had reached out and touched him. A wave of terror engulfed the boy.

“Injuns!” he cried.

“Stay here!” ordered Keener. “I’m going to the brow of the rise. Back in a little while.”

Keener moved swiftly up through the hackberry thicket. He knew that the Indians must have been watching the wagon outfit and must have seen him and Boone ride away. Even before he reached the ridge the firing had died down. When he saw the wagons, one glance confirmed his fears. More than a score of mounted warriors surrounded the outfit. Keener believed the teamsters were dead. They were old frontiersmen, and given time to put up a fight would never let themselves fall alive into the hands of the savages. But, dead or alive, he could do nothing for them. He had to think of the boy’s life and his own.

That they were in imminent danger he knew. Not for a moment would the raiders forget them. Through the brakes he caught sight of a party of riders heading for the creek, swinging a little to the west in order to cut them off from the camp left that morning.

Keener turned. Frightened eyes, set in the boy’s white face, stared at him.

“I couldn’t stay back there,” Boone whispered.

“We’ll have to light out an’ shove for the river,” the old soldier said.

They ran back through the thicket to their horses. Keener flung the lad into his saddle to save time. Boone’s heart was beating wildly. He would be caught and killed. If they could, they would take him alive and torture him.

“D-don’t leave me,” he begged of his friend as they rode up the hillside on the other bank of the creek.

The voice of the old Arkansan came evenly to him. “Don’t you get skeered, son. I’ll be right with you. We’ve got a head start, an’ we’ll beat ’em from where they laid the chunk. We cain’t fly, but we can catch birds.”

They caught their first sight of the pursuing Indians from the top of a little draw. At the same time the savages saw them and let out the yell that has shaken many a soul. There were perhaps a dozen of them, still on the far side of the creek, about three hundred and fifty or four hundred yards distant.

The sound of that yell, the swift glance he took at the naked riders behind, melted the boy's courage. He began to whimper.

"None of that," ordered his companion curtly. "You got to go through. We'll cut the mustard if you've got sand in yore craw."

They were riding for the river, still twenty miles away, over a very rough country. Keener watched his chance, guided with his knees, and fired his "big fifty" without slackening the pace. A pony stumbled and fell. The Indians answered the shot, but they were out-ranged, and their bullets fell short.

Boone was riding in front. He lifted his rifle from the saddle.

"No, son," Keener told him. "Right now I'll do all the shootin' is necessary. You 'tend to yore ridin'."

"There's more of 'em—over to the right," Boone cried.

"I 'lowed there would be. We'll keep right on for the cap rock—won't let 'em drive us back if we can help it."

To Boone this looked suicidal. They and the Indians were converging toward a common point.

"We'll beat 'em to it," the plainsman said.

His voice rang out more confidently than the facts justified. They would beat the natives to the cap rock if let alone. But how close would those coming up from the right be when they passed? If he and the boy won through it would be by a narrow margin, Keener knew. But he dared not let himself be driven into the open country to the left. Their one chance was to outride the Comanches trying to intercept them.

Keener rode on the right side of the boy, between him and the Indians. Twice he fired, riding at full speed. Presently bullets began to throw dirt in front of and behind their horses.

"We'll make it. They can't shoot for beans," the old-timer shouted. "Ride hell-for-leather, son. We'll be past in a minute now."

Even as he spoke, a bullet struck his horse. Keener was flung over its head as it went down. Boone pulled up, hardly by conscious volition, but rather by automatic instinct. The unhorsed man snatched up his rifle, ran toward the boy, and vaulted on the back of the pony behind the saddle. Instantly Pinto struck into a gallop again.

The rock rim was less than half a mile from the fugitives. The Comanches

were pressing them closely. During that wild ride Keener's buffalo gun did deadly execution. It dropped two horses. It sent one brave flying from his mount.

As they drew close to the rock rim, Keener gave instructions. "Listen, son. We got one chance—just one. I'll jump off above the rock rim. You keep on going. Head for the low ford. Get to yore father's place an' bring me help."

"But——"

The voice of the old soldier was harsh and final. "Don't argue. Do as I say. An', boy, ride like the Watsons."

They rode straight for a break in the rampart of rocks. Keener dropped from the pony, and it clambered up the rock fault like a mountain goat. Hard on its heels came the buffalo hunter.

Boone obeyed orders. Without stopping, he rode forward across the mesa. Once he looked back. No Indians were in view, but he could hear their blood-freezing yelps down below. Keener lay on his face. The boom of his buffalo gun sounded once and again. Then, borne clear on the thin air, came the defiant Rebel yell the old fellow had learned when he rode with Kirby Smith's raiders.

The boy did not know it at the time, but that ringing yell was Wesley Keener's gallant challenge to Death. He had come to the end of the trail and was going out like a soldier.

Steadily Boone covered the miles. A thousand times he looked back, fearful lest his eyes fall upon a line of bobbing riders. Once, in the shinnery, he started some antelopes, and the sound of them crashing through the oak bushes gave him a moment of panic.

The pinto was labouring heavily. His feet began to drag. The little paint horse had answered every call upon his strength made by Boone, but as he dragged through the sand now his feet stumbled. Dusk was falling. The river must be near, but the boy doubted if the horse could make the crossing.

He dismounted, to relieve the pinto in the heavy sand. The pony's head drooped more and more. He staggered and fell, never to rise again.

Boone walked toward the river. Darkness came. He ploughed doggedly forward. The moon rose. At last—the river. He had struck the Brazos within a half mile of the home crossing. Following the bank, he came to the ford.

The water was low. At another time Boone might not have attempted it. But he thought of Keener, fighting for his life on the rock rim. He must get help to him. Soon.

The boy waded in. He knew the tricks of the current at this point, for he

had been across the ford twenty times with his father and brothers. Here there was a sand bar. There the current ran deep. By bearing to the right one found the place where the stream was wider and therefore shallower.

Water rose to his waist but no higher. He reached in safety the farther shore. At once, exhausted though he was, he turned toward the hollow where lay his home. He reached the head of the hollow and looked down. They were there, the house, the clearing, the worm fence surrounding the pasture. The hounds were barking. He could see them running into the open, half a dozen of them, yelping a warning that someone was coming.

A lump swelled in the throat of the boy. Home at last! Home after many wanderings!

He moved down into the clearing. The dogs recognized him, ran forward, and leaped at him joyfully in a din of yelpings. He pushed through them to the house, past the ash hopper from which lye was dripping.

From inside the cabin his father's voice called: "Who's there?"

"It's me, Boone," the boy answered.

The door was flung open. James Sibley, half dressed, caught Boone in his arms with a little sob of relief. He had given up his son for dead, and he was alive and close.

Callie ran out. "What is it? What is it?" she cried, sure somehow that there was news about the little boy who nowadays was never out of her mind. At sight of Boone she stopped.

"Mother!" he cried, and flung himself upon her.

She caught him to her bosom. When she spoke it was in a voice he did not recognize. "My boy! My li'l' baby!"

The older sons joined the group.

Presently, the first burst of emotion past, James Sibley asked, "Where have you been?"

"With the buffalo hunters. Mr. Lemley sent me back with the wagons." The boy's voice broke. There had come back to him, forgotten for a moment in the joy of his homecoming, the tragic story of his return. "The Injuns jumped us. They—killed the drivers. Mr. Keener, he stayed to fight them."

"With the other men?"

"No—alone. They killed his horse. He said for me to bring help."

"How many Injuns?"

"A lot—thirty-forty, maybe."

Sibley roused himself to instant action. He sent his sons on horseback to

gather the neighbours. Three hours later, a small rescue party crossed the river headed for the rim rock. In all there were nine of them, heavily armed. Boone was at home in bed, safely tucked up by his mother. His protest that they could not find the place without him had been summarily dismissed.

“I’m sending yore father an’ the three boys. That’s enough of the family for one time,” Callie said grimly.

She knew they were going on a forlorn hope. Keener had chosen to give his life that her little boy might live. He had held back the Indians long enough for Boone to escape. But she had no expectation that the rescuers would find him alive. Moreover, there was always the chance that James Sibley’s party would be ambushed and wiped out. The Indians were in far greater numbers. They were wily warriors. The mother waited all through the night and most of the next day in an anguish of dread, and while she waited she sat in the cabin with weapons ready in case the Indians should cross the river and attack.

It was late afternoon when the posse rode into the clearing. They were tired and hungry and caked with dust. The dry lather on the horses showed how hard they had been ridden.

Callie made dinner for them while her husband told the story of their adventure. They had seen no Indians from first to last. At the rim rock they had found the body of Wesley Keener. Around him, on the rock where he lay, were dozens of shells flung out from the buffalo hunter’s gun after he had emptied them. There were no dead Indians in sight. The raiders had taken their casualties with them, as was their custom. But Keener was a dead shot. It was certain the attackers had paid heavy toll before the old soldier had sent the last shot crashing through his own brain.

CHAPTER V

TOUGH NUT WAKES

TOUGH Nut lay in a coma of sunshine. Apache Street was almost deserted. A hound crossed the dusty road, leisurely pursued by a three-year-old child giving orders in a piping voice.

“Tum here, Tarlo, dod-done you.”

Carlo went his way, magnificently oblivious of the infant. Drooping horses waited patiently at the hitch racks in front of the saloons. A grocery clerk came out of a store and from a watering can sprinkled the hot ground in front.

A four-mule team came down the street. The fine yellow dust of travel lay thick on the canvas covering the load. The mule skinner, Boone Sibley, now grown to manhood, was a stranger to Arizona. He had come to Cochise County from New Mexico by way of the San Simon Valley. Already he was pleased with Tough Nut. It sat on the top of the world. A roll of hills and valleys fell away on either side to the shining mountains, to the Mules and the Whetstones, the Dragoons and the Huachucas. The miles of cholla and greasewood and mesquite in that panorama of space were telescoped to a minimum in the clear, untempered light of the champagne atmosphere.

The adobe town was clean. The road of disintegrated granite gave evidence of municipal pride. Tough Nut belied its name, its evil reputation. So Boone Sibley decided. It was a nice town, and peaceful as old age. He was glad he had come. His arms and his long lithe body stretched in a yawn of indolent well-being. Soon he would hit the hay. For thirty hours he had not slept. Grub first, then sleep. Yes, a real nice, quiet town. That woman now going into the butcher shop with the baby in her arms . . .

A shot shattered the stillness. Through the swing doors of a saloon burst a man. He was small, past the prime of life. As he ran, odd sounds came from his throat. They were not yelps or shouts, nor were they moans; rather a combination of all three. The awkwardness of his flight would have been comical but for the terror on his face.

A big man, revolver in hand, tore through the doors in pursuit. Another shot ripped the silence. The little man staggered, stumbled, and went down just beside the wagon. With swift strides the gunman moved toward him. The eyes in his bearded face blazed.

Boone Sibley lived by the code of the West. This was a private difficulty. Therefore, none of his business. He started to slide from the far side of the wagon in order to use it as a bulwark between him and stray bullets.

Started to do so, but changed his mind. The hound had come around the tail of the wagon, and hard on its heels the three-year-old. The bearded man, intent on the kill, did not see the youngster. His weapon jerked up, covering the victim.

The mule skinner swung his whip, swiftly, expertly. He could pick a fly from the ear of the off leader. Now the lash snaked out, twined itself around the wrist of the big man, and sent the revolver flying. Yet another moment, and one hundred and ninety pounds of bone and muscle had descended upon the killer from the sky. The fellow went down as though hurled into the earth by a pile driver. He lay motionless, the breath driven out of his body by the shock of the assault.

Lean-loined and agile, Boone was up like a cat. He scooped up the revolver from the ground and whirled, his back against the front wheel of the wagon. For out of the saloon had come men, four or five of them. They had drawn guns—at least, two of them had—and they were moving toward the scene of action. Out of the tail of his eye Boone saw the little man, dragging one leg, vanish behind the wagon.

The bearded man sat up, one side of his face covered with dust. He was still dazed, but anger and annoyance were rising in him. He glared at Boone, ferocious as a tiger with its claws cut. His .44 gone, he was momentarily helpless.

“Who in Mexico are you?” he roared.

The mule whacker answered not the question but the issue: “The kid. You didn’t see it.”

“What kid?”

“With the dog. In the line of yore fire.” Boone’s words were directed toward the bearded man, his eyes and his attention toward the newcomers.

They were big, rangy men, hard-eyed and leathery. They wore long drooping moustaches after the fashion of the period.

One of them spoke, harshly, with authority. Beneath the black moustache he had a stiff imperial. His mouth was straight and thin-lipped. “That’s right, Curt. You didn’t see the kid.”

The bearded man rose and took two long steps toward Boone. “Gimme that gun,” he demanded.

The young teamster had lived all of his twenty-three years on the frontier

where emergencies must be met by instant decision. Already he knew that the man with the imperial was a leader. The breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the poised confidence of manner were certificates of strength. He alone had not yet drawn a weapon.

“I’ll give it to *you*, sir,” Boone replied. “Yore friend is some annoyed yet, I expect.”

Holding the revolver by the long barrel he handed it to the man selected.

“I’ll take that gun, Whip,” its owner said roughly.

“Don’t burn up the road, Curt,” his friend answered. “This young pilgrim is right. You might have hit the kid. He didn’t aim to jump you but to save the little fellow. I reckon you’ll have to leave him go this time.”

“Leave him go? After he lit on me all spraddled out? Gun or no gun, I’ll sure take him to a cleaning.” Curt moved toward Boone, a trifle heavily. He was a full-bodied man, physically more like the grizzly than the panther. He stopped in front of the teamster.

Young Sibley looked at him quietly, steadily. “I’m not lookin’ for trouble, sir,” he said. “Sorry I had to drap on you on account of the kid. I figured you wouldn’t want to hurt the little fellow.”

“I aim to work you over proper,” the bearded man announced. “I don’t need no gun.”

Boone’s revolver was on the wagon seat. This was just as well. He was debarred from using it, both because his antagonist was unarmed and because the man’s friends would instantly have shot him down if he had drawn a weapon. A crowd was beginning to gather. He heard comments and prophecies. “Curt will sure eat up this pilgrim.”—“Y’betcha! If Mr. Mule Skinner allows he’s the venomous kypoote, he’s due to get unroostered pronto.”

The bearded man lashed out at his intended victim. Boone ducked, drove a left to the fellow’s cheek, and danced out of range. Curt roared with anger, put down his head, and charged. His heavy arms swung like flails, savagely, wildly, with great power behind the blows. The younger man, lithe as a wildcat, alert to forestall each movement, smothered some of these swings, blocked others, dodged the rest. His timing, his judgment of distance, were perfect. He jolted the bearded man with two slashing lefts and a short-arm uppercut, sidestepped the ensuing rush, and with a powerful right, all the driving power of his weight back of it, landed flush on the chin at precisely the right instant. Caught off balance, the big man went down like a pole-axed steer.

He went down and he stayed down. His body half rolled over in the dust.

He made a spasmodic effort to rise, one of his hands clawing the ground for a hold. Then he relaxed and seemed to fall into himself.

For a moment nobody spoke, nobody moved. Curt French had the reputation of being the best bit of fighting machinery in the new camp. In the current parlance, he could whip his weight in wildcats. So it had been said, and he had given proof in plenty of his prowess. And now an unknown mule skinner, probably a greener who hailed from some whistling post in the desert, had laid him out expertly, with a minimum of effort, and there was not a scratch on the young chap's face to show that he had been in a fight.

An enthusiastic miner slapped his hat against the leg of a dusty pair of trousers. "Never saw the beat of it. Short an' sweet. Sews Curt up in a sack, an' when he's good an' ready, bing goes the sockdolager, an' Curt turns up his toes to the daisies."

"Say, you ain't Paddy Ryan,^[2] are you?" demanded an admiring bartender.

[\[2\]](#) This was a few months before John L. Sullivan defeated Paddy Ryan for the heavyweight boxing championship of America.

The man who had been called Whip pushed forward and spoke curtly. "What's yore name, young fellow? And where d'you hail from?"

The teamster met his heavy frown steadily. "Boone Sibley. I'm from Texas."

"Well, Texas man, I'm offerin' you advice free gratis. Drive on an' keep right on going. Tucson is a good town. So's Phoenix."

"What's the matter with this town?"

"Not healthy."

"For me, you mean?"

"For you."

The eyes of the two clashed, those of Boone hard and cold as chilled steel, his opponent's dark and menacing, deep-socketed in a grim, harsh face. It was a drawn battle.

The older man added explanation to his last answer. "For anyone who has done to Curt French what you've done."

"Meanin' there will be a gun play?" Boone asked quietly.

“Don’t put words in my mouth, young fellow,” the other said stiffly. “Leave it as it lays. Light out. Make tracks. *Vamos.*”

Boone did not say he would take this advice. He did not say he would not. “I’m sure a heap obliged to you,” he murmured, with the little drawl that might or might not conceal irony. His glance went around the circle of faces, some curious, some hostile, some frankly admiring. It dropped to the man he had vanquished and took in the fact that the fellow was beginning to stir. Then, unhurriedly, he turned his back, put a foot on the hub of the wheel, and climbed back into the wagon.

“Gidap!” he clucked to the mules.

The long whip snaked out. The tugs straightened as the mules leaned forward. The wagon went crunching down the street.

CHAPTER VI

BOONE MEETS MR. TURLEY

A MAN called on Boone that evening at the Dallas House. He gave his name as Mack Riley. A youngish man, weather-beaten and tanned, his face had written on it marks of the Emerald Isle. He spoke as a Westerner does, with only a trace of accent.

"I come from Mr. Turley," he explained. "He wants to see you. Reckon he feels some obligated to you."

"Never heard of him," Boone answered.

"He's the fellow you kept Curt French from killin' to-day. Curt got him in the leg, so he couldn't come himself. He asked would you come to see him."

"What's he want?"

"I dunno. He's kinda mysterious—lives under his own hat, as you might say. It's not far. He stays in a shack back of the Buffalo Corral."

"What was the trouble between him and this Curt French?"

"Something he put in the paper. He's editor of the *Gold Pocket*. Say, young fellow, I saw the show you put on. You certainly were sailing. You been educated all round, up an' down, over, under, an' between. Either that or else you had nigger luck."

"I expect I was lucky. Tell me about this Curt French, him an' his friends, too."

Across Riley's map-of-Ireland face there flitted an expression that masked expression. His eyes went dead. It was as though he had put on a mask. "What about 'em?" he asked warily.

"Anything about 'em—or all about 'em. I didn't quite *sabe* the game."

"Meanin' just what?" asked Riley cautiously.

"I got an impression—maybe there's nothing to it—that this Curt an' the man he called Whip an' two-three others were kinda in cahoots."

Riley said nothing, in a manner that implied he could say a great deal if he chose.

Boone continued, watching him: "When this Whip fellow told me to throw the bud into my leaders an' keep travellin', I reckoned he was talkin' for his gang as well as for French."

“Me, if I thought so, I’d sure take his advice,” Riley said in a voice studiously colourless.

“Why?” asked Boone bluntly. “Is this Whip a bad crowd?”

“You’ll never get me to say so, young fellow. I told you what I’d do. That’s enough.”

“You’ve said too much or too little, Mr. Riley.”

“I’ve said all I aim to say.”

“Those other blackbirds that had their guns out, who were they?”

“One was Russ Quinn, brother of Whip. The other was Sing Elder.”

“Kinda hang together, do they, them an’ this French fellow?” Sibley asked.

“You might say they were friends.”

“Got any business?”

“Right now I’m swampin’ for Dave Reynolds at the Buffalo.”

“I was speakin’ of these other gents—the Quinns an’ Elder an’ French.”

“Oh, them! Whip owns the Occidental. Biggest gambling house in town. Sing runs a game for him. They’re cousins. Russ is shotgun messenger for the express company.”

“An’ Mr. French?”

“Curt? Well, I dunno. He bucks the tiger consid’rable. Onct in a while he’s lookout at the Occidental.”

“A tinhorn?”

“I’m not using that word about him. Not none. An’ if I was you I wouldn’t either, stranger. You’re a likely young fellow, an’ you’re sure a jim-dandy with yore dukes. You’d do fine in Tucson likely. It’s a right lively town, an’ the road there is in first-class shape.”

“Tucson certainly gets good recommendations from you gentlemen in Tough Nut,” Boone said drily. “Any of you ever try that road yore own selves?”

Riley gave up, his patience exhausted. “All right. You’re the doctor. Maybe you know best. Maybe nobody is aimin’ anyhow to hang yore hide on the corral fence. I thought, you being only a kid, I’d see could I do anything for you. More fool me. You know yore own business, likely.”

“I’m much obliged, Mr. Riley,” the Texan said in his gentle voice. “But I reckon I’ll look around awhile before I move on.”

“Suit yoreself,” the Irishman said shortly. “What about Turley?”

“I’ll see him. Want I should come with you?”

“Better sift around after dark. It’s the ’dobe shack just west of the corral. You can’t miss it—a one-room house.”

Boone did not wait till after dark. He saw no reason why he should. For the present, at least, he meant to stay in Tough Nut. To move about furtively, after dark, avoiding trouble which might never materialize, was not consistent with his temperament. There was no reason why these men should make difficulties for him. The affair with French had been none of his seeking. He had acted instinctively to save the child’s life. Afterward he had apologized, had tried to placate the angry ruffian. His associates would probably talk him out of his resentment.

None the less, Boone went prepared for trouble. In a sling under his left arm he carried a Colt’s .45 sixshooter, one with a nine-inch barrel. Another, not so long, hung from his belt. He did not expect to have to use them. Still, he wanted to know that they were handy if needed. The point about trouble was that it usually jumped you suddenly when least expected.

The sun was in the west, setting in a crotch of the jagged porphyry mountains. It was still king of the desert, its rays streaming over the silvery sheen of the mesquite. Boone stood a few minutes to watch the spectacle, at the end of a street which stopped abruptly at the rock rim above the valley. The dust, finer than sand, gave colour to the landscape, an opaline mist that blurred and softened garish details. Already an imperial purple filled the pockets of the hills. Soon, now, that burning lake above, which fired the crags and sent streamers of pink and crimson and orange flaming across the sky, would fade slowly into the deep blue of approaching night.

Boone turned and walked with his long easy stride back to Boot Hill Street, then followed it as far as the Buffalo Corral. His eye picked up the adobe shack described to him by Riley, and two minutes later he was knocking at the door.

It was opened to him by Riley. There were in the cabin a bed, some plain furniture, and a great many books. On the bed lay the wounded man. Against the wall, chair tilted back and one run-down boot heel caught in a rung of it, lounged a curly-headed youth with the rich bloom of health in his cheeks. He was dressed as a cowboy.

Riley did the honours. “Meet Mr. Turley, Mr. Sibley. Shake hands with Mr. Rhodes.”

The cowpuncher unhooked his heel, dropped the front legs of the chair to the floor, and got to his feet, all with one swift, lithe motion.

“Known as Dusty Rhodes,” he added by way of further introduction. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Sibley. You’re right famous already in our li’l

burg.”

“News to me, sir,” Boone replied. He liked the appearance of this impetuous youth. An open face recommended him, and the promise of buoyant gaiety was prepossessing.

“You couldn’t expect to make Curt French look like a plugged nickel without having word of it spread like a prairie fire. He’s been the big wind pudding here for quite some time.”

“Meanin’ that he’s a false alarm?”

“No, sirree. He’s there both ways from the ace. In strict confidence, he’s a dirty flop-eared wolf, but I reckon he’ll back his own bluffs.”

The man on the bed spoke. “I have to thank you, Mr. Sibley, for saving my life to-day.” His voice held a clipped precise accent. He tugged nervously at his short, bristly moustache. Boone was to learn later that this was an habitual gesture with him. It arose from nervousness, from an inner conviction that he was quite unfitted to cope with the wild frontier life into which some malign fate had thrust him.

“That’s all right,” young Sibley said. The subject embarrassed him, though no sign of this showed in his immobile face. “Fact is, I was thinkin’ of the kid. Mothers hadn’t ought to let their babies go maverickin’ off alone.”

“Not much to you, perhaps, but a good deal to me,” the little editor replied, referring to what was in his mind rather than to what Boone had said. A muscular spasm of reminiscent fear contorted for a moment his face. “The ruffian meant to murder me, and, but for the grace of God and your bravery, I would now be a dead man,” he concluded solemnly.

“There’s a right few slips between what a feller figures an’ what he makes out to get done. Curt aimed to bump you off like I aimed onct to bring to my wickiup for keeps a li’l’ lady in the San Simon, only my plans got kinda disarranged when she eloped with a bald-headed old donker who had four kids an’ a cow ranch. You cain’t always sometimes most generally tell. Lady Luck is liable to be sittin’ into the game,” the cowboy suggested with philosophic flippancy.

“It wasn’t luck this time. It was God’s providence that I’m so little injured,” Turley corrected. “He held the hand of the slayer because my work is not yet done. It is about that I want to see you, Mr. Sibley.”

Boone said nothing. Evidently the editor had some proposition to make. The Texan had a capacity for silence. He could wait while another did the talking. It was an asset in the Southwest to be a man of few words, especially when those few were decisive.

“The Lord chose you as His instrument. I take it as a sign that we are to be associated.”

“How?” asked Boone.

He was not favourably impressed. Turley was not his kind of man. A feeling of distaste, almost of disgust, rose in him. He had seen the editor running for his life, in a panic of raw fear, the manhood in him dissolved in quick terror. Now he was talking religious cant like a preacher. In Boone’s code, inherited from his environment, the one essential virtue was courage. A man might be good. He might be bad. Without nerve he was negligible, not worth the powder to blow him up. Measured by this test, Turley failed to pass. It looked now as though he were a hypocrite, to boot.

Turley settled his shoulders nervously before he began to talk. “You are a stranger, Mr. Sibley. I do not know you, nor do you know me. What I have to say will be spoken by one who has the best interest of the community at heart. I am editor of the local newspaper, the *Gold Pocket*. That paper has a duty to perform to Cochise County. It must stand for law and order, for advancing civilization. Do you agree with me?”

“I’m listenin’,” Boone said. “You’re talkin’.”

“I take it that you have had a reasonable amount of schooling, Mr. Sibley, from the standpoint of the Southwest.”

“Correct, sir.”

“This community stands at the crossroads. It is infested by gunmen, gamblers, and criminals. These are largely outnumbered by honest citizens who stand aside and let the ruffians have their way. The *Gold Pocket* must be the organ of righteousness. It must be the centre around which can rally all those who believe in law enforcement. Mr. Sibley, I want to enlist you in that cause.”

The editor’s voice had become a little shrill, oratorical with excitement. Boone looked at him with a wooden face. Again he asked, “How?”

“As assistant to me in editing the paper.”

The Texan’s answer was immediate. “No, thank you.”

“Don’t make up your mind precipitately,” the editor urged. “Think it over.”

“Not necessary. Yore proposition doesn’t interest me.”

“At least leave it open. You do not have to say ‘No’ to-day.”

“I can’t leave open what never was open. I’m not a politician. I don’t care who is sheriff. Why come to me? I never was inside a newspaper office.”

“That doesn’t matter.” The editor sat up, his black eyes shining. “This is a

fight, Mr. Sibley. I have put my hand to the plough. I can't turn back. What I need is a fearless man to back me up in my fight for good."

"Maybe it's yore fight. It's not mine."

"It is yours as much as mine. It is every honest decent citizen's business to stand up for what is right."

"Dusty Rhodes to bat," announced the owner of the name genially. "What's eatin' Mr. Turley is that the bridle's off this burg an' she's kickin' up her heels every jump of the road. He gets all het up about it. Give us time, I say. Tough Nut is only a kid yet." He rose from the chair, stretched himself, and announced that he was going to waltz up town to the Can-Can for grub. "It's a good two-bit restaurant, Mr. Sibley. Better come along an' feed yore face."

"Reckon I will," assented the Texan.

"What I object to," the editor said by way of correction, "is cold-blooded murder on our city streets, and robbery under arms, and intimidation of justice, and corruption of officials. As an American citizen——"

"As an American citizen," interrupted Riley, "you are entitled to squawk, an' you've done right considerable of it. If you had any horse sense, carryin' that pill in yore leg, you'd know when to quit. If I was you I'd sure turn my back on that plough you was so eloquentious about. I tell you straight you ain't got a lick of sense if you don't shut yore trap. I don't want to be listenin' to nice words from the preacher about you. Now I've said all I'm gonna say, to you an' this young fellow both. I aim to live long in the land myself, an' I onct knew a fellow got to be 'most a hundred by mindin' his own business."

"Amen!" agreed young Rhodes in his best mourners'-bench voice. "Meanwhile, it's me for the Can-Can to eat one of Charlie's steaks smothered in onions."

The two young men walked up town together.

"So you reckon you don't want to be an editor," Rhodes said, by way of getting his companion's opinion.

"Funniest proposition ever put up to me," Boone responded. "How come he to figure I might throw in with him? What's his game, anyhow?"

"Well, sir, that's right queer. He ain't got any game, except he thinks it's his duty to bawl out the Quinn outfit an' any others ridin' crooked trails. Course, they'll bump him off one of these days. He knows it, too. Scared to death, the li'l' prune is, but stickin' right to the saddle."

"Why? What's the use?" asked Boone, puzzled.

Dusty looked at him, grinning slightly. "Leavin' our beautiful city to-night,

Mr. Sibley?"

"No, I reckon not."

"Soon?"

"Thought I'd look around awhile. Were you aimin' to tell me that Tucson is a right lively town where I'd probably do well?"

"No, sir. But you got yore answer. You cain't see why old man Turley stays here, but you're aimin' to stay yore own self."

"Not the same. First off, I haven't been objecting to the bridle being off the town."

"No," agreed the cowboy drily, "you jest jumped Curt French when he hadn't done a thing to you, an' that ain't supposed to be safer than throwin' a match into a keg of powder."

"An' second, if this Curt French is sore at me—well, I expect I'll be present when the band begins to play. But Turley he'll wilt right off the earth."

"Sure he will."

"He's got no more nerve than a brush rabbit."

"That's whatever. He's plumb scared stiff half the time."

"Then why don't he light out—cut dirt for Boston, or wherever he comes from?"

"Because he's got sand in his craw—guts."

"You just said——"

"I said the goose quills run up an' down his spine every time he sees a bad man. Now I say he's the gamest bird I ever raised. You an' me—he's got us backed off the map for sand. If I was half as scared as he is, I'd be in New Mexico by now an' still travellin'. No, sir. I take off my hat to him."

"I didn't cotton to him much myself."

"You wouldn't—not at first. He don't know sic' 'em about this border country. Came out for his health. Got all sorts of funny notions. He aims to gentle us an' get us saddle broke to nice ladylike ways. Yet I'll be doggoned if I don't like the li'l' cuss—an' respect him. He's gonna play out his hand to a finish."

"Why don't he get you to back his play?" Boone asked.

Dusty suspected sarcasm in the question, but he grinned cheerfully. "Me? Why, I ain't bought any chips in this game. I'm one of these here innocent bystanders. Come to that, I do a li'l' hellin' around my own self, onct in a while."

Boone nodded. He could believe that.

The cowboy added another reason.

“An’ I don’t aim to take up a residence in Boot Hill if I can help it. I don’t claim everything’s right in this town. It ain’t. But nobody elected me to read the riot act to the bad actors.”

“Meanin’ the Quinn gang?”

“I’m naming no names. Here’s Charlie’s place. We’ll sashay in an’ feed us at his chuck wagon.” He hung on the threshold a moment to add a word to what he had said. “But Whip an’ Russ ain’t a bad crowd, stranger. There’s a heap worse than them in this man’s town.”

“An’ French—have you got a gilt-edged testimonial framed up for him, too?” Boone asked.

The cowboy grinned. “S-sh! Hush yore fool mouth.”

CHAPTER VII

INDIRECT DISCOURSE

A THIN old man, toothless, sat in the Can-Can eating a plate of flapjacks. Dusty Rhodes hailed him.

“How you makin’ it, Dad?”

“Fat like a match. How’s yore own corporosity sagasuate?”

“I’m ridin’ high, wide, an’ handsome.”

“Hmp! You sayin’ it don’t mean a thing to me. You got no ambition—none of you young riders. Give you a saddle, a quirt, spurs, a bronc, a forty-dollar job, an’ onct in a while God send Sunday, an’ you don’t ask another thing.”

“Meet Mr. Sibley,” the cowboy said. “Mr. Sibley, shake hands with Mobeetie Bill. Don’t ask me what his onct name was. All I know is he lit in Cochise three jumps ahead of a posse.”

“Nothin’ to that, Mr. Sibley,” the old man corrected. “Fact is, I skinned a jerk-line string when I fust come.”

“I been told he hit Texas when the Palo Duro wasn’t a hole in the ground yet. No tellin’ how old he is. Mebbe a hundred. Don’t you believe anything this old Hassayampa^[3] tells you, Mr. Sibley. By the way, Dad, Mr. Sibley is from yore own range.”

[3] The legend is that anyone drinking of the waters of the Hassayampa River cannot afterward tell the truth.

“Not exactly, if you hail from the Panhandle,” Boone said. “I come from the Brazos.”

“Sit down, Texas man,” the old-timer invited. To the slant-eyed waiter he gave orders. “Another stack of chips. An’ wait on these gents, Charlie.”

They sat down, ordered, ate. Casual conversation flowed on. For the most part Boone listened. Mobeetie Bill had been a buffalo hunter. He had, in his own words, “tooken the hides off’n a heap of them.” Before that he had served

with the Confederate army, and prior to that with General Sam Houston. He had known the Southwest many years before barb wire had come in to tame it.

“Yes, sir, them was the days,” he said reminiscently. “There was mighty few cutbacks in the herd when I fust come to Texas. Clever folks, most of ’em. Course, there was trouble, lots of it. If you was anyways hostile, you could always be accommodated. At El Paso there usta be a cottonwood at the head of a street where folks grew personal. They nailed their opinions of each other on it. Anse Mills posted three citizens as liars. That was sure fightin’ talk then. Dallas Studenmire stuck there a list of bad men he aimed to kill pronto if they didn’t light out sudden. He bumped off three-four to show good faith, an’ the rest said ‘Good-bye, El Paso.’ Times ain’t like they was. Folks either. Me, I’m nothin’ but a stove-up old donker.”

“This country is wild enough for me right now,” Rhodes said. “Four of us was jumped by ’pachies last year. If it’s shootin’s you are pinin’ for, why, I expect Tough Nut could accommodate you.”

“Hmp! Boy, you’re a kid hardly outa yore cradle. You brag about yore Quinns an’ yore Curt French. Say, if they had bumped into John Wesley Hardin when he was going good, or even Clay Allison, our Texas killers would sure have made ’em climb a tree.”

Boone observed that Rhodes looked around quickly to make sure nobody else had come into the restaurant. “I ain’t arguing with you, Dad. All I say is that when I meet the gents referred to I’m always real polite.” He had, even in making this innocuous remark, lowered his voice.

“Why, someone was tellin’ me on the street that some pilgrim from back East beat up yore Curt French this very damned day,” Dad said belligerently.

“No need to shout it, Dad,” the cowboy warned. “Old as you are, you might annoy Curt considerable if he heard you. In which case, he’d take it outa either you or me or both of us. But since you’re on the subject, it wasn’t any pilgrim from the East but this Texas brother of yores who mixed it with Curt to-day.”

Mobeetie Bill’s eyes glistened. “Son, you’ll do to take along, looks like. But, boy, pack yore hogleg wherever you go, or you’ll sure sleep in smoke. Hell coughed up this fellow Curt French. He’s a sure enough killer, an’ he trails with a bad bunch.”

“You’re certainly gabby to-day, Dad,” Rhodes protested mildly. “A young fellow like you had ought to learn to keep his trap shut.”

The old-timer paid no attention to the cowboy. He addressed himself to his fellow Texan. “If you’re a false alarm you better cut dirt *pronto*.”

“For Tucson?” Boone asked gravely.

Dusty grinned. “Mr. Sibley has been told two-three times already that Tucson is a right good town, an’ the wagon tracks are plain headin’ thataway.”

“Correct,” agreed the old buffalo hunter. “That’s good advice, Texas man, an’ it don’t cost a cent Mex.”

“Good advice for anyone that wants to take it,” amended Boone.

Mobeetie Bill looked into his cool flinty eyes.

“Correct once more. Good for anyone but a fightin’ fool, an’ maybe for him, too. If I get this Curt French right, he’ll aim to make Tough Nut hotter’n Hades with the blower on for you. He’ll likely get lit up with tarantula juice an’ go gunnin’ with a pair of sixshooters. Like enough he’ll take two-three Quinns along when he starts to collect.”

“Cheerful news,” commented the young Texan. “He seems to be some lobo wolf.”

“Prob’ly you could get a job freightin’ up Prescott way, thereby throwin’ two stones at one bird.”

“Right now I’ll throw my stones, if any, at birds in Tough Nut. For a day or two, anyhow, while I look around.”

Mobeetie Bill let out a soft-pedalled version of the old Rebel yell. “You’re shoutin’, boy. That’s the way folks talked in the good old days. Make this tinhorn climb a tree.”

Rhodes spoke quickly, in a low voice: “*Chieto, compadre!*”

Men passed the window of the restaurant. A moment later they came in, two of them. Instantly Boone recognized them as two of the men who had been with French at the time of his difficulty with the gambler. They took seats at a small table in a corner of the room. As they moved across the floor the Texan saw again that they were big and rangy. An arrogant self-confidence rode their manner.

“Brad Prouty an’ Russ Quinn,” murmured Rhodes.

The buffalo hunter bridged any possible silence the entry of the newcomers might have made. His voice flowed on as though he had been in the midst of narrative.

“. . . made camp in a grove of cottonwoods on White Deer creek that night. I rec’lect I was mixin’ up a batch of cush^[4] when a fellow rode up with his horse in a lather. The Cheyennes were swarmin’ over the country, he claimed. They had burned his ranch, an’ he had jest saved his hide. Well, sir, we headed for ’Dobe Walls an’ got there right after the big fight Billy Dixon an’ the other boys had there with about a thousand Injuns. That’s how clost I come to being in the ’Dobe Walls battle.”

[4] Cush was made of soaked corn bread and biscuit, stirred together and fried in bacon grease.

“Was you in the War of 1812, Dad?” asked Rhodes with innocent malice.

The old man shook a fleshless fist at him. “I ain’t so old but what I could take you to a cleanin’ right now, boy,” he boasted. “Trouble with you young sprouts is you never was wore to a frazzle with a hickory limb when you needed it most.”

Dusty slapped his thigh with a brown hand. “Dawged if I don’t believe you’d climb my frame for four bits,” he chuckled.

“Make it two bits. Make it a plug of tobacco,” Dad cackled with a toothless grin.

Quinn and Prouty ordered supper and ate. Russ, facing Boone, said something to his companion in a low voice. Brad turned and stared at Sibley. The young Texan, apparently absorbed in what his friends were saying, endured the look without any evidence that he knew he was the object of attention.

“Curt’s right. Population of this town too promiscuous,” Russ said, not troubling to lower his voice.

“That’s whatever, Russ. Ought to be thinned out.”

“Good thing if some emigrated. Good for the town. Good for them.” Through narrowed lids slits of eyes watched Boone. “If I was a friend of some of these pilgrims, I’d tell ’em to hive off for other parts—kinda ease outa the scenery, as you might say.”

Making notes of these men without seeming to see them, Boone took in the lean shoulders, muscular and broad, of Russell Quinn, his close-clamped jaw, a certain catlike liteness in the carriage of his body. Brad Prouty was heavier and shorter of build, a hairier man. His mouth was a thin, cruel line below the drooping moustache. It might be guessed that Brad was of a sullen disposition, given to the prompt assertion of what he considered his rights.

“Yep, slap a saddle on a broomtail an’ light out. I’d sure call that good medicine.” This from Prouty.

Quinn took up the refrain: “Sometimes a guy has a li’l’ luck an’ presses it too far. I’ve seen that happen seve-re-al times. Don’t know when to lay down a hand. Boot Hill for them right soon. Nobody’s fault but their own.”

Into this antiphony Boone interjected a remark, addressed apparently to

Mobeetie Bill, in an even, level voice.

“Yes, like I was sayin’, I like yore town. Reckon I’ll camp here awhile. Lots of work, an’ folks seem friendly an’ sociable.”

The old hunter strangled a snort. “Well, they are an’ they ain’t. Don’t you bank on that good feelin’ too much.”

“Oh, I’ll take it as it comes,” Boone answered carelessly.

It occurred to Mobeetie Bill, looking at this tall, lean young man, with cool, sardonic blue-gray eyes in the sunburned face, that he was competent to look after himself.

“If you stay, it’s on yore own responsibility,” Dusty Rhodes chipped in. The cowboy’s eyes were shining. This byplay took his fancy. If the odds had not been so great, he would have been willing to take a long-shot bet on Sibley’s chances.

“Well, yes,” drawled Boone. “I eat an’ sleep an’ live on my own responsibility. Fact is, I’ve been hittin’ too fast a clip. I kinda want to rest awhile in a nice, quiet, peaceable town like this. Two churches here already, an’ another headin’ this way, they say. Nice li’l’ schoolhouse on Prospect Street. First-class climate. Good live newspaper.”

It was Russ who took up the refrain on the part of the other table. “That’s right, come to think of it, nobody been buried in Boot Hill for a week. Liable to be someone soon—some guy who blows in an’ wants to show he’s a bad man from Bitter Creek. Well, here’s hopin’. Shove the salt thisaway, Brad.”

“So a quiet young fellow like me, trying to get along, lookin’ for no trouble an’ expectin’ none, had orta do well here,” Boone went on placidly.

What Dusty Rhodes thought was, “You durned ol’ horn toad, you sure have got sand in your craw.” What he said was, “I can get you a job on a ranch in the Chiricahuas, above the San Simon, forty dollars per if you’re a top hand with a rope.”

“Maybe I’ll take you up later. No rush. I reckon the cows will calve in the spring, same as usual,” Boone said nonchalantly.

“I’ll be rockin’ along thataway in a day or two. Like to have yore company,” Rhodes insisted.

“Oh, well, we’ll see.”

Dusty Rhodes paid the bill, insisting that it was his treat. His guests reached for their hats and sauntered out.

Russ Quinn spoke a word as the cowboy was leaving. “Dusty.” Rhodes turned and went back to the table. A minute later he joined Sibley and the old buffalo hunter outside.

“What’d he want?” asked Mobeetie Bill.

“Wanted I should get this yere durn fool pilgrim outa the neighbourhood before Curt qualified him for his private graveyard.”

“Kind of him,” Boone said with mild sarcasm.

Dusty had his own point of view. “Russ is no crazy killer. Course, he’ll gun a guy if he has to, but he’s not lookin’ for a chance. I reckon he’d like to see you light out for yore own sake.”

They walked along the roaring street. Already it was filled with lusty, good-natured life. Men jostled each other as they crowded in and out of the gambling halls. Sunburned cowboys, sallow miners, cold-eyed tinorns, dusty freighters, and prosperous merchants were out for amusement. Inside the variety halls and the saloons, gaudily dressed women drank with the customers and offered their smiles to prospective clients. But outside none of the weaker sex showed themselves on Apache Street. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief: they crowded one another impartially in democratic simplicity. One was as good as another. All were embryonic millionaires, sure that the blind goddess Luck would strike them soon.

Whatever else it was, Tough Nut was a man’s town.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE IN THE HILLS

BOONE was not looking for trouble, but he was warily ready for it. He and his companions wandered through Jefford's and the Golden Eagle. They took a flyer at the wheel in Dolan's Palace. They watched a stud game running at the Last Chance.

More than one man recognized Boone and out of the corner of his mouth murmured something to his nearest neighbour. The Texan's face was impassive, his manner indifferent. He seemed to be negligently at ease. But his cool eyes carried to him all the information they could gather. They searched out the personnel of every crowd. When swing doors were pushed open, they were aware of who entered. Each gambler's face was noted and dismissed.

His business was to show himself in public, briefly, at several places, to put at rest any question of his being in hiding. This was not bravado. It was an insurance policy, by no means bulletproof, against attack. For if Curt French suspected that Boone was afraid of him he would certainly begin burning powder when they met.

The Texan did not invite a challenge. He stayed away from the Occidental, where French was most likely to be found. A visit to Whip Quinn's place at present would be considered in the nature of a defiance, and Boone had no desire to stir up the wild animals. There was always a possibility, though from what he heard about Curt he judged it slight, that if he did not meet the man too soon the fellow's simmering wrath might not explode. The Quinns might talk him out of an attempt at reprisal.

It was still early, as Tough Nut judged time, when Boone went back to his room at the Dallas House. He rolled and smoked a cigarette meditatively. Certainly, it was hard luck that within five minutes of his arrival in town he had made an enemy of a bad hombre like Curt French and had fallen tentatively into disfavour with the Quinns. They would be a hard combination to buck against. He could not run away. That was not consistent with his code. But he would stand back and sidestep trouble unless it was forced on him.

He went to bed and was asleep within five minutes.

Sunlight was streaming into the room when he awoke. He dressed, breakfasted, and walked the quiet streets as he went about his business of

feeding the team and disposing of the supplies he had brought to the camp. French was a night owl, as gamblers are, and the chances were that he would not be seen till afternoon. None the less, Boone went cautiously. The fellow might surprise him.

Noon passed. The sun moved westward and sank lower. Twice Boone saw some of the Quinn crowd. Once Whip and Brad, at a distance, came down Apache Street and disappeared into the Occidental. Later, he passed Russ and another big dark man standing on a street corner. Someone spoke to the second man, calling him Sing.

Russ looked bleakly at Boone. "Still here?" he said.

"Still here," Boone answered curtly.

Just before supper time Dusty Rhodes came to Boone with news. "I saw Doc Peters li'l' while ago. Whaja think? Curt's down with the measles."

"Measles?"

"Yep." The cowboy grinned. "Got 'em bad. He's in bed an' liable to stay there three-four days. Kinda funny, a big elephant like Curt gettin' a kid disease like the measles."

For Boone this was good news, unless it was a trap to throw him off his guard.

"What kind of a fellow is this Doc Peters? Stand in with the Quinn gang, does he?"

"No, sir. He's a good doctor, educated 'way up, an' he's straight as a string. Anyone will tell you he's a good citizen."

"Find out from him how sick French is, will you?"

"Bet yore boots. Say, what about that Chiricahua proposition we was talkin' about. No use stickin' around waitin' for Curt to get well enough to bump you off. I'm for being accommodatin', but there's sure a limit."

"I'll throw in with you if you'll wait two-three days."

Dusty hesitated. "Looky here, fellow, I like yore style. But let's git down to cases. The Quinns are our friends—us fellows up in the hills. Kinda mutual give an' take. 'Nough said. I cain't plumb throw 'em down. I'm figurin' to get you outa town before the earthquake."

"Suits me fine," agreed Boone, smiling. "But I've got business here for a coupla days. After that I'm with you."

"You don't figure on havin' a rumpus with any of the Quinns?" the cowboy asked cautiously.

"Not none, unless some of 'em ride me."

“All right,” conceded Dusty reluctantly. “But why wait two days? You want to show you ain’t scared, I reckon.”

“That’s about it. Just like a kid,” Boone admitted. But he knew that his reason ran deeper than vanity. He was staying a reasonable time partly out of self-respect, partly because he knew that a man in trouble is always safer if he puts on a bold front.

Dusty took occasion to drop around to the Occidental for a word with its owner. He found Whip Quinn making measurements with a carpenter for an addition of an ell at the rear of the house to enlarge its capacity.

The cowpuncher had come for a definite purpose, but he stood around rather awkwardly trying to find a way to make what he was about to say sound casual.

Whip anticipated him. “Hear you’ve found a new friend, Dusty.”

The cowboy met the hard stare of the gambler. “Looks thataway,” he admitted, somewhat disconcerted. “I kinda like the guy. It was about him I wanted to speak to you.”

“I’m listenin’,” Whip said briefly.

“Sibley is not lookin’ for trouble. It was sorta wished on him.”

“I was there at the time. Not necessary to explain it to me.”

“That’s right,” agreed Rhodes. “Well, all I wanted to say was that he’s leavin’ for the hills right soon.”

“When?”

“In a day or so. He’s got some business to finish.”

“Did he ask you to tell me that?”

“No-o, he didn’t.”

“Well, if he’s not huntin’ trouble he’d better light out before Curt is around again. You can tell him that from me.”

The cowboy did not carry this message. He was afraid it might have the opposite of the desired effect. Sibley would not let himself be run out of town or driven out by fear of consequences.

Boone sold his team and bought a cow pony. His saddle he had brought with him in the wagon. When at last the two were fairly on the road, Dusty took a deep breath of relief. He was reckless enough himself and had come out of more than one scrape during which guns had blazed. But he liked this Texan, and he was convinced that if Boone stayed in town it would be only a few days until Curt French would force the issue and the Quinns would be drawn in. Under which circumstances his new friend would not have a rabbit’s

chance.

They rode through the grama grass into the golden dawn of the desert. Before them were the jig-saw mountains, bare and brown. In that uncertain light they had a curious papier-mâché effect, as though they had been built for stage scenery.

The riders descended into a valley blue and pink with alfilaria. The season was spring. There had been plenty of winter rain, and the country bloomed. The brilliant flowers of the cacti were all about them; the prickly pear and the ocotillo in scarlet bloom, the sahuaro great candelabra lighted, as it were, with yellow flame. Here and there in the chaparral were florescent buckthorn and manzanita.

They came upon a pair of burros picketed out, and close to them the camp of a pair of prospectors. The old fellows were typical desert rats, unshaven, ragged, and dust-grimed.

Young Rhodes gave a shout. "Look who we've jumped this glad mo'ning—old Toughfoot Bozeman an' Hassayampa Pete. What do you-all gravel scratchers figure on findin' down in the flats here?"

The eyes of one of the old-timers twinkled. "'Lowed to run acrost a stray jackass or two, maybe."

His partner took the question more seriously. "We been in the Chiricahuas lookin' around. Nothin' there. We're headin' for the Dragoons. You better quit hellin' around an' go to prospectin' yore own self, young fellow."

"Meet Mr. Sibley, from Texas, gents. No, I ain't got the patience to spend all my time diggin' graveyards for my hopes. Me, I'll stick to cows."

"Yore own or someone else's?" Pete asked innocently. Then, lest this sounded too pointed, he added: "You young galoots got jest about brains enough to head off a steer high-tailin' acrost the desert. Well, go to it, boy. I'll buy you a ranch when we've done made our strike."

The two young men left the prospectors packing their outfit.

"We'll get outa the flats soon," Dusty promised.

Beyond the valley they climbed into the foothills and jogged along for hours, gradually working higher as the trail wound in and out of arroyos and small cañons. On the sleepy shoulder of a ridge spur they unsaddled to rest their horses.

Dusty shot a rattlesnake.

"First I've seen this year," he said. "Almost stepped on it as I come round that niggerhead."

They lay down and chatted disjointedly. Their talk was of the common

subjects that interested Arizona. They mentioned the rains and the good grass and how fat cattle were. They wondered whether the Apaches would soon break out again. Both of them knew that Cochise County was the home of scores of rustlers who were engaged in running stock across the border from Mexico. But that was a subject best not discussed by strangers, and these two young men were scarcely more than that. All that Boone knew of his companion was that he seemed a friendly, likable youth. No doubt he was a wild buckaroo. Left an orphan at an early age, he had scrambled up without training or family traditions. What his reaction toward honesty might be, Boone did not know. But the Texan noted that Dusty gave no details of his manner of life. He did not name his employer, if he had one; nor did he say anything of a ranch and brand of his own.

There were few cattle ranches and these as yet not well stocked. The Mexican line was close, and beyond it were the haciendas of señores rich in land and cattle. It was an easy though a risky undertaking to slip across to Sonora, round up a bunch of cows, and drive them into Arizona in the dark of the moon. The ranchers on the San Pedro and the Sulphur Springs valley asked few questions as to length of ownership. They “bought at a whack-up” and were glad to stock their range at a low price. If the local market was glutted, the rustlers hid the cattle in small mountain parks, changed the brands, and drove a herd to some of the government posts which needed beef for the Indians on reservations.

The two young men resaddled and took up again the trail for the uplands. They were now in a rough country. The arroyos had become gulches, the hills mountains. The cholla and palo verde had given place to scrub pine and juniper. The riders followed a tortuous path. They climbed stiff shale ascents and dropped down precipitous pitches.

To them drifted the sound of a shot, faint and far.

“Box Cañon over thataway,” explained Dusty. “Back of it the McLennon ranch.”

Another shot came to them, and after it the popping of four or five more explosions, much as though someone were setting off firecrackers.

The riders drew up to listen. For a few moments there was silence, then again another cracker went “plop!” Presently, like a muffled echo of it, a duller report reached their ears.

Dusty looked at his companion. “Trouble, sounds like. Rifles an’ sixshooters both. We better head thataway.”

The Texan nodded. Neither of them said anything about the need for caution, but instinctively they left the draw they were ascending and put their

horses to the steep hillside. Both wanted to see as soon as possible those who were shooting. There was a good deal less chance of riding into a trap from a hilltop than from a gulch.

While they were still climbing to the ridge, other shots sounded. These were louder than the others. Boone judged that the riflemen were moving rapidly nearer. Oddly enough, both men knew that what they heard was not the exuberance of youth making a noise to express itself. This firing meant battle, the spit of deadly bullets, the sinister whistle of Death screaming on its way. How they knew it, neither could have told; perhaps by some sixth sense given to those who tread wild and dangerous trails.

From the summit they looked down on a hill pocket of mesquite terminating in a rocky wall. Three men lay crouched in the brush behind such shelter as they could find. Fifty yards in front of them was another. His body lay huddled face down where he had fallen.

The men were trapped. That was clear enough. But even from the height where Boone stood, it took him some seconds to find any of the assailants. They, too, had taken such cover as the draw afforded. Presently the sun glistened on the barrel of a rifle, though no man was visible behind it. A puff of smoke some distance to the right showed him where another squatted. His eyes picked out a third behind the trunk of a twisted mesquite. There were others, of course, hidden in the chaparral. In the distance a bunch of cattle could be seen grazing.

“Our boys,” Dusty cried, his voice shrill from excitement. “They’ve got one of ’em.”

Already he was sliding from the saddle, rifle in hand. Boone followed his example and took refuge behind a low broad oak. But the Texan did not imitate him in his next move. For Dusty, from behind another live oak, took careful aim and fired at the man back of the twisted mesquite.

The man jumped up and ran for the shelter of a wash. Boone made a discovery. He was a Mexican in tight trousers and big sombrero.

There was quick, excited speech. A second man broke for the wash, and a bullet sang past him as he scudded for safety. Then Boone saw two men moving cautiously through the brush. They, too, were heading for the wash. All of them were Mexicans.

“We’ve got ’em runnin’,” Dusty shouted to those below.

A moment later a compact group of men, on horseback, clambered out of the wash, on the far side, and rode away at a gallop. They broke formation, scattered, and circled the cattle. Dusty let out an exultant “Hi-yi!”

CHAPTER IX

RUSTLERS

EXCEPT as to details, the situation explained itself to Boone. It told its own story without words. These cowboys in the hill pocket below were rustlers. They had driven this bunch of cattle across the line and had almost reached safety. But for once the Mexican vaqueros had outgeneralled them. They had pursued, cut off the cowboys, killed one of them, and recaptured their stock. Already the victors were hustling the tired herd along the back trail.

The arrival of Dusty Rhodes had been opportune. It was his shot from the bluff that had startled the attackers. They had settled down to wipe out the rustlers, but the sound of reinforcements had frightened them. They were in the enemy's country and might in turn be caught in a trap. Hence, their immediate withdrawal.

Boone counted seven of the vaqueros, and he was not sure that he had not missed one or two. They had ridden bunched, and after they had spread to gather the herd the riders were so mixed with the cattle that it was not easy to distinguish them.

There was a puff of smoke, and an instant later the sound of a shot. Boone could see now that someone had ridden out to a little spur almost in front of the moving mass of animals. One of the Mexicans had fired at him. Too late the man turned to escape. A second shot brought down his horse. He picked himself up and ran for a clump of firs. Bullets plopped at him as he fled along the spur.

He was a slim, lithe young fellow, and he ran fast. One of the vaqueros spurred his horse forward to cut off the retreat.

"They've got him," Dusty cried in excitement. "They've sure got him. What a fool trick to show himself!"

The runner stopped, cut off from the timber. He dragged out a revolver or a pistol and fired. He had aimed at the Mexican who barred his flight.

The sequel was surprising. From his horse the vaquero leaped and swept his sombrero almost to the ground in a raffish bow. What he said was indistinguishable, but there was apparently an exchange of words. Another rider cantered up. The first vaquero led his horse toward the cornered man.

There was more talk. The Mexicans urged something at which the other demurred. With a swift gesture, one of them snatched the weapon from their captive. Reluctantly, so it seemed, the latter drew nearer the bronco. His foot found the stirrup, and with one lithe motion he was astride the horse of the second rider, sitting behind the vaquero.

“They’re takin’ him along,” Dusty cried. “Why, by golly? Howcome they didn’t pump him full of lead an’ leave him lay?”

Before he had finished speaking, he knew why. The hat of the prisoner had fallen off when the horse had gone down. Now, as the vaquero gave his mount the spur, a flag of red hair streamed out in the breeze. The captive was a woman—more than that, a young and lissom one.

“Who is she?” asked Boone.

“Til McLennon, I reckon. We better move down to where the other boys are at.”

They found a break in the bluff where their horses could pick a way down by sliding rather than walking.

The men below were grouped around the one who had been killed. A pockmarked man turned to Dusty as he approached.

“They done got Bill. Lucky for us you drifted along, prob’ly. The greasers got scared an’ lit out.”

Dusty looked down with awe at the dead rustler. He had known him for a year and more as a gay and carefree boy. “Sure tough,” he said, his voice grave. He swallowed a lump in his throat before he went on. “Meet Mr. Sibley, boys. This is Sandy Joe. Shake hands with Tom Tracy an’ Sid Edwards.”

The invitation to shake hands was a figurative and not a literal one. They wasted no time in formalities, but fell at once into a discussion of ways and means. All of them had seen the Mexicans pick up the girl. She must, of course, be rescued. They did not need to argue about that. The question was how.

“They’ll head through Box Cañon. That’s where they laid for us an’ jumped us,” Edwards said. “They can’t follow that bunch of cows an’ make their getaway. We got time enough.” He was a squat, heavy-set man with bowed legs, the oldest of the party. By common consent, he took command. “Can’t stop to bury Bill now. Have to wait for that. Sandy, you light out for the McLennon place an’ pass the word to Hugh about his sister. Tell him to bring whoever is handy an’ meet us at Galeyville. He’ll come hotfoot. The rest of us will trail these birds till we’re through the cañon.”

Boone fell in between Edwards and Dusty Rhodes.

“We’ll need fresh horses,” Dusty said. “We been on ours all day, an’ yores look plumb wore out.”

“Pick up plenty at Galeyville,” Edwards said. “Two-three of us will stay right behind the greasers whilst the rest round up broncs for the outfit.”

“Question is, can we get at ’em to settle their hash before night.” Dusty looked at the westering sun. “We don’t want to leave Til with ’em all night. She’d sure think we was a nice lot of cautious guys. Hadn’t we better bust right into the bunch an’ give ’em billy-be-damn?”

“No sense to that. They won’t hurt Miss Tillie any, I don’t reckon. They collected her as a kind a hostage, likely.”

“I don’t care what they collected her for,” Dusty snapped out. “You can bet yore boots they ain’t a-goin’ to keep her long as I’m sound enough to tote a gun.”

“Hold yore horses, boy. Who is figurin’ on them keepin’ her? But tell me how we can take her away without pumpin’ lead right near where she’s at. No, we gotta use strategy.”

“Beats me what Til was doing there, anyhow,” Dusty went on. “Howcome she on that doqgone ridge right then, an’ whyfor did she ride out so’s they could see her?”

“Hmp!” This contribution came from the man called Tracy. He was a hard-faced citizen with shifty eyes and a mean, thin-lipped mouth. The tone of the exclamation seemed to suggest a good deal that might as well be left unsaid.

“What you gruntin’ at, Tom?” challenged Dusty.

The other cowboy drawled his answer out insultingly. “Thought you claimed to know that gal right well. She’s liable to be any place any time, particularly if it’s where she hadn’t ought to be.”

Indignantly Dusty denied it. “She’s a right fine young lady. Course, she clicks her heels some. Why shouldn’t she when she’s the prettiest thing in Cochise? Me, I like a gal whose eyes flash—one who has got a will of her own.”

“I’ve seen guys before that liked to be tromped down like a door mat,” jeered Tracy.

Edwards interfered. He did not like the man’s manner. In the hill country of the frontier, it was not customary to speak of women except with respect.

“That’ll be enough, Tom,” he said with finality.

Boone guessed that there was something personal back of this interchange between Dusty and Tom Tracy. It was possible they had clashed about the young lady, or, for that matter, on some other subject. Tracy’s fling at her

might have been made merely to irritate young Rhodes.

The Texan rode beside the cowboys with a mental reservation. He would go as far as any man to rescue an American woman captured by Mexicans, and that meant to the limit of endurance, as long as he could ride or stand or fight. That was not any distinction in the border land. It was in the code, was expected of every man. But there was another aspect to the situation. These men, with the possible exception of Rhodes, at least, were rustlers caught in the act. If the question came to issue, he would make it clear that he was joining them to help rescue the young lady and not to get back the cattle.

Boone was no prig. He held the ideas of his class in those times regarding rustling stock from the Mexicans. In the first place, he had been brought up, like most Texans, to hate Mexico and the Mexicans. The days of the Lone Star State's fight for freedom were too near to forget. One of his great-uncles had been with Ewen Cameron on his fatal expedition, had drawn a black bean when life and death had been in the balance, and had died with a score of his companions in front of Santa Ana's firing squad. Boone had met old men who remembered the Alamo. A score of incidents in his own time had kept green the bitter memories of earlier times, in many of which no doubt the Texans had been aggressors.

But young Sibley came of honest pioneer stock. His father had been a God-fearing man and had taught him the difference between right and wrong. Yet, in practical application of this teaching, Boone found himself just now in some doubt. Running cattle across the border, with the risk of a desperate fight thrown in, was not plain stealing. It had at least some of the elements of high adventure, and it might be excused, even though not justified, on the ground that it was despoiling the enemy.

All that Boone was sure of just now was that he must go slowly. He had no intention of letting himself be driven by force of circumstance into a position that would make him an unwilling rustler. He knew that most of the wild young cowboys engaged in lifting cattle were not criminals at heart. They had drifted into lawlessness out of good fellowship or carelessness, or to meet a temporary shortage of funds. But Boone was no drifter. He walked the way of the strong. When he did wrong, it would not be because of weakness but by reason of deliberate choice.

They rode fast, though their horses were tired. It was well enough to assure themselves that the Mexicans dared not injure their captive, but all of them had heard stories that made their blood surge. That these stories might not be true did not affect their feeling, since they believed anything of Mexicans. They were prejudiced beyond hope of change.

After an hour of riding, Edwards drew up. "We'll head for Galeysville, Tom an' me," he said. "Dusty, you an' Mr. Sibley better stay by the trail. Don't get too close to these fellows. The idee is jest to keep tab on them. We'll start soon as we can an' ride for the foot of the round top north of Nigger Bill's claim. Ought to reach there soon after dark. You join us there, Dusty, an' guide us back to where you left Mr. Sibley. After that we'll figure out some way to surprise the greasers."

The herd trail had been dropping down from the mountains through rolling hills toward the flatlands. The two young men rode through mesquite thickets to open slopes of bear grass, spiked yucca, and tufts of Spanish bayonet. In front of them, a mile and more away, moved a cloud of yellow dust. It drifted leftward in the wind, and when Boone and his friend topped a rise, they could look down on a moving mass, closely bunched, as is a herd of cattle driven hard. At this distance it was impossible to distinguish horse from cow, but somewhere among those crawling dots was one which represented the figure of a girl whose heart was heavy with dread.

The sun went down. The hot sands of the desert began to cool, though the fine dust still rose from the hoofs of the horses and settled upon the faces of the riders, into their nostrils and baked throats, upon every wrinkle of hat and shirt and boot.

Behind Sugar Loaf Peak the sky was a splash of brilliant hues slashed above the horizon line by the master painter. From moment to moment it changed. The scarlet and the crimson grew less vivid, died away. Violet became purple as the darkness descended over the land. With the coming of night the harshness of the desert softened. Garish details were blotted out. It was as though a magic wand had touched the land to beauty.

The wind freshened. Clouds drifted across the sky. In the air was a hint of coming rain. There would be no moon, perhaps no starlight.

"Reckon I better be hittin' the trail for that round top back of Nigger Bill's," Dusty said. "I don't want to hold back the boys any. You stick right here till we get back. *Adiós!*"

Dusty vanished into the night. Before he had gone five yards he was a blur, no more distinct than one of the ironwoods that surrounded them. A moment more, and his position could be told only by the creaking of the saddle and the clop-clop of the horse's hoofs.

Boone delayed only to be sure that Dusty was gone. He had no intention of staying there to wait for the cowboys. Presently he was guiding his horse through the chaparral in the wake of the herd. The Texan rode with a purpose. He had conceived a plan, one that at first thought seemed wild and

harebrained. But its boldness, its very danger, might make for success. Failure would prove disastrous, but that was true of most hazardous enterprises.

He had no confidence in the wisdom of any scheme the cowboys might devise. If they succeeded in rescuing Miss McLennon it would be only after a fierce battle and much bloodshed. Boone meant to play a lone hand and trust to a more subtle attack. Both the darkness and the nature of the country favoured him. The terrain was rough and the vegetation thick.

The Texan rode as fast as he could wind in and out among the brush. What he had to do must be done quickly, for fear the clouds be brushed aside by the wind and let the starlight through.

There drifted back to him the lowing of the cattle. He knew cows. As he drew closer he could tell by the bawling that they were thirsty as well as spent and weary.

CHAPTER X

A LONE HAND

BOONE knew he must have luck to succeed. But he knew, too, that by shrewdness and audacity a man sometimes makes his own luck.

He drew closer to the herd, watching for a chance. The steady, insistent bawling, the stringing out of the cattle, made him think that they were drawing close to water. Experience told him that the vaqueros would be strung out as lead, flank, and tail riders.

What he had to determine was at which position Miss McLennon rode and how well she was guarded. He drew closer to the right flank and presently brought his horse alongside the longhorns. Just in front of him a rider moved.

The vaquero called to one riding on the point to look out for the cutbank. He spoke, of course, in Spanish.

The cattle bunched. Evidently they had reached a deep arroyo, and the leaders were hesitating on the edge. Boone pulled his hat low. A bandanna handkerchief covered his face from the bridge of the nose down, ostensibly to protect him from the dust. He put his horse to a canter and swung back of the herd.

A vaquero, turning back a straying cow, shouted a question at him. Had they come to water? Without stopping, Boone called back an answer. He could speak Spanish like a native Mexican.

The Texan passed within five yards of one of the drag drivers, who mistook him in the darkness for one of his companions. By this time Boone knew that Miss McLennon must be with some of the men on the left flank or point. So far his luck had stood up fine.

The bunching of the cattle was fortunate for Boone. The two swing men were close in, urging the beasts on the outskirts forward to bring pressure on those in front. Unnoticed, the Texan rode past them.

Excitement drummed in Boone's veins. The young woman was directly in front of him, not more than seven or eight yards away. She was still riding behind one of the Mexicans. A second vaquero rode on the left.

Boone staked all he had on one card. "Head them up the arroyo, not down," he called.

It is the instinct of a Mexican peon to take orders first and question them

later, if at all. The vaquero beside the girl put his horse to a jog-trot and slithered down into the arroyo to turn the cattle.

Next moment Boone ranged up beside the horse carrying double. He pushed in between it and the cattle. The unsuspecting Mexican turned to speak to him, and at the same instant the Texan's deft fingers withdrew the man's revolver from its pocket on the chaps.

The vaquero's startled eyes stared at him. Out of nowhere an Americano had suddenly appeared and disarmed him. His own weapon pressed against his ribs. In another moment bullets would be tearing out his vitals. Terror held him dumb.

Boone's cool voice, in good, understandable Spanish, gave quiet directions. "Turn to the left into the chaparral. Easy now. Don't you make a break an' I'll not hurt you."

The man gasped. He took little stock in the promise, but the gun barrel pressing against his ribs was a mighty persuader. He swung his mount slowly to the left and rode into the brush. Boone kept pace with him, step for step. They wound in and out, skirting mesquite and cholla and prickly pear. For a hundred yards Boone held to that even pace, without another word being spoken.

Then he gave another order. "Get outa that saddle slowly. On this side. Stand right there with yore hands up. Now move forward exactly like I tell you. Keep to the right of that cholla. Head for the big mesquite. . . . Now to the left. No, stay in the open."

He gave no directions to the girl. It was not necessary. She had slipped at once into the saddle left vacant and was riding beside him. He remembered afterward, though he did not think of it at the time, that she had not spoken a word, had not made a sound from first to last. Of what she looked like he had not the least idea. His whole attention was concentrated, and had been from the moment he had first seen him, on the Mexican walking in front of them. The man might have another weapon concealed on him. Boone was taking no chances.

They came to a place where two mesquites grew, one on either side. A narrow path ran between them. The Mexican passed through the opening, then ducked sharply to the right. There was a sound as of a rabbit scuttling into the brush. Boone pushed the branches of the mesquites aside as his horse plunged forward. He stood and watched the prisoner escape.

The young woman spoke. "He got away."

"Yes," the Texan agreed.

She noticed that he made no attempt to follow the man, did not take a shot

at the bushes through which he was diving. Her guess was that the man beside her did not want to call attention to their presence by a shot.

“We’d better drift,” he said. “Follow me close.”

It struck her as odd that he paid no particular attention to her. She was not sure that he had even looked at her. He appeared to think she was just a necessary part of the scenery.

The night became vocal with shouts.

“He’s lettin’ ’em know,” Boone said evenly.

His companion observed that he did not quicken his pace. He held his horse to a walk as he led the way through the mesquite. For hours she had been anxious and frightened. Now she wanted to call out to him to hurry, that if they did not run the Mexicans would come swarming on them like bees. She had controlled herself before the vaqueros, knowing that it would be a mistake to let them know how much afraid she was. Though her fears had choked her, she had given no sign, fighting back the panic in her bosom. The reaction of weakness was now on her.

“Won’t they find us?” she asked in a small voice.

“No chance,” he said over his shoulder, without stopping. “They won’t even look for us, I reckon. They don’t know where they’re at. Might be a dozen cowboys trailin’ them instead of just me. Right now they’re bunched together expectin’ an attack. It would look like suicide for them to start combing the brush for us.”

There was reassurance in his quiet, steady voice, poise in the flat-backed figure clamped to the saddle. Whoever he might be, she knew that he was a man unafraid and one very sure of himself. They were following a crooked trail on account of the rough terrain and the heavy growth of mesquite and cactus, but she knew they were travelling as directly as possible to some given point he had in mind. Not once did he hesitate.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To yore friends. We’re to meet up back here a ways.”

They were climbing a stony slope where there was little vegetation except some catclaw and scrub palo verde. He fell back beside her.

“Did they send you to get me?”

“No, ma’am. They had other notions. While they were away roundin’ up help, I played a lone hand.”

The scudding clouds, driven by the wind, no longer hid the stars just overhead. For the first time their eyes met, and for a long moment held fast. She had an odd feeling that she was plunging fathoms deep into the cold steel-

gray depths of his. When she reached the surface again it was to take a deep breath of recovery. What kind of man was this? she asked herself. Not like the others she had known. It came to her that she was not going to like him, that there would be the clash of battle between them; and with this went as accompaniment the flash of fear. She was used to victory, but a sure instinct told her she would get little profit of this man.

“Who are you?”

It was a question that had been in her mind from the first. Now she flung it at him like a challenge.

“My name is Sibley,” he answered, with the little drawl he had inherited.

“From Texas?”

“From Texas.”

“Just got into this country?”

“Just got in, ma’am.”

In his soft answer there was, she thought, a faint flavour of irony. She resented it. The repetition of her words, some hint of hidden mirth, the cool detachment of him, stung her pride. He was treating her almost as though she were a child. He had saved her, and he made it a matter of no importance. If he stayed in the hills he would find out that Til McLennon could be scornful of men to her heart’s content, that when she snapped her fingers half a dozen would come running.

“I’ve met Texas men—and heard of others,” she said, and somehow contrived to make of the remark an offence, even though she hated herself for it.

Boone smiled, not at her but at the stars. She found, for the first of many times, that he had an irritating capacity for silence. What she meant was clear enough. A good many of the riff-raff from Texas, wild young hellions ready for any deviltry, had drifted into Arizona and New Mexico. This was notorious. They had been used as “warriors,” to employ the local name, in the Lincoln County war where Billy the Kid achieved notoriety. They were floating in and out of every frontier town in the Southwest. Dozens of them were now rustling for a living in Cochise. Why did he not speak up and resent her insinuation so that she could apologize with a smile that mocked her words?

Yet, even while she felt the stir of antagonism, deep within her flowed a current of gratitude. What the intentions of the Mexicans had been she did not know. Perhaps they had taken her along merely as a hostage, to protect them against attack. But their view toward her might have changed. Racial hatred

might have stirred their inflammable passions. And he had saved her, without a blow, without the firing of a shot, by the coolest audacity and daring. She wanted to pour out to him her thanks, to let him know how much she admired him. It was all she could do to keep from breaking down and sobbing out her relief.

If he had been less flinty, less indifferent, she could have told him what was in her heart. Once she tried.

“I—I want—if you hadn’t come——”

Her voice faltered. He waved her emotion aside as a matter of no importance. “Psho! The boys would have been around after a while, don’t you reckon? An’ the greasers wouldn’t have harmed you none. Onct they had reached the line they would have turned you loose.”

His manner froze her. He had thrust her gratitude back on her almost carelessly, almost insultingly. It was hateful of him, she felt, to put her in such a position immediately after having rescued her. She bit her lip to keep back the quick tears.

After that they rode in silence. Once or twice they stopped to listen. He knew that they were close to the place where Dusty Rhodes had left him.

Presently he stopped. “We’ll wait here,” he said.

“What for? Why can’t we go on to the ranch? Or toward Galeyville? We’d likely meet them.”

“An’ more likely not. No, we’ll stay here.”

He was right, of course, and she knew it. None the less, she rebelled at his easy assurance, his assumption that any decision he made would be final. What right had he to step into her life and take charge of it, even for a little while? And on the heel of that thought, with swift repentance, came another: if he had not taken charge of it, she would still be riding the heavy-hearted trail to Sonora.

They waited, once more in silence, until out of the darkness came sounds of horses’ hoofs striking stones, the jingle of bits, the voices of men.

CHAPTER XI

MISS TILATHA RAISES HER VOICE

THE voices were raised in debate.

“If you ask me,” one of them urged, “I’d say stampede the herd an’ get the greasers on the run. They’ll drop Miss Tillie quick enough then.”

“Hmp! How d’you know they will? They’d prob’ly all light out for the line hellamile an’ leave their stock. Then where would we be at in the darkness? My notion is to lay for these guys an’ bushwhack ’em.”

“How about makin’ them a proposition to keep the stock if they’ll turn over Til to us? Kinda flag of truce business.”

One of the men raised a shout. “You there, Sibley?”

“Here,” Boone called back.

As the men rode up the young woman moved forward.

Dusty gave a gasp of astonishment.

“Hugh!” the girl cried.

A big man, broad-shouldered and rawboned, flung himself from a horse and ran toward her. “Til!” he shouted. Then, “Where’d you come from? How’d you get away from the greasers?”

“Mr. Sibley took me from them.”

“Took you? How took you?”

“Just rode up and got me.”

They stared at her and at the young man sitting at negligent ease on his horse, a little way back from the group. For an hour they had been discussing how to rescue this girl without endangering her life, and, lo! it had been done.

“How rode up an’ got you?” asked Dusty.

“Why, rode up—acted like he was one of ’em, spoke Mex to ’em, and made my guard ride off into the brush with me.”

“Made him?” Hugh repeated.

“With a gun poked into his ribs. Then he let the guard go back and brought me here.”

“But, hell’s bells! how many of the vaqueros were there?”

“Eight.”

“Eight! An’ he rode up an’ took you away from eight fightin’ greasers?”

“Not exactly.” It was Boone’s cool drawl speaking for the first time. “I reckoned some would be on the point, some on the flank, an’ some pushin’ along the drag. All I had to do was to locate the lady, surprise the gent or gents in charge, an’ persuade him or them to let her come back with me.”

“That was all, eh? An’ if they got a good look at you, why they’d pump a pint of lead into you. Fine.”

“It was right dark, Dusty.”

“Was it any darker for them than it was for you?”

“I was lookin’ for them an’ they weren’t lookin’ for me. A big difference. Then, too, they were busy gettin’ the cattle down to water. I passed three or four on the jump, an’ not one took a second look at me. That’s the way I figured it might be.”

“Didn’t you figure it might be another way?” Dusty asked. “I’d go quite some way for a friend of mine’s sister, but——”

“I had the drop on the fellow with Miss McLennon,” interrupted Boone. “He wasn’t any more dangerous than a brush rabbit.”

“Well, you take the cake, brother. You sure go through from hell to breakfast. Me, I ain’t got the nerve to jump eight guys all armed an’ on the prod. I’d be scared my days wouldn’t be long in the land, as Parson Brown usta say.”

Someone laughed, not pleasantly.

Without turning his head, Dusty snapped out a question. “Somethin’ on yore mind, Tom?”

“Why, I was thinkin’ I would admire for to see you—or yore friend either—pullin’ off this grand-stand play. I expect it would be right amusin’.” Tracy’s voice carried a jeer.

“Yes? Meanin’ what?”

“Oh, nothin’. Just a private notion of my own.”

“Mebbe a fellow sometimes had better close-herd his private notions,” Dusty said to the world at large.

The blustering answer of Tracy came promptly: “Say, fellow, anyone that tries to ride me is liable to go to sleep in smoke.”

Hugh McLennon cut in curtly: “That’ll do, Tom. Nobody cares a plugged dime what you think. Me, I’m indebted to Mr. Sibley right consid’rable. He can hang his hat up at the ranch long as he’s a mind to. What next, gents? I aim to cut dirt back to the ranch with my sister. Anyone headin’ thataway?”

There was a moment's silence. Edwards broke it.

"Do we let these greasers get off scot free after they done killed poor Bill?"

"Better send 'em a vote of thanks," Tracy suggested.

The subject was one that could not be discussed before all of these present without dangerous admissions. The cowboys had been rustling cattle belonging to the Mexicans at the time of the attack which had resulted in the death of Bill. Since he had been shot down in fair fight, there was no need of avenging his death. But Hugh McLennon and those who thought with him could not raise this point before the stranger Sibley or before the young woman.

"Dusty, you ride on a ways with Mr. Sibley an' Til," advised Hugh. "I got to cinch this saddle tighter."

"A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, Hugh," his friend murmured.

The three rode toward the hills, a man on each side of Miss McLennon. The stars were out, and for the first time Boone got a good look at the girl. She was wearing plain leather chaps and a dust-brown shirt. The sun had browned her face to a coffee tint. She rode with the straight back and the easy saddle of long experience. So far she was externally a product of her environment. But out of question she was an individual of a very specialized variety. Through the tan burned the rich bloom of youth. The skin was fine-textured as satin. Beneath long lashes incredibly live eyes gleamed insolence or passion or sulkiness. For one moment he had seen them flash gifts of love to her brother. He guessed she was an untamed little devil, ruling her slaves with a rod of iron. That temperament would go with her red hair.

In the darkness he smiled. Boone was impervious to the charms of women. Their moods did not disturb him. He lived his life among men.

Dusty was the first to speak. "You got that coyote Tracy, didn't you, Sibley? Got what he meant? That's his way, always hintin' an' hintin'."

"It doesn't matter what he says or thinks," the girl said impatiently. "Hugh is right about that. Why do you quarrel with him, Dusty?"

"I get sore at him. For instance, just now. What did he mean? That Sibley here had some kind of stand-in with the greasers?"

"He's a jealous cur—doesn't like anyone to get a good word except himself. You oughtn't to pay any attention to him," she reproved.

"He's got no license to ride me," the cowboy protested.

"Just pay no attention to him," she advised virtuously.

Dusty looked at her and grinned. He was thinking that it depended on whose steer was gored. Til McLennon would not for a moment let Tom Tracy

or any other man run over her without putting him in his place.

Horses cantered toward them. Out of the darkness rode Hugh McLennon and a nester named Charles Brown.

“Where are the others?” the young woman asked sharply.

“They’re headin’ for Galeysville,” her brother said, after a moment’s pause.

She pulled up her horse and listened. The far faint sound of horses’ hoofs could be heard. “They’re not, either. They’re not going that way.”

“All right. If you know already so doggone well why do you ask?” her brother said impatiently. “It’s none of yore business anyhow, is it?”

“They’ve gone south,” she charged.

“South or north, do you care?”

He caught the rein of her horse and started it. Though she pulled the rein from his hand, she let her mount move forward beside his. The other three fell in behind. Boone could hear fragments of what she and Hugh said to each other.

“I know where they’ve gone,” she flung at her brother.

“Not yore business—or mine.”

“. . . own fault . . . get killed some day.”

“Shet yore mouth, girl.”

The men behind dropped farther back. This seemed to be a family quarrel.

Charley Brown chuckled. “She sure hasn’t got red hair for nothing. Miss Til is a right up-an’-comin’ young lady.”

In the back of Boone’s mind stirred some vague remembrance, some cutback to days long since past. Was it a tone of voice? Or was it some familiar scene or words brought back? “Shet yore mouth” . . . a brother subduing a vixenish little sister . . . a tangle of wild red hair. Why, it was on the Brazos just after he ran away from home. And the little pest’s name was Til—Til McLennon. He was almost sure the brother had been called Hugh.

To draw out information Boone asked a careless question of Dusty. “Just the two of ’em in the family?”

“That’s whatever. Old man McLennon died year before last. Got thrown by a wild horse.”

“They’re mighty clever^[5] folks, too,” Brown said. “Think a lot of each other, Hugh an’ Miss Til do.”

In the Southwest the word clever has the significance of friendly and agreeable.

The girl's voice came back to them, lifted rebelliously. "I had a right to ride out an' find out who were driving them. It's a free country, ain't it?"

Dusty laughed, with relish. "They sure enough do, Sibley. Her bark is worse than her bite."

Boone made no comment. Come to think about it he might have safely predicted that she would grow up into a tempery woman.

They came, by steep trails which circled hills and plunged into gulches, to a mountain park watered by a stream twisting across the meadow. Here the current was deep and swift close to the bank, there it widened and grew shallow, with riffles foaming down.

"Trout here, looks like," Boone commented.

"Y'betcha!" Dusty agreed.

The horses splashed through and climbed a slope leading to the house. The riders dismounted.

"Show Mr. Sibley the bunkhouse, Dusty," said McLennon. "Soon as you've washed up, come up to the house for supper."

"Be there pronto," promised Dusty. "I could eat a government mail sack, let alone Til's co'n bread."

To Boone, while the Texan was combing his hair, Dusty stopped drying his face to prophesy: "This ain't any fair test, because she's got to knock together some grub in a hurry, but I'll bet my boots you say it's the best supper you've had in a month. Til has got the world beat as a cook."

Forty minutes later Boone was willing to agree with Dusty.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE McLENNON RANCH

DUSTY, doing his full duty by the wheat cakes at breakfast, announced that he had to see a fellow in the hills but that he would be back next day.

“If you’re not pushin’ on yore reins, Sibley, why don’t you stick around the ranch to-day?” he suggested. “We’ll ride in to Galeyville to-morrow. . . . I could do with another stack of flapjacks, Til.”

“Don’t hurry Mr. Sibley, Dusty. He hasn’t hardly rested his saddle yet,” McLennon said. “This is his headquarters while he’s up here.”

Boone made the proper acknowledgment of this hospitable offer. He added that he had been the guest of the McLennons before.

“Thought you were a stranger in this country,” Hugh replied, a little surprised.

“I am. Never saw this neck of the woods till yesterday. I expect you’ve forgot, but more’n ten years ago yore father took me in an’ fed me.”

Tilatha, who had gone to the stove for another plate of pancakes, stood waiting for a moment, her eyes on Boone. The Texan thought he had never seen a woman so vivid and so unaware of her own beauty. The sleeves were rolled to the elbows of her well-moulded arms. It was easy to understand why the cowboys paid court diffidently to this young queen, so free, so untamed, so rhythmic in her movements.

“Back in Texas or here in Arizona?” asked Hugh.

“In Texas. On the Brazos. I was a buffalo hunter.” Boone smiled. “You roped me from my pony an’ yanked me outa the river.”

“The little runaway boy,” cried Tilatha. “The one who wouldn’t stay with us.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Again Boone’s winning smile warmed his face. “’Bout so big,” he quoted, and measured a space on his forefinger with the adjoining thumb.

“We always wondered if the Indians molested you.”

“Not till after I reached the camp. They jumped us on the way home an’ killed three hunters. One of the three stood ’em off to let me make my

getaway.”

“We heard about that killin’,” Hugh said after a moment of reflection. “It made us hump right fast through the Injun country. An’ you’re that li’l’ boy. Well, it sure is a small world, after all.”

It was too unexpected a reunion to dismiss without more talk. Tilatha, in particular, was excited by the discovery. Somehow, she had never forgotten that small boy, so quaintly dignified, of such old-fashioned courtesy, so determined to carry through the enterprise he had begun.

Later in the day, while he was fishing the creek, she wandered down to ask him what luck he was having. With the mannish clothes of yesterday replaced by a simple print frock that was very becoming, she had discarded also her wilfulness and impatience. She was gay and friendly, without any touch of sex coquetry.

“Are you as good a fisherman as Hugh was?” she asked.

He pointed to his string. “I get more, but not as big ones. Of course, this isn’t the Brazos.”

“There ought to be one in that rifle just above there,” she suggested. “Usually there is.”

“There was. I got him.”

He made a cast toward the opposite bank. A trout struck, but did not take the hook. As Tilatha watched this tall brown man, observed the muscles in his long, flat back, and saw with what light ease he handled himself, she thought she had never seen a human being so well proportioned. The movements of the body seemed to express him. There was no dissipation of energy, no waste of force in the poised rhythm.

“We don’t change, after all,” she said. “Not the real we. You’re that little buffalo hunter grown big, an’ I’m the red-headed nuisance that can’t mind her own business.”

“We shape ourselves some, but I reckon the raw material we have to work with stays always the same,” Boone said, with the slight drawl that gave the effect of indifference.

Her brown eyes crinkled to mirth. “I’ve been rememberin’ about the time we met before. You said Pappy ought to drown me.”

“Expect I needed to be frazzled with a hickory. You’ll be glad to know Wayne Lemley blacksnaked me when I reached the camp.”

He hooked a trout, and while he was landing it she did not speak.

“That’s a nice one. . . . Dusty Rhodes says you had a run-in with the Quinns.”

Before he answered he took care of his catch. "Dusty is a right pleasant old lady," he murmured. "Yes, he sure gets my vote for head of the sewing circle."

"Why shouldn't he tell me? It's common talk for everybody in Cochise."

"Matter of fact, I didn't have any run-in with the Quinns."

"With Curt French, then. It's the same thing. An' Whip Quinn did serve notice on you, didn't he?"

"He recommended Tucson."

"I wouldn't start trouble with them. They're dangerous."

"You have it wrong. I'm nowadays hostile to the Quinns. If there is no trouble till I start it——"

"They're fighting men—killers. That's the reputation they brought here. So is that Curt French. He's bad. You can't help admiring Russ Quinn an' his brother, but French——"

"I reckon the Quinns are more friendly killers," he said in his gentle, derisive drawl. "Maybe they don't kill you so hard or so rough as Curt."

"They're men," she came back quickly. "Whip an' Russ may meet trouble more than halfway, but they don't go huntin' it."

"Friends of yours?" he asked.

Beneath the tan in her cheeks the quick colour ran. "They are kinda friendly to Hugh an' to lots of the men in the hills."

Boone wondered what was the basis of this friendliness. Why any relationship at all? The Quinns were townsmen, parasites who lived from the pickings of a rich mining camp. What interest had they in cattle, which was the only occupation of the cowboys? And of what benefit would it be to the rustlers and cattlemen to have an understanding with these gamblers whose influence was so potent in Tough Nut? Perhaps it was politics. It was said that Whip wanted to be sheriff, which was a very lucrative fee office. He might be only playing up to the cowboys for their votes. Bob Hardy was deputy United States marshal, and one of Whip's loyal henchmen. The brothers might be trying to get control of the party machine in the county.

The young woman went on, her voice a little anxious: "Don't have trouble with them. Their enemies have bad luck. They are too strong a combination."

"That seems to be a general opinion," he said drily, "I'm not buckin' the combination. If they lay off me, that's all I ask."

"I think they will. I'll speak to Russ," she replied.

Instantly he flung back curt refusal of her aid. "Don't you, unless you want to make trouble. There's nothin' to this, likely. But if they want to run on me,

why, that's between them an' me. You're not in it, you or any other woman."

Again the colour flooded her face. She stared at him, her eyes hot with resentment. Her desire had been to do him a service, and his answer had been like a slap in the face. In effect, he had told her to mind her own business. Her stormy gaze challenged for a long moment his steel-cold eyes. She wanted to pour out furious words pell-mell. Instead, she turned on her heel and walked like an outraged queen to the house.

Boone watched her, a grim little smile on his lips. "That'll hold her, I reckon. No use arguin' or explainin'. She'd have her own way, anyhow. Now she'll keep still. I'd look fine hidin' behind a girl's skirts, wouldn't I?" His thoughts flowed on. "She'd ask Russ to let me off, would she? I expect she figures she's got a right good stand-in with Russ. Well, I can see where one Quinn has a mighty fine reason for tying up with one Chiricahua cattleman."

An hour later Boone returned to the house. Hugh was on the porch sorting out some horseshoes. Every ranch in those days had its own blacksmith shop.

The cowman looked up. "Nice string of trout. Better leave 'em in the kitchen."

Boone walked in. Tilatha was baking pies. There was a dab of flour on one temple where she had brushed back her rebellious hair with the back of a hand.

"Where'll I put the fish, Miss Tilatha?" the Texan asked evenly. His manner ignored the fact that he had so lately managed to get himself out of her good graces.

She looked at him explosively. He was not sure whether she was going to say nothing or a great deal. Unexpectedly, after a tense pause, she surprised him.

"In that pan of water," she said, almost as though she grudged the words.

He did as she had told him, then sauntered out to the porch.

"You might as well hear it now as later," Hugh told him. "Two of the boys got shot up last night."

This was not unexpected. It had been an easy guess that Edwards had led the cowboys in pursuit of the Mexican vaqueros.

"Killed?" asked Boone.

"No. They'll make the grade. Sandy Joe an' Tom Tracy." McLennon hesitated before he continued: "I'm not offerin' advice, you understand, but personally I don't know anything about it. Least said soonest mended, as the fellow says."

There was a flicker of sardonic mirth in Boone's eyes. If this was not advice, he did not know it when he met it. But he intended to follow it and did

not resent the suggestion.

“I’ve got notions along that line myself,” Boone agreed. “Most generally I keep my trap shut when in doubt.”

“I figured you thataway. Fact is, in Cochise right now a man has got to be some blind. I notice the officers are. Prob’ly there’s more going on than they can ride herd on. Fact is, a fellow has to take conditions as he finds them. When I buy a longhorn bunch I got no way of knowin’ whether they come up the San Simon with their tails draggin’. Course, I take reasonable precautions as to previous ownership.”

A rider had come into the park and was dropping down from the rim to the meadow. As the ranchman talked Boone watched the stranger idly. The horseman splashed through the creek and moved up the slope to the house. He was a big man tanned to bronzed health by wind and sun.

Boone’s eyes were no longer indifferent. They had narrowed slightly when they recognized Russ Quinn. Otherwise there was no change in the Texan. He sat on the porch at negligent ease.

Quinn swung from the saddle with a casual “ ’Lo, Hugh! How are cases?” He stood there, the bridle still in his hand, looking at Boone. Evidently he was surprised.

“Meet Mr. Sibley, Russ,” the ranchman said.

“Why, I’ve met the gent, Hugh,” he said, his manner conveying more than his words. “Down at Tough Nut.” His manner dismissed the Texan as unimportant. “Got kinda tired ridin’ the stage an’ come up for a coupla days.”

“Fine. Long as you like.”

“Anything new?”

“No-o, I reckon not. How about down yore way?”

“Stage robbed yesterday near Bisbee. They killed Buck Galway.”

“Buck was the messenger?”

“Yep. Never got a chance for his white alley. The fellow cut loose on him before he hollered to stop.”

“How many hold-ups?”

“Two. Masked, of course.” Quinn looked at the Texan deliberately from head to foot. “One of ’em a tall, well-built fellow on a sorrel.” He added presently, “With a kind of Texas drawl.”

“You might be describing me an’ my horse,” Boone said in his low voice, meeting the look of the other.

“Didn’t happen to be down Bisbee way yesterday about 10 A. M. in the

mornin', did you?" Quinn asked insolently.

"No, I didn't. Did you?"

Russ laughed hardily. "You got a come-back, fellow. I wasn't askin' did you hold up the stage. Thought mebbe you might have met the birds that did."

"Not that I know of. I've met undesirable characters off an' on lately, though."

"Well, so have I." Quinn turned his back on the Texan and spoke in a low voice to McLennon.

Boone rose and strolled over to the stable.

"When did that fellow show up, Hugh?" asked Quinn.

"About sundown yesterday. Don't get off on the wrong foot, Russ. He didn't hold up the stage."

"How you know he didn't?"

"He's not that kind. Anyhow, he was with Dusty all day."

"With Dusty, eh? A middle-sized cowboy wearin' chaps an' a brown shirt." The last was apparently a quotation.

"Now, looky here, Russ. If you're implyin' that Dusty was in that hold-up _____"

"I'm not. I'm just mentionin' a coincidence. I don't presume he rode a bay horse."

"He did. I reckon there ain't more'n several thousand bay horses in Cochise. I ride one myself. Maybe I did it."

"We lost the tracks, but they were headin' this way."

"How far back?"

"A long way. I don't claim I tracked them here."

Hugh shook his head. "No, sir, you're sure barkin' up the wrong tree, Russ. Lemme tell you about that fellow Sibley."

Quinn dropped the reins to the ground and sat down on the porch. "Shoot yore story," he said. "I'm listenin'."

The ranchman told what he knew of the Texan, both as boy and man. "I never saw a gamer fellow or one I'd rather have to back my play," he added by way of comment.

"I ain't denyin' he's got guts. It took guts to stand up to Curt French. That's not got a thing to do with it," Quinn replied.

"It has, too. No game man would have shot down Buck Galway when there wasn't any need of it. Either a killer or a coward did that."

“How do you know this Sibley isn’t a killer?”

“He don’t look like one.”

“That’s just what he does, Hugh. Think up the killers you’ve met. Aren’t most of ’em quiet, soft-spoken, gray-eyed birds who look as though they were never lookin’ for trouble?”

“I’ve seen that kind.”

“The most dangerous kind. See what this fellow did to Curt French—knocked him cold an’ walked off without a scratch on him.”

“The way I heard that was——”

Quinn waved the explanation aside. “I’m not blamin’ him. He can put up a reasonable story about bein’ in the right. That ain’t what I’m drivin’ at. The point is there’s trouble wherever these fellows are. It just drifts their way, looks like. They may claim they’re not to blame. Anyhow, it happens.”

“Lookin’ at this thing fair an’ square, Russ, you’ll have to admit a fellow doesn’t have to be a trouble hunter to get into a rookus with Curt. He’s a sure enough bully. You’ll have to admit that.”

“His parlour manners ain’t ladylike, if that’s what you mean.”

“Me, I like this Texan, personally.”

“Me, I don’t, personally.”

McLennon smiled. “Well, every fellow I don’t like isn’t necessarily a stage robber. I reckon that goes with you, too.”

“I haven’t claimed he is. All I say is, I wouldn’t put it past him, an’ there’s circumstantial evidence against him.”

“Look here, Russ. I know Dusty right well. He’s a good boy, take him by an’ large. If he’d helped murder Buck Galway in cold blood, he wouldn’t of sat here joshin’ this mornin’ like he didn’t have a care in the world. No, sir. You better get this fool notion outa yore head.”

“Dusty might of been an innocent bystander at the killin’. There’s a difference between holdin’ up a stage an’ shootin’ down without reason a man who hasn’t hurt you any an’ who doesn’t have to be killed.”

Still arguing, they moved toward the stable with Quinn’s horse.

CHAPTER XIII

THREE THOUSAND DOLLARS, DEAD OR ALIVE

DUSTY watched Russ Quinn saddle the two horses. The cowboy sat on the porch with his back against a post, legs stretched at full length. On his face there was a look of disgust. His companion guessed it was due to jealousy.

“That fellow sure has ridden close-herd on Til all day. First off, when I drifted in, she was fishin’ an’ Russ fixin’ her lines like she couldn’t do it well as he can. Now he’s aimin’ to go ridin’ with her. They seem to be havin’ a right nice time. If a girl liked that big black kind of guy, she’d call him good-lookin’, don’t you reckon?”

“I reckon.”

“Nothin’ to me, of course, but shucks! he’s no kind of man for her to encourage.”

“Is she encouragin’ him?” Boone was amused at his friend’s naïve complaint.

“What else would you call it? Actin’ like he’s the only man on earth. She’d ought to know any of the Quinns are bad medicine for any girl. She does know it, too.”

“Maybe that’s why she likes to be with him,” the Texan said indolently. “Nice tame good men don’t go so strong with women, I notice.”

“Saddlin’ that pinto for her now. Hmp! There he goes helpin’ her on so tender, an’, by cripes! I’ve seen her swing on that bronc without ever touchin’ the stirrups.”

“Prob’ly a handsome bad man wasn’t beaung her right then,” Boone suggested.

“What I say is you never can tell about a woman, not when it comes to a man. They don’t use their judgment, looks like. I’d sure hate to see Til marry Russ Quinn. He’s got his good p’int, but he’d sure ruin her life. He’s one of these here masterful devils, an’ that wouldn’t suit Til.”

“Wouldn’t it?”

“Not by a jugful. She wants to rule the roost her own self. He’d break her spirit like he would a wild horse. That’s the Quinn of it. Rule or ruin. Likely

he's got her fooled into thinkin' she can twist him round her li'l' finger."

"They're sure a good-lookin' couple on horseback. . . . Hugh is callin' you, Dusty."

The cowboy bowlegged his way to the corral. For ten minutes he engaged in conversation with the ranch owner, after which he returned to the house.

"Heluva note," he said to Boone, apparently not sure whether to be annoyed or amused. "Hugh says the stage was robbed near Bisbee day before yesterday an' they are claimin' we did it, you an' me."

"Got that far, have they? I had a notion that was comin'."

"You knew about it?"

"Only what Russ Quinn said. He hadn't got farther than insinuations yesterday."

"Well, I don' know as he claims we did it, out an' out. But he sure enough describes us an' our horses. Hugh told him he was crazy with the heat, but I noticed he was glad to have me tell him there is nothin' to it. I've been some wild, an' with a cowboy most generally you cain't tell. He's liable to go bad unexpected after a spree. Worst of it is they killed Buck Galway, the shotgun messenger."

"You're unfortunate in yore friends, Dusty," the Texan drawled. "The Quinns would like to hang this on me, if they could. It's a convenient excuse to drive me outa the country."

"I reckon I'm drug in because I was with you. Well, don't you worry about me, Boone; if the Quinns ride me too hard, my sixshooter will be smokin' right beside yours."

The other man shook his head. "Don't talk thataway, Dusty. We're law-abidin' citizens, an' we don't aim to go gunfannin' like a pair of crooks. First off, we'll ride into Galeyville an' see what talk there is, if any."

"Then what?"

"If there's a serious charge against me, I'm going back to Tough Nut to face it down."

"Would that be wise, do you reckon? If the Quinns are fixin' to hang this on you, they'll have evidence, you can bet yore boots. An Buck was popular. No tellin' how far a drunken crowd might go if it was worked up. The only alibi we got is somewheres up in the Dragoons. We might be gosh-awful dead before we could dig up our witnesses."

"A fellow has to take chances when his good name is at stake. That's my platform. You don't need to take my view of it."

Dusty flushed. "If you go, I will, too."

They saddled and took the road for Galeysville. The wagon tracks ran plain before them. Half a mile from the house Dusty drew up. He pointed to the marks of horses' hoofs deflecting from the road to follow a bridle path.

"They're takin' the high-line trail," he said gloomily.

"He's showin' good judgment. Don't tell me, Dusty, you'd stick to the main-travelled road if you had such good company."

They held to the wagon tracks, though the cowboy looked up at the pine-clad slope regretfully. To ride the high trails in dappled sunshine, with the blue sky back of the green trees, the lady of one's choice beside one, is an enchanting experience; to know that another man is riding them under the same conditions not so exhilarating.

"We'll beat 'em to town an hour," Dusty predicted mournfully.

It developed that he was more or less a true prophet.

Galeysville was a one-street 'dobe town. Chiefly it consisted of saloons, gambling houses, one-room mud huts, and two or three shaft houses with gray dumps drooping from them like great beards. There were, too, a couple of general stores.

The two riders tied up at a hitch rack and went into one of the saloons. Eight or nine men, evidently cowboys, were in the place. Four were playing stud poker. Two were having a drink at the bar. One lay on a bench asleep.

"'Lo, Dusty," someone called. "When did you-all get back?"

Boone noticed that the eyes of all present, except those of the sleeping man, turned curiously upon him. And more than curiously. There was in their regard a wary intentness. They had heard about him. That was clear. What had they heard? About his brush with French? About the rescue of Miss McLennon? No doubt. But had they heard, too, that he was charged with stage robbery and the murder of the shotgun messenger?

"Meet Mr. Sibley." Thus Dusty, in a sweeping introduction to all present.

The Texan nodded to two or three of those nearest and moved to the bar. He knew that the eyes still watched him, but no evidence that he knew it reached the cowboys. He was at ease, unconcerned, indifferent. He drank, watched the stud game for a few minutes, sauntered out.

Dusty stayed. His friend had murmured a suggestion.

"Find out what they know."

Boone moved across the street to one of the stores. There were three or four men inside. One was inquiring for mail, another trying on a pair of boots.

But at his entrance business was suspended. Again he was the focus of all their regard. These men, too, had heard of a stranger answering his description. They, too, watched him with a fascination respectful but ominous.

In Cattleland news flies on the wings of the wind. It is swept, with incredible swiftness, to the remotest ranch and the loneliest cow camp. It happened that Boone was the central figure of three startling episodes. He had whipped Curt French. He had rescued the McLennon girl from nine armed Mexicans. He had robbed a stage and killed Buck Galway. That this last was not true did not matter. An accused man is guilty in popular opinion till proved innocent.

These recent adventures were reason enough for the attention given him. Yet Boone was not entirely satisfied with his explanation. It did not cover the whole ground, he felt. The absorption of their interest in him held an eagerness almost wolflike. The glitter in the eyes of some of these men suggested that they were crouched for the pounce. Why? Even if he were an outlaw, what personal attraction had he for them?

To pass time, he was buying a pocket knife. His manner was easy and unconcerned. Apparently, he gave his whole attention to examining the quality of the steel. Yet all his senses were keyed to alertness.

He was aware of a man coming into the store, and knew a moment later that the person was Dusty. Without turning his head, he became conscious that the cowboy was striding fast, that he was moved by excitement.

“Let’s git outa here *pronto*,” whispered Dusty in the ear of his friend. The young man’s voice was rough and hoarse.

“I’ll take this one,” Boone said casually. “What’s the tariff?”

“Six bits,” the clerk said. He too showed excitement. His face had the shine and the pallor of the consumptive, but a red spot burned in each cheek.

Boone did not hurry. He paid for the knife and sauntered down the aisle toward the door, the centre of still fixed observation.

Once outside, Dusty almost dragged him down the steps to what protection there was in the adobe wall of the store.

“We got to light out,” the cowboy exploded. “There’s a reward for us—three thousand for you, five hundred for me.”

A reward! Boone understood now what the glittering eyes had been telling him. The emotions shining out of the faces of some of these men had been greed and the lust to strike, tempered by the uncertainty of fear.

“Dead or alive?” asked Boone evenly.

His question struck at the very heart of the matter. If he was worth as much

dead as alive, they very likely would not risk an attempt to capture him. A shot from the window of some saloon might drop him at any moment.

“Dead or alive, either one,” Dusty answered. “Jim Barkalow got in from Tough Nut an hour ago with the news. Listen, Boone. They don’t want me, none of the boys. It’s you they’re after. Well, we got to hustle. They’re talkin’ it over—what they had best do. I’ll kinda saunter up an’ get the horses.”

Boone shook his head. “Too late, Dusty.”

An eruption of men had poured out of the saloon in front of which the two mounts were tied. Also, the Texan noted, a man and a woman, riding down the street, had reached the spot. The man was Russ Quinn, his companion Miss McLennon. Quinn swung from the saddle and joined the other men.

“Some of the boys were talkin’ up for you, ’count of what you did for Til,” Dusty explained. “Listen, Boone, I’ll go try an’ talk ’em out of any notions they got.”

“You’re not in this, Dusty. Like you say, it’s me they want. I’ll play a lone hand.”

A shot sounded. A bullet struck the adobe wall behind Boone and sent dirt flying.

“That come from lower down the street,” Dusty cried in excitement.

“This town will be a hornet’s nest in three minutes. Get back into the store, Dusty.”

“No, by golly. Not without you.”

Another bullet struck the wall.

“We gotta go, Boone.” As he spoke, Dusty crossed in front of his friend, intending to duck around the corner of the store.

At the same moment came the crack of a revolver. Boone caught sight of a face, almost directly opposite them, lifted above a windowsill.

Dusty turned to his friend, a look almost of incredulity on his face. “I’m hit, doggone it,” he said petulantly, catching at Boone to steady himself.

The hinge of one knee shut up like a knife blade. Boone caught him, dragged him up the store steps, and left him just inside the door.

Yet another moment and the Texan was again outside. Even as he leaped from the steps he saw that the group of cowboys from the saloon above were moving down, Russ Quinn a few yards in advance of them, that a bald-headed man with a rifle was peering out of a doorway at him seventy-five yards below, that two others were crouched behind cottonwoods a little back from the road. He was cut off from his horse. Both ends of the street were blocked.

Viciously bullets spat at him. One took a splinter from the window frame close to his head. Others scattered dirt from the soft adobe wall. He zigzagged across the street and plunged into the first open doorway he saw.

CHAPTER XIV

TILATHA DOES NOT KNOW

WHAT Dusty had said was true. Tilatha had been more kind than usual to Russ Quinn. It was as though some inner excitement drove her to him. She was cherishing resentment against another man, but she would have denied that that had anything to do with it.

She loved to ride. There was something that stimulated her interest in the dark personality of Quinn. Was it necessary to give herself any other reason why she rode to Galeyville with him?

After they took the upper trail, they rode in silence until it broadened sufficiently for Quinn to join her knee to knee.

“No, you’re wrong, Russ,” she said in her decisive way, pursuing their previous conversation. “I don’t believe it at all. He’s not that kind. Mind, I don’t like a hair of his head. He’s so insultingly——”

She stopped to search for a word, then spat out, “superior” for want of a more definite one. “He thinks a woman should sit in the corner and sew. A detestable man!”

“Then what makes you so sure he didn’t rob the stage?”

“Because. He doesn’t look like one of that kind. He isn’t one.”

“Can you tell a stage robber by the colour of his hair, girl? Do you reckon a hold-up man looks different from anyone else?”

“I could tell my brother isn’t one, couldn’t I?” she flung out:

“All right. Name some fellow that does look like one,” he persisted, with a view to making her position untenable. Somehow it annoyed him that she should defend this fellow Sibley against him. He wanted to drive her to admit that he was right.

Tilatha was a little irritated herself. She did not have to accept his opinions ready made. “Well, yore friend Curt French looks like he might be one,” she said, not without malice.

He turned dark eyes on her, frowning. “I wouldn’t say that if I was you, even if I was funnin’.”

“I’m not funning,” she replied with spirit. “You asked me what I thought a hold-up might look like an’ I told you. An’ why shouldn’t I say it about Curt

French if you do about Mr. Sibley?”

Quinn was not looking for a quarrel with her. He laughed a little sourly. “Have it yore own way, girl. All I meant was that Curt——”

“—might come in an’ beat my head off if he heard,” she cut in. “Like he did to this Mr. Sibley.”

“You get the last word, Til,” he said ruefully. Then added: “Women sure take the cake. You claim you don’t like this pilgrim Sibley, but you stick up for him through hell an’ high water, beggin’ yore pardon.”

“I don’t, either.” She cast in her mind for a simile. The one she found was not very apropos, but it was the best at hand. “I don’t like Benedict Arnold, but I don’t have to believe that he tried to poison George Washington, do I?”

“You win.”

“After what he did for me, I ought to like this Mr. Sibley, but he gets my back up so. I s’pose I’m ungrateful.”

“Oh, well, leave him lay. No use worryin’ about him. One o’ these days, if he stays around here promiscuous, Curt will make him step high as a blind dog in a stubble field. . . . It’s been a thousand years since I saw you, Til. Last week I tried to make it out here, but I couldn’t cut it. A gold shipment going out, an’ the company wanted me to take it.”

“You get tired of town, I reckon. At least I soon do. The wild-cherry blossoms are lovely, aren’t they?”

“No, I don’t get tired of town,” he answered. “An’ I didn’t come to see wild-cherry blossoms but a wild rose with thorns. I aim to pluck it one o’ these days. Right soon, too.”

She did not look at him. Her gaze was on the trail ahead, but she knew his bold, dark eyes were on her, filled with passionate and possessive desire. It did not just now suit her to challenge his assurance.

“The thorns might prick you,” she said lightly.

“Who cares? I wouldn’t have my rose without the thorns.” He opened his big brown hand and closed it tightly. The back of his fingers were covered with short black hair. There was something almost cruel in the strength of the gesture. “I’ll crush ’em—the thorns—till there’s no sting left in ’em.”

Her smile was not quite true. “Don’t you think you might crush the rose, too?” she asked.

But she did not wait for an answer. They had come to an open plateau on a hilltop, and she put her horse to a canter.

One of these days she would have to make up her mind about this dark

Quinn. He was a strong man, positive, assertive. It was his boast that he always got what he wanted. Well developed in him were the primal virtues of the frontier. No man without these could hope to marry Tilatha McLennon, for she was of the outdoors, what the wind and the sun and pioneering ancestors had made her. But she knew a score of men who possessed courage and energy, were faithful to their friends. More than these she demanded of the man who was to be her mate.

As yet there was some barrier between her and Russ Quinn. Her heart had not been swept toward him on a tide of emotion. More than once she had wondered why. He was stronger than she, and she wanted for her husband a dominant man, even though she did not know it. When she thought of him, little doubts crept into her musings. She was not sure about the inner quality of the man. He could be hard and ruthless. He had killed, more than once, she had heard. This was bad, but not of itself fatal to his chances if he had slain from imperative need. What she must find out beyond question was the nature of the real Russ Quinn. Was he evil in his heart? She did not know, and the very uncertainty made her push him away for the time, at least. Before she gave her life into his keeping or that of any man, she must be very sure of him.

Therefore she evaded the issue during the ride, not once only, but several times. By the light turn of a phrase, by the touch of a spur to her pony's side, by a sudden exclamation at sight of a flowering ocotillo, she deflected his attention until they reached Galeysville.

He was not naturally a patient man, this dark, dangerous wooer. But he had all the self-confidence in the world. The girl was interested in him. He knew that. She was a little afraid of him. That did not displease him; he had seen more than once how it kindled a woman's feeling for him. She would think about him when he was not present, and her emotions would quicken. If it suited her to play for time—well, he could afford to wait.

They rode into Galeysville quite unaware that the next hour or two would decide for all time who was to be the captain of her heart.

At a road gait they jogged up the dusty street.

Out of the Silver Dollar saloon men poured like pips squirted from a lemon.

"There's something wrong," Tilatha cried.

Her companion did not answer. He swung from the saddle and joined the excited group.

Someone flung at him an explanation. "It's the road agent who killed Buck Galway."

A shot rang out.

Tilatha's eyes swept down the road, even as another revolver sounded. Two men were standing in front of Pete Andrews's store, and it was at these the shots were being fired. One of the men was Dusty Rhodes, the other Boone Sibley.

CHAPTER XV

A FLAG OF TRUCE

TILATHA sat her horse, petrified by horror, while the guns blazed at their target. Neither Rhodes nor Sibley had his sixshooter out. She wanted to scream a useless warning to them, but the vocal chords in her throat were frozen. Why didn't they run? Why did they stand . . . ?

The girl found her voice in a cry of despair. Dusty had gone down. She saw his friend stoop, pick him up, and carry the body into the store. Then, to her terror, Sibley was back again on the steps, the guns once more roaring at him.

Through lanes of fire he darted across the street. Every instant she expected to see him plunge to the ground, shot through and through. But his foes were too many and too hurried. They hampered one another. They flung their bullets wildly at their victim. He reached Sanford's store and vanished within.

"Got away," someone gulped out with an oath.

"Like a streak of cat before a bulldog," another cried.

Russ Quinn took charge of the attack. "Bart, you take four-five of the boys an' see he don't get out the back way. If he shows up, plug him. Van, you hold the other end of the street. See yore boys ain't too brash. This fellow is a killer. I'll handle this end. We've got him. All we got to do is smoke him out."

The girl's heart sank. They were going to kill him like a cornered rat. She must do something—stop this murder. What could she do?

From the front door of the store Sanford and his clerk came hurriedly. "He's locked himself in," the proprietor said. "You fellows want to be careful. There's all kinds of guns there."

Tilatha slipped from her mount and ran to Quinn.

"You can't do this," she cried. "You can't do it. He's the wrong man."

Russ Quinn turned to her, listening while he brought his mind back to understand what she wanted. He stood there impatiently, his slightly bowed legs set apart, a big, black purposeful man with a Colt's .45 in one hand. Then, silently, with a sweep of an arm, he brushed her aside. This was not women's business.

Tilatha caught at the sleeve of another man. "He didn't kill Buck Galway!" she cried. "He isn't the man."

“Didn’t, eh? Bet yore boots he did. The poster’s tacked up in the saloon—name, description, horse, everything. An’ three thousand reward, dead or alive. Sure we got the right bird.”

“No, no, Jim. Stop to think. This man saved me from the Mexicans day before yesterday, just a little while after the hold-up.”

“About ten hours after,” the cowboy corrected. “Sure. Why wouldn’t he? Makin’ a bluff to cover his tracks. Likely he was in cahoots with the greasers. You said yore own self he didn’t have to fire a shot.”

She turned to another man, a young fellow who was an admirer from a distance. She had seen him watching her at dances.

“You won’t let ’em do this awful thing, will you, Ted? It’s all wrong.”

He was embarrassed and distressed. “Nothin’ I could do,” he said. “I’d help you if I could, but they’re hell-bent on going through. You can see for yoreself how it is, Miss Tillie.”

“Go to the ranch for my brother. Ride fast,” she begged.

He did not want to go. She saw that. But still less did he wish to refuse. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “But it won’t do any good. He’ll not get here in time.”

“He may, if you hurry.”

The cowboy swung to a saddle and rode out of town.

For the first time in her life Tilatha felt quite helpless. As child and young woman, she had gone her self-willed way. Early she had discovered that she could get what she wanted by clamorous insistence. That had been when she was still a long-legged brat with a wild tangle of red hair. Later she changed her tactics, having gained in worldly wisdom. It was not necessary to get into a temper to win out, not if one happened to be the prettiest girl in Cochise County. A smiling suggestion would usually do. If that failed, a flash of imperious will.

But this situation had got beyond her. The deference these young fellows had paid her was gone. She had been pushed out of their minds by the thrill of the man hunt. In their voices she could hear the rough snarl of the wolf pack. It frightened her to learn that her opinion and her desire counted for nothing with them. She was only a woman, and it was a man’s world.

The attackers were at a disadvantage in one respect. They could not set fire to the building and smoke out their victim. The property was too valuable. To storm the store would probably entail heavy loss, since he was well armed and would fight to the finish.

“We’ll snipe him,” Quinn announced. “But, first off, I’ll have a talk with

him an' give him a chance to surrender."

He asked Tilatha for her handkerchief to use as a white flag. She gave it to him.

"I'll go along," she said eagerly. "Maybe he'll listen to me."

"You'll stay right here," the shotgun messenger told her curtly.

As Quinn moved forward he shouted to the beleaguered man. "Say, fellow, I come for a powwow." He thrust his weapon into its holster.

"Don't make any mistake," the Texan advised him, his drawling voice cool and even. "This scatter gun shoots all over Arizona."

In spite of Russ Quinn's command, Tilatha had slipped forward at his heels. She could see Boone Sibley at the window, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. He was surrounded, caught in a trap, with no chance for escape. A hundred foes were clamouring for his blood. But never had she seen a man who looked more master of his fate. In the grim face, with its tight, straight-lipped mouth and its cold steady eyes, there was no least flicker of panic.

"Fellow, you're bucked out," Quinn said arrogantly. "We got you right. But I'm givin' you a chance to surrender before we start shootin' you up."

"An' if I surrender, I'd be shot tryin' to escape on the way to Tough Nut. Much obliged. I reckon not. When I give myself up it will be to a sheriff with a warrant for my arrest. I'll make another proposition. Leave me go, an' I'll ride in to Tough Nut an' surrender."

"You got a consid'able nerve, Texas man. How do I know you wouldn't light out for the line?"

"How do I know if I surrender I won't be shot down, anyhow?"

"I'm givin' you my word."

"I was givin' you mine."

"Hell, we got you, fellow. I'm offerin' terms, not you." Quinn's voice held the rasp of impatience.

"I wonder if you've got me, Mr. Quinn. I'm well fixed to send a few of yore friends to Kingdom Come first, anyhow. An' listen. You wished this on me. If I kill, I'm driven to it. I'm an American citizen attacked by a mob."

"You're the outlaw who killed Buck Galway, that's who you are!" the dark man cried angrily. "An' we're 'lowin' to collect yore hide *pronto*. You claim you're a bull rattler, eh? Watch us stomp you out."

Tilatha spoke pleadingly. Her confidence was gone. "If I rode along with you to Tough Nut would you surrender, Mr. Sibley?"

"No, ma'am, I would not," he answered curtly.

The sharp angry bark of a pistol rang out. Instantly the sawed-off shotgun swept up in an arc and boomed. A man crouched at a window of the Andrews store collapsed with a groan.

Quinn backed away. "Stay behind me, girl. What you here for, anyhow? Step lively. I'd beat the head off that fool who shot if he hadn't already got his."

The battle was on. Snipers from the cover of windows, walls, and street corners centred their fire on the store. The glass of the front was shattered. Tilatha could hear those in the rear pouring in their bullets. Occasionally the trapped man's guns flamed out defiance.

The heart died in her bosom. This could not last long. Some of these random shots would reach their mark.

She looked despairingly up the road. There was no sign of her brother, nor could there be for an hour. And what could Hugh do with this blood-mad mob?

Her eyes took in a landscape all colour, light, and air. The atmosphere was a rose-tinted haze. Lakes of lilac filled the mountain pockets, but the peaks had form without depth, an opalescence devoid of substance. Soon it would be night, and the desert would take on the softness laid on it by nature's magic wand.

Yet here, in this raw, ugly 'dobe village, the passions of men flung lances of death, forgetful of all the loveliness of life.

There must be some way to save him, if she could only think of it. She caught her hands together and looked up, perhaps to fling a prayer into the sky, and in that moment saw a gleam of hope. If they did not kill him in the meantime, if some of them did not think of it first, if it could be done unnoticed, there was perhaps a chance for him to escape.

She prayed for darkness, that she might set about her preparations.

CHAPTER XVI

“LIKE BUZZARDS TO A WATER HOLE”

INSIDE the store Boone built what defences he could. Sacks of grain, piled against the lower window panes, reduced the area of attack. Barrels of nails helped to barricade the doors against the chance of being battered down. He could hear the spatter of bullets against the adobe walls, and could see the splinters they made as they tore through the doors. Looking out through his peepholes, he could count his attackers gathering.

“They’re comin’ like buzzards to a water hole in the spring,” he said aloud.

As he saw it, night was his only chance. If he could survive until darkness fell, he might somehow contrive to slip away. In this frontier store he found plenty of ammunition and weapons, and he did not hesitate to avail himself of them. Through front and rear windows he fired a good many shots, but they were not intended to kill or even wound. If his foes came to close quarters with him, it would have to be different. Already he had dropped one man with a load of buckshot. That was enough for the present.

A bullet struck his left hand in the fleshy part just above the little finger. He tied up the wound with a handkerchief taken from stock.

Even during the battle, Boone found time once or twice to wonder what was back of this whole thing. He understood the attack. It was born of impulses easily comprehended, fusing into emotions of anger and greed. But why had the Quinns singled him out so instantly as the outlaw? Why had they instigated so big a reward as three thousand dollars *dead or alive*? No doubt the reward had come from the express company over the signature of the sheriff, but Boone did not doubt that the Quinns had urged it. And dead or alive. Did they prefer to have him brought in dead rather than alive? If so, why?

The Quinns had nothing serious against him. It was ridiculous to suppose that they were hounding him to his death merely because he had thrashed Curt French. The motive was not sufficient. Then what potent reason urged them?

The answer came like a flash of light. The Quinns were diverting suspicion. They were covering the tracks of the real robbers by throwing the blame upon him and Dusty Rhodes. There could be no other explanation. They had either robbed the Bisbee stage themselves, or else they knew who had.

Crouched between two dry-goods boxes, Boone listened to the spitting of the bullets as darkness fell. The fusillade had died down for the time. Only an occasional shot sounded. Were his enemies massing for a rush?

He rose to find out. As he did so, a tapping came from above. He looked up, revolver ready, to the skylight above.

“Mr. Sibley,” a low voice whispered.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Me. Til McLennon. My pony is waiting beside the Silver Dollar. You can cross by the roofs and drop down.” The girl’s voice was tremulous with fear. “Oh, hurry, hurry!”

His thoughts moved in lightning flashes. Swiftly he caught up a Mexican sombrero and a scrape from a shelf. A moment later he stood on one of the counters, stepped upon some sacks of flour, and pushed his head through the skylight. He lay beside the girl on the roof.

“Crawl along the roofs,” she whispered. “You’ll have to jump across to the Silver Dollar roof, then lower yoreself the other side. What’s that?” She caught her hands in a gesture of terror.

There was a sound of crashing timber below, accompanied by fierce and savage voices.

“They’re breakin’ in,” he cried.

Twice he had rejected harshly her mediation, once within the hour. He did not refuse her help now. She had brought him his one chance for life. He accepted it instantly.

But he did not creep along the roofs as she had suggested. He slipped the scrape over his head and donned the sombrero, then ran from roof to roof. They were flat. Someone had caught sight of him and shouted. Her heart stopped as she saw him leap across to the Silver Dollar, stoop, and swing down from the roof.

“It’s a Mexican,” someone yelled. Then, “No, by cripes, it’s the killer.”

A shot sounded, another, three or four in quick succession. There came the swift drumming of hoofs. He had got away.

Cautiously a man’s head and shoulders came through the skylight.

“Don’t shoot,” the girl cried.

“Til McLennon,” a surprised voice ejaculated.

A moment later Sid Edwards stood beside her on the roof.

“What you doin’ here?” he asked.

“Helpin’ Mr. Sibley get away,” she answered.

His jaw dropped. “Good Lord, girl! You might of got shot. How’d you get up here?”

“By the cottonwood tree over there.”

Another man’s head and shoulders showed, this time those of Russ Quinn. “Is he here, Sid?”

“Gone. Miss Tillie’s here.”

Quinn ripped out an oath. In three sentences the situation was explained to him. He relieved his feelings in harsh and unflattering words as he stood close to her, his sinewy fingers pressing into the flesh of her wrists.

She did not hear him. Her mind was with the man flying through the night. She had seen a bloodstained cloth around his hand. Was he badly wounded? Had he been hit again in the rush to escape? Had he escaped only to die of his hurts in the desert?

CHAPTER XVII

BOONE TAKES A LONG CHANCE

SWIFTLY Boone went from roof to roof, crouching as he ran. He leaped across to the one that covered the Silver Dollar and from the far side looked down. A man, revolver in hand, stood near the wall just below him. Twenty yards away, beneath a cottonwood, was a saddled pony.

The Texan did not take time to reason out his best course. Sure instinct guided him. He dropped from the roof upon the man below, who went down as though a hod of bricks had fallen on him.

As Boone clambered to his feet, he heard someone shout a warning. A gun barked in the darkness. The hunted man had no time for caution, none for retaliation. One wasted second might blot out his chance for escape. With long strides he scudded for the cottonwood. More guns sounded. Voices were lifted, shrill with excitement.

He caught at the bridle rein of the horse and vaulted to the saddle. One pressure of the knee was enough. He was astride a peg pony. It swung in its tracks and was off.

“Scratch gravel, you Billy boy,” he murmured, his heart exultant.

For already he was out of range. In the night they would never find him unless some pursuer stumbled on him by chance. Grimly he smiled. Already no doubt they were blaming one another bitterly for their failure to get him. He could imagine Russ Quinn’s chagrin and humiliation. The man had been outlucked by his victim, outwitted by the girl he expected to marry. Unless Boone misread greatly his temperament, Quinn would take his setback as a personal affront.

Boone owed his escape wholly to Tilatha McLennon. Except for her interference, he would have been shot to death during the assault on the store. He recognized that fully. She had risked her life to save him. This did not hurt his pride. He exulted in it. If he had known in advance and could have prevented it, he would never have let her do it. Plainly enough he had told her to mind her own business. Her answer had been to plan his escape and to venture into the fire zone to save him. He would not soon forget the sight of her on the roof—fear-filled eyes shining with excitement, tremulous voice urging him to hurry, a young thing of unconscious grace whose slender throat

carried the lovely head gallantly as the stem does a rose.

It was odd, this lift of the spirit, even though he had evaded the sharp menace of immediate death. A fugitive, he was riding from pursuit, already wounded, flying from danger into danger. That he was up to his neck in trouble, he knew. His only chance, any prudent man would say, was to head for Mexico and get across the line. There was in him some stubborn strain that would not let him do that. His intention was to ride to Tough Nut and face down his foes. Without a trial, without waiting for the defence, public opinion had voted him guilty. If his enemies would give him time, he might reverse that verdict. A forlorn hope, he knew. It took no wisdom to perceive that they would strike hard and soon.

He rode through the night, following no trail but heading toward Tough Nut. A tenderfoot would soon have become lost in the maze of hills, but Boone had lived almost entirely in the open. The stars guided him, the general roll of the land told him which way lay the plains. A small stream confirmed his judgment.

At the creek he stopped to wash and bind his wounded hand.

“My luck sure stood up fine that time,” he told himself, and he reknotted the handkerchief with the fingers of one hand and his teeth. “I reckon they spilled a couple hundred bullets at me. Never did see a burg get het up so sudden an’ so unanimous.”

Naturally at this point his thoughts reverted once more to the young woman who had starred in his rescue. They continued to dwell with her as he jogged on down the creek. He had not even had time to say “Much obliged.” Did she think he was ungrateful? Maybe so, considering how he had previously repulsed so curtly her offers of assistance.

A gray light sifted into the sky. Dawn broke. It would not do to ride into Tough Nut in open daylight. There were arrangements to be made before he surrendered. He drew aside into the thick chaparral and unsaddled. He picketed the cow pony and let it graze on alfalaria. Boone had shot two quail at a water hole. He dressed and cooked them, then stamped out the fire. The birds served him for breakfast.

Under the shade of a mesquite he slept, woke, and slept again, wearing the day away until after the sun had set. He had, as most riders of the plains have, a capacity for patience. He did not fret at the slow hours, nor did he let himself worry about the future. What would be would be.

As darkness began to fall, he saddled and took up again the road for town. When he reached Tough Nut he did not enter by way of Apache Street, nor did he put up Billy at the Buffalo Corral. Publicity was just now the last thing he

wanted. He followed a burro trail that wound up an arroyo to a cabin on the outskirts of town. Not far from the cabin he dismounted and crept forward. There was a light in the shack, but before he announced himself he wanted to know whether the owner of the place was alone.

When he raised his head and looked through the window, his first glance told him there was only one person in the one-room house. Boone went to the door and knocked.

Mobeetie Bill opened to him. The old-timer's eyes could hardly credit what they saw. "Dog my skin, son, is it sure enough you?" he asked. "Come right in an' make yoreself to home."

"I'll look after my horse first," Boone said.

He unsaddled the cow pony and slipped the bridle from its head. Within a day or two he knew that the animal would be back at the McLennon ranch.

"You tell yore mistress that I'm right much obliged for the loan of you, Billy," the young man said aloud.

When Boone returned to the house, carrying saddle and bridle, he found that the old Texan had been busy. He was tacking a newspaper over the window.

"I reckon you've heard the news, some of it," Boone said. "I'm not figurin' on imposin' on you, not too much, anyhow. I've got no claim on you an'——"

"You have, too. You're from Texas, ain't you?"

"A heap of scalawags are from Texas, Dad. Well, I sure would like to talk things over with you if you've got no objections."

"You're gonna stay right here with me to-night. Had any supper?"

Boone had not. His host knocked together a hurried meal.

Before Boone washed his face he asked the old Texan the question that was heavily on his mind. "Have you heard about Dusty? Was he shot up bad?"

"In the laig. The boys will look after him all right. He's got friends aplenty. They say he's at the McLennon ranch."

The young man drew a deep breath of relief. "I was worried about him. The fellow that shot him was aimin' at me. Dusty crossed in front of me right then. That boy will sure do to ride the river with."

"A kinda nice kid. I'm glad it wasn't any worse." There was a gleam of sly humour in the old fellow's eyes. "He won't be stove up long. When he gets afoot again, they can bring him in an' hang him nice."

"Don't, Dad. You make my neck ache," Boone answered, with a rueful grin.

Mobeetie Bill emptied the contents of the frying pan into a plate. "Come an' get it, son," he said.

Not till after Boone had finished did either of them mention what was in both their minds.

The old man's eyes were shining with excitement. "Son, you've certainly done stood this town on its head. All kinds of stories are floatin' through the gambling halls. I reckon I'll know what's what quickest if you make oration whilst I listen. Hop to it, boy."

Boone told the story of what had occurred since he had left Tough Nut two days since. More than once the former buffalo hunter's toothless grin applauded him.

"Didn't have a thing to do with the Bisbee stage hold-up?" Mobeetie Bill asked.

"Not a thing. Something queer about that, Dad. Why wish it on me so immediate?"

The old fellow wrinkled his forehead, nodding his head slowly. "What I'd like to know, too. Someone mighty anxious to settle on a hold-up man real quick, looks like. Why? What was the doggone hurry?"

"You tell me, Dad. I know what I think."

"You think the same I do. The guys that did it were scared someone would strike the right trail, so they picked on you an' started folks lookin' for you. Funny the hold-ups were ridin' horses same colour as yores an' Curly."

"Unless they picked horses that colour because they knew the ones we were ridin'," Boone suggested.

"Hmp! Say, boy, that might be, too. I reckon I'll be right busy askin' a few questions to-morrow, or even to-night."

"I hoped you would."

"What about that wounded hand? You got to have a doctor."

"How about Dr. Peters? Is he a good doctor?"

"Why, he's a right good doctor, they say. But he might figure it his duty to tell the sheriff where you're at. He's got his own notions, Doc Peters has."

"I'll risk him. He doctored Curt French for the measles, didn't he?"

Mobeetie Bill was puzzled. He did not quite see what this had to do with it, but he could see by Boone's manner that there was some connection.

"Why, I dunno, did he? Want I should get Doc Peters here right away?"

"I hate to trouble you, Dad. If you don't want to mix up in this, I'll find him myself."

The old man exploded. “You leave me lay, boy. I’ll do like I doggone please. I was totin’ a gun before these Quinns were outa the cradle, an’ I don’t aim to git off’n the earth for the whole passle of ’em.”

Boone smiled. “All right, Dad. It’s yore say-so. Only ask yore questions careful. Don’t get into a rumpus with these killers.”

“Hmp! You’re a nice fellow to be givin’ advice like that,” Mobeetie Bill grunted. “I been hearin’ about all yore goings on in the hills. Beats me how you read yore title clear to talk thataway now.”

“One thing kinda led to another, but I sure wasn’t lookin’ for all the trouble that piled up on me. How much of a haul did the hold-ups get?”

“The express company ain’t give out the figures, but I heard more’n twelve thousand.”

Mobeetie Bill put on his coat and started on his errand.

Boone called after him. “Better not tell the doctor who his patient is.”

“I been thinkin’ that my own self,” the old man replied.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOC PETERS CHANGES HIS MIND

DR. PETERS was a tall, thin man, very dignified. He wore an imperial but no moustache. As to clothing, he was fastidious.

Shrewd eyes under grizzled brows took in the Texan keenly. Apparently the doctor was a man of few words. After the briefest greeting, he removed his coat, folded it neatly, washed his hands, and examined the wound. He asked only one question.

“How long ago did this happen?”

Boone told him.

The doctor dressed the torn flesh, washed his hands a second time, and resumed his coat. He stood frowning down at his patient.

“How much?” asked Boone.

“No fee,” answered the physician. “I regret to say, Mr. Sibley, that I find it my duty to report your presence in town to the authorities.”

“You know me, then?”

“You were pointed out to me on the street some days ago.”

“Fair enough, Doctor. You wouldn’t want to take a fee from yore patient an’ then sell him for three thousand pieces of silver, would you?”

The doctor flushed angrily. “I do not take blood money, sir, nor do I shield criminals.”

“Meanin’ me?” Boone asked, his voice low and even.

“I won’t bandy words with you, young man. But I give you fair warning that I must notify the sheriff.”

“You’re playin’ fair, Doctor. I expect you think I’ll light out. Well, they’ll find me here. What do you reckon I came back to town for?”

“I don’t know, unless you’re mad.”

“Which I ain’t.” Boone leaned forward, an elbow on the table, his gaze plunged into the black eyes of the physician. “How far would you go, Doctor, to clear yore good name if it was attacked unjustly?”

The young man could see this sink in. He had given the doctor a jolt straight from the shoulder. It chanced that Joel Peters was an honourable man

who very much valued his good repute.

“You mean you didn’t rob the Bisbee stage and kill Buck Galway?”

“That’s just what I mean. Dusty Rhodes an’ I weren’t within forty miles of the place when it happened. Don’t know Dusty, do you, Doctor?”

“I’ve seen him.”

“An’ you think he’s a wild young buckaroo ready for anything? Not for cold-blooded murder, Doctor.”

“I understand the descriptions fit you both, even to the horses you were riding.”

“Too closely. Someone kinda touched up the descriptions, I reckon. Someone left tracks, maybe, an’ wanted it hung on someone else real *pronto*.”

For a moment Dr. Peters was silent. “Young man, if you’ve got anything to say, I think you’d better say it without riddles. You have someone in mind, I take it,” he said quietly.

“Correct, sir. But let me ask a question, first. Curt French was yore patient. He had the measles. Did you call on him that day? If so, when?”

Dr. Peters cast back to remember. “In the evening. He sent word to me not to disturb him in the morning because he wanted to sleep till afternoon.”

“I’ll bet he did his sleepin’ on horseback, Doctor.”

“Are you telling me that French robbed the stage?”

“Not for sure. I don’t know yet, but I’m going to find out if I live long enough. Let’s say he did, though, French an’ one of his friends. We’ll say the friend’s last name was—well, call him Quinn. Though I wouldn’t swear to it—might be Prouty, say. We won’t give him a first name yet. Let’s suppose there was a slip-up somewhere, an’ they were worried for fear it might be laid to them. What would they do if they happened to know another man they could put it on, one they didn’t like, anyhow?”

“As I understand it, this is all guess work on your part.”

“Mostly. I saw they must have a reason for jumpin’ on me so sudden an’ so hard. Why three thousand dollars, *dead or alive*, before I got a chance to prove I didn’t do it? Why put a name to the robbers only on suspicion? Ain’t that some unusual, Doctor?”

Peters tugged at his imperial. “Yes, it is. And the size of the reward. It surprised me. Why, too, such a difference in the price to be paid for you and for Rhodes?”

“Don’t you reckon maybe they preferred me dead to alive? If I was dead, probably not many questions would be asked; but alive, I might be some

inconvenient if I had a good alibi.”

“You might, since you are the kind of a man you are.” The doctor’s eyes took in the lithe, muscular build of the man, the easy poised alertness of his stance. They passed to the face, cut as it were out of granite, lit by cold gray eyes, steady and hard as steel. There was intrepid force in him, either for good or for evil. Peters prided himself on being a judge of character. Sibley might be a killer, but he had the unshaken nerves that would keep him from fool murder when there was no necessity to slay. The shooting of Buck Galway had been wanton. It had been done, Peters believed, either by a man in drink or by one in panic. “What do you expect to do here, Mr. Sibley? Do you know that your life isn’t worth a jackstraw if your enemies stir up the town against you?” he asked.

“I could guess that after the rehearsal they put on at Galeyville. I’ve got to take my chances. I’m here to give myself up to the sheriff, but I aim to round up what evidence I can first. Mobeetie Bill is out now, kinda puttin’ a few casual questions for me. Let me ask you one, Doctor. Do the Quinns an’ their friends own this town? Can they put over anything they like, no matter how raw?”

The doctor considered this before he answered. “Yes and no. They are bold ruffians. I’ve known them disregard the opinion of the better part of the community. But Whip, who is their leader, plays a wary game. He usually moves under cover of the law. It would not be good for business to outrage public sentiment.”

“An’ how about the sheriff? Is he a Quinn man?”

“No, he isn’t. It’s a fee office and worth a lot of money. Whip Quinn wanted it, but the Governor appointed Brady. I don’t think the feeling between the sheriff and the Quinns is friendly, though there has been no open break. My judgment is that Brady is an honest man.”

“But he offers three thousand dollars’ reward for a man dead or alive before the man has been proved guilty.”

“If you knew Brady you could understand that. He’s slow—rather thick-headed, in fact. The express company offers the reward through the sheriff’s office. Dugan probably talked him into it. Dugan is the local manager of the express company, and he is a great admirer of the Quinns, Whip in particular.”

There was a knock on the door, a loud rap, and two softer ones, after a pause.

“Mobeetie Bill,” said Boone.

He opened the door to the old man.

“Well, Doc, how’s yore patient?” the old-timer asked. “I done told that fool boy he deserves to have his head shot off instead of his hand if he monkeys with onloaded sixshooters.”

“Dr. Peters knows who I am, Dad,” explained Boone. “How did you come out?”

The ex-buffalo hunter glanced at the doctor, then looked at Sibley. He understood that he was to tell what he had found out.

“Curt French an’ Sing Elder rode outa town right after you boys, maybe a half hour later. They rode horses the same colour as you an’ Dusty. Curt had been drinkin’ some an’ had a bottle with him. I got it from Mack Riley, who is swampin’ for Reynolds down at the Buffalo Corral. Mack says they didn’t git back whilst he was on duty. They said they were deputies for Bob Hardy on official business which was private an’ not to be discussed. Curt did most of the talkin’, seems. About the time I’d got that much outa Mack, he suspicions somethin’ an’ shuts his trap. Mack ain’t lookin’ for any trouble.”

“You got a lot more from him than I expected you would. We’re on the right track, looks like. Much obliged, Dad.”

The old man grinned his toothless smile. “You don’t owe me a thing, Texas man. It would be a pleasure to help hogtie Mr. Curt French with evidence he did this.”

“I expect Curt did the killin’. They say he’s a terror when he’s drunk. Sull an’ mean. What do you think, Doctor?”

Peters did not commit himself. “I think you had better go slow, Mr. Sibley. Your enemies are likely to move with deadly swiftness if they discover you are here and on their trail. My advice is to send for Mr. Turley and give him the facts. The *Gold Pocket* has much influence with the sober citizens of Tough Nut. If it indorses you, a counter sentiment will be started in your favour.”

“Tha’s sure enough good medicine,” Mobeetie Bill agreed. “I’ll see Turley to-night.”

“I’ll drop in on him,” the doctor promised. “I think what I have to say might have weight with him.”

Boone made a stipulation. “Tell him not to do or say anything that might get him into trouble with the Quinns. He’s not a fightin’ man and ought to be careful.”

“He’s a fighting man, though not with guns,” the doctor corrected. “I’ll carry your message, but he will do what he thinks right regardless of personal consequences.”

Bag in hand, the doctor departed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE QUINNS DELIVER AN ULTIMATUM

DR. PETERS found Turley setting the story of the Galeysville fight. His wound had been slight, and already he was back at the office. The two men were friends and cronies, so the editor merely motioned his visitor to a chair covered with newspapers. He did not feel it necessary to desist from work.

They were alone, both the pressman and the editor's assistant having finished for the night. Dr. Peters lighted a pipe, strolled up and down the office, then sat down.

"Just got back from a visit to a patient," he said presently.

"If someone is sick, that is probably a story," Turley said.

"Even if he has been shot?" asked Peters, a twinkle in his eyes.

Turley stopped to look at him. "Someone else been shot?"

"Not someone else." Casually the doctor added, "Have you written the Galeysville fight story?"

"Just setting it now."

"I can give you a line to add to it. Mr. Boone Sibley is paying a short visit to Tough Nut."

"What!" Turley stared at his friend.

The doctor nodded confirmation of his news. "As the guest of our esteemed fellow citizen Mobeetie Bill," he appended, by way of footnote.

"What is he doing here?"

"Come to give himself up to the sheriff."

"Claims he is innocent, I suppose?"

"Claims to be—and I think is."

"Tell me all about it, Joel," the editor said.

Peters told the story briefly, without ornamentation. Much of it Turley already knew, for the accounts of Miss McLennon's rescue and of the subsequent Galeysville battle had been brought to him by several parties. The new angle to it was Boone Sibley's point of view and the discovery made by Mobeetie Bill.

The editor thumped his fist down on a table. "I never was satisfied with the story given out. I don't know why, but I had a feeling inside facts were being held back. Then, too, I know young Rhodes. He is wild, but there is a long jump between that and cold-blooded murder."

"You met Sibley. How did he impress you, Thomas?"

"Of course, I was predisposed in his favour," the editor said in his clipped precise way. "Naturally, one would be in the case of one who has saved one's life. But I watched this young man. He is strong and reserved. He knows his own mind and goes his own way. That rescue of the McLennon girl—I'd expect that sort of thing from him. But I wouldn't expect him to hold up a stage and murder a decent man like Buck Galway."

"Nor I. It would not be in character—at least, as I read the man. He's a fighting Texan, but I think he would fight fair."

The eyes of the editor were shining. "Joel, I'm coming out flatfooted for him. Read to-morrow's paper. I'll say editorially that the *Gold Pocket* believes he is being persecuted and that he is an innocent man."

"Go slow, Thomas," advised his friend. "Don't make any references that point to the Quinns. Be very careful."

The door of the office opened, and two men walked in. They were Whip Quinn and Bob Hardy.

"Feelin' all right again, Mr. Turley, after Curt's fool gun play? I expect Doc here has fixed you up good," Whip said genially.

"I am very much improved, thank you," the editor said stiffly.

"Fine. Glad to hear it. I certainly read Curt the riot act for his foolishness. I told him he'd ought to apologize, but you know Curt. At heart one of nature's noblemen, but gnarly as an old apple tree."

"I know him," Turley said drily, without editorial comment.

"Well, I'm glad you're up an' about again practically good as new. All's well that ends thataway, as the old sayin' is. We got to take men as we find 'em, I suppose. Curt is a leetle too generous with his lead pills once in a while."

The editor had nothing to say in words, but his silence was eloquent. Presently he would find out the object of this call. He knew that Quinn had not come because of any social impulse.

Bob Hardy, impatient of diplomacy, came bluntly to the issue of the day. "You've been shoutin' for law an' order, Turley. Now you got a chance to come out flat-foot an' denounce this fellow Sibley. We're expectin' the *Gold Pocket* to be there both ways from the ace."

Whip put the matter more smoothly. “Like you say, Mr. Turley, this town an’ county has to stop lawlessness. A killing here or there—well, that’s to be expected. But robbin’ stages an’ shootin’ shotgun messengers hurts the town. I reckon Sibley is safe in Mexico by now, but it won’t hurt to hand him one of yore well-known editorial scorchers. Show other outlaws where we’re at, for one thing.”

Turley gathered his courage for the stand he must take. His slender body grew rigid, his throat dry.

“I—I don’t believe Sibley is an outlaw, Mr. Quinn. We’re not after the right man.”

“What!” Whip Quinn flashed his hard eyes on the editor. “Not the right man? Do you claim to have some information we haven’t got? If so, spit it out.”

“No information.” Turley swallowed a lump in his throat and went on timidly: “But I know Dusty Rhodes. He is not that kind of young man.”

“We’ll go easy on Dusty. This Sibley led him into it.”

“But did he? I can’t think so. I feel——”

Bob Hardy broke in roughly: “It don’t matter what you feel. We’ve made up our minds. This fellow did it. It goes as it lays.”

Once more the other found a more diplomatic way to apply pressure. “You don’t want to let yore personal gratitude to this killer stand in the way of the town’s good, Mr. Turley. I was on the ground with the marshal here, after the crime. We looked into the evidence. It pointed straight to Sibley. Why did he resist arrest at Galeyville? Why did he shoot Jim Barkalow there? Why did he light out after he got away? Where’s he at now?”

Turley tugged nervously at his moustache. He felt that he was being driven toward disaster, but if he let himself be bullied into submission he would always despise himself.

“Probably he lost his head at Galeyville. They were shooting at him. He had no chance to surrender. He was fighting for his life.”

“He did, too, have a chance to give up. Russ put it up to him, an’ he come back by takin’ a shot at him. If yore paper stands back of this Texas wolf, Turley——”

Bob Hardy did not finish his sentence, but the black look that went with it was a threat, a savage and ruthless one.

The editor felt his stomach muscles let go, as though his vitals had become cold lead. His heart died within him.

“Bob is right,” the other man agreed, his mouth tightening grimly. “You

can't throw down this town because you're thick with this bad man Sibley. Not for a minute, you can't."

"It's not only my personal gratitude, Mr. Quinn. If I thought he was guilty the *Gold Pocket* would certainly say so. But I can't feel that he is."

For the first time Dr. Peters spoke. "Nor I," he said quietly.

"Are you in this, Doc?" Bob Hardy asked roughly.

"Who do you think did it, Doctor?" Whip asked, dangerously suave.

"Haven't the least idea. Might have been some cowboys from the hills. Might have been someone from Bisbee."

"It was two fellows from right damned here. One was this Texas warrior Sibley, the other was Dusty Rhodes." The older man looked hard at the editor. "Don't make any mistake, Turley. Get this in yore paper correct."

"It will be true as I see it," the newspaper man said. He was white as a sheet, but he looked straight at Quinn.

"If I was you, I'd see it right. This town won't stand for you aidin' and abettin' an outlaw like Sibley," warned Whip.

"You'll shoot off yore mouth onct too often," Bob added harshly. "We're plumb tired of you runnin' on us. Me, I've had aplenty."

"Don't make a mistake, Turley," Whip advised once more, a dark warning in his voice. "Like Bob says, you've been on the prod with us aplenty."

With which the men turned and left the office.

CHAPTER XX

“SHERIFF, SHAKE HANDS WITH MR. SIBLEY”

QUINN and Hardy left behind them in the office of the *Gold Pocket* two men wretchedly downhearted. Neither spoke for a few moments. Each of them knew that an ultimatum had been served, that there was danger ahead if Turley opposed the killers.

“They have their necks bowed, Thomas,” Peters said ruefully.

The editor nodded, swallowing hard. His lips were gray, his face bloodless.

“You’ve got no proof that Sibley is innocent. Better drop it. That is what he says himself—Sibley, I mean. He told me to tell you to keep out of this,” the doctor continued.

“I can’t,” said Turley miserably. “These ruffians must not dictate the policy of the paper. I’m a coward, God knows, but—I’ve got to draw the line somewhere. I can’t take orders from them—not and call myself a man.”

Peters spoke to his friend, his voice very gentle. “Thomas, you are not called upon to—to do this thing for a town that wouldn’t even understand why you did it. These ruffians have an argument reason can’t oppose. You are not in Massachusetts. The sixshooter is mightier than the pen out here. I advise you to make no editorial comment whatever about this business.”

“And this is free America, Joel,” the harassed man said bitterly. “To save my skin, I’m to kowtow to these scoundrels. I won’t do it.”

“Why raise the point of Sibley’s innocence, since you have no evidence of it? At least wait—see what developments occur.”

“I must talk with him—to-night.”

The door of the office opened. A girl walked into the room swinging a sunbonnet. She was a slender but rounded little thing. In age she might have been nineteen, in spite of her diminutive stature. But childhood still caressed the blooming cheeks, the golden hair, the small animated face.

“You’re working too late, Uncle Tom,” she said as she came forward, and there was the caress of the eternal mother in her voice. “You look all tired out. I won’t have it.”

She smiled at Dr. Peters. Small white teeth, strong and even, gleamed between the red lips. The doctor was old enough to be her father, but the long-

lashed blue eyes made their soft appeal to him. Eve Turley could no more help it than she could help breathing. She did not mean any harm. She never did. If she was a coquette, it was by instinct rather than design.

The eyes of the two men grew tender as they looked at her. Most men felt that she needed protection and were moved by chivalrous impulse to see that she had it.

“You ought not to have come here alone,” her uncle reproved.

“It was such a teeny way,” she protested, smiling at him. “And I didn’t come alone. Colin brought me. He’s outside.”

“Tough Nut is a wild town, my dear, not like one of our villages at home.”

“Yes, but I’m going to love it, dear. I’m so glad I came.”

Eve had been in Tough Nut only two days. Her lungs were thought to be delicate, and her mother had sent her out to see what the dry sun-kissed Arizona air would do for them. Her uncle had moved into a larger house the day before her arrival.

Turley rose to accompany her home. She found his crutch and offered him the support of her slim shoulder on the other side. The house they had taken was scarcely a hundred yards from the office. The editor limped the distance, his friend on one side and Eve on the other.

“He’s lots better. Isn’t he, Doctor?” the girl said.

She did not know he had been shot. The story given her was that he had fallen and strained a ligament.

Eve went in to light the lamp, and the two men lingered on the porch.

“Shall I bring Sibley around to see you?” Peters asked.

“I wish you would. I’d like to hear what he has to say.”

“I’ve been wondering if it would not be a good thing to sound Brady out. We do not need to tell him at first that Sibley is here, only that we have reason to think he may not be guilty of the stage robbery.”

“Perhaps you are right. I’ve got to line up what strength we have if I’m going to stand out against the Quinns. Brady would be reasonable, though he won’t come out definitely on our side. But let me talk with Sibley first.”

Half an hour later Eve answered a knock on the door to let in Dr. Peters and two other men. One of these was a leather-faced old man. The other was a tall, brown young athlete who carried his lean, trim body lightly and gracefully. He did not look at all like the young men she had known in Massachusetts, nor did he act like them. For one thing, though her eyes had fallen full in his, he gave no evidence that he knew he was meeting a very

pretty girl. She did not remember ever having seen anybody whose gaze was so hard and cold. Her uncle introduced the strangers as Mobeetie Bill and Mr. Sibley, then suggested with a smile that since she must be tired after her long day they would excuse her if she wished to go to bed.

Eve did not want to go to bed. She wanted to stay and make eyes at this remarkable young man who did not seem to have the least interest in her. She was skilled in ways to thaw out even as icy a youth as this one. But she could not very well insist on staying.

She said good-night prettily, pouting a little, just enough to make her Cupid's bow mouth irresistible. Then, flashing her dewy-eyed smile at all present, she departed, light-footed and swift.

"She's sure a right peart young lady," Mobeetie Bill said inadequately. Then, with his toothless grin, he added: "Some of the lads are liable to notice her, don't you reckon, Mr. Turley?"

"I gather there is a young man back at Harvard," the editor said, smiling.

"If the young fellows out here are like they was in my time, they'll sure give him a run for his money," the old fellow predicted.

"This is a council of war, gentlemen, to decide the best policy to pursue," Dr. Peters announced. "Shall I talk, Thomas, or will you?"

"Go ahead," Turley said.

Out of the ensuing conference came two decisions. The first was made by Turley: he would go through with the editorial policy of criticizing the attempt to find Sibley guilty before he had been tried. The second came from Sibley: Sheriff Brady was to be brought to the house and all the facts laid before him.

Mobeetie Bill found the sheriff playing poker at Dolan's Palace. Brady was winning, and he viewed sourly the old man's invitation to take a walk with him. The old-timer was insistent, and to get rid of him the sheriff left his chips to hold the seat and followed the Texan out of the house.

"Dad gum yore old hide, what's it all about?" the officer asked, not unamiably. He had not wanted to leave the table, but now he had come he was in no hurry. The game would go on all night and perhaps all the ensuing day.

"I said for you to take a walk with me, Brady. We ain't took it yet."

"Mostly I do my walkin' in a saddle, Dad. What in Mexico has got in yore old coconut? Is it officially you want me?"

"You're liable to find out when we get there. What's eatin' you, anyhow? Won't anyone steal yore measly li'l' stack of chips."

"You're sure mysterious to-night, Dad, an' you the gabbiest galoot that ever come a-runnin' outa Texas ahead of a sheriff. Hmp! I recollect onct

findin' a buffalo skull on the old Chisum trail. It had wrote on it, 'Talked to death by Mobeetie Bill.' They had stuck it up for a marker on the poor pilgrim's grave."

Turley admitted the two men to the room where the others were waiting. The sheriff glanced around carelessly.

"Hello, Doc! How's every little thing? This old donker drug me away from a poker game. Were you figurin' on startin' one here?"

"Not exactly. Sheriff, shake hands with Mr. Boone Sibley."

The smile vanished from Brady's wrinkled brown face like the light from a blown candle. The starch of wariness ran through him instantly and tensed his figure. He waited silently, watching the young Texan with steady, appraising eyes.

"Don't drop jokes like that around, Doc. They're liable to go off an' hurt someone," he warned.

The sheriff had spoken to the doctor, but his gaze did not for an instant release Sibley.

Boone nodded his head. "No joke at all, Sheriff I'm the man you want."

"Who took you? How come you here?"

"Nobody took me. I came to surrender myself because I hear I'm wanted."

The officer stared at him, dumb with amazement. His mind grappled with the situation and could find no fight. If this was the bandit Sibley, what crazy scheme had brought him straight to the vengeance awaiting him?

"Surrender yoreself?" the sheriff repeated at last.

"Yes. To clear my name. To prove I didn't do it."

"Not hold up the stage?"

"And to find out, if I can, who did do it."

"You got me whipped," the sheriff said. "Why, you damn fool, you've been identified, practically. You haven't got a dead man's chance."

"Who identified me, Sheriff?" Boone asked.

"One of the hold-ups was about the size of Dusty Rhodes, an' he wore chaps an' a brown shirt like they claim Dusty was wearin' when he left here. He was on a bay horse."

"You ever wear a brown shirt an' ride a bay horse, Sheriff!"

"Might have done so, but not last Tuesday. The other hold-up, the one that did the killin', was taller than his friend. He rode a sorrel."

"As I did," Boone added. "Bay an' sorrel are right frequent colours for

horses. I know two other fellows left here Tuesday mornin' mounted thataway."

"Who?" asked Brady.

"Comin' to that soon. Ain't that kinda slim identification, Sheriff, for a reward of three thousand, dead or alive?"

"Whip Quinn an' Bob Hardy talked with the passengers. They sure enough described a man like you."

"I'll bet they did—after Quinn had described me to them first. Did it ever strike you that this was wished on me an' Dusty too sudden? That someone was mighty eager to elect us by unanimous consent with a hurrah?"

"Got any alibi?"

"We have an' we haven't. About the time the stage was being held up we met two old prospectors headin' for the Dragoons. Dusty was acquainted with 'em. One he called Toughfoot Bozeman an' the other Hassayampa Pete."

"Where was this?"

"A few miles this side of Sugarloaf Peak."

"What time of day, did you say?"

"About ten o'clock, I reckon."

"That sure lets you out if they back what you say. I'll send someone out after the old donkers."

Boone, in his soft drawl, raised a point. "Talkin' about alibis, I wonder what kind of a one Curt French an' Sing Elder would offer."

The sheriff's eyes clamped to his. "Meanin' just what?"

"I'm interested about how they would explain their little *pasear* if anyone asked them. They left town Tuesday mornin' half an hour after Dusty an' me. French rode a sorrel. Sing Elder was on a bay. Sing is some shorter than his friend."

"Where did they go?"

"That's what I'm wonderin'. Yore guess is as good as mine."

"Got any proof of this?"

"Mack Riley. He's swampin' at the Buffalo Corral. Mack says French had been drinkin' an' had a bottle with him. French said they were deputies of Bob Hardy on official business an' for Riley not to say anything about them leavin' town."

"French had the measles," Dr. Peters added. "I was attending him. He sent word to me that morning not to come to see him as he wanted to sleep. Bob Hardy brought me the message and asked if I would call after supper instead."

Quinn came to me long after French and Sing Elder had left town—that is, if it is true what Riley says.”

“Hmp! Looks right queer.” The sheriff’s eyes narrowed. “When did they get back to town?”

“We don’t know,” Peters replied. “Not till after Riley was off duty. He went off about four in the afternoon.”

Brady muddled it over in his mind. If the Quinn outfit had done this and had used him to further their plans, if they were laughing up their sleeves at him for a chuckle-headed rabbit, he would show them a thing or two before he got through. Anger simmered in him. Whip had flattered him for his prompt action in issuing the reward. Why had he taken the trouble to do this? What did he care whether the bandits were caught? Unless he had a personal interest in it. Come to think of it, the stage was never held up when Russ Quinn was the shotgun messenger. Nor was it robbed unless there was a gold shipment aboard. It looked as though there was a leak of information somewhere. In that case, the robbers must live in Tough Nut and must be close to the company. Whip was a boon companion of Dugan, the local manager of the express company. Very likely Dugan was not in on the robberies. He was a vain little man who took much pride in being the friend of the great Whip Quinn. It would be easy enough for Whip to get out of him casually what he wanted to know, especially since Russ was employed in a confidential capacity by the company.

The longer Brady thought about it the more convinced he became that the Quinns or some of their friends were at the bottom of the robberies. His anger against them mounted. They had chosen him as their monkey, had they, to draw the chestnut out of the fire for them? He would show them whether they could make a fool of him. But he must go slow. He must not take it for granted that this Texan was innocent.

“Since you claim you’re innocent, why didn’t you surrender peaceable at Galeysville?” Brady asked.

“They began shootin’ at me, first off. Later, I wouldn’t surrender to Russ Quinn because I figured I would never reach town alive.”

“You wouldn’t have, either, not if what you say about the bandits being fellows close to the Quinns is true. But folks are all het up about you shootin’ Buck Galway an’ then that cowboy Barkalow.”

“Is Barkalow dead?”

“No, sir. He’s got better than an even break to live, I hear. But that ain’t yore fault.”

“Nor his,” the Texan added. “I can prove he fired at me while Quinn was

talkin' to me under a flag of truce.”

“Maybeso. P'int is that folks ain't in a mood to listen to any of yore explanations. You're a regular Billy the Kid. So they think. Their notion is that the sooner you're bumped off the better it will be for all concerned. I'll have to arrest you, Mr. Sibley.”

“I've ridden fifty or sixty miles to give you a chance, Mr. Sheriff,” the young man answered, a faint ironical drawl in his voice.

“I reckon I'll play my hand close to my belly till I find where we're at. No use tellin' the Quinns where you are. I'm arrestin' you for stealin' a horse up at Prescott. Yore name is Jack Blayney, if anyone asks you.”

“I'll remember that.”

“Now, I'll take yore guns, Mr. Sibley, if you please.”

The Texan handed over his sixshooters. “Mr. Blayney, you mean,” he corrected with a smile.

CHAPTER XXI

TURLEY PASSES THE BUCK

TOUGH Nut buzzed like a beehive with whispered comment. Women gossiped and men hazarded surmises as to future developments. The *Gold Pocket* had come out editorially in defence of the accused men Sibley and Rhodes. Its story of the battle at Galeysville did not carry the slant hitherto given the affair. According to the newspaper account, the two men had been fired upon without warning and Rhodes wounded. The Texan had defended himself, one against fifty. He had shot Barkalow only after the cowboy had violated a flag of truce by firing at him. Eventually he had escaped only because a young woman whom he had rescued from a band of Mexicans a day or two earlier had risked her life to save him.

As to the attack upon the stage, the editor of the *Gold Pocket* said the accused men, so at least one of them claimed, could establish an alibi, if given time. The paper advocated patience on the part of the citizens of the town and county. Facts were likely to develop within a day or two that would entirely change the present outlook. Precipitate action of any kind, such as had occurred at Galeysville, was to be deplored.

Those who had inside information saw, both in story and in editorial, a challenge to the Quinns. Bob Hardy, deputy United States marshal, had with Whip Quinn taken charge of the hunt for the bandits. They had followed the trail into the hills and lost it. They had interviewed passengers on the stagecoach and obtained descriptions of the robbers. On their advice a reward had been offered for Sibley and Rhodes. Whip's brother Russ had taken command of the cowboys in the Galeysville attack.

"It's a Quinn proposition from start to finish," a miner at Dolan's Palace said to another. "They've got it hung on Dusty an' this Sibley. Prob'ly they've got the right guys. Where did this Texas man hail from, anyhow? Nobody knows. But we're sure he's a tough son-of-a-gun. That's been proved aplenty. Turley had ought to know the Quinns ain't gonna be pleased for him to try to give 'em the laugh by claimin' they don't know what they're doing."

"Turley is too biggity. He wants to run this yere town like a Sunday school. Then, when we have a cold-blooded murder, he sticks up for the guy because the fellow done him a good turn. Or maybe he's hired to, I dunno."

These represented fairly enough the casual opinion of Tough Nut, but there

were those who believed the Quinns had a much more urgent reason for resenting the articles in the *Gold Pocket*. One of the latter was Sheriff Brady, now riding doggedly toward Bisbee after a rather active night spent not at poker. Another was a young man in jail charged with stealing a horse at Prescott. Dr. Peters and Mobeetie Bill were two others. And Mack Riley, at the Buffalo Corral, began to be uncomfortably aware that something serious was in the air and to wonder if he had talked too much with his mouth.

It was observable that at Jefford's, at the Last Chance, at the Occidental, and at other gambling houses men began to gather in knots to discuss the affair. In each group was one positive individual who sawed the air with forceful gestures. It might be Curt French. It might be a Quinn. It might be some one of their hangers-on. But the purport of the argument was always the same. The time had come to show Turley where to get off at. He was standing up for criminals and cold-blooded murderers, and he ought to be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. The more excited the orators became the more necessary it was to wet the throat with another drink all around. Each drink called for more heated vituperation.

Meanwhile, Whip and Russ Quinn walked down to the newspaper office. An itinerant printer who was cleaning type told them that the boss was out. Perhaps he was at his house. The Quinns went to Turley's home and found him there. But not alone.

With him was a very pretty young blonde whom he introduced as his niece. Two visitors from the hills were also present. "I think you know Mr. and Miss McLennon," the editor added.

The editor's heart melted within him. Had the Quinns come to exact vengeance upon him for his defiance of their warning?

"Yes, we know 'em," Russ said harshly, his eyes fastened to those of Tilatha. "Be glad to smoke 'em out right here an' find where they're at. Do you claim you're friends? Or ain't you?"

Hugh spoke evenly. "Just as friendly as we ever were, Russ."

"Don't look like it, the way this fool girl acted at Galeyville."

"What would you expect?" asked Hugh, a suggestion of the grating of steel in his voice. "Sibley saved Til from those Mexicans. Wouldn't you figure she'd do him a good turn if the chance came?"

Whip took the answer quickly out of his brother's mouth. "Of course. Russ is sure sore the fellow got away. Can't blame him. But we don't aim to have any trouble with you because Miss McLennon was some too impulsive. We're here to ask Mr. Turley some questions."

"G-glad to answer any," the editor said in a fading voice.

“First off, what d’you mean by claimin’ this Sibley was in the right at Galeyville?” The voice of the older Quinn stung like a whip lash.

“Why, my information—if I’m wrong I’ll be glad to correct what I wrote—but Miss McLennon was there—and——”

“Does she say there wasn’t a reward out for this killer, dead or alive?”

“She can speak for herself,” Tilatha answered. “She says they never gave him or Dusty a chance to surrender before they began firing at them.”

“Didn’t Russ give him a chance afterward?”

“Yes, an’ while they were talking, Jim Barkalow fired at Mr. Sibley. He was afraid they’d kill him if he did surrender.”

“He was thinkin’ about what he did to Buck Galway. That’s why he didn’t surrender,” Russ broke in savagely.

“My notion, too,” his brother agreed. “But pass that. Another question, Mr. Turley. Is it Dusty or this other killer that claims they’ve got an alibi? An’ when did he claim it?”

“Miss McLennon says——”

“Passin’ the buck again,” Whip interrupted grimly. “Well, what does Miss McLennon say this time?”

“Dusty told me, Mr. Quinn,” Tilatha replied, “that they met two old prospectors in the desert just about the time the stage was robbed.”

“An’ who were these prospectors?”

The hill girl caught the flash of warning in the editor’s eye. “He didn’t give their names. They were going into the Dragoons, they said,” was her answer.

“About like I expected. He had to claim something, didn’t he?”

The girl’s spirit flashed to expression. “I don’t care. I believe every word he says. They didn’t do it.”

She thought Whip Quinn’s smile hateful. It implied much more than it said, more than he would have dared say in words. Beneath the tan, colour flamed into her cheeks. Yet there was no answer she could make, not without giving him more excuse to believe his unspoken accusation.

He turned again to the editor. “What facts are likely to develop that will change the present situation as regards this killer Sibley? Just what did you mean by yore editorial?”

Turley tugged at his moustache helplessly. He dared not let Whip think for a moment that the Quinns or their followers were suspected. A moment of inspiration saved him. “Why—about the alibi—it’s likely to be established when word reaches the prospectors, don’t you think?”

“No, by God, I don’t.” Whip brought his big fist down on the table like the blow of a hammer. “I think you’ve thrown in with those road agents. That’s what I think. This fellow Sibley, an’ Dusty Rhodes, too, was at yore house the night of his run-in with Curt French. Did you fix it up then that if they didn’t make a clean getaway after they robbed the stage you was to claim in yore paper they were innocent?”

“You don’t mean that—seriously?” the newspaper man gasped.

“It’s ridiculous—and hateful—to say that about my uncle,” Eve cried, her blue eyes flashing fire. “As though—as though he were a robber.”

“He’s tryin’ to protect one—a robber an’ a murderer both,” the younger Quinn answered.

“That’s not true, Russ Quinn,” Tilatha flung back at him. “He’s neither one nor the other. Why are you all so anxious to condemn Boone Sibley without giving him a chance? What harm did he ever do you?” Her stormy eyes challenged the angry ones of Russ.

“Looks thataway to me, too, boys,” Hugh said amiably enough. He had no wish to quarrel with the Quinn crowd. That would be both dangerous and unprofitable. “You’re sure enough barkin’ up the wrong tree. I reckon Sibley has lit out for good. But Dusty is still with us. Fact is, he’s at the ranch now. Give him a chance to prove his alibi. Won’t do any harm, will it?”

“Nor any good,” Whip retorted. “I worked up this case myself, me an’ Bob. Real thorough, too. D’you think we’re fools, McLennon?” Abruptly he turned to Turley. “Look out for yoreself. We’ve protected you up to date. But no more. If the citizens of this town through a law-an’-order committee take action, don’t blame us.”

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Russ frowned at Tilatha. He hesitated, as though he were about to say something, then closed his mouth like a steel trap and followed his brother.

Eve turned to her new friend Tilatha McLennon. She was puzzled and disturbed. Half an hour ago, she had heard for the first time that her uncle had been wounded by a drunken bully. These black Quinns were threatening him again. The community to which she had come seemed to be a resort of thieves and murderers.

“Isn’t it dreadful?” she murmured. “I—I never heard of such things before.”

“What did they mean about a law-and-order committee?” Turley asked McLennon.

The ranchman shook his head. “No idea what he meant. Maybe just tryin’

to scare you.”

Turley thought that if that was what Quinn wanted he had certainly succeeded. If any law-and-order committee waited on him, he knew that Whip Quinn would be back of it. They would do what he told them to do, yet he would not be responsible for their actions in the eyes of the community. What did law-and-order committees do to their victims? Did they hang them? Or did they merely beat them with whips till they wished they were dead?

CHAPTER XXII

BOONE GETS BACK HIS SIXSHOOTERS

SHERIFF Brady's trip to Bisbee did not unearth any important evidence, but it had the effect of disturbing some conclusions regarded as already established. The passengers could give no accurate description of the robbers. Buck Galway had been killed almost before the stage stopped. The effect of this had been to terrorize those on board. The big bandit, the noisy one who did the talking, handled his sixshooters so recklessly that they had been too frightened to make accurate observations. Moreover, most of the time they had been lined up with their backs to the road agents.

Before leaving for Bisbee the sheriff had made a discovery of interest. The day after the hold-up, Curt French had bought at the leading jewellery shop in Tough Nut a diamond pendant, presumably for a sporting lady named Faro Kate in whom he was interested. He had paid for it with greenbacks. The significance of this lay in the scarcity of paper money on the frontier. It was practically never used in Tough Nut. A strange coincidence was that one of the passengers on the stage, a New Yorker, had been relieved of six hundred dollars in bills.

In the jail yard Brady hitched his horse and knocked the dust from his hat. He bowlegged in to his office. Two old-timers were making themselves at home there. Both were smoking corncob pipes. One was laboriously reading a newspaper to the other.

"The king at present on the thorn sits in-se-cure-ly. No, Pete, I reckon it ain't 'thorn'—must be 'throne,' don't you reckon?"

Brady guessed what they were doing here, but he did not give them a lead. "Thought you old vinegaroons were out prospectin' in the Dragoons," he said.

"We was headed thataway, but seems like one thing an' another is always comin' up," Hassayampa Pete complained.

"Fellow told us how Dusty Rhodes an' another gazebo held up the Bisbee stage Tuesday," Toughfoot Bozeman explained querulously.

"That's what they say, about ten in the mo'ning."

"Well, they didn't. We met 'em out on the desert about that time up somewheres near Sugarloaf."

"Would you know the fellow with Dusty?"

"I ain't plumb blind, be I?" demanded Bozeman.

Five minutes later they confronted Boone Sibley.

"That's him—the fellow with Dusty," Pete snapped.

"Y'betcha!" corroborated his partner. "An' someone has sure got to pay us for the time an' trouble we've took to come to town."

"Reckon Mr. Sibley will be willin' to foot that bill," the sheriff said. "First off, though, we'll git yore story on paper an' witnessed. I'll ask you both to stick around town for a coupla days."

"Hmp! Mr. Sibley payin' for that, too?"

"I'll see you're paid," the sheriff promised.

After the prospectors had gone, the sheriff summarized the situation. "Well, Sibley, it looks like we ain't got a thing on you. Soon as you like you can walk outa that door."

"About that horse I stole up at Prescott," Boone drawled.

Brady grinned. "Mistaken identity. Turns out you ain't Blayney. Still an' all, I'd advise you to stay right here or light out pronto. Some up-an'-comin' lad might bump you off before I can get that reward withdrawn. Then there's the Quinns an' Curt French."

"That's good medicine, Sheriff. Since you're so hospitable I'll sleep in yore hotel to-night, anyhow. I'd hate to be shot for a reward that ain't."

"Make yoreself comfortable. I'll tell Hank you're yore own boss now."

The jailor, Hank Jacobs, offered his guest a cot downstairs in exchange for the cell he had been occupying.

"Glad you proved you wasn't the man," he said. "Horse stealin' in Arizona ain't no game for amachooors to buck."

"No business for a quiet, timid man like me," Boone agreed. "By the way, Sheriff, do I get my sixshooters back? Might run acrost a rattlesnake."

Brady handed the guns to him. "You be right careful how you use these, young fellow. Don't you go firin' them off promiscuous in this town. Well, I got to go home an' meet the wife. She claims she's a widow since I took this job. My own kids don't hardly know me."

Boone sat in an armchair in the sheriff's office and read the newspaper. The jailor excused himself, retired to a back room, and prepared to make up arrears of sleep.

The young Texan read the advertisement offering a reward for him dead or alive. In a parallel column was the story of the Galeville battle. It was written without colour or bias, but so vividly that he lived again the half hour before

he was astride Billy galloping for the chaparral. On an inside was the editorial pleading for fair play.

“Dusty was right,” Boone told himself. “Turley has got guts. He’s sure the nerviest scared man I ever met. He’s got no business in this town with the Quinns rampagin’ around.”

An hour passed. Boone had read even the patent medicine advertisements. He dropped the newspaper on the desk, leaned back, stretched his arms, and yawned to the bottom of his lungs. Time to turn in.

He chopped the yawn off unfinished, arms still extended. What was that noise? It sounded like the roar of surf. Then he knew. The night had become vocal with the growl of many voices drowning each other out. Boone rose, walked to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

Down the street, three hundred yards away, the road was filled with men. Others were pouring out from saloons and gambling houses. They were like busy ants swarming about.

Something was afoot.

A man hurried past. Boone called to him.

“What’s up?”

“They’re runnin’ Turley outa town—gonna tar an’ feather him first.”

Boone asked no more questions. He knew why, just as he knew that the better element—nine tenths of the citizens of the town—would disapprove of such a lawless high-handed proceeding. The riff-raff and the ignorant were doing this, instigated by the Quinns, who very likely would stay in the background and laugh up their sleeves.

Already Boone was striding down the street. This was his business. It had been for espousing his cause that Turley had become the object of their wrath.

He began to run.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROAR OF THE PACK

DURING the day Turley had heard rumbles of the coming storm. He was as uneasy as a man sitting on the edge of a volcano due to erupt any minute. Just before supper Dr. Peters came to him.

“I don’t like the way things look, Thomas,” he told his friend. “I don’t want to alarm you, but there is trouble brewing. The sober people of the town will back your policy, but there are a lot of hoodlums and some thick-headed honest men ready for mischief. The whole gambling element is lined up against you. If I were you, I’d leave town at once, and stay away until the excitement has died down.”

Turley shook his head. “Can’t do that, Joel,” he said, his voice heavy with gloom. “I’ve done nothing wrong. I won’t run away like a cur.”

“I would. Don’t be obstinate, Thomas. It’s the Quinns’ work. Why oblige them by staying here and becoming a victim of it?”

“No. I won’t go. Probably the whole thing will blow over, anyhow. I’ve put my hand to the plough. I’ll stay.”

Peters knew it was no use to argue with him. Besides, it was likely he was overestimating the danger. Perhaps the best way was to stay and face it down.

“I wish you had a bodyguard—someone like that Boone Sibley,” he said.

The editor’s answering smile held no mirth. “Do you know anyone looking for a job like that, with French and the Quinns and Sing Elder as my chief enemies? Not to mention that eminent peace officer Bob Hardy. If you meet such a man, please send him around. I’d like to see him, though I won’t promise to hire him.”

“At any rate, go armed.”

“Why? I can’t hit a barn door. It is known I don’t carry weapons. That serves me as a protection.”

“Did it help you when Curt French shot you?” Peters asked bluntly.

Turley found it difficult to eat his supper. Food stuck in his throat and choked him. He could hardly get it down. His mind was full of alarms. He found himself listening intently. For what?

Eve knew he was troubled, and in the world-old ways of women tried to

distract him. She talked, cheerfully, with occasional chirrups in her voice like the notes of birds.

“I like Tilatha McLennon. Isn’t Tilatha a funny name? It’s so old-fashioned. I never met a girl like her. She’s so—so Joan of Arc-ish, if you know what I mean. I wish I were like her. But I couldn’t be, not in a thousand years. Wasn’t it splendid the way she saved that solemn Mr. Sibley at whatever the name of the place is? Oh, I wish I were that kind of a girl. It’s funny, too. She can do all sorts of things, they say. Shoot like a man. And ride a bucking bronco. But she’s not a bit mannish. Back home she’d be a sensation with that glorious red hair and those big eyes and that kind of easy grace with which she carries herself—regal, I guess you’d call it. But she wouldn’t fit back there, either. She needs the hills and wide spaces and Arizona sunsets for a background. Don’t you think so, Uncle dear?”

Turley brought himself back with a start. “Yes. Yes, indeed. Quite so.” His voice quavered a little. He had heard, or thought he had, an unusual sound in the street.

“I asked Miss Peters about her. She isn’t the kind of girl to talk about herself. Miss Peters says that one of the Quinns, the one they call Russ, will likely marry Tilatha. But I hope not. He isn’t good enough for her. Do you know, dear, I wonder if she isn’t in love with Mr. Sibley? Russ Quinn thinks so, too. That’s why he hates him so much—one reason, anyhow. I watched him when he was talking to you. What’s the matter?”

Turley had risen. Again she caught that look of intent, alarmed listening.

“Nothing, my dear. I expect I’m a little nervous. I’ve been under some strain. Afraid I’m not very good company.”

“I don’t wonder you’re nervous after all you’ve been through. It’s perfectly horrid of those ruffians, but I wouldn’t worry about them, dear.” She put her arm around him with a quick little affectionate hug. “I won’t let them hurt you. I’ll make them leave my uncle alone. You see if I don’t.”

Her promise amused him a little. He smiled. She would be about as efficient in this emergency as a fluffy little kitten which men instinctively pick up and pet. Yet her sympathy warmed him. And, after all, it was true that most dangers merely threaten and never become acute.

He sat down after supper and tried to read while she busied herself with some fancy work. A Mexican woman had cleared off the table and was doing the dishes.

The book he had picked up was one of Herbert Spencer’s. He found it impossible to concentrate. His mind hopped back, whenever he would let it alone, to the immediate problem of his life. How was it possible to cope with

such ruffians as these who were his enemies, strong, unscrupulous men striding to their end without jumpy nerves to hamper them? One ought either to get out of their way or knuckle down, unless he were like this Sibley, as game and harsh and forceful as they were. And the odds were that these wolves would drag down and devour Sibley, too, if he stayed in their vicinity, in spite of his scornful confidence and his uncanny skill at self-defence.

Someone hammered on the door of the house. Turley leaped from his chair as though released by a spring. His legs shook as he moved forward.

Eve reached the door first to let in this imperious visitor. Mobeetie Bill turned the key in the lock after he had entered the hall and came into the room. His faded old eyes were shining with excitement.

“They’re after you, Turley. Right damn now. Headin’ thisaway already. Light out. Pronto.”

The heart of the editor died within him. It had come, the hour he had dreaded. “Where shall I go?” he faltered.

“Anywheres but here. Slip out the back way. Circle round an’ head for my shack. We’ll git you a horse.”

“And—Eve?”

“They won’t hurt her none. She’ll be in my care. Don’t worry about her. Move lively.”

Turley forgot his resolution not to be driven away. Already he could hear the low, ominous voice of the mob. Anything was better than to stay and face it.

Eve urged him to speed. “Hurry—hurry, dearest,” she cried, and clung to the trembling man as she pushed him toward the back door.

They passed through the kitchen. He opened the door. A revolver barked. There was a spatter of ’dobe dirt from the wall three feet from his head. Hurriedly he closed the door and drew back.

His face was ashen. “God!” he murmured.

“Too late,” the ex-buffalo hunter said. He bolted the door and blew out the kitchen lamp. “It wasn’t aimed to hit you, Turley. Jes’ meant as a warnin’ to stay here.”

“What’ll I do?” By sheer will power Turley dragged himself back from panic. “I can’t stay here and endanger Eve.” There flashed to his mind a picture of the Galeyville battle as he had imagined it, scores of guns pouring lead into a building where one man crouched like a trapped wolf. In such a mêlée his niece might be shot down before the mob dragged him out. He could not risk that. He must give himself up.

“Don’t push on yore reins,” the old-timer urged. “We’ll play for time. Hear what they got to say. Talk ’em out of it if we can.”

Mobeetie Bill had no confidence in his own programme. But they were in no position to choose. The cards were stacked and had to be played that way. Strangely enough, his old blood warmed to the danger. It had been years since peril had jumped at him in this stark fashion. He remembered the yell of Morgan’s raiders. It was in his throat ready to leap out. Back of that, in his early youth, he had ridden on that disastrous filibustering expedition when gallant Ewan Cameron lost his life. He had seen George Crittenden draw the white bean that meant life and then hand it to a married comrade with the remark that he could afford to take another chance. Brave days those, when life and death hung on the colour of a bean drawn from a box. It thrilled him to renew for an hour the old daily association with danger. Better, far better, than to sit nodding in the sun waiting for his days to draw out.

They could hear outside the tramp of feet, the sound of many voices. Mobeetie Bill blew out the lamp in the sitting room.

“Let ’em guess where we’re at,” he added.

The mob murmur died down. A heavy voice called:

“Come outa there, Turley. We want to see you.”

It was Mobeetie Bill who answered. He stepped to the window, which was open, and looked out into the moonlit street.

“Evenin’, Mr. French. Who was it you said you wanted?”

“Tom Turley—an’ quick, too.”

“What you want with him?”

“None of yore business. Who are you, anyhow? It’s Turley we’re after.”

“Me, why I’m only an old donker, a stove-up pilgrim from Texas. You know Mobeetie Bill, don’t you, Curt?”

French moved forward. “Tell Turley if he doesn’t come outa there we’ll drag him by the neck. No use hidin’. We know he’s there.”

“Now, looky here, Mr. French,” the old-timer protested. “I ’low you don’t mean any good to Turley. Let’s talk this over, friendly-like. Prob’ly we can fix up a reasonable compromise.”

“Don’t argue with me, you old fool,” French roared. “I’m comin’ to drag him out immediate.”

Later Eve never could explain the impulse that urged her to swift, rash action. It was very likely a reaction of what she had been thinking of in regard to Tilatha McLennon. Tilatha had known what to do when the life of her lover

was in danger. Tilatha had not stood and wrung her hands despairingly. So Eve now stepped out of character and did an amazing thing.

Without a word, she slipped into the hall and unlocked the door. In another moment she had whipped it open, stepped outside, and closed it behind her. She stood, drenched in the moonlight, facing that hungry wild-beast mob.

Once there her spirit fainted. It was appalling to look down on all those harsh faces, unshaven, savage, inflamed by the strange lust of the pack for the kill. They were normal human beings, most of them, moved by the common emotions of mankind, by tenderness, by generosity, by greed, by sudden unaccountable hates and loves. None of this she saw now. They were not individuals, but the pack. Only one stood out among them. He was bearded, heavy, full-bodied. His eyes were bloodshot, face gross and sullen. He moved slowly toward her, as far as the bottom step.

There he stood staring at this apparition in white, the slim, golden little creature who confronted him and his followers. It could have been no more astonishing if a winged angel from heaven had descended from the sky, so alien was she to the spirit of their purpose. What was she doing here? From where had she come? Some of those present may have heard that a niece of Turley had come to town from the East. If so, they had given the fact no attention. Scores of people poured in daily to share in the sudden prosperity of the camp.

“Who in Mexico are you?” demanded French, hoarsely.

She found her voice. “I’m Eve—Eve Turley. You mustn’t hurt my uncle. Oh, you mustn’t—you mustn’t, please.”

The words out of her soft throat were like music. Tears welled into the blue eyes. Haloed by the flood of moonlight, her beauty seemed unearthly.

CHAPTER XXIV

MOBEETIE BILL DRAWS A BLACK BEAN

THE effect of Eve's sudden appearance, of her broken appeal, was startling. The wild frontier always respected good women. They were as safe as though they were in God's pocket. The worst outlaw, if there was any basis of manhood in him, would go far to aid and succour any of them in need. This girl's youth, her charming helplessness, an air of innocence enhanced by the simple white dress she wore touched by the magic of moonlight, all reached them as though they had been well-calculated stage devices.

Even Curt French was taken aback. He glared sullenly at her, while his slow brain groped with the problem. A bully and ruffian, a killer never deterred by moral distinctions as to fair play, his impulse was to crush her and push on to his purpose. But he knew that would not do. Vaguely he was aware that the men behind him were sentimentalizing the situation. She was not just a fool girl to them; she was for the moment the embodiment of an ideal they had been cherishing in their hearts through the sodden years.

"Now, missie, you-all better run along somewheres. We 'low to have a li'l' talk with yore uncle," he wheedled. "Jes' a li'l' talk about business, y'understand."

"No—no!" Her refusal went past him to the men behind. It was as though she knew that she might win them but not their leader. "You won't do him any harm, will you? If you understood—if you knew how good he is——"

"We know he's backin' up this killer Sibley," someone flung back.

"But he just asked you to wait, not to make up your minds too soon. I'm only a girl. I don't know anything about it." Her voice broke in a little wail. "But I know my uncle is good—and—and you mustn't hurt him."

"This yere is a he-man town," another man growled. "We don't aim to let him run it like a kids' school an' then renig when he feels like it."

"Gripes, no!" French flung out an oath. "Nor he can't hide behind a woman's skirt. Outa the way, girl. We won't hurt you none, but we aim to get Turley."

He took two steps forward, then stopped. Someone had come around the corner of the building, vaulted lightly to the porch, and was standing beside

Eve.

The killer's jaw dropped. Never in his turbulent life had he met such a surprise as this. The man who had joined the girl was Boone Sibley.

It was a murmur to begin with, the sound that swept the crowd, then, as the name passed from one to another, it became a roar. Before the harsh menace of it Eve shrank back, appalled. But not the Texan. He faced the rising storm of rage silently, eyes undaunted, poised figure motionless. He made no gesture toward a weapon.

The house door opened. Mobeetie Bill came out, caught Eve by the shoulders, whirled her bodily, and pushed her into the passage. He grinned at Boone.

"Looks like a pleasant time was gonna be had by all," he drawled.

"What you doing here?" demanded Boone.

"Or you, comin' down to cases?" the old man retorted. His faded blue eyes were blazing with excitement.

There was an upheaval in the mob, a shrill outcry, and from it broke two men. They ran past French to the porch.

"Not the right fellow," one screamed, and the other, "We're alibi-in' this bird." They were the two old prospectors, Hassayampa Pete and Toughfoot Bozeman.

French threw a wild shot from the holster—a second—a third. In the moonlight his distorted shadow was like some malignant creature conjured from hell.

Mobeetie Bill tried to steady himself, caught at the wall, began to slide down. With incredible swiftness Boone's Colt was out and booming. He fired twice, then stopped.

French had dropped his sixshooter and was clutching at his elbow, face distorted with pain.

A voice shouted. "Stop shootin'. Listen! Listen to me, you damn fools!" Sheriff Brady pushed through the crowd and raised his hands. "Listen! Listen!"

Hassayampa Pete had snatched up the fallen gun of the killer. Boone dropped the barrel of his revolver toward the floor and stood waiting. French cursed bitterly, savagely.

"Listen, you wooden-heads!" the sheriff ordered, his words carrying to everyone present. "He's not the man that killed Buck—this Sibley here. Not the guy that held up the stage. Him nor Dusty, neither. They were forty miles away at the time—in the desert near Sugarloaf, talkin' to Pete an' Bozeman at

their camp when the stage was stopped. Step up, Bozeman. You tell 'em."

Bozeman told them, and after him Hassayampa Pete. Sibley's alibi was established beyond doubt.

"Who did it, then," someone demanded sullenly, "since you know so doggone much, Brady?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow," the sheriff answered. Then, abruptly: "Don't you, Curt! Don't you! I'll sure drap you in yore tracks."

Brady had snatched out his gun and was covering French. The bad man had drawn a long-barrelled .45 from under his shoulder. He had done it with his left hand, awkwardly and slowly, because his right was disabled.

"Take that gun from him, someone," the sheriff ordered. "You, with the brown hat. Take it, can't you? Now bring it here."

"I'll sure fix you for this, Brady," the bad man swore, "if it's the last thing I ever do."

The sheriff did not answer him. He addressed the crowd. "You better drift, boys, don't you reckon? You're doing yoreselves no good here. Turley was right. He told the truth, but you were hell-bent on believin' Sibley guilty. So you had to get all het up an' go off half cocked. I sure hope you-all are proud of yoreselves. Me, I'd say you'd ought to be put to bed an' spanked real thorough."

Someone laughed and broke the tension. From that moment the danger was past. The crowd began to thin away. French went, nursing his elbow and threatening vengeance.

Already Boone was on his knees supporting the old buffalo hunter. "Hit bad, old-timer?" he asked in a low voice.

Mobeetie Bill's cracked laugh answered. "Not bad, Texas man, but good—good an' thorough. I got aplenty."

Boone picked him up, carried him into the house, and followed Eve into her room. Gently he put the old man down on the bed.

"Has someone gone for a doctor?" Turley asked.

"No use," the old fellow answered. "I'm headin' fast for the divide. You stay with me, Texas man. The trail's gettin' steep—an' it's dark. I got to find the way home."

Already his mind was beginning to wander.

"I'll go get Doc," the sheriff said.

"My bronc musta piled me," the wounded man murmured, his hand against his side. "I'm right bad hurt, seems like—all stove up inside. . . . The greasers

are crowdin' us, boys. Look out."

Vaguely his mind was in the past. "Dark to-night, sure enough . . . but . . . right clost . . . to home." His feeble voice rang firmer. "I drew a black bean, boys. Suits me fine. So long. Well, I'm ready, you damned greasers."

Presently he tried to raise himself without success. He waved a weak arm. The old rebel yell quavered in his throat.

Ten minutes later he passed away.

Eve looked up at Boone, frightened. She had never before been so close to death. "Has he—gone?"

The Texan looked at her and nodded. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Don't you feel bad," he said in a murmur. "He wouldn't 'a' had it different, not if he could have chosen for himself."

Turley looked at the old wrinkled face lying on the pillow, and he was greatly moved. "He died on my account—came to warn me what they were going to do."

The Texan smoothed back gently the scant gray hair. "He'd say it was all right, if he was alive to tell you. No kick comin' from him. He took his fighting chance, like any man has got to do. Maybe he knows how we feel."

"It's terrible," the girl sobbed. "They killed the poor old man, and he wouldn't have harmed anyone."

The young man differed. "No, it's not terrible. He had to die soon, an' this was the way it was comin' to him—the one way he would have wanted it to be. He wouldn't have asked a better break. You see, miss, he was one of the old Lone Star State fightin' crowd, an' you can't say better than that of anyone. You tell 'em in yore paper to-morrow, Mr. Turley, that he knew Travis an' Bowie an' Crockett an' fought with 'em. Tell 'em the story of the black bean."

The Adam's apple in Turley's throat shot up and down spasmodically. "I'll do just that," he promised.

They moved toward the other room, the lamp in the editor's hand. The Mexican woman drew Turley to one side to discuss arrangements with him. The two went into the kitchen, leaving Boone and Eve together in the moonlit bedroom.

The girl looked up at the young Texan, gifts of admiration and gratitude in her eyes. "You saved my uncle's life," she cried.

"Sho! I didn't do any such a thing," he protested.

She was tremendously keyed up, lifted into an hysterical exaltation from

terror and despair. Always dependent, always a creature of her emotions, she yielded now to natural impulse. Her slight body swayed forward. Her arms slipped around his neck. She clung to him, trembling like an aspen in the wind.

The door of the room opened. Dr. Peters walked in, followed by Tilatha McLennon and her brother.

Eve's arms relaxed and fell. She looked at Tilatha, defensively, as though she had been accused.

"Mr. Sibley saved us," she said slowly. "He—saved us from that awful mob." She broke down and began to sob.

"He's the greatest rescuer in the business," Tilatha answered, her voice hard and dry. "As a saver of ladies in distress he has no match. Isn't that true, Mr. Sibley?"

Boone had rehearsed several times what he would say to this girl when they met, how he would put into a dozen words his gratitude for what she had done for him. But her irony stung. It struck dead the friendliness in him. The last thing he wanted was to be a knight errant, a woman's man. His cold eyes met the hard glitter in hers.

"You do a little in the rescue line yore own self, don't you, Miss McLennon?" he drawled.

She flushed angrily. "I'm only an amateur beside you. Believe me, I'm quite through now I've squared accounts—if I have."

"Oh, with interest, Miss McLennon. I'm sure a heap obliged——"

She brushed his words aside almost insultingly. "Sheriff Brady came for the doctor. Perhaps it's more important for him to attend his patient than to listen to us make speeches."

Peters had moved to the bed the instant he came into the room. Now he spoke, very quietly: "My patient is past needing me, Miss McLennon."

Tilatha turned to him with a startled exclamation. The flare of fierce challenge died out of her eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

BOONE GETS A JOB

ALIVE, Mobeetie Bill had been of no importance in the community, nothing but a garrulous old-timer who filled a chair on the sidewalk in front of the Dallas House and told cheerful reminiscences of the good old days. He had been a bull whacker and a mule skinner, a buffalo hunter and a soldier. His life had been an adventurous one, but the younger generation often was in too much of a hurry to listen to his comments on the passing show as illustrated by experience.

Dead, he had been for a day the most important figure in Tough Nut. The circumstances of his going might not have occasioned much discussion if Turley had not dramatized the event in the *Gold Pocket*.

Old Bill would have been much embarrassed if he could have read what was there said about him. He would have called it "guff." It would have seemed to him like boasting, even though another man had written the account.

There was a sketchy story of his life, pieced together from information dropped by him at various times. This followed the lead covering his death. On the editorial page was a black-bordered box inclosing a tribute to him headed "Mobeetie Bill Draws A Black Bean."

The editorial ran:

We called him Mobeetie Bill because he came to us from the Panhandle. He was a Texan and proud of it. We never knew him by his real name William Blake until after his death. Nor did we know that in the days when Travis and Bowie and Crockett fought for the freedom of the Lone Star State they hailed him comrade. He lived an adventurous life, and as he lived he died. So he would have had it. Pioneer, soldier, buffalo hunter, freighter, he played always a man's part.

Nearly fifty years ago William Blake rode with Ewan Cameron when his expedition crossed the border in pursuit of marauding thieves. The story of that unfortunate raid, filled with high lights of tragedy and heroism, deserves to rank in some ways with that of the Alamo. The invaders were captured and ordered flung into dungeons with the lowest criminals. They overcame their armed guard and

escaped to the mountains. Some few reached the border, but most of them were recaptured after desperate resistance.

General Santa Ana, in reprisal, ordered the Texans decimated. Their individual fate was determined by lottery. Each man drew a bean from a sack. If the bean was white, he lived; if it was black, he died.

The story is that the Texans went to that fatal lottery as though it had been a game. They jested as they drew the beans that meant life or death. One of them, George Bibb Crittenden, later a Confederate general in our Civil War, gave the white bean he had drawn to a comrade who had wife and children, with the remark that since he was unmarried he could afford to take another chance. William Blake was fortunate enough to get one of the white beans that meant life. Years later he was freed from a Mexican dungeon.

The last words of Mobeetie Bill were that he had drawn a black bean. He smiled when he said it. Never a man passed into the unknown with soul less troubled. God rest our gallant old friend. He died to help a girl and an unarmed man.

Tough Nut read the story and the editorial, and the effect was immediate. Drunkards wept maudlin tears over their rum. Miners agreed that he sure was a good old donker and it was a damned shame. Women grew sentimental and busied themselves about the funeral. Citizens affirmed, not too loudly, that something ought to be done about the killing.

Almost everybody in town, with the exception of Curt French, attended the funeral. The Quinns, their cousin Elder, Bob Hardy, and Brad Prouty were there in a body. In an attempt to stem the tide of public opinion, Whip had announced that he would pay all expenses of the interment. This gesture cost him nothing, since Sibley, Peters, and Turley, all present as pallbearers, had already settled with the undertaker.

Whatever the intentions of the Quinns might have been as to Sibley, these had temporarily to be postponed. It would not do just now to precipitate trouble. The town was in no mood to permit it.

“Right soon folks will be over this sentimental jag,” Whip told his brother and French. “Then we’ll talk turkey to this pilgrim.”

“An’ what if he talks turkey to us first?” Curt wanted to know from the bed on which he lay. “They say Brady has done made him a deputy. What in Mexico does that mean if not trouble?”

Whip looked down at him blackly. “There wouldn’t have been any trouble if you an’ Sing hadn’t robbed the stage, or if you hadn’t got drunk an’ killed

Buck. Or even then, if you hadn't bought that fool pendant for Faro Kate with the greenbacks. An' if that ain't enough, you've got to get drunk again an' bump off old Mobeetie Bill instead of Sibley. By God, Curt, you sure wear yore welcome out amongst yore friends."

"Don't pull yore picket pin, Whip, an' go to snortin'," answered French, scowling sulkily. "I had bad luck. I ain't denyin' it, am I?"

"You made yore own bad luck, an' ours, too. Now we've got to back yore fool plays an' bluff our way through. This last week you've done nothing but get us in bad. Right now we're mighty unpopular, an' you especial. It's got to stop, Curt, unless you want to go it alone without us."

"Was it me fixed up to tar an' feather Turley an' run him outa town?"

"No, but it was you got drunk an' killed old Bill," Whip answered curtly.

"I noticed none of you Quinns was on the job that night," French jeered. "Not a one of you."

"You needn't have been, either. I told you to stay out of it an' let the crowd do the work for us, but, no! you were hell-bent on being in it. Consequence was, you kill Mobeetie Bill, an' Sibley shows you up like a busted flush."

"Me! Me! Shows me up?" roared the bully. "Goddle-mighty, Whip, you cain't talk thataway to me."

Quinn's bleak eyes met the furious ones of the wounded man. "What you mean I can't, Curt? I'm tellin' you what this whole town is sayin'. Make yore choice, an' make it quick. Do like I tell you from right damn now, or play a lone hand."

"Me afraid of that pilgrim, by——"

"I didn't say that. I said that so far he'd taken every trick—an' he has. It'll be yore turn later—maybe. Question is, are you quittin' all this foolishness, or ain't you?"

"I'll sure make that bird climb a tree when my arm gets right," French bragged. "If anyone thinks different——"

"Not the point right now, Curt. Answer my question. Are you gonna let me play the hand from now on? If you trail with our outfit you've got to take orders."

"Take orders! Where do you get that talk from, Whip? I never have took orders. I never will. Far as this stage hold-up goes, Sing is in deep as I am. Don't you forget that for a minute, Whip. If they hang it on me, they're gonna hang it on him, too. You can bet yore boots on that."

Whip looked at him with a steady, unfathomable gaze. Something about it made the wounded man uncomfortable. Yet all Quinn said was, in a quiet low

voice, "Suits me if it does you, Curt."

"Course, I don't aim to make any trouble," French added by way of concession. "But if you try to make me the goat, I'll squeal sure."

"I see you don't," Quinn returned quietly.

The other man, meeting those cold black eyes, felt a chill run down his spine. He did not know that he had just condemned himself to death.

What French had said was true. After the funeral the sheriff had offered Boone a position as deputy, and the Texan had accepted it.

"I'm gonna call for a showdown," Brady said. "We'll arrest Curt for killin' old Bill, then we'll spring it that he shot Buck Galway, too. I want a deputy back of me who'll stay put."

"Have you figured how you're gonna arrest him without the Quinns takin' a hand?" Boone asked. "Don't forget their cousin Sing was in it. I'll say for the Quinns they back their friends."

"My notion is to drive up to the Widow Slater's, where he's got a room, right after supper time. You'll stay outside with the buckboard an' I'll bring Mr. Curt out. Then we'll take a back street to the jail. It'll be kinda dark, anyhow."

"We may have to hogtie him if he's obstinate."

"That'll be up to him. If he acts up, he'll get what any other bummer would. I'm through kow-towin' to him an' his friends," the sheriff said.

It was growing dark when two men in a buckboard left the Buffalo Corral, drove up Howard Street, turned to the left at Piñon, and drew up in front of the Widow Slater's house. The taller one of the two waited outside, while the shorter one went into the front yard and knocked on the front door.

Mrs. Slater opened to the knock.

"Good-evenin', ma'am," the visitor said. "I'm Sheriff Brady. Like to talk to Curt. No, you needn't tell him I'm here. I'll jest drap in on him. This room? Much obliged, ma'am."

French was playing, awkwardly and slowly, a one-handed game of solitaire, using the bed quilt for a table. He looked up when the sheriff entered. His jaw dropped. He cursed as his left hand dived under the pillow.

The sheriff had him covered. "Empty, Curt, empty. Bring yore hand out empty. I don't want to plug you. . . . That's the idee."

"Whajawant?" the bad man growled, in one word.

"You, Curt. I'm arrestin' you for killin' old Bill."

"Had his gun out, hadn't he?"

“Not so I could notice it—till after you began to shoot.”

“Well, he had—him an’ that Sibley, too.”

“You’ll get a chance to tell the judge that, Curt. Lucky you’re dressed. We got a rig out front for you.”

“I’m not gonna stand for that, Brady. You cain’t get biggity with me. I’ve killed guys for less.”

“That’s why I’m arrestin’ you. No use bellyachin’, Curt. You’re going with me.”

French hesitated, then admitted defeat in a fury of anger. “Onct I get out, Brady, I’ll kill you on sight.”

“You’re not out yet. You’re just going in. Here’s yore hat.”

Sullenly the killer moved to the door, passed into the other room, and out of the house. He drew back when he caught sight of the driver on the buckboard.

“So you’re in this,” he snarled. “It’s a frame-up to gun me whilst you’ve got the dead wood on me.”

“Get in that buckboard an’ don’t be a fool, Curt,” the sheriff ordered. “You’ll get a fair run for yore money an’ that’s a lot more than you’d give either one of us.”

By back streets Boone drove the buckboard to the jail. Once French shouted to a man he knew, “Tell Whip Quinn this —— —— sheriff slipped up whilst I was sleepin’ an’ is takin’ me to jail.”

Brady took his prisoner upstairs and locked him in a cell. All the time the vitriolic tongue of the bad man flung blistering epithets at him. The officer paid not the least attention. Presently he rejoined Sibley downstairs in the office.

“I reckon now we can begin to look for trouble,” he said to his new deputy.

“Trouble on our trail, sure enough. Question is, what kind? I don’t hardly think the Quinns are ripe for shootin’ yet, not in public, anyhow. Whip’s too smart for that. He knows the town wouldn’t like it, an’ he’s not ready to ride roughshod over public opinion. Not for a while, anyhow.”

“My notion, too, but you never can tell. It’ll be some kind of law move first, don’t you reckon? Bly eats outa the Quinns’ hands. He’s the J.P.”

“Maybeso.”

“Onless Russ or Sing hear we’ve arrested Curt before Whip does. They’re liable to come a-shootin’, either one or both.”

Within the hour Whip Quinn and Bob Hardy, accompanied by Bly and

Dugan of the express company, were in the office of the sheriff.

“What’s this grand-stand play, Brady?” demanded Whip harshly. “You know you can’t make it stick.”

The officer ignored the curtness of Quinn’s voice and manner. “I’m sheriff, Whip. The boys elected me to enforce the law. I aim to do it. So I had to arrest Curt for killin’ Mobeetie Bill. That’s reasonable, ain’t it?”

“Did you have to sneak up on him when he was alone an’ asleep? Why not arrest him open an’ aboveboard, if it was a straight game?”

“I arrested him open enough, an’ he wasn’t asleep, either.”

For the first time since he had come into the room Whip let his black eyes rest on Boone. “If you didn’t aim this at us, Brady, whyfor did you get this Texas warrior to help you?”

“I know a good man when I see him, Whip.”

“You know a man who is our enemy, an’ you pick him for yore deputy—a man accused of murder an’ robbery. What am I to think of that?” Beneath the heavy black brows Whip’s dark sunken eyes blazed. The fingers of his left hand nursed the imperial below the tight thin lips. “You’ve always been against us, Brady. You’re showin’ yore hand now because you think we’re in a jam.”

“Nothin’ to that, Whip,” the sheriff denied. “Live an’ let live. That’s my motto. As to what you say about Sibley, he’s been cleared of the stage hold-up. If he’s yore enemy, I don’t know it. I made him my deputy because he’ll do to take along, if you want to know.”

“Cleared by a coupla old desert rats you could buy for a pint of redeye,” Whip flung back bitterly. “We’ve not come to the end of that road yet. What’s yore play, Brady? Why are you standin’ in with this Texas killer? That’s the question folks are askin’.”

Brady had been brought up on the fighting frontier. He was a quiet man, one who preferred always to sidestep trouble when he could. But he was no coward. Now anger burned in his face.

“They’re askin’ another question, Whip,” he retorted hardily. “They’re askin’ where Curt French got the ten marked twenty-dollar bills that fellow Lacy lost when the stage was robbed?”

Whip glared at him. For a moment an explosion seemed imminent. Then Dugan cut in suavely:

“One moment, gentlemen. Do you claim, Sheriff, that Curt French was one of the stage hold-ups?”

“I claim the evidence points to him.”

Dugan had no more to say. He looked at Bob Hardy, a triumphant little smile twitching at his lips.

Hardy was a smaller man than the Quinns. He had come from a city of the Middle West, and he lacked the brawn and sinew that an outdoor life had given his friends. But his skim-milk shallow eyes were cold and hard. Now he stepped forward and took the stage.

“I want Curt, Sheriff, for robbing the United States mail. This is a Federal case, and it takes precedence of any claim you may have on him.”

Brady stared at the deputy marshal, taken aback by the audacity of the demand. Yet he was not sure that he could deny the legality of Hardy’s position. As a representative of the United States government he had a right to take French in charge, very likely had a prior right to his own. He played for time.

“Kinda sudden this, Bob. But look at it thisaway. Murder is a more serious offence than robbin’ the mails. Couldn’t that come first?” His perplexed doubt was offered to the company at large, but his eyes turned to Sibley to learn what he thought of it.

“Looks so to me, but I’m no lawyer,” Boone answered.

“Fellow, you’re not in this,” the marshal said to Sibley insolently. “Brady, use your head. The government has a murder charge, too. This hold-up killed Buck Galway, didn’t he? An’ Buck was guarding the mails.”

“Do you claim you’re arrestin’ French for that?” the sheriff asked sceptically.

“I’m arresting him because you say you’ve got evidence against him. Have you? Or are you four-flushing?”

“I have. Consid’rable of it.”

“Then that’s enough. I want my prisoner.”

The sheriff looked down at the table as though he could gather wisdom from it. Doggedly he said: “I got to have some kind of legal paper, even if you’re right.”

Hardy handed to Brady a document demanding the body of French.

The county officer read it, still uncertain whether it was effective in law.

He grinned a little, to palliate the effect of his words. “Course, you may be runnin’ a shananigan on me, Whip. Looks like you got the dead wood on me right now, if you got a right to serve this paper on me.”

“Ask Bly,” Whip said scornfully. “He drew it up, an’ it’s gonna stick.”

“It’ll stick if I’m convinced it’s okay,” Brady said stoutly.

“Then I’d advise you to be convinced,” Quinn flung back.

“Don’t get on the prod, boys,” the justice of the peace advised. “It’s a perfectly good order of the court, Brady. You got no option but to honour it.”

Again the sheriff looked toward his deputy, found no suggestion in Sibley’s wooden countenance, and decided to give way.

“All right, Bob. You can have him. Want to keep him in the jail here?”

“No, sir.”

Brady looked at Boone. “Bring him down, Sibley.”

Five minutes later the small group of Quinn adherents went away jubilantly, French in their midst. The prisoner left some threats for the sheriff and his deputy to ponder over. He swore either to run them out of town or see them planted in Boot Hill.

Boone observed that Whip Quinn did not echo any of his henchman’s wild talk. In fact, he made one sharp criticism. “That’s plumb foolish talk, Curt. You’re shootin’ off yore mouth heap much when it’s not necessary.”

Later Boone wondered why Whip had declared himself thus publicly. Was he getting ready an alibi against the day when he might need one?

CHAPTER XXVI

TILATHA BLOWS HOT AND COLD

WITH a caution not in the least obvious, Boone walked the streets of Tough Nut. His bearing, his strong stride, held the easy confidence of one at peace with the world. Yet he knew that at any moment a bullet might come whistling from door or window at him. French had been released on bond given by Whip Quinn and his man Bly, and he was breathing vengeance threats at every gambling house. Probably he would wait until his shooting arm was healed, but his impatience might outweigh his discretion. The man's vanity had been affronted. The Texan guessed that he would be simmering with rage until he had wiped the slate clean.

The Quinns and their other adherents, too, had to be reckoned with as enemies, though Boone did not expect any of them to pot him from ambush. They were too arrogant and self-confident for that. They would set the scene for a battle, take whatever odds they could, but they would fight in the open.

In front of Jefford's, Boone met the two old prospectors who had come to town to testify in his behalf. He stopped and shook hands.

"I haven't told you-all yet how much obliged I am for yore good word the other night in front of Turley's place," he said.

"Hmp! Nothin' to that, fellow," snorted Hassayampa Pete. "You hadn't paid us yet for our time an' expense stickin' around town. If you'd got shot up we'd been out what all is comin' to us."

"Y'betcha!" agreed his partner. "An' what I can hear you ain't any too damn good a risk now. Don't you reckon you better settle with us immediate before anything happens?"

Boone smiled. These gnarled old desert rats would hate to admit they had helped him out of friendliness. "Suits me. What's the damage?"

"Oh, well, we don't aim to break you," Pete said, and named a sum astonishingly low.

Boone paid it, thanked them, and went on his way. They were good old scouts even though they harshly denied it.

At the post office Boone saw Tilatha McLennon. An underlying glow of carmine streamed into her cheeks. She knew this, and it annoyed her. In answer to his greeting she bowed stiffly.

Boone got his mail and returned to the doorway. He ripped open a letter from his mother, but his eyes followed the figure that moved down the street with such light grace and supple movement. She walked as though she loved the air and the sunshine, as though she were kin to all wild free things.

He put the letter back in his pocket, stepped out, and presently was beside her. She turned, a hard, lively light in the eyes beneath the finely arched brows.

“Like to say a few words to you, Miss McLennon,” he said, lifting his wide hat.

“There’s nothing preventing you, is there?”

Unfortunately, he smiled. She was so uncompromisingly hostile. At once he knew that smile had been a mistake. The stab of her eyes, which had in them little tawny flecks matching the hair of lustrous copper, dared him to be amused at her. He did not say at once what he had come to say. Instead he asked her a question.

“Why do you hate me so?”

“Hate you? I don’t hate you. But it’s just like you to flatter yourself that I do. You’re so—so important, aren’t you?” She flung it at him insultingly, with a flare of feminine ferocity.

Her manner puzzled him. He did not see any justification for it. Why did she always clash with him whenever they came together?

“Am I?” He smiled again. For the life of him he couldn’t help it. She was so direct and uncompromising.

“I suppose you think—because people talk about you—that you’re a great man an’ can strut around——”

“So I strut, too, do I?” He strangled a desire to shout with laughter.

She understood his reaction, and it irritated her the more, drove her on to a further exhibition of temper that later she would lash herself for. “You’re hateful,” she told him.

“I see. I’m hateful, but you don’t hate me,” he drawled.

Two defiant stars flashed at him. “I never knew a man so—so——”

She stopped, for sheer inadequacy of expression.

“All right, Miss McLennon, I’m conceited an’ I strut an’ I’m hateful. We’ll let it go at that, unless you’d like to free yore mind real thorough. But I’m not ungrateful. I haven’t had a chance yet to thank you for what you did for me at Galeysville. I’m thankin’ you now. Hadn’t been for you I’d never have reached the roof in time, an’ if I had I’d never have made a getaway without yore pony.”

Under the direct look of his steady gray eyes she felt her blood flutter. Somehow he had disarmed her anger at once.

“Billy got back,” she said irrelevantly, not knowing what else to say.

“I never saw the like of it—you comin’ across the roofs to pull me outa the tightest hole I was ever in. Twice I’d told you I didn’t want yore help. But I took it, an’ mighty glad to get it. So no matter how hateful I am, you’ll know that once I wasn’t struttin’.”

This time she did not mind his smile. She liked it. There was something warm and winning in it that went straight to her hammering heart. This cold, hard man had never offered her friendship before, if he was really offering that now.

Her eyes fell. “I don’t think you’re hateful always,” she said.

“That’s something,” he laughed. “Anyhow, I got it said, what I been wantin’ to tell you.”

“There’s something I wanted to tell you, that first night we met, but I didn’t say it. You wouldn’t let me—at least, I thought you wouldn’t. It hurt my feelings because you acted as though it didn’t much matter whether you had rescued me or not. An’ first thing I knew I was mad at you.”

“There seems most always to be a breeze when you an’ I are in the same neighbourhood,” he commented.

“I don’t know how to say ‘Thank you’ nice, the way some girls do. I’m too independent, maybe.”

“You’re criticizin’ Miss McLennon; I’m not.”

“An’ I fly off the handle so. I’ve always had my own way too much, I reckon.”

He had nothing to say about that. Tilatha took his silence as condemnation.

“If I were like Eve Turley, so sweet an’ pretty an’ gentle——”

“Why, then you wouldn’t be Tilatha McLennon,” he finished for her.

Again she felt that he was judging her. She thought of Eve, inheritor of all the graces that make women dear to men. Before her flashed a picture of her in Boone Sibley’s arms. Of course he would love a girl like that. How could he help it, or any man on whom she turned those soft appealing eyes? Jealousy flamed up in her like lighted tow.

“Anyhow, you wouldn’t want me to be grateful her way,” she said, and could have bitten her tongue out a moment later.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he said promptly. His thought was, neither she nor Eve nor any other woman.

Naturally she misunderstood. “Don’t worry. I’ll not trespass on her privileges. Am I to congratulate you yet?”

He looked at her. “You sure take the cake, Miss McLennon.”

“For bad temper, I suppose you mean.”

“Take it any way you like it,” he replied coldly.

They had walked to the end of a side street that looked down into the valley and across to the mountains beyond. He lifted his hat and turned to go.

Out of the last house on the street came Russ Quinn. He stopped in his stride to stare at them, in the middle of the road, directly in the path of Boone. There was in his attitude the menace of a hesitation that might in an instant leap to action.

Boone moved forward evenly, eyes fixed on the face of his foe.

“Russ,” the girl cried in warning.

Already Quinn had read the meaning of the girl’s stormy face. They had been quarrelling, these two. He moved aside and swept his hat off in a bow to the Texan.

“Not yet, Mr. Sibley,” he jeered. “It’ll be some other day for you an’ me.”

“You’ll find me waitin’ at the gate, sir,” Boone said quietly.

“Any time, any place, Texas warrior.”

Boone did not look back, but he knew Russ Quinn had joined Tilatha.

CHAPTER XXVII

EXIT A BAD CITIZEN

SHERIFF Brady took the stage and train to Tucson. Casually he mentioned at the Last Chance that he was going to run down a tip he had been given as to the whereabouts of a horse thief wanted in Cochise. His real purpose was to consult a lawyer in whom he had confidence as to his status in the Curt French case. It would be strange, he thought, if the law was so written that a man could walk the streets undisturbed with two separate murder charges hanging over his head.

The sheriff was back in Tough Nut next day, his mind made up as to what he could and could not do.

“Matlock says if Curt is free we can arrest him,” Brady told Boone. “If the government wants to sit in, it will have to bring charges against him in the proper legal way. Bob Hardy hasn’t done that. He don’t aim to put any charges on record at all. Well, we’ll arrest Curt again an’ make the Quinns show their hand. They’ll have to put chips in the pot if they want to draw cards.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“Anything happen while I was away?”

“Not much. Quiet all along the Potomac. Oh, one little thing, which may or may not be important. Sing Elder had words with Curt French at the Occidental. Don’t know what the row was about.”

“You can guess, can’t you?”

“If I was guessin’, I’d say Sing was some sore at Curt for ballin’ up that little business they were on the other day. I’ll lay a two-bit bet with you, Sheriff, Curt ain’t going to lie down in brotherly love with the Quinns much longer.”

“No takers present. Now, about this arrest. The sooner the quicker. Why not now?”

“You’re boss of this round-up, Sheriff. Now it is.”

They made what preparations were necessary and started on their way.

“He’d ought to be gettin’ around to the gambling houses about this time of night,” Brady said.

They did not find him at Dolan’s Palace, but Boone saw there a man he

had met in the hills, Tom Tracy. His arm was in a sling from the wound he had received during the attack on the Mexicans.

“How’s Dusty Rhodes gettin’ along?” the Texan asked him.

“I’m not keepin’ cases on Dusty,” the man answered sourly. “Ask Til McLennon, if you’re anxious to know. I hear she nursed him real tender.”

“Better look cheerful when you talk about Miss McLennon,” Boone advised him coldly. “Some of her friends might misunderstand yore manner.”

“Do you claim to be one of them?” Tracy asked insolently. “She has some right ornery ones.”

“We’ll not discuss Miss McLennon here, Tracy.”

The cowboy looked at him and started to say something, then changed his mind. He wanted to be ugly, but the steely eyes daunted him. This Sibley was no kind of pilgrim to work off his temper on. Moreover, at that precise moment he heard the sheriff put a question to the bartender. Brady wanted to know, in a low voice, if Curt French had been around that evening.

Tracy glanced at the sheriff and back at the deputy, murmured an indistinct defiance, and withdrew from talk. A moment later he departed by the back door.

“That fellow Tracy has gone to warn French we’re out after him, looks to me,” Boone said to his chief, as the cowboy slipped out. “We better get right busy.”

They tried Jefford’s and the Last Chance. French had not been in either place. “Liable to be at home yet,” one faro dealer said to Boone, a gleam of malice in his eye. “He don’t get around so much since—since his accident.”

The officers walked to the house where French roomed.

“Better wait here an’ get him as he comes out,” the sheriff decided. “He won’t be surprised in his room a second time.”

Boone did not answer. He was listening. Voices from within the house came to them, harsh, menacing voices. A shot rang out, two more almost together, then a fourth. There came the sound of running feet—and silence. For a moment they could see shadowy figures vanishing into the darkness.

“Went out the back door, whoever they were,” the sheriff said.

“In a sure enough hurry, too. Not waitin’ for the neighbours to gather.”

Brady drew his Colt’s .45 and trod softly toward the house.

“Won’t need that, I reckon,” Boone said in his ear. “Still, might as well play it safe.”

“You figure he’s gone,” the sheriff whispered.

The Texan looked at him queerly. “Yes, gone.”

“If Tracy was here to warn him, what was the shootin’ about?”

“Tracy wasn’t here.”

Boone tried the front door, turned the knob gently, and tiptoed in. From under the door of the bad man’s bedroom came a gleam of lamplight. The officers moved gingerly across the floor. One of the boards squeaked. Brady motioned to his deputy to give him right of way. The sheriff felt for the latch, raised it slowly, and flung the door open.

He stood in the doorway, crouched, wary, revolver in hand. “We’ve got you, French. Don’t——”

The words died in his mouth.

Boone looked over his shoulder. A man lay face down, half on the bed and half on the floor. The fingers of the left hand still clutched a sixshooter. His legs were sprawled out awkwardly. The bandaged right arm hung lax. In the supine body was no sign of life.

Neither of the officers needed to turn over the bearded face to know that this was Curt French.

“They got him right,” Brady said.

Boone examined the weapon. “He fired once. A bullet struck the floor over there, probably his, after he was hit, likely. . . . See, they hit him three times—here an’ here an’ once in the throat.”

The sheriff agreed. “The last shot after he was down. They intended to make sure.”

“They were thorough—figured that a dead man couldn’t do ’em any more harm an’ that a live one might upset their apple cart.”

“The Quinns did it, you think?”

“Heard from Tracy we were gonna arrest French an’ beat us to it. Maybe they didn’t intend to kill him, only to make sure he’d keep still, but when he acted ugly they let him have it. You can’t tell. Might have been that way.”

“Which of the Quinns?”

“When we find out which ones Tracy met when he reached the Occidental _____”

“How do you know he went to the Occidental?”

“He’d head straight for there, wouldn’t he? Since he scouted up the alley he wouldn’t meet any of ’em before he reached there, chances are.”

“It had got to where the Quinns had to kill him, you figure.”

“Don’t it look thataway? Maybe not the Quinns, but some of their friends.

He got 'em into this jam—first by gettin' drunk an' killin' Buck Galway, next by buying the jewellery with the marked bills, then by shootin' Mobeetie Bill. He'd gone wild. They couldn't control him any longer, an' they didn't know what he would do or say. They had to get rid of him or light out themselves. Naturally, they bumped him off."

"Well, he was a bad citizen. He was after yore scalp an' mine. I won't mourn him any."

"Nor I. He was a killer of the worst kind—irresponsible. He killed when there wasn't any need of it. You could never tell when he would break loose. I expect he would have got me if the Quinns hadn't held him back."

"He died with a gun in his hand. We can't prove he didn't fire the first shot."

"No, I don't reckon he did, but we can't prove it."

For some moments they had heard voices outside. Now someone called to them, asking what the trouble was.

The sheriff went to the door. "You can come in, boys, far as the inner room. Curt French has been killed by parties unknown. Don't come any closer. I want the coroner to look things over first."

The men in the doorway stared at the figure lying on the edge of the bed.

"Who killed him?" someone asked presently.

"Yore guess is as good as ours, Hartley," the sheriff answered. "We found him dead when we got here. We had come to arrest him."

"Mrs. Slater had gone to prayer meetin'. She always does Wednesday evenings," a neighbour contributed.

"Too bad she wasn't here. She would have known who was with Curt," Brady said.

One man rubbed his chin and sidled a look at him, another at Boone. There was suspicion in those furtive glances.

"Doncha reckon they chose a time when they knew she'd be out?" he asked.

"Don't know a thing about that, Hartley. Would you mind bringin' Meade up?" Meade was coroner and undertaker. "Now I'll have to ask you boys to get out for a while."

"Just a moment, Hartley," demurred Boone in his low even voice. "Might as well take a look at our guns before you go, the sheriff's an' mine."

Brady looked at him, surprised. He had not caught, as the Texan had, those looks of veiled suspicion. "What for?" he asked bluntly.

“Some folks might claim we did it, Sheriff, as the easiest way to get rid of him. Better set all minds at rest about that right now.”

Boone handed his revolver to Hartley. The man examined it. The hammer rested on an unloaded chamber. The other five held cartridges.

“Not been fired recently,” Hartley reported, showing the sixshooter to the others present.

The weapon of the sheriff was passed from one to another.

“Now make sure we’re not carryin’ any other concealed guns,” Boone said.

Hartley patted the bodies of both the sheriff and the deputy.

“Curt had been makin’ his threats everywhere what all he was aimin’ to do to both of you,” someone said. “If you’d killed him, any jury would have said self-defence, an’ there wouldn’t have been any complaints from decent citizens.”

“Only we didn’t kill him,” Boone replied. “That’s the point we’re makin’ clear.”

“Who did, d’you reckon?” blurted out a little fat man, one whose curiosity and instinct for gossip outran discretion.

The sheriff, face immobile, eyes cold and blank, looked at him. “You tell us, Simmons,” he suggested.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TOM TRACY WALKS AND TALKS

TOM TRACY stepped out from the Bohemian Theatre and turned his steps down Apache Street. It was nothing to him that the sky was full of stars and that a lovers' moon rode the heavens, that a faint breath of wind carried with it the low murmur of pines. What he wanted to hear was the rattle of poker chips, what he wanted to see was an ace full pinched closely in his hands.

Light swift footsteps sounded behind him. A voice drawled in his ear.

"Evenin', Mr. Tracy. Walk with you, if you don't mind."

Tracy's hangdog look took in Boone Sibley. "I'm particular who I walk with," he blustered.

The Texan laughed. "So am I—sometimes, an' since we're both——"

"I'm not lookin' for yore company, sir."

"Well, I'm lookin' for yores," Boone told him.

The cowboy stopped. "Meanin' what?"

"Like to have a few moments' conversation with you at the sheriff's office."

"You arrestin' me? What for?"

"I didn't say so. Want to ask some questions."

"Ask 'em here," Tracy said belligerently.

"I mentioned the sheriff's office."

"You got another mention comin', fellow. I ain't going there. You got no right to take me."

"I reckon I have. Anyhow, that's the way it'll be."

Stormily Tracy glared at him. Surges of rage swept him but did not reach the point of explosion. There was something about this long Texan that daunted him. He dared not call for a showdown.

"You can't take me without a warrant," he protested.

"Turn to the left here," Boone said in an even, matter-of-fact voice that had compulsion back of it.

Tracy hesitated, then with an oath did as directed.

The sheriff was reading the evening paper in his office. He took his feet down from the desk and nodded amiably at Tracy.

“ ’Lo, Tom. How’s yore arm comin’?”

“Bring me here to ask me that?” growled the cowboy.

“Other things, too.” The sheriff put his arms on the desk, leaned forward, and looked hard at the cowboy. “After you left Dolan’s awhile ago an’ went to the Occidental, you met Sing Elder an’ Brad Prouty. The three of you went outside together. Where did you go?”

“Say, what’s it to you, Brady?” bristled the hill man. “Do we have to ask you where all we can go?”

“We know what you told ’em. That’s not important. Point is, where did you leave ’em an’ when?”

“I ain’t said I was with ’em a-tall. None of yore business whether I was or wasn’t. I choose my own friends, Mr. Sheriff.”

Brady nodded, to himself apparently, as though this confirmed something he had in mind. “We’ll lock this fellow up in a cell, Sibley.”

“What for?” demanded the cowboy.

“For the murder of Curt French.”

Tracy’s jaw dropped. He stared at Brady, eyes wide with astonishment. “Curt French—dead?” he got out incredulously.

“Where have you been the last hour an’ a half, Tom?” the sheriff asked.

“Why, I been in a box at the Bohemian, drinkin’ beer with one of the house girls.”

Boone said, “All O.K. I’ve checked up on that.”

“When did you get to the Bohemian?” the sheriff asked Tracy.

“I dunno exactly. Right after I left Sing an’ Brad.”

“An’ where was that?”

The cowboy grew cautious. He had not meant to make that admission, though he did not know what the sheriff was after. It had been surprised out of him by the impact on his mind of stunning news, that French had been killed and he was charged with the crime.

“What you drivin’ at, Brady? Do you claim I killed Curt French—if he’s dead?”

“The story has been on the streets an hour, Tom. It certainly reached the Bohemian. Funny you hadn’t heard it.”

“Tell you I was alone in a box with a girl watchin’ the show. How would I

hear it?”

“You didn’t help kill him, then? Didn’t know he was gonna be killed?”

“No, sir,” Tracy protested, little beads of sweat on his forehead.

“If that’s so, all you can get is a penitentiary sentence for concealin’ facts and helpin’ the murderers escape.”

“Me? Why, I got no notion who they are. Didn’t know Curt was dead till you told me two minutes ago. I ain’t gonna be drug into this, Sheriff.”

“Come clean, Tracy,” urged Boone. “When did you leave Sing Elder an’ Brad Prouty?”

The cowboy gulped. He would have liked to talk with his friends before he did any explaining. As it stood now, he was quite in the dark. One thing he knew: he had no intention of being dragged into this killing when he had had nothing to do with it.

“What’s the idea, Brady? Are you claimin’ Sing an’ Brad did this? That’s a fool notion. Ain’t they all good friends? Don’t they all run together?”

“We’re askin’ the questions, Tom. You don’t have to answer them if you don’t like. You can stand yore fightin’ chance of acquittal at the trial.”

“Trial!” the cowboy repeated, his voice raised. “Hells hinges, you can’t try me for somethin’ I didn’t do. Send for Whip Quinn. I want to talk to him.”

Brady shook his head. “No, Tom, you’re going into a cell, an’ you’ll do no talkin’ to anyone—not yet. We’ll find out what we want to know without yore help. Don’t blame us later when you’re in a jam. You’ve had yore chance to talk.”

“I left ’em right outside the Occidental,” Tracy blurted out. “Right away.”

“When you told them we were lookin’ for Curt French, what did they say?” asked Boone.

“Why, I dunno. I don’t recollect hardly what they said.” The cowboy’s manner was sullen and reluctant.

“Said they were going to warn Curt, didn’t they?”

“Maybeso.”

“They did or they didn’t. Which?”

“Why, yes, I guess they did.”

For half an hour they grilled the harassed man. They got out of him all he knew, which was not very much. Then, in the presence of Hank Jacobs, the jailor, Tracy signed a statement covering the facts.

“Can I go now?” he asked.

“Sorry, Tom, but we’ll have to hold you for the present,” Brady said after a low-voiced consultation with Boone. “Don’t worry. I reckon you’re not in this.”

“If I ain’t in it, why can’t I go?”

Brady did not tell him the real reason, which was that he would run at once to Whip Quinn with the story of what had occurred. Indignant and ill at ease, Tracy found himself locked in a cell for the night. It was, he felt, a high-handed outrage. He would sure tell Whip and have him bring these fellows to account.

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO MEN

HUGH McLENNON had gone back to the ranch, but his sister stayed in town as a guest of Eve Turley. Tilatha did not herself quite know why she was remaining. There were several factors contributing to her last-minute decision. One was the friendship which had sprung up between her and Eve. Brought up in a world of men, of rough, hard-riding cowboys almost as simple and elemental as the longhorns they drove, she had taken on the colour of her environment. There was a hard, metallic quality about her. She looked at facts without any of the indirection of her sex. Watching Eve, she realized that there was something she had missed, the soft and sheltered life that stresses femininity.

Always, vaguely, this clean, brown, fearless girl from the hills had known dissatisfaction with her primitive existence. She loved the mountains. It was a joy to her to be in a saddle riding the windswept hills. But she had wanted friends of her own sex, not the gaunt, tight-lipped wives of ranchmen, women who had been buffeted by the hardships of pioneering, but young girls full of laughter and whispered secrets, such as Eve Turley.

This gold-and-ivory Eve charmed her. There was a provocative unexpected quality about the girl. She could grow so enthusiastic about dress, so starry-eyed over the colour of a ribbon, that Tilatha envied her. She bubbled with mirth regarding the young men she met, and mocked them to their faces so prettily that they came back for more.

Tilatha could not bring herself to go home yet because she felt, too, that the struggle of which Boone Sibley had become the central figure was moving to a swift and tragic climax. No longer did she deny to herself that he held her heart in that strong brown hand of his. He could crush it if he wished. Hourly he walked his light-footed way in great danger. Soon now the blow would fall, and when it struck him down she, too, would be stricken. She would, of course, go on living, but she would carry always in her bosom the dull ache that is close to despair.

The news of the death of Curt French came to her at first as a shock of relief. He had spread his threats broadcast. Now he was powerless to execute them. One great danger no longer confronted the man she loved.

She wondered how French had come to his death. There was some mystery

about it. Apparently the sheriff and his deputy had cleared themselves, though there had reached her rumours that they knew more than they were telling. Logically, as far as she could see, they were the men who benefited most from his death. Perhaps they had tried to arrest him and had been forced to shoot when he resisted.

With Eve she called on her dressmaker for a fitting the morning after the bad man had been killed. They met Russ Quinn in front of Blum's photograph gallery.

At sight of Tilatha the man's dark eyes lighted. He had supposed she had left town with her brother.

"Glad to meet up with you," he told her. "Thought you'd gone home."

Miss McLennon rescued her hand and reminded him that there was another young woman present. "You're glad to meet Miss Turley, too, aren't you?" she suggested.

He smiled at the little blonde girl. "I reckon Miss Turley can understand when I say that there isn't any other lady present for me when I meet Til McLennon."

Eve clapped her hands. "Bravo! That's the nicest compliment I've heard since I came to Tough Nut." She nodded her head in vigorous approval. "And when I look at her I know why you feel that way."

"Happy to have yore endorsement, Miss Turley."

Her shy eyes flashed at him an audacious challenge. "I'm endorsing the sentiment, Mr. Quinn."

"I see, an' not the sentimenteer." His bold eyes, reflecting careless amusement, met her gaze coolly. "Couldn't you go a little farther, miss? So's not to leave me quite heartbroke."

"No, sir." She shook her fair curls vivaciously. "Not the leastest mite. You're too wild and woolly for me."

"No hope for me a-tall. Have I got to start pinin' right off?" he derided.

"You'll have to ask Tillie that," she said wickedly.

Tilatha changed the subject. She did not want to discuss even in badinage Russ Quinn's feeling for her. He was out of the running, definitely, finally. She did not understand now how she could ever have considered him as a husband. From that point of view Boone Sibley filled her horizon.

"Have you heard anything more about Curt French—who killed him, I mean?" she asked.

The muscles in his dark face tightened. "I don't need to know any more."

Sibley an' Brady killed him.”

“But they showed their revolvers to everybody in the room. They hadn't been fired.”

“What leads you to think this Texas warrior ain't a two-gun man?” he demanded. “Brady, too, for that matter.”

“They were searched by Mr. Hartley.”

Quinn laughed unpleasantly. “So they were, after they had got rid of their second guns. That's an old dodge. An' tell me why this Texas man mentioned lookin' at his gun if he wasn't fixin' up an alibi.”

“He knew he would be accused, since Curt French had been threatening him an' Mr. Brady. They did not leave the house. What became of the other guns, if they had two each?”

“Gimme a harder one,” Quinn returned scornfully. “Why, they shoved 'em in a bureau—or under the bed—or beneath the mattress—till they shoed the crowd out. I notice they wouldn't let the boys come into the room an' look around.”

“They couldn't do that till the coroner had seen the body,” Tilatha protested. “You're unfair to them, Russ. You twist around everything they did.”

“Bet yore boots they couldn't, not without someone finding the sixshooters. So they didn't take any chances. They herded the crowd out an' fixed things to suit themselves.”

“I don't believe it, not for a minute. Why should they? Curt French had threatened them both repeatedly. If he resisted arrest they had a perfect right _____”

“An' if he didn't resist arrest? If he never got a chance to resist?”

Tilatha flung up her head and looked straight at him. “That wasn't the way of it. They're not that kind of men, either of 'em.”

His black eyes narrowed. “You mean Sibley ain't that kind of a man,” he challenged.

“I said both of 'em. I say it again. Why do you stick up for Curt French when you know what he was, Russ Quinn?” she asked indignantly.

“I know what this Sibley is, too. Up to date, he's sure had a lot of luck. First that business of Buck Galway an' the stagecoach robbery, then Jim Barkalow——”

“Jim Barkalow isn't dead, an' he isn't going to die.”

“Then Curt French.”

“That’s not proved.”

“If he gets by with that, too, he’s certainly a good one. Listen, girl. He’s struck twelve o’clock. He’s through.”

“I should think you’d be ashamed to mention Jim Barkalow—fifty of you against one.”

“Against two,” he corrected darkly. “I’ve not forgot that.”

There had been the sound of footsteps clicking down the walk. Now Eve let out a little “Oh!” of dramatic alarm. Boone Sibley was striding directly toward them.

At the same moment Tilatha and Russ Quinn looked up and became aware of his approach.

The shotgun messenger spoke first, his voice harsh and insolent. “I’ve been tellin’ Til McLennon that you an’ Brady murdered Curt French,” he called out.

Tilatha noticed for the first time how like a bird of prey this black Quinn was. He had the rapacious nose and the glittering eyes of a hawk. He seemed, at this instant, about to swoop down on his victim.

The eyes of the men actually seemed to clash, so hard and steely was the meeting of them.

“Then you’ve been tellin’ her what’s not true,” the Texan countered. “An’ I reckon you know it.”

“Meanin’ what, Sibley?” asked Russ, his body dangerously tense and motionless. “That I’m a liar?”

“Meanin’ that we’ve got the killers locked up in jail.”

Quinn forgot, in his astonishment, the anger that had been simmering to the boiling point. “Got ’em locked up! Who?”

“The men who killed Curt French. You notice I choose my words, Quinn. I don’t know whether they murdered him or not.”

“I asked you who you’re talkin’ about.”

“So you did. Sing Elder and Brad Prouty.”

“You’ve got ’em in yore jail—Sing an’ Brad?” the express messenger demanded.

“Yes.”

Quinn was amazed. He could hardly believe it. Yet he knew it was true if the Texan said so.

“How come they there? Who took ’em?”

“I did.”

“When?”

“This mornin’. Half an hour ago.”

“An’ they didn’t shoot you full of holes—either one of ’em?”

“Not so I noticed it. They were right sensible an’ peaceable, once they had time to think it over.”

“By God, I don’t believe it.”

“That’s yore privilege, Mr. Quinn.”

Russ glared at his enemy savagely. He wanted to break loose now and have it over with. He had no fear. He was game and hardy and self-reliant. If he reached for his sixshooter, he or this Texan whom he hated would be dead within a few seconds. But something held his hand. Was it the presence of the women? Was it his wish to consult Whip before he struck? He never knew.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and strode away.

Eve, white to the lips, stared at Boone. “I thought—I thought——”

She did not finish the sentence. Tilatha knew what she meant, for she had desperately feared the same thing—that he would strike here, regardless of them. Her imagination had heard the roar of guns, had seen the flash of fire, had felt the stab of bullets. She leaned sickly against an adobe wall, limbs and body lax. For the first time in her life she felt as though she were going to faint.

Boone looked at Tilatha. What he saw in her face made his voice gentle.

“It’s all right,” he told her.

“It’s all wrong,” she cried brokenly. “He nearly——”

“He was some annoyed,” the man told her. “Can’t blame him for being disturbed at bad news.”

“Did they do it—Sing Elder an’ Brad Prouty?” Tilatha asked. Her impulse was to divert him from her agitation.

“We think so. Looks thataway. A woman saw them going into the house where French roomed. That was five minutes before the shootin’ began.”

“But why should they kill him? He was one of their crowd, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but he was runnin’ wild on them. They couldn’t trust him, the way I figure it out. They had just got news that the sheriff was lookin’ for French to arrest him again. Sing was in the stage hold-up with him. We know Sing had had trouble with the fellow at the Occidental. I’d guess French was makin’ threats to spill the beans if he couldn’t have things his way. Prouty an’ Elder are thick as thieves. Maybe they called on French to make sure he’d keep his mouth shut, an’ a quarrel flared up. We can’t prove they went to kill him nor

that they fired the first shot. We do know the only shot French fired went wild, as it might have done if he was badly wounded when he pulled the trigger. But there's an answer to that guess. He was using his left hand an' wasn't used to handling his sixshooter so."

"An' might have been trying to beat them to the draw," the hill girl added.

"Just that, an' in his hurry turned loose before he was ready."

"But if you think that, why arrest them an' make them an' the Quinns mad?"

"I didn't say I thought so. I said it might be like that. It's up to Elder an' Prouty to show self-defence if they can."

Tilatha shook her head. "I don't see why you couldn't let 'em alone. They can't be convicted. You know that. Why make trouble for yoreself?"

"We're law officers, Brady an' I. We've made up our minds to clean up this town, if we can. What kind of sheriffs would we be to let these fellows get away with this an' never even call for a showdown?"

"You don't have to go lookin' for trouble, do you?"

"We have to meet it when it looks for us. No use beatin' about the bush, Miss McLennon. We've served notice to the Quinn outfit that law has come to this town to stay."

"But suppose they—shoot you or something?" Eve asked, eyes wide with the thrilling horror of this drama.

Boone smiled at her naïve question. He thought it very probable they would, but not if he could prevent it.

"Yore uncle kept on writin' pieces in the *Gold Pocket* about conditions here even after one of 'em had shot him," he reminded her. "Someone has got to stand pat if ruffians aren't going to rule the roost."

The three of them had turned and were walking back to the Turley house.

"Tell me how you captured them," Tilatha said. "They're so—so lawless, both of 'em."

"Got the drop on both. I knew they were up till two-three o'clock at the Occidental an' would sleep late. So I dropped in an' waked 'em. Sing hadn't even bolted his door. He hadn't a chance to resist. The other fellow, Prouty, came an' opened the door when I called. I gave the name of yore friend Russ Quinn to him. He was sleepy an' yawnin', so I had him, too. For a moment he had notions, but he changed his mind an' saw reason."

Tilatha made a little gesture of impatient despair. "If it would do any good, but they'll be out again soon walkin' the streets an' lookin' for you. Don't you

know that? But of course you do.”

“I know, too, that there’s a change in the sentiment of this town,” he told her. “Most folks here always were honest an’ law-abiding, but they didn’t dare protest. Turley played almost a lone hand. Now it’s different. Men meet me on the street an’ wish more power to us. The time has passed when the Quinns can run the town by high-handed methods.”

“The time hasn’t passed when they can shoot you down in the streets,” Tilatha replied. “What’s the use of saying that law is here when it is no such thing?”

“It’s on the way. Don’t you worry, Miss McLennon. The day of the Quinns is pretty near past, an’ nobody knows it better than Whip Quinn. He won’t give up without a fight. But he’s fixed so he loses if he wins. Say he wipes me an’ Brady out. Public opinion——”

She stopped and looked at him. He noticed for the first time the tawny flecks in the big brown eyes.

“Will public opinion bring you back to life after they have killed you?” she flung fiercely at him.

He was surprised at the passion in her voice. No reason was apparent to him for so much ferocity. The thing he was doing was only what had to be done. Even she must realize that, untamed and wilful though she was.

“They haven’t killed me yet,” he told her grimly.

“No, but they will. Why do you come here an’ mix up in this? It’s not yore fight, but you hadn’t got clear into town with yore mule team before you had started it.”

“Struttin’ around, I reckon,” he murmured with a smile. “Me thinkin’ myself a big man an’ wantin’ folks to talk about me.”

She brushed aside his drawling quotation of her frank appraisal of him made at their latest meeting. “How you can stand there an’ joke about it when you know, just as well as I do, that——” The hill girl broke off her sentence. Unexpectedly her throat had filled with a sob.

Boone looked at her in swift surprise. He saw the stormy rise and fall of her bosom. A flag of colour fluttered in her cheeks. Tilatha bit her lip, turned, and walked swiftly into the house. His amazed gaze followed her.

Eve looked at him, imps of mischief dancing in her blue eyes. “Mr. Sibley, would you like me to tell you something—real important?”

He shrugged broad shoulders. “I’m listenin’.”

“Do you know what a duffer is?”

“A duffer! Why, a fellow who—who——”

“Exactly. Well, you’re one.”

And with that she turned and went flying into the house.

CHAPTER XXX

THE RUSS QUINN BRAND?

TO Tilatha came a grinning little coloured boy with a note. Having read this, she passed it to Eve.

“See how proper our wild man can be when he wants to,” she said.

“I’d never have expected a formal invitation like this, all written out so pretty and neat,” Eve admitted with a chuckle. “Even our villains don’t run true to form, no matter how wild and woolly they are.”

The note was couched in the phraseology conventional to time and place. It ran:

MY DEAR MISS TILATHA:

May I have the pleasure of accompanying you to church to-morrow evening?

Your friend,
RUSSELL QUINN.

“He never called me Miss Tilatha in his life,” said the young woman who bore that name. “But I suppose, since I’m in town, he wanted to do this the way it ought to be done.”

“Shall you go?” asked Eve.

“Yes, I’ll go. I don’t want to, and it won’t do any good, but I can’t afford to offend him,” the hill girl said wearily.

Eve did not need to ask her why she could not afford to offend him. She understood that Tilatha’s fear was for the man she loved; she did not want to inflame Quinn’s passion against him by anything she might do.

So Tilatha sat down and wrote a staid little note in reply, to the effect that she would be very pleased to have Mr. Quinn escort her to church to-morrow evening, then gave it with a dime to the shiny-faced black boy, the while Eve lay curled on the bed eating chocolate creams.

“What do you s’pose he wants?” Miss Turley asked. “Course, I know he wants *you*. It stared out of his hungry eyes. But church, my dear! He doesn’t *look* like a nice, quiet, churchgoing person, your tiger man doesn’t. He isn’t a deacon, is he?”

Tilatha laughed. “Not exactly. Church is the only place to take a young

woman in this town. It's the proper thing to do for a young man who likes a girl. When he has been seen with her there several times, he has served notice that his intentions are serious."

"Hm! Your Quinn person doesn't have to serve notice that way, not to me, anyhow. And he wouldn't do anything so tame. I'd expect rather to see him ride up like young Lochinvar and snatch you away." Miss Eve sighed. "But men are disappointing, even the worst of them. Have another chocolate, dear."

Her friend took one, absent-mindedly, but it did not lift her gloom. During the night, contrary to custom, she had wakened several times, and her thoughts had been full of apprehension. She knew Russ Quinn, and to a lesser extent she knew his associates. They were stark, ruthless men. When they struck, it would be certainly and finally. They might take their time, let days pass before they brought the quarrel to issue, but even if they did she could gather no hope from that.

And there was nothing she could do—nothing at all. She could only wait for the blow to fall. No law officers could be appealed to, since the contending factions represented what established order there was in town. Boone Sibley was as immovable as a great rock to any prayer she might make. He would go his own way, alert and fearless and apparently unperturbed, until the Quinns called him to account.

At noon, when Turley came home for dinner, he brought with him news. There had been a jail break when Hank Jacobs had gone to the cells of the prisoners in the morning. One of them had struck him over the head and knocked him senseless. Just how it had been done was not clear, but the keys had been taken from him and all prisoners released. Among these were two Mexicans, an ore thief, Tom Tracy, and Elder and Prouty. The last three had obtained horses and ridden out of town.

"They think Prouty did it," Turley went on. "Old Jacobs has been out of his head most of the time since, but he mentioned that name once."

"Is he badly hurt—Mr. Jacobs?" Tilatha asked.

"Yes. Dr. Peters can't tell how badly yet. He thinks there is a chance for him."

"Sheriff Brady an' Mr. Sibley weren't at the jail when it took place?" the hill girl asked, her eyes aflame with interest.

"No. They didn't hear of it for an hour. They have taken the trail after the escaped men."

"After Elder and the other two, you mean?"

"Yes. I saw Brady for a moment. He was not very sanguine about finding

them. It is easy to lose one's self in the desert. The chase may last several days."

Tilatha drew a breath of relief. To pursue outlaws who might at any time turn on them and fire from ambush was not the safest occupation in the world, but it was less dangerous than to be in town with the Quinns on the warpath.

The editor talked during dinner about the jail break and its effect on the citizens of Tough Nut.

"A week or two ago there would have been no out-spoken criticism of the Quinn crowd," he said. "It would have been taken for granted that they would do as they pleased. But there has been a change. Men are beginning to speak out and say we have had enough of the whole crew. Sibley is responsible for this, and he alone. His stand has showed people that the Quinns and their friends are not invincible."

"He's not either," Eve protested. "My uncle is the editor of a paper which stood out against these men before ever Boone Sibley came to town. I'm going to see he gets the credit he deserves."

"Your uncle would have been run out of town long ago if it had not been for Sibley," said Turley, smiling at her. "But you can keep right on sticking up for me, my dear. You have done your share, too, both actively and passively."

"I'd like to know how."

"By standing in front of the mob the other night and defending me. That is one way. Another is by merely coming to town; every good woman who arrives at Tough Nut makes it safer for decent people."

"That's true," agreed Tilatha. "Especially if the good women bring children with them. There's nothing so tames a wild town."

Eve watched her friend dress for church next evening. "I never saw you look so beautiful," she averred. "If this black Quinn has any blood in his veins, I expect to learn that he has flung you on a horse and taken you into the hills with him."

"A lot of good that would do him," Tilatha answered. "No, he's not such a fool, even though he won't like what I've got to tell him."

"You're going to tell him to-night then?" Eve's eyes bubbled with interest. The ways of a maid with a man, and vice versa, always intrigued her.

"He intends to make me tell him one thing or another. I wish he wouldn't. Why can't he see that—that——"

"That you prefer another man. My dear, no man wants to see that. It's not satisfying to his vanity."

"I didn't say I did." Tilatha replied, a deeper colour in her cheeks.

Russ Quinn was plainly of Eve's opinion in regard to Tilatha's good looks. He could not keep his sombre eyes from her. She was in a sprigged taffeta which billowed with ruffles below the waist. It was a new dress, made under the direction of Eve, and it suited the long supple lines of the girl from the Chiricahuas.

Tilatha slipped her arm under that of her escort and stepped into the gathering darkness. As Quinn turned to the left instead of the right at the next cross street she glanced at him in surprise.

"We're not going to church," he said.

"Oh, aren't we?" she said docilely. "Where are we going?"

"For a walk. I've got something to say to you."

"We'd better not go far. If we go wandering about an' don't show up at church people might talk."

"Let 'em talk."

"Easy for you to say that, Mr. Russ Quinn," she answered lightly. "It's not you they'd talk about, but me. I'll go a little way with you, though."

"You're gettin' right fussy, Til. If we were at the ranch, you'd ride twenty miles with me after dark any time you'd a mind to."

"We're not at the ranch," she told him. "When we are at Tough Nut we must do as Tough Nutters do."

"Most generally I do like I want to, an' I've noticed you do the same," he told her carelessly.

"Yes, an' I've been wonderin' about that, Russ—whether we're right or not, I mean. Ever since I was a teeny little girl I've been set on having my own way. Mostly I've had it. Well, what good has it done me? I've overridden everybody that stood in my way, as though nobody but me had any rights. The consequence is that folks dislike me—at least they think——"

"The consequence is that you're a fine high-steppin' girl——"

"Which is only a polite way of sayin' that I've got a bad temper."

He laughed at that, pressing her arm against his side as they walked. "You're tempery, Red-head. I wouldn't have you any other kind since I aim to have the tamin' of that bad disposition. You be as ornery as you like to other folks, an' you an' me will step in harness together right friendly at a good fast clip."

Tilatha hurried on. She had not yet said all that was in her mind. Probably there was no use in saying it, but at least she would have done her best to let him know how she felt and to bring him to a reasonable consideration of their

problem.

“That’s just it, Russ. We’ve got no more right to click our heels an’ hold our heads high than other folks. I’ve always acted as though I had, but I know that’s just a form of conceit. We’ve always got to respect others’ rights if we play fair, don’t you reckon?”

She asked it impetuously, with a kind of desperate seriousness. It was a prelude to an appeal that she felt she had to make.

“We’re sure havin’ the sermon whether we went to church or not,” he told the girl, smiling down at her a little derisively but still amiably.

“No, but really, Russ, isn’t it true?” she pleaded. “I know I’m not the one to talk. I’ve always ram-stammed through, as my father used to say. But things look different to me now. It’s not the way to do.”

He thought he knew why things looked different to her now. Another man had come into the equation of her life. The voice with which he answered her was harsh, the manner abrupt.

“Listen, girl. You’ll find both brush rabbits an’ panthers out there.” His arm swept out toward the darkness to indicate the desert and the mountains. “If you’re a brush rabbit you play the game thataway; if you’re a wolf or a panther, why that’s different. All the little laws, they’re for the rabbit tribe. You’ll find lots of ’em right here in Tough Nut. But if you’re strong enough an’ game enough you make yore own laws. Question is, do you want to be a rabbit or don’t you?”

“I don’t want to be a wolf, Russ. But that doesn’t force me to be a rabbit. There are all sorts of lovely creatures that are neither wolves nor rabbits.”

“You can’t buck the facts, girl. We’re in the desert here, not back in Boston, if that’s where yore sassy little friend comes from. There’s one law out here. The strong get there, the weak go under. It’s written over every arid acre between here an’ yore ranch. There’s nothin’ but fight to it. Every bunch of greasewood, every shoot of ocotillo fights for water an’ goes halfway to China for it. Every sahuaro an’ catclaw has got its spines an’ barbs. Why, the very foxes are made different, leaner an’ tougher than others so they can live longer without moisture. Animals are at war one with another. They got to be to live. It’s the same with us humans. We’ve got to play the cards the way they’re dealt us. Me, I’m not allowin’ to slink about an’ sneak an’ be on the dodge like most of the scurryin’ tribe out there. When I’m challenged I fight.”

“Yes, but you don’t always have to carry a chip, do you?”

He frowned. “Spit it out, girl. Get down to brass tacks.”

“I think we’ve got to change our way of lookin’ at life, you an’ me both,

Russ.” She put her hand on his arm with a friendly little gesture that begged him to meet her halfway. “We’ve got to learn to respect laws an’ sometimes give way to the other fellow’s point of view. Its kinda stupid to claim that we’re above the laws that are made to help folks get along with each other.”

He seized on one word of her argument and let the rest go. “The other fellow! That means Sibley. You’re askin’ me to give way to that Texas warrior. No, by God! He never saw the day when I’d give him a foot of the road, that bird.” His voice was hoarse with anger. He strode up the footpath they were following, pushing forward so fast that she almost had to run to keep pace with him.

When he stopped, he was at the edge of an old prospect hole, one that had been deserted years before. It was in a district little frequented. Prospectors had tried their luck on the ridge and given up, since all the pay mines lay in the opposite direction from town. The lights of Tough Nut lay below them, to the west. Apache Street seemed to open up from the very foot of the hill where they stood. Yet Tilatha knew the near end of it was more than half a mile distant. Seen in the moonlight, the noise of its revelry blotted out, the place looked peaceful as old age.

He turned fiercely on her. “Til, you’re makin’ a fool of yoreself over that Sibley. I’m through. I won’t put up with it. It stops right now.”

The colour poured into the girl’s tanned face. “If I am, that’s my business,” she flung at him.

“Anyone can see it. The way you’re throwin’ yoreself at him is plumb ridiculous.”

She tried to hold in leash her temper. “How long have you been runnin’ a young ladies’ finishin’ school an’ teachin’ deportment, Miss Quinn?” she taunted.

“If you had any self-respect——”

Her brown hands clenched. “Russ Quinn, if you dare say——”

“Don’t try to bully me,” he cried, moving a step nearer and looking straight into her furious eyes.

“Bully! That’s a nice word for *you* to use,” she panted, almost as though she had been running. “What else are you ever but a bully? You glory in it. You think that—that if you look at a woman she should come runnin’ to you like a whipped cur. Bully, indeed!”

What she said did not trouble him. She could have made charges that would have stung, but this was not one of them. He knew that if he was a bully he had the courage to back his domineering manner. Indeed, he hardly heard

what she was saying. But the challenge of her manner stirred the rapacious instincts of his predatory nature. The rise and fall of her stormy bosom, the breathing colour driven into the cheeks by strong emotion, the healthy vigour of her wild young beauty, all went to his head like strong drink. The blood drummed through his veins. His woman! In spite of hell and high water, he would have her, regardless of her rebellious will. As he had conquered fractious horses by spur and whip, so he would subdue this defiant young spirit. She needed a master. He would be the man. Those eyes flashing fire at him would offer instead gifts of adoring love. The vital courage of her must be beaten down. Until she came to him with hands outstretched, he felt he would never know a moment's peace. She was to be his. She was to know herself his, body and soul.

Quinn caught her wrists in his sinewy fingers and held them fast, his eyes burning into hers. She did not try to free herself but faced him with a kind of fierce disdain, head up, gaze locked to his. His arms went around her and he snatched her close, kissing cheeks and lips and throat with an unleashed savagery.

Not even then did she resist. Her strength was powerless against his, and to oppose him would be to give him the satisfaction of a sort of victory. She held her body stiff and inert, gave no response whatever to his flaming passion.

So, for lack of fuel, the man's ardour died down. His arms relaxed, though he still held her and looked hungrily down into her face. When he spoke his voice was rough with feeling.

"You're mine, girl. You're wearin' the Russ Quinn brand. I'll kill any man that comes between me an' you."

She made no motion to free herself. Her arms hung by her sides. When he looked at her and heard her voice, he knew she had never been more remote, never since he had known her less his.

"If there wasn't another man in the world, I'd never be yours," she told him.

His heart felt as though drenched with ice water. This was not the hot-headed impulsive girl he knew. There was a cold finality in her voice. She looked at him like a strange judge who condemns a criminal without emotion. It came to him that he had lost her, that all his strength could not tear aside the barriers between them. And he thought of the man whom he held responsible for this.

"I'll kill him soon as we meet—to-night, if he's back," he said.

"Do you think you're God—or Satan?" she asked him.

"Him or me—right away," he said, his voice low. He was staring at her,

but he did not seem to see her. Behind the girl, in the shadows of the night somewhere, was the man he had doomed.

She knew she had lost. No use to talk to him about the sacredness of life, no use to plead for this one man who was dearer to her than breathing. He would go his own tragic way, no matter what it might involve. Then, in a surge of feeling, she knew she could not bear to be with him another moment.

Quinn was standing with his back to the prospect hole scarce a yard from the edge. A cactus barred her way, and she had to pass close to him. He stepped back. The moon shone on his harsh, strong face. One moment he was there, an imminent threat to all the joy of her life, the next he had vanished, swallowed by the earth.

She gasped, starting back. The ground on the edge of the deserted mine had caved in and taken him down to the bottom of the hole with it.

CHAPTER XXXI

A HOT TRAIL

THE fugitives had no more than an hour's start on the sheriff and his deputy, but sixty minutes was as good as a week. They had taken the Benson road, which was pretty fair evidence that they were not going to Benson, since all three of the escaped prisoners had been on the dodge often enough not to leave a straight plain trail behind them.

A mule skinner freighting to Tough Nut had passed them, "ridin' hell-for-leather" as he put it. A covered wagon outfit a mile farther on the road had seen nothing of them. Evidently the outlaws had taken to the chaparral at some point between the two.

The officers backtracked slowly, checking up on the road. They picked up the trail again, but after the loss of a precious hour. It led east.

"Looks like the boys are headin' for the Chiricahuas," Brady said. "They'll find friends there, I shouldn't wonder. But not so many as they would have done a few weeks back. The cowboys feel kinda sore about Sing Elder killin' Buck Galway an' then tryin' to lay it on Dusty. Buck come from thataway an' was popular with the hill folks."

They rode cautiously, eyes and ears open, for they did not want to run into an ambush. At present this was not likely, since the men they were after did not know their trail had been picked up.

Presently the sheriff and his deputy lost the trail in heavy brush.

"Just as well," Boone said. "We'll make better time without it. They're headin' straight for Galeyville, looks like."

The two men plodded on through the sun and the dust. Their throats were caked before they reached Galeyville, and their clothes were covered with white powder. Lather streaked the flanks of their mounts.

Stiffly they dismounted and bowlegged into the Silver Dollar saloon. They strolled in with apparent carelessness but with a very real wariness. Four cowboys were playing a game of stud. No others were present except the bartender, who nodded in a friendly way to the sheriff and stared with frank interest at Sibley. One of the cowboys ambled forward, the game suspended for a minute, and offered his hand to Boone with a grin.

"'Member me? Sandy Joe. Glad to meet up with you again, Mr. Sibley."

Boone shook hands. “Heard you’d been hurt—fallin’ from a horse or something. You all right now?”

“Yep. False alarm. One o’ the greasers creased me. No harm done. I was needin’ a haircut, anyhow. Bullet didn’t hardly break the skin.”

“Good enough. Heard how Dusty’s gettin’ along?”

“Fine. Fine as the wheat. He was a right patient invalid for a spell, but his nurse has done gone to town, an’ the boy’s rarin’ to go again. He’s still up at the McLennon ranch. Why don’t you drop in an’ see him? He’d be real pleased to see you.”

“Here on business,” Boone said in a low voice. “Under the sheriff’s orders. Seen anything of Tom Tracy, Sing Elder, or Brad Prouty?”

Sandy Joe looked shrewdly at him. “They been up to some mischief—something new, I mean?”

“Charged with killin’ Curt French, two of ’em.”

“That sure must hurt yore feelings, if what all they say is true.”

“My feelings don’t figure in it. But that’s not all. They broke jail this mornin’ an’ left old Hank Jacobs for dead.”

“Killed him?” Sandy Joe asked eagerly.

“Not dead yet when we left. You know what we want, Joe. We think the three men came to Galeyville. Seen anything of ’em?”

The cowboy took a swift glance at the bartender and another at the card players. “Why, no. No, I haven’t.”

Boone understood that he was not getting the truth and that the cowboy might be willing to talk if they were alone. The sheriff was engaged in conversation with the bartender.

“We need fresh horses, Joe,” he said, moving toward the bar. “Know where we can raise some *pronto*?”

They drank, discussing mounts. Sandy Joe suggested Pete Andrews as a possible source of supply.

“Store’s closed,” he added. “Show you his house.”

They moved to the front of the saloon and passed out. Boone asked a question, not changing his tone of voice or his indolent manner.

“How long ago?”

“Three hours. Stayed half an hour, got fresh horses, an’ lit out.”

“Went which way?”

“No idea. Find out for you. Be at Sanford’s store in fifteen minutes. If they

went north, I'll buy chewing; if south, it'll be smoking. Watch the way my right hand points when I yawn. . . . No, I don't know how much Andrews will want for 'em. He'll be reasonable, I'd say." This last for the benefit of a couple of men passing into the saloon.

"How is Barkalow gettin' along—the man I had to shoot?"

"Got nine lives, that fellow has, like a cat. Doc says he never did see a man get well so fast. He'll be out in two or three weeks more. Well, so long."

Boone went into the saloon again and joined the sheriff. Presently the two returned to their horses, and Boone told Brady what he had learned.

"Good. Didn't get a thing from the barkeep. Afraid to talk, I expect, especially with so many present. Well, let's drift over to Sanford's."

At the store they bought a few supplies. Sanford watched Boone for a few moments from the home-made desk where he was sitting, then moved forward to the counter, where the sheriff and his deputy were looking at a spur.

"I've been wonderin', Mr. Sibley, who's payin' for my stock in the store damaged the other day," the merchant said.

Boone showed surprise. "Why, didn't the boys fix that up with you, Mr. Sanford?"

"No, they didn't. They took up a collection an' paid for new windows. But I'm not talkin' about the windows. Two good suits of clothes had bullet holes shot in them. Several sacks of flour an' grain were practically ruined. Do you think it right for me to have to stand the loss?"

"No, sir," Boone answered promptly. "The fellows that shot up yore stock ought to make the loss good. Maybe Russ Quinn would like to send in a contribution to the cause. I'd write to him about it."

"Here's my point, Mr. Sibley. I'm not rambunctious about this, y'understand. It won't break me if I have to make good the loss myself. But if you hadn't run into the store the stuff wouldn't have been spoiled. Isn't that so?"

The Texan considered. "Tell you what I'll do. Call in three of the boys. Say the first three that pass the store. We'll put it to 'em, an' I'll abide by their decision if you will. Is that reasonable?"

Sandford agreed.

Three cowboys passed a moment later. They were the ones who had been playing stud at the Silver Dollar. The merchant stated the case. Boone added a word or two. The jury retired to a corner of the store and consulted.

They presently came forward. "Verdict in," said one of them. "Jury finds Mr. Sibley not guilty but Sanford had orta get damages. Wherefore jury agrees

to raise the amount by unpopular subscription among the gents participating in the fireworks.”

Boone smiled. “I participated to a certain extent, so I’ll shell out ten dollars as my share,” he offered, and at once tossed over a piece of gold to the chairman of the committee on restoration.

Into the store came Sandy Joe. “Glad you ain’t closed yet, Sanford. Gimme a plug of the old reliable an’ charge to yores truly,” he said. The cowboy yawned, throwing wide his arms in a gesture of abandon. The fingers of his right hand pointed northwest. “That poker game has sure been runnin’ steady last two-three days. I aim to get caught up on my sleep to-night for sure.”

The foreman of the jury disagreed. “You think so. Different here. Betcha a dollar you’re sittin’ in before twelve o’clock midnight this very P. M. Either at the Silver Dollar or some other place.”

“Take you, fellow. I can use that dollar.”

The officers left the store and returned to their horses.

“Sandy Joe was pointin’ right straight to the McLennon place,” Brady said.

“In that direction, sure. What say we ride over there? We can get fresh horses at the ranch,” Boone suggested.

“Might as well. Hard to tell where those fellows have holed up. I don’t hardly reckon they’ll be at the McLennon place.”

“No, but Hugh may know something, or in the course of a day or so may hear where they’re at. You know how news travels up here.”

They took the road to the ranch, jogging along easily to rest their tired horses. The stars were out before they dropped into the mountain park where the ranch was set. They could see the lights gleaming from the house windows as they splashed through the creek. A young hound barked furiously at them and the Chinese cook came to the kitchen door.

“Hello the house!” the sheriff called. “Reckon we’ll light, Charlie, if you can fix us up some grub.”

“Me fixum,” the yellow man promised.

A man flung open the front door. The man was Dusty Rhodes. “Don’t shoot, whoever you are,” he called cheerfully to them.

“Any other guests here except us, Dusty?” asked Brady.

“None, onless I’m one. Why? Are you allowin’ to give Hugh an’ me a surprise party? Dog my cats, if it ain’t the Texas warrior!” He fell upon Boone and pounded him with both fists. His boyish face was alight with pleasure. “We was plumb low for excitement. Hugh an’ me was debatin’ whether I’d

better massacre him or him me to stir things up.”

“Come in, boys,” invited Hugh. “Had any supper yet?”

“No. The chink’s gonna fix us up some. When did you get toney an’ set up a yellow boy for a cook, Hugh?” the sheriff asked.

“Til found him stranded in Galeyville an’ brought him home. He was plumb down to the blanket. She was right busy, an’, anyhow, she wanted to get away for a while. Charlie ain’t permanent.”

Hugh did not ask them why they had come or what they wanted. That was their own business. If they wanted to tell him they would do so in due time. Meanwhile, they were welcome to the best he had. Hospitality on the frontier is not a virtue but a matter of course.

They chatted in a casual fashion, mentioning to one another such news as might be of interest.

“I reckon you heard about Curt French gettin’ shot,” the sheriff said during a pause.

“Yep. Hugh was in town, you know. Good work, Texas man. Would suit me down to the ground if you’d have sent him to Boot Hill.”

“Not referrin’ to that. I reckon you’re suited, Dusty. You haven’t heard about him gettin’ killed, then?”

“No. Who shot him?” Dusty asked quickly.

“We don’t rightly know,” the sheriff answered nonchalantly. “Evidence points to Sing Elder an’ Brad Prouty. So we arrested ’em on suspicion.”

“But, great ginger mills, what in Mexico would they bump Curt off for?” demanded the cowboy.

“Seems they had had a quarrel,” Grady said. “Curt got right troublesome to his friends, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“So you’ve got Sing an’ Brad in yore calaboose,” Hugh made comment. “I expect that will rile ’em some.”

“My teacher usta tell me I got my tenses all mixed, Hugh,” the deputy explained. “You’re thataway, too. We had ’em, but we haven’t got ’em now. There was a jail break this mornin’, an’ right now the county doesn’t have to feed any of its guests.”

“A jail break!”

“Hank Jacobs got careless, an’ they hit him over the head with a piece of iron pipe. Fractured his skull, looks like.”

“Bad medicine,” said Hugh. “An’ the prisoners lit out?”

“Three got horses,” the sheriff said. “Sing an’ Brad an’ Tom Tracy.”

“Tom. Was he in the Curt French killin’?” asked Dusty.

“Not in it. A material witness.”

There was a moment of silence while Hugh and Dusty digested the news. They did not need to wonder any longer what Brady and his deputy were doing here. The officers were after the escaped prisoners.

CHAPTER XXXII

“STICK ’EM UP”

NONE of those present said instantly and frankly what was in his mind. The subject was a delicate one and recognized as such.

McLennon approached it indirectly. “So they made their getaway. Wonder which way they headed.”

“They were in Galeyville three-four hours ago,” the sheriff said, rolling a cigarette. “Our information is they was movin’ kinda toward Cochise Head. How about fresh mounts, Hugh? Ours are played out.”

The eyes of the sheriff and the rancher met. Brady was asking a good deal, and he knew it. McLennon was surrounded by rustlers at outs with the law. To supply horses to officers on the trail of criminals would be regarded by many as an unfriendly act, even though the men wanted had not been engaged in cattle or horse stealing. Hugh knew this. If he did what the sheriff asked, he would be aligning himself squarely with the law against those who went their own wilful way. But he realized that the present conditions could not endure. Law must come to the mesquite. Long ago he had made up his mind to help bring this about at the proper time.

“I can let you have horses,” he said.

“Good.” Brady smiled wryly. “I ain’t sure they’ll do us any good. Be like findin’ a needle in a haystack to run these fellows down in the hill pockets around the Head.”

Dusty looked at McLennon. His eyes asked a question.

“Go ahead, Dusty,” his host said. “Shoot yore wad. It’s a free country. I’m not coverin’ for these scalawags. Time honest men showed their colours.”

“They’re makin’ for the Clear Spring cache, looks like,” Dusty told the officers.

“My guess, too,” agreed Hugh.

“Could a fellow find this cache?” the sheriff asked casually.

“Not unless someone took you there. It’s hidden in the hills.”

“Think we could get a guide?”

Hugh spoke with studied indifference. “Maybe so. When you want to go?”

“Right damn now. Soon as we’ve eaten, anyhow.”

“Are you askin’ for a posseman or for a guide to the hole-up?”

“All we want is a guide. Soon as we reach the cache he can cut his stick.”

“I reckon I might find you one,” the ranchman said.

No promise of secrecy was given or asked, but all those present understood it was implied. Hugh lived in the country and expected to continue to do so. He could not afford needlessly to make enemies.

After supper horses were roped and saddled. Hugh had not said who the guide was to be, but he swung on the third horse and led the way over the hills.

The country they traversed was rough and broken. It was seamed with gulches and scarred by rock slides. The riders went up breakneck hills and slithered down pitches covered with loose rubble. They wound in and out through arroyos running in all directions. But Boone noticed that McLennon never hesitated. He knew exactly where he was going.

They climbed, steadily, after the first two miles, coming at last to a ridge looking down a wooded slope. Along this ridge the ranchman led them. For perhaps a half mile they followed it before he stopped.

“See those two rock spires ahead,” he said. “Go between ’em an’ dip sharply to the right. You’ll find yoreselves in the cache.”

“We’ll not forget this, Hugh,” the sheriff promised. “*Adiós.*”

The officers went on alone. They passed between the spires as directed, swung down a precipitous slope, and found themselves entering a gateway to a small park. In the moonlight a corral could be seen, and presently a lighted cabin nestling on the edge of timber.

“We’ll tie here,” the sheriff said, swinging from his horse.

The officers crept forward on foot. They approached the cabin from the timber in the rear.

Boone reached the window first, raised himself, and looked inside. Three men were in the room, Elder, Prouty, and Tracy. They were playing cards by the light of a tallow candle stuck in a beer bottle. Even as Boone looked, Tracy dealt a hand, rose, and walked to the door.

The Texan did not stop to discuss with the sheriff what must be done. He ran swiftly around the house, jerking out his sixshooter on the way. Tracy was standing in front of the house, his back to it, a few yards from the door, which was partially closed.

At the sound of footsteps he turned lazily. Evidently he thought one of his friends had come out of the house. He started to speak, then stopped, mouth open and eyes bulging. A revolver in the hands of Boone was pressed against his stomach.

The cowboy swallowed hard. This was the last thing in the world he had expected.

“Don’t speak—or move,” the Texan advised in a whisper.

The sheriff came around the corner of the house and in one glance took in the situation.

Boone held up two fingers and pointed to the house. Brady nodded, stepped to the door, and walked inside. His sixshooter was in his hand.

One of the men at the table had his back to him, the other sat in profile.

Elder spoke. “We’re waitin’ for you, Tom.” Then he looked up and made a motion to rise.

“Stick ’em up!” the sheriff ordered. “Both of you.”

Both men stared at him stupidly, as though their brains had not yet functioned clearly enough to understand what had taken place. Neither of them put his hands up, neither made any gesture toward any offensive.

Brady watched them closely. He did not expect any trouble now, since he had the drop on them. They were too old at the game for that. But he knew that the least wavering of the eye might be fatal.

“Reach for the roof, boys,” the officer said sharply. “No foolishness.”

Elder found his voice first. “This some of Tracy’s work?” he asked, with an oath.

“Get yore hands up! *Pronto!*” Brady’s voice had a whip-lash sting.

Four hands went up reluctantly.

Tracy came into the house, followed by the deputy.

Prouty looked venomously at the Texan. “So you’re in this,” he snarled.

“Collect the hardware, Sibley,” the chief officer said. “Throw the guns on the bed for the present.”

Boone did as directed.

“Put on the cuffs,” Brady continued. “Look out, fellows. Don’t make any break, or you’ll sleep in smoke.”

The three men submitted to be handcuffed.

Sing Elder turned on Tracy. “You claimed this was so safe—nobody knew yore hole-up but friends. If you’ve sold us out, fellow——”

“Don’t get on the prod, Sing. I dunno howcome this any more’n you,” Tracy protested sulkily.

“You’d better not,” growled Prouty.

Neither of the officers volunteered any information. If their prisoners got to

quarrelling among themselves, they were likely to tell more than they should. There might be mutual recriminations and accusations, out of which might come the discovery of which one had struck down the jailer.

Elder, the shrewdest of the prisoners, realized this and changed his manner. "Might as well make the best of it, boys. I don't reckon Tom has had anything to do with this. Fact is, I don't see how he could, since he's been with us all day, Brad."

"Any fool could see that," Tracy said bitterly. "You got no more right to blame me than I have you. Come to business, not as much, because——"

The cowboy cut his sentence off without saying what was in his mind. But Boone could have made a pretty good guess as to the unspoken part of it. The man had been about to say that he was not as much to blame for the trouble they were in because he had not slugged Hank Jacobs.

"No need going into that," Elder admonished. "Far as that goes, I'd as lief go back to town as not. Like to get this thing cleared up for good."

"What thing?" asked Brady.

Elder turned his cold, wary eyes on the sheriff. "Why, whatever you claim to have against us. We know you, Brady. You've thrown in with our enemies, an' you're trumpin' up whatever you can against us."

"Nothin' to that, Sing," the sheriff denied amiably. "No sense in blamin' me because yore own bullheadedness gets you-all into trouble. You know doggone well I've got to make these arrests."

"We know you're runnin' with this Texas killer. You two an' Turley are tryin' to get control of Tough Nut. Because we won't stand for it, you're abusin' yore position of sheriff to hound us."

"Have it yore own way, Sing. I don't aim to start any debatin' society here. Now, we'll have to fix up some way to sleep our little family. How about blankets, boys?"

The sheriff and Boone took turn about sleeping. Their prisoners were handcuffed, but they had to be watched. A moment of relaxed vigilance might give one of them the chance he was looking for.

The night wore away. Light sifted into the sky. The sleeping men woke, three of them stiff and cramped from the constrained position in which they had been forced to lie.

Boone lighted a fire in the stove and started to prepare breakfast.

"You better step out an' look up mounts, Sibley," the sheriff said. "Guess you better rope an' saddle while I fix up some grub."

Prouty had got out an old greasy deck of cards, and the three prisoners

were sitting at the table, still handcuffed, playing seven up.

“Got to have that table in a minute, boys,” Brady said. “Finish yore game, though. I’ll mix up a batch of flapjacks first.”

The sheriff’s sixshooter was in his way as he worked. He took it from where it hung by his side and thrust the barrel into the leg of his boot.

Boone hesitated a moment. It was in his mind to tell Brady to be careful while he was away. But why? The sheriff presumably knew his business and did not want any advice from a young deputy of not one fifth his experience. Anyhow, the prisoners were handcuffed. Apparently they were intent on their game. The deputy left the house and started for the corral.

“I’m against that fellow every turn of the road, Brady,” said Elder harshly. “Don’t see why you cotton to him. . . . High, low, an’ game. Tom gets jack.”

“He’s all right,” Brady said cheerfully. “Wouldn’t want a better man with me, Sing.” He was pouring flour into a tin pan. “I reckon you boys have got good healthy appetites.”

“Yep.” Sing was dealing the cards awkwardly on account of his bound wrists.

Presently Brady had his pancakes mixed and moved to the stove.

The cabin was small, and the table where the players sat was to the right of the stove, about three feet from it. Brady dropped the dough into two frying pans sputtering with grease. He kept an eye on the prisoners, never turning his back on them. The cuffs jingled as they gathered and played their cards. He was glad to see that they appeared in a more amiable frame of mind than last night. Sing Elder especially seemed to be taking the arrest philosophically.

“Makes game, boys,” he said to the others. “That’s a dollar six bits you owe me, Tom. You an’ me are square, Brad.”

“No such a thing,” Prouty protested. “You owe me four bits, Sing. There was six bits comin’ to me from the other game, an’ now——”

Elder, shuffling the cards carelessly, dropped one and stooped to pick it up. He fumbled awkwardly for it. With his shackled hands he could not easily reach it and pushed his chair back toward the stove. Swiftly his hands lunged out and snatched at the butt of the .45 sticking from the sheriff’s boot leg.

Brady was not a quick man. His brain and muscles coördinated one instant too late. Elder had the sixshooter in his grip before he woke to action. The sheriff dived for his wrist and closed on it. They struggled, Brady to keep the barrel pointed down, the outlaw to raise and fire it.

Prouty rose heavily, flinging down the bench upon which he sat. He and Tracy closed with the officer. A shot rang out and a bullet crashed into a wall

of the cabin. Prouty raised his arms and brought down his wrists upon the temple of the sheriff. Struck by the heavy iron, Brady swayed on his feet, fell against Elder, and slid to the floor.

“Gimme the sixshooter,” Prouty called to Elder. “Quick. I’ll finish his business.”

“No need of that,” Elder answered. “Find his keys, Tom. In that right-hand pocket. We got to get these cuffs off.”

Tracy stooped, fumbling for the keys. It took him several seconds to find and drag them out.

“Here they are, Sing. We got to hustle.”

The door was flung violently open. Boone Sibley burst into the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A FRACAS

BOONE walked out to the corral and got his rope. He stepped inside the fence and adjusted the loop. The wary horses had already edged over to the farther side of the inclosure. Boone moved slowly forward, the rope snaked out, and the loop fell true over the head of a sorrel gelding. Not knowing which outlaw owned the horse, he chose the first saddle that came to hand.

The animals began to circle the corral once more as soon as he stepped toward them, lariat in hand. Boone missed his next cast, arranged rope and loop, and caught a round-bellied bay. This, too, he saddled. He had just finished tightening the cinch when a shot sounded.

The sound had come from the cabin. His reaction was instantaneous. As he ran toward the house he dragged out a revolver. The chances were ten to one that Brady had not fired the shot, and even if he had, it was because trouble had started. He had been careless. One of the prisoners had found the opportunity for which he was looking, had perhaps got his fingers on some gun hidden in the bedding. . . . Or Brady, taken by surprise, had been forced to defend himself.

The Texan had no time for strategy or finesse. He plunged at the door and flung it open. A bullet struck the jamb close to his shoulder. Sing Elder, hands still shackled, had fired at him. Almost without breaking his stride the deputy charged him. In that fraction of a second he had seen that the sheriff was down, that the prisoners were still handcuffed and two of them unarmed. He might have played it safer by killing. He chose, if he could, to take his men in alive.

The barrel of his Colt struck Elder's forearm, but not before another bullet had crashed into the wall. The gambler's weapon fell. With a side sweep of a foot, Boone kicked it under the stove as he braced himself to meet Prouty's rush.

The fellow was powerful and heavy-set. His drive was intended to fling the deputy back upon the stove. Boone dodged the full force of it by sidestepping and clinching with Elder. Prouty plunged into the stove, and the pipe came clattering down.

By this time Tracy, too, was lumbering into action. His arms were raised,

to use the handcuffs for a weapon. Past the shoulder of Elder the Texan drove a hard left into the man's unprotected face. For the moment it stopped him completely.

Elder had seized Boone's right wrist. The deputy struggled to free it, for Prouty was gathering himself up from his frustrated assault. Elder was big and strong. His grip was like living steel. The deputy's left hand went to the man's face. The heel of the palm caught Under the chin and thrust upward and back. The finger searched for the eyes. With a howl of pain Elder fell away from the torture, releasing the wrist. Boone's right arm rose and fell. The heavy barrel crashed against the man's forehead. Elder swayed against a bunk and collapsed upon it.

Just in time Boone got out from the corner where he was. With a roar of anger Prouty flung himself at the young officer. Still Boone did not fire. Without looking down, he felt an overturned stool brushing against his leg. He gave ground, inching the stool into Prouty's path. The man stumbled, caught at Boone's waist with his bound hands, almost dragged the deputy down with him. Boone was flung against a wall.

The Texan hung there, breathless and shaken. But the day was won. Elder rolled over, trying to rise. Prouty had fallen hard, his head under a bunk. In cuffs, he found it difficult to get out and rise. Tracy had backed away, his hands up.

Brady was sitting up, his hand to his head. He looked at the red stains that covered it, then at Boone, with an odd chagrined humility. "I got careless, Texas man," he said.

Boone spoke sharply, to Prouty and not to his chief. The man was awkwardly getting to his feet.

"Line up beside Tracy. Don't you even look like fight or I'll shoot you down."

Prouty glared at the young Texan. His mouth was a thin, cruel line below the drooping moustache. The sullen eyes burned with hatred. But he knew when he was beaten. He slouched across the room and joined the cowboy.

"No breakfast here now," Boone said, glancing at the smoking stove. "What say we go to the McLennon ranch an' get a hand-out, sheriff?"

"Just as you say, Sibley:" The sheriff recovered his weapon. "I sure played a good hand mighty bad. Hadn't been for you, I'd have had to go sneakin' back without my prisoners. Well, a fellow lives an' learns. I'm an old dog, but that was sure a new trick I picked up from Sing."

Elder was sitting on the bed nursing his head. "We was all shackled. Hadn't been for that it would have been different." He looked at Boone sulkily.

“I’d like to meet you on even terms somewhere, Texas man. Gimme a chance an’ I’ll show you up.”

“We’d better all go out an’ finish saddling,” Boone suggested to his chief, “after you’ve tied up yore head.”

“I reckon,” Brady agreed. He was quite dispirited. What had just taken place was a reflection upon his capacity as an officer. He had just missed disgrace by a hair’s breadth, and by no merit whatever of his own.

He rose from the stool on which he was sitting and moved toward the water pail.

“Need any repairs, Sing? I’ll fix you up if you do,” Boone said curtly.

“You touch me an’ I’ll beat yore brains out,” Elder promised viciously.

“Which is a polite way of sayin’ ‘No, thank you,’ I reckon,” Boone said. “Well, it’s yore head an’ not mine. Have it yore own way.”

He tied up the sheriff’s wound, a watchful eye on the prisoners. This done, the party adjourned to the corral. Fifteen minutes later they were riding up the slope that led to the spires.

It was a sorry-looking party that forded the creek and rode up to the McLennon ranch house. That active five minutes in the shack had damaged the appearance of several of its members. His wound still unwashed and unbound, Elder looked much worse than he actually was. Prouty had cut open his cheek when, in falling, he had struck the edge of the bunk. The sheriff’s bandaged head was frank admission that he had been through battle.

Dusty followed Hugh to the porch. He took one sweeping glance at the riders.

“Meet a cyclone on the way, boys, or anything?”

“No, Dusty,” the Texan answered. “Some of us had a few ideas, but we’ve got over ’em now. The sheriff an’ I persuaded them to play our way. . . . Can we get some breakfast here, McLennon?”

“Sure. I’ll speak to Charlie.”

“We been through ours two hours. Wasn’t there any grub where you-all come from?” asked Dusty.

“We kinda kicked the apple cart over amongst us,” Brady said. “We spent the night in a shack up a ways in the hills, but I noticed about breakfast time we didn’t seem hungry. Too busy. Still, at that, don’t forget we’re full-grown men when you turn that order in to Charlie, Hugh.”

They dismounted. The sheriff ranged his prisoners in a row on the porch and watched them while Boone and Dusty took care of the horses. While

breakfast was being prepared, Hugh McLennon gave first aid to Elder. This done, he turned toward Prouty.

“How about you, Brad?”

Prouty looked angrily at him. “All I want from you is water. I’ll ’tend to this cut. If anyone asks you, I tripped up. That’s how I got it. That ain’t all, Mr. Hugh McLennon. You claim to be our friend. Well, I see what I see. These fellows come right to our hangout, straight as a crow flies. They’re on horses wearin’ yore brand. Someone brought ’em there. By God, I can guess who.”

Hugh McLennon was no faint-heart. He had put up more than one gun fight when forced to it. It was known all over the country that he “had sand in his craw.” Now he looked grimly at Prouty, eyes steady and cold. When he spoke it was after he had come to an important decision.

“What do you mean I claim to be yore friend, Prouty?” he asked. “I know you by sight. I know the name you go by. Does that make me yore friend? If you want to know, I’m particular who my friends are.”

“I’ve heard about rats an’ a sinkin’ ship, Hugh,” Elder jeered.

The poet Joaquin Miller once said about the ’Forty-niners, “The cowards never started, and all the weak died on the road.” This was not literally true of the Argonauts any more than it was of the early Arizonians, but it held more than a kernel of truth. These pioneers were men and women who had fought Indians, drought, hunger, and the lawless depredations of their own race. Most of them were hard and weather-beaten and virile. Hugh McLennon was a leader among those with whom he had cast his lot, and he had won preëminence by the strength in him.

His bleak look met Elder’s sneer steadily.

“You’re beginnin’ to hear about the law, too, Sing,” he said. “It’s come into this country, an’ it’s come to stay. I’d advise you to think about that. I’m on that side. I’m against sculduddery an’ promiscuous killings an’ stage robberies. When the sheriff of this county comes to me an’ asks for horses to go about his business of runnin’ down men wanted for crime, as a decent citizen I give him mounts to help him on his way. When he asks me to guide him through this country with which I’m acquainted, I guide him. I’m not concerned with whether that suits you or not.”

“You talk mighty big. Get down to cases. Do you claim I’ve done any promiscuous killin’ or robbed any stages?” Elder demanded.

“I don’t know a thing about that,” came Hugh’s prompt retort. “All I know is that the law charges you with crime. That’s enough for me. You’ll have chance enough to prove yoreself innocent.”

The pigtailed head of the Chinese cook appeared at the kitchen window.

“Breakfast all ready,” he announced.

Recrimination ceased. The men filed into the house, sat down, and began to stow away corn bread, bacon, eggs, and coffee.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TILATHA MAKES A DECISION

TILATHA looked down into that black hole, standing as near the edge as she dared. She had no idea how deep it was, no assurance as to whether Russ Quinn was dead or alive.

In a faint voice she called down: "Russ—Russ."

There was a sound, as though of something stirring. Then an answer to her call, if it might be called an answer, for what she heard was a deep-throated curse.

"You're not hurt?" she cried.

"No. Shaken up. Go get help to haul me out."

"Yes," she promised. "I'll not be long."

She turned and ran down the ridge toward the road. But she did not run more than a hundred yards. There had come to her the memory of his threat, to kill Boone Sibley this very night if the Texan had returned to town. She could not rescue him without condition, knowing what he meant to do. She stood, thinking, then walked slowly back to the prospect hole.

"Russ," she called down.

"Meet someone to send to town?" he shouted up.

"No. Listen. I want you to promise not to hurt Mr. Sibley. He's not lookin' for any trouble with you. Let him alone."

His voice was hoarse with anger. "You go down to the Occidental an' tell Whip what's happened to me. Dirt's tricklin' in here right along. An' hurry, too."

"No, but, Russ, listen! You're all wrong about him if you think he's interested in me. He's not. He never looks at any woman. Hates them all, or at least doesn't know they're on earth. If you'd be reasonable, if you'd understand——"

"Don't stand there arguin' with me, girl. You light out pronto an' get Whip. No use tryin' to bully me into any promises. I'm intendin' to get that Texan—right away."

She pleaded with him, eagerly and forlornly and at times passionately. The only effect was to increase his rage.

“How can I have you brought up from there when you tell me that you want to get out to kill a man—one who saved me from a bunch of Mexican raiders? Don’t you see I can’t, Russ? It would be like me being a party to it. If you’d only be human—like other folks.” Her voice broke a little.

“Can’t you ever learn to mind yore own business?” he burst out. “I never saw such a girl. Always got to run things. If you were mine, I’d lay a horsewhip across yore shoulders. By thunder, I would. You’re the most aggravatin’ little fool——”

He stopped, from sheer exasperated inadequacy of expression.

“Not the least bit reasonable,” she said hopelessly. “Can’t you see my position, Russ? If I had you hauled up while you’re in that state of mind it would be just like turning a raving maniac loose with a sixshooter. I can’t do it—I can’t.”

“You do like I say, an’ do it right away. Don’t you stand there dictatin’ to me what I’m to do.” He ripped out a sudden furious imprecation.

There was no use talking further with him. Tilatha turned away and walked slowly back to town. She did not know what to do. There seemed no way out of the situation, none that had any promise of hope. Very likely he might stay there days without being discovered, or, on the other hand, someone might hear his shouts before the night was out. She could take food and water to him, but she could not tell that there would not be another cave-in of loose earth that would bury him completely.

Eve and her uncle were in the parlour. Turley was reading, and his niece was playing on the organ. At Tilatha’s entrance Eve wheeled to face her.

“Must have been a short sermon,” Miss Turley said.

“We didn’t go to church,” her friend said. “We took a walk instead.”

The girl on the organ seat flashed a quick look at her. Tilatha looked depressed and worried. That the situation had been threshed out, and to a conclusion not satisfactory to her guest, Eve knew without having to be told in words. But she asked no questions. Probably Tilatha would tell her what had taken place after they went to their bedroom to retire.

“Where did you go?” Eve asked, to make conversation.

“Oh—around!” the hill girl said wearily. She took off her hat and sat down on the sofa.

“You look tired,” Turley said. “It’s been hot to-day. Perhaps some lemonade, Eve?”

His niece nodded vigorously. “It’s still hot. You get the best ideas, Uncle Tom.”

There came a knock at the door. Eve opened to let in Dr. Peters.

He sat down in a rocking chair.

“How is poor Mr. Jacobs?” Eve asked.

“Doing very well. The skull isn’t fractured. He isn’t out of the woods yet, but unless complications arise he should continue to improve.”

“I’m very glad to hear it. I suppose we’ll not see anything more of the ruffians that did it for some time,” the editor said.

“You think not?” The doctor looked at him, a humorous gleam in his eye. “Haven’t you any confidence in our sheriff?”

“They’ll hide out in the chaparral,” Turley replied. “Very little chance of finding them, unless Brady settles down to make a long hunt of it.”

“If that is an editorial opinion, I’m glad you haven’t put it into print yet,” the doctor mocked. “Brady and Sibley reached town twenty minutes since with three prisoners.”

Turley sat up. “What prisoners?”

“Some outlaws by the name of Prouty and Elder and Tracy.”

“Where did they find them?”

“In the hills somewhere. Near Cochise Head.”

“And these men surrendered without a fight?”

“I took a look at a couple of broken heads. Brady has one of them. Elder the other.”

“Boone Sibley?” asked Tilatha. The words came as though almost without her own volition.

“Oh, that young man bears a charmed life. But I dressed his wounded hand again. He used it in the scrimmage.”

“I’ve got to go to him—at once,” Tilatha said, rising from the sofa. “It’s very important.”

The doctor looked at her and read the agitation she was suppressing. He judged that if Miss McLennon said her business was important it was likely to prove so. She was not a young woman given to hysteria.

“I don’t know where he is, but we can find him,” Peters answered. “Very likely he is at a restaurant or at the Dallas House. Let me be your escort, young lady.”

“If you will, Doctor, please,” Tilatha responded. “I—I must see him, just as soon as I can.”

Eve felt sure that her friend’s agitation and her urgent need to see Boone

Sibley had something to do with what had taken place between her and Russ Quinn during their walk. The girl walked across the room to Tilatha and said to her in a low voice, "Do you want me to go with you, dear?"

Though Tilatha did not need her, she would not repulse the kind impulse. "If you'll come along, dear, I'd be glad."

They found Boone at the Dallas House. He was washing up for supper, but he came down to the hotel parlour as soon as he had finished. Dr. Peters and Eve withdrew to the porch.

"I had to see you—to tell you something," Tilatha explained, as soon as the two were alone.

Her heart was behaving queerly, as it always did nowadays when she was with this quiet brown man. She felt love pouring through her strong young body. His steady eyes seemed to plunge deep into her, to set fluttering pulses of quivering emotion. He said nothing, waiting for her to define her errand. That was like him, she thought, characteristic of his reticent force.

"About Russ Quinn," she went on. "He wants to kill you—to-night—as soon as you meet."

"Where is he?"

"He has fallen in a prospect hole. I thought—before we let him out——"

"How did he fall in?"

"I was with him. We took a walk there. He wanted to talk. Then he told me he was going to kill you—an' he fell in."

"Is he hurt?"

"No. I tried to get him to promise not to hurt you." The colour beat through her skin in a rich tide. "But he's gone crazy about it. I had to tell you. What will you do?"

"Defend myself," he said quietly. "Have you sent anyone to get him out?"

"I wanted to see you first—to tell you what he's threatening."

His immobile face told nothing. She did not know how much he had thought of her these last days, how in the watches of the night he had seen her, stormy, gallant, aglow with life, or perhaps shining with a soft and gentle warmth. She did not guess how he admired her fine, healthy, vigorous body, built up by years in the open.

"That's right good of you," he said gently.

"You won't go away?" she asked, without much hope.

"No, I won't go away."

"But you're not a killer like they say you are. You don't want to kill or be

killed. Surely you don't."

"No."

"Then go away. Just for awhile. It's awful to stay—an' wait for him."

He smiled grimly. "Tell *him* to go. I'm makin' no threats. I'm going about my business, lookin' for no trouble. He's the one you'd better argue with, don't you reckon?"

She caught her hands together for a moment. "Oh, I have. But he—he won't listen."

"Then you've done all you can, Miss McLennon. An' I thank you for yore kindness."

"My kindness!" She cried the word bitterly. "I could wish that the sides of the hole would cave in an' bury him. What right has he got to talk about killing another human being? God gives life. I think——"

"Is the hole cavin' in on him, or likely to?"

"I don't know. It's loose around the edges. If it does——"

He interrupted again: "We'll get a rope an' some men. Maybe there's no time to lose. Meet you at Turley's in fifteen minutes."

"You're not going yoreself?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"No. You don't know what he'll do when he sees you. I won't have it." She spoke a little wildly.

"First thing is to get him out. Prob'ly that will be easy enough. After that—oh, well!" He shrugged his broad shoulders.

Tilatha found herself walking beside him along the sidewalk. A tumult stirred in her blood as she kept step. He moved like a young Greek god come back to earth. Instinctively, matching his pace, her legs reached out resiliently, with an untamed joyous freedom born of muscles perfectly coordinated. She begged no more, surrendered her will to his. What must be must be. A lift of the spirit glowed in her. After all, the future was in God's hands. In spite of all his pride and arrogance Russ Quinn sat in the bottom of a hole, helpless as a child, waiting for someone to come and rescue him, while she walked beside the man she loved, the clean, brown, straight man who passed through life so fearlessly without regard to those who, like wild beasts, were ready to pounce for the kill.

He left her at the corner, and she went alone to her friend's house. It had been in despair that she had gone to him, the threat of what was to come hanging heavily over her soul; but some quality in his strength had blown

away her fears, as a breath of wind does the morning mists. Now she moved eagerly, deep-bosomed and supple-limbed, no longer afraid. What was it about him that made everybody so sure of him?

His eyes, maybe? They were so level and steady, flinging out no flags of flurry. Out of them looked the man's character. They promised, if he was your friend, to go all the way with you, to ride hard and risk much, to see you through your trouble, never to give up as long as there was life. But there was more than that. Her brother Hugh's blue eyes said all that. So did those of a dozen cattlemen she knew. Dusty Rhodes, for instance. But when she thought of Dusty she did not walk a feather-footed trail, she did not know that of all the men she had ever met he was the king, her heart did not sing a song of rapture.

Tilatha laughed a little, breathlessly. She whispered to herself, without words, "I love him . . . I love him." With a fine rapture her shining eyes looked up at the stars. For the first time she knew the ecstatic shock of a maiden's plunge into the wonderful pool of love.

CHAPTER XXXV

BOONE PUTS A ROPE AROUND HIS WAIST

“IS he going to pull that man out of the hole to let him shoot him?” asked Eve, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know. He’s going to pull him out,” Tilatha answered.

“But—if the man says he’s going to kill him——”

“Boone doesn’t pay any attention to that. He never does. He acts as though he couldn’t be killed, as though these men who threaten him were children. He always did go his own way, even when he was just a little, little boy. I told you how he rode alone through the Indian country to the buffalo hunters’ camp—an’ he was just big enough to carry a gun. My father tried to stop him, but, no! he had to go. He just missed being scalped then.”

“This Russ Quinn is dangerous,” Eve said. “He doesn’t think right. I don’t understand such men. They are cold and deadly, like a rattlesnake. It’s not as though he and Mr. Sibley were going to fight fair and square, though heaven knows that would be bad enough.”

“I’ve told myself all that,” said Tilatha wearily. “But what can we do? Nothing. Nothing at all.” She looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes since she had left Boone.

A knock sounded on the door. Boone was there, two men with him. They had a coil of rope, a pick, and a shovel.

Tilatha joined them. She and Boone led the way. They turned from the street and followed the trail she and Russ Quinn had taken.

“Not far from here,” the girl said. “Over this way.”

“Must be old Jim Bleam’s hole,” one of the men said.

“Better not crowd too close,” Boone said. “More ground may be ready to cave in.”

He dropped the slip noose of the rope over his head and tightened it around his waist. This done, he moved cautiously forward. The other end of the rope was in the hands of the men.

Near the edge of the pit he stopped. “Everything all right, Quinn?” he called.

There was no answer. He shouted a second time. Still no reply came to

him.

“Is he—has something happened?” Tilatha asked.

“There’s been another cave-in, looks like,” Boone told her. “He doesn’t answer. Nothin’ to do but for me to go down an’ find out what’s wrong.”

Her heart seemed to drop into her stomach. If there had been two earth slips, there might very easily be a third, especially if the soil was disturbed by the pressure of a man’s weight upon it. But she said nothing.

“Gimme some slack, not too much,” Boone said to the men. “The ground looks firmer on the other side. Circle round thataway. Correct. Now, pay out rope as I call for it.”

Close to the edge of the pit, he lay face down and wriggled backward till his toes kicked into space. Very cautiously he worked himself over. He could see the trickling of rubble, could feel the ground softening and cracking beneath his weight.

“Now, then—slowly,” he ordered. “The whole thing is ready to give if we’re not careful. That’s right. Easy now.”

Foot by foot they lowered him. Little splashes of dirt struck now and again his upturned face. The stretch of starry sky above contracted as he went jerkily down. He guessed he must be twenty-five or thirty feet below the surface when his foot struck something solid.

This proved to be a timber jammed across the pit. An examination showed him that it was one of several. Either they had fallen or been flung in from above.

He had not brought with him a miner’s lamp or candles, and in the darkness of the pit he had to feel rather than see the problem before him. There was dirt piled up on the timbers. How far below them the excavation went he could not tell. Quinn must be still lower, probably at the bottom of the shaft.

Boone called to him.

A voice answered: “’Lo! Who’s that?”

The Texan did not give the information. “Come down after you,” he said. “You hurt?”

“Busted my leg, I reckon. An’ pretty near buried down here. Funny. I didn’t hear you come down. Reckon I must have fainted.”

“If I drop you a rope, can you hang on while they pull you out?”

“No. Pinned down by a timber an’ smothered by dirt. Have to be dug out, looks like.”

It was plain to Boone that he must have a light. The least misplacement of

the timbering on which he stood might send half a ton of dirt plunging down upon the man below. He would have to work very carefully. Probably he would have to send the dirt up in buckets. But he could not be sure of this until he had examined the ground.

He called to the men above: "Send someone for candles and a bucket. Better get help. Have to dig him out, looks like."

Tilatha volunteered at once. "I'll go," she called down.

"Bring Dr. Peters, too—an' Whip Quinn," Boone said.

She flew down the path toward the lights of the town. It was a relief to her to be helping, even in so insignificant a rôle as that of messenger. That Boone and the man he had gone down to rescue were in danger she knew. The ground was very treacherous. Very likely it had been all ready for a cave-in, and the weight of Russ Quinn had started the slides. Probably there would be more, since the soil must have been disturbed by the lowering of the Texan. If buckets of dirt had to be hauled up, that would mean a further pressure on the crumbling edge of the pit.

Tilatha went straight to the Occidental. She spoke to a man lounging outside, and what she said was almost a cry.

"I want to see Mr. Whip Quinn, please. Right away."

The man looked at her curiously. She did not look like the sort of a woman who might be expected to stand outside a gambling house and inquire for Whip Quinn. The standards of Tough Nut in regard to its women were simple. They were either straight or they were not. This girl with the honest, direct eyes, who had come running up the street with supple grace, was straight beyond any question. Therefore it was odd that she had come here, so hurried and eager and yet fearful, inquiring for Whip Quinn of all men.

"I'll get him, miss," the lounge said.

Three minutes later Whip Quinn joined the girl on the sidewalk. "You want to see me?" he said; then recognized her. "What can I do for you, Miss McLennon?"

"Russ has fallen into a prospect hole," she explained. "They're tryin' to get him out, but they want candles an' a bucket an' more men."

"Fallen in a prospect hole—where?" he asked.

She waved her hand impatiently in the direction of the place. "It's the old Jim Blean hole. We must hurry. The ground is cavin' in. Better take another rope, too, I think."

Whip woke to action. He called to a passing man:

"Tim, get a coupla more miners an' come with me. Russ has fallen into a

shaft. Can you dig up a bucket to haul dirt up in? I'll get candles an' a rope. Meet you here in five minutes." He turned to Tilatha. "Stay right here till I come back. Won't be gone more'n three-four minutes."

She paced up and down the busy street. Men looked at her with curiosity. The unwritten law of the town was that only women of a certain class should be seen at this end of Apache Street after dark. Some of the men jostling along the crowded thoroughfare knew her by sight, but even those who did not were aware that this red-haired beauty with the big troubled eyes was one not to be addressed with familiarity.

A cowboy bowlegged along the sidewalk. Tilatha recognized him as Ted Holliday, the lad she had sent to bring her brother in an hour of trouble at Galeville.

At sight of her he exclaimed: "Why, Miss Tillie!"

"There has been an accident, Ted," she explained hurriedly. "We need a doctor. Get Dr. Peters, if you can. Do you know where the old Jim Bleam prospect hole is? Of course you don't, but plenty of people can tell you. Get the doctor an' bring him there."

"Sure," Ted promised. "I'll most certainly do that."

In his hurry to oblige her, he went away without asking who had been hurt.

Whip Quinn was back almost within the time he had allotted. While they waited for the miners, he asked questions.

"How come Russ to fall in? What was he doing there, anyhow?"

"We went for a walk an' stopped there. He stepped too close, an' the ground caved under him.

"Is he hurt?"

"He told me only bruised. I came down an' got help. Boone Sibley was lowered into the hole an' from something he said I thought Russ might be hurt. He wanted me to bring a doctor—Boone Sibley, I mean. I've sent Ted Holliday for one."

Quinn frowned at her. "Did you say Boone Sibley?"

"Yes. He's down there with Russ. The ground round the edge is cavin' in. I'm afraid, if we don't hurry——"

"How come this Texas man to go down there?" demanded Quinn harshly.

"Why, he was the first man I spoke to about it. He got two men an' a rope an' started back with me. He just put the rope around his waist an' went down."

The miner to whom Quinn had spoken showed up down the street. He had

with him two other men and a mule. Upon the mule's back was a pack saddle, from which were suspended a bucket, a shovel, and a pick.

“Found these lads down at the corral all fixed to go prospectin’ tomorrow,” Tim told Whip. “So we didn’t lose any time. All ready now?”

The little party moved down the street and took the trail for the Jim Bleam mine. Whip led the way, with long swift strides. To keep up with him, Tilatha had at times to break into a run. He said no more. She wondered what was in his mind. Was it filled with concern for his brother, or with fury at the Texan who had dared to do the Quinns a service after they had declared war on him? She could not tell. There were deep dark chasms in the soul of such a man not to be plumbed. What he might mean to do, if his intentions were yet clear to himself, was a riddle beyond the solving.

CHAPTER XXXVI

“A CLOSE CALL”

TO the Texan came booming down Whip Quinn’s voice. “Come up outa there, you. I’ll take charge of this job myself.”

Evenly Boone answered: “Too risky, Quinn. Ground is shaky above an’ below here on the timbers both. We’d sure start an avalanche an’ bury yore brother. He has got to be dug out as it is.”

The imprisoned man reinforced this argument. “That’s right, Whip. Bad enough now without another cave-in. Leave it the way it is.”

The miners who had come with Whip took the same position, and the gambler gave way.

Candles were lowered in a bucket along with a pick and shovel. Anxiously Boone watched his supplies come bumping down. He lighted a candle and made an inspection of the bottom of the shaft. Russ was pinned down by a bit of planking, the end of which stuck out from a mass of earth which covered the rest of it.

With great caution Boone slipped down through a narrow opening. He took the shovel with him. As he raised the candle to see what was the best way of getting to work, Quinn recognized him.

“You!” he exclaimed.

The Texan nodded, without answer, unless it was one to say, “A bad business. We’ve got to go mighty carefully about this.”

He stuck the candle on an outcropping ledge and began to shift the loose earth toward the other side of the shaft.

“Get outa here,” Quinn said bitterly. “Send someone else.”

“Like to oblige you if I could, but I reckon we got to play the cards the way they are dealt. . . . Sing out if I hurt you.”

“I don’t want you here, Texas man. Get out.”

Boone continued to shift the earth. It was possible that he might get enough of it away to remove the plank without having to send any up in a bucket. “No use you or me either buckin’ about this, Quinn,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “We’re here, you an’ me both. You can cuss me out after we get back above—if we ever do. No sense in us actin’ like children, especially when

we've got to pull together to make the grade.”

Russ said no more. What was there to say? He knew that this quiet, imperturbable man would pay no attention to him.

Presently Boone handed him the candle to hold. “See better with it there,” he said.

The pinioned man took the candle in his free hand. After a little Boone put down the shovel and began scooping away loose dirt with his hands. He released Quinn’s arm.

From above Whip Quinn called down: “How about it now?”

“We’re diggin’ out,” the Texan reported. “Takes time, but we’re makin’ progress. Looks like we won’t have to send any dirt up if we’re lucky.”

He shovelled industriously but cautiously. He did not want to shift the dirt below in such a way as to bring down that which was resting on the timbers. Again he laid aside the shovel.

“Maybe if I eased up this timber you could get yore leg out from under,” he suggested.

With both hands he lifted, very slowly, the end of the broken plank. Inch by inch, Quinn edged back, dragging his injured leg. Boone’s muscles grew taut under the strain of the weight, but he did not lower the timber until the other man was free. Then, again with the greatest care, he released his hold.

Dirt had been trickling down from above in little spurts ever since he had begun to work. Now a small rivulet of it poured upon them.

“Have to go up an’ help haul you after me,” Boone said.

He wriggled through the opening in the broken timbers.

“Now, if you’ll crawl up as far as you can,” he suggested.

There was no time to lose. The disturbed earth was pouring down into the cavern rapidly. Quinn had to get out or be caught, this time in such a position that Boone would not be able to get at him.

Quinn pushed head and shoulders through the opening and stuck. His legs were caught by the rising tide of rock and earth. Boone stooped, slid his hands beneath the armpits of the trapped man, and heaved upward with all the strength that was in him.

A ton of loose earth went down with a rush, but the body of Russ Quinn rested safely on the cross timbers. He looked at his rescuer and said faintly but evenly, “Close call.”

“Make ready up there,” Boone shouted.

“Got him loose?” Whip asked.

“Yes. Wait till I give the word.”

Boone undid the rope from the bucket and tied it around the waist of Russ Quinn.

The man looked at him defiantly. “You first. I’m not going up first.” His voice was low. The last slide had jarred him badly.

“Don’t be foolish. It’s got to be thataway. I can look after myself. You can’t.”

“No, sir. Like enough the first one up will jar loose another ton or two of rock. I’ll wait.”

He was too feeble to make his protest effective. Boone made sure the rope was fast and called to those above:

“All ready. Easy now.”

Quinn’s body began to jerk upward. It swung to and fro as it struck the side of the shaft. Boone gave directions even as he refastened about his own body the other rope.

“Easy there! Easy! Go slow near the top. That’s right.”

Russ hung close to the edge. A rope end was tossed to him. He caught at it and was dragged forward to the treacherous ground.

A woman’s voice lifted in a shout of terror: “Look out!”

Boone saw it coming, another slide of dirt and rock, started by the weight of the rescued man. He clung close to the wall, sheltering his head with his arms. Most of the plunging mass missed him, but he did not escape entirely. His body swayed. He had a feeling of being flung far into space at a tangent, of floating high on waves of ether. Then he knew no more.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WOMEN HANGING AROUND

BOONE opened his eyes upon a world which needed a moment for orientation. The harsh face of Whip Quinn, flung into relief by the flames of a fire that had been built, looked grimly down at him. A score of other men, miners, cowboys, clerks, made a background silent and attentive.

The Texan's wandering glance came back to Quinn. He noticed that the gambler's long broadcloth coat was stained with dirt and that his usually immaculate boots were soiled to the top of the legs into which the lower part of the trousers had been thrust.

There flashed back to Boone a memory of the scene through which he had just passed.

"Yore brother all right?" he asked.

Whip did not answer. His deep fierce eyes burned down at the other out of a black face, an effect of darkness produced by hair, eyebrows, moustache, and imperial rather than by the colourless complexion. He turned abruptly away and shouldered a path through the crowd.

Vaguely Boone had been aware that his head rested on a pillow. Now he made the discovery that this pillow was a woman's lap. His gaze lifted, met brown eyes, anxious and disturbed, in the tawny depths of which strange lights flickered. The red-haired girl, of course, who had been so present in his life of late even when bodily absent.

He made an attempt to raise his head, but she gently pressed her hand against his shoulder.

"Better wait till the doctor sees you," she said.

"How did I get here?" he asked. "Last I knew I was in the shaft."

"Whip Quinn went down after you. There was another slide, an' it half buried you. Are you in much pain?" Her voice was low.

"Some. Bruised up, I reckon. How about him?"

"Whip Quinn?"

"No, Russ."

"Dr. Peters has been examining him. We don't know yet. You mustn't talk."

Boone had the natural outdoor man's objection to being considered an invalid. He felt ashamed to lie there with his head on the lap of a woman. It was not only the fact itself that embarrassed him, but the presence of so many watching men.

"Sho! Nothin' the matter with me. I'll sit up, miss, an' not discommode you," he said.

In spite of the pressure of her strong brown hand he sat up. His head swam dizzily, and his fingers caught at her arm. The semicircle of faces tilted skyward. He found himself being forced down again.

Presently he was aware of extraneous pressure on his body, moving expertly from point to point.

"Ouch!" he grunted, and opened his eyes.

Dr. Peters spoke crisply. "Bring that other door here. We'll carry him to town. That's right. . . . Easy with him, men."

Thomas Turley pushed forward. "Take him to my house, Doctor. We can look after him better than they can at the hotel."

The inarticulate protest of the patient was entirely disregarded.

"I'd better hurry back an' talk with Eve about a bed," Tilatha suggested.

"Do that," assented Dr. Peters. "And have hot water ready."

Tilatha woke up to the fact that the eyes of many silent men were upon her. She had till now been quite unself-conscious, her whole being absorbed in the drama of life and death that had been playing with her lover as the leading character. But the intentness of the gaze focussed upon her was startling. Here was public opinion in the process of making its judgment. An imperative urge rose in her to escape, to be alone in the night where the cool breeze might fan her hot cheeks while she thought things out with none to observe.

"I'll go with you, Tilatha," the editor said.

"No—no, you stay with Mr. Sibley," she urged, and almost fled down the path.

The night breeze did not take the heat out of her cheeks. What had she done? How completely had she given herself away? Was it not bad enough to be in love—oh, sunk fathoms deep beyond recovery—with a man who cared nothing about her, who had brusquely repelled her more than once, without making an opportunity to show it to every Tom, Dick, and Harry in town? No wonder they had stared at her. Why, she had been as bad as the women who worked the dance halls of Apache Street at night, as flagrant in her conduct. A girl, not married, the only woman in a crowd of men, and she had rushed forward to take his head on her lap, to bathe his face with the water someone

had brought up. It was slight comfort to remember that she had given Russ water, too.

All over town the gossip about her would run, of how unmaidenly she had been, of how she was flinging herself at the head of this Texan who in his heart, no doubt, despised her. As soon as she could, to-morrow, she would go back to the ranch and bury herself there. That was the least she could do. And as long as she lived she would never marry. No, never!

As soon as she had told Eve what was wanted, the two girls flew to make ready. Tilatha lit the kitchen fire while her friend prepared her own bed for the patient. They were barely ready when men's footsteps could be heard coming down the walk and shuffling along the porch.

They brought Boone in, though he protested that he did not want to be such a nuisance, that he would be all right at the Dallas House if they would only take him there.

Dr. Peters smiled at him. "You'll take orders from me, Mr. Sibley, for quite a few days—from me and from your nurses. The young ladies are going to look after you. Let me tell you that you are lucky. Two of the prettiest girls in Cochise County will cool your fevered brow. I know plenty of men would be grateful for the opportunity."

The Texan made objection: "Look here, Doctor, I've been stove up a lot worse than this without having two women hanging around. Not necessary. I'd rather be at the hotel." At that moment he happened to catch a glimpse of a blonde seventeen-year-old making a face at him. "Of course, I appreciate their kindness, but I don't aim to invite myself here an' take up their time. That's short an' sweet."

"You'll do exactly as I say, young man. You've been cock of the walk long enough. Now, lie down and let me examine you. Not another word out of you."

So Boone occupied the best room in the Turley house. The doctor did not keep his promise. The chief nurse was the Mexican woman, who was relieved in the kitchen by Eve and Tilatha. Occasionally, the girls came in and sat with him in place of Juanita, especially after the first two days, when he began to mend rapidly. Peters had been afraid of internal injuries, but the patient had escaped with some broken ribs.

"How is Russ Quinn getting along?" he asked the doctor one day.

"Famously. You men out in this country take a lot of killing. Even old Jacobs has been demanding a steak smothered in onions. I've told Brady to see he gets it to-night."

"Fine," Boone said drily. "You'll have us ready to be shot up in a week or

so. This ought to be a good country for a doctor.”

Tilatha came into the room carrying E. P. Roe’s new novel *Without a Home*. She had been reading it to the patient, who did not care for it in the least but had reasons of his own for not telling her so.

“Your patient is doing fine, Miss Tillie,” the doctor said.

“He’s not my patient but Juanita’s, so I can’t take any credit, Doctor,” she said. “He’s fretting to get up, I s’pose to hunt bandits. Isn’t it a sign he’s gettin’ better when he’s so impatient?”

“Is he impatient?” Peters asked, with a quizzical lift of the eyebrows toward her.

“Too many women hanging around. Of course he appreciates our kindness, but——”

“That little minx told you I said that,” he interrupted.

“Miss Eve Turley told me.”

“Maybe I’d better take back that minx right away,” Boone said, with a grin. “Women tell all they know. If you’re tellin’ her anything, say I think she’s just about the prettiest little trick that ever came down Apache Street, an’ that’ll be the truth, too.”

“As well as that she’s a minx, you mean.”

“I leave it to you, Doctor, if there’s not more mischief hatched in that head of Miss Eve’s, spite of her lookin’ like an angel ready to flutter wings, than ——”

At this apropos moment Eve walked in, made eyes at Boone and at the doctor, and asked jauntily: “How’s everybody?”

“Everybody is on the mend, my dear,” Dr. Peters answered. “What mischief are you hatching now, you little minx?”

Eve Turley was nobody’s fool. She recognized quotations in the voice of the physician.

“Who said that?” Her eyes swept the room and found the guilty party. “You did, Mr. Sibley, and only this morning I gave you a cup of cold water, except that it was a glass, but it’s all the same.”

“He also said you were the prettiest girl who ever came down Apache Street,” Peters added.

Eve dimpled. “Did he? He’s improving. I don’t mean his health.” She proceeded to pay off her score at once. “Do you remember when I told you what a duffer is, Mr. Sibley? If you don’t, I’ll be glad to recall time and circumstance.”

Boone flushed. "I remember," he said hastily.

"A minx would probably go into particulars," she mused aloud,

"I took that word back right away. Fact is, I meant it for a compliment. A right lively young lady was what I had in mind to say."

She curtsied, laughing. "I've forgotten about the duffer incident, sir," she assured him.

The doctor and Eve went out of the room together. They were great friends, and she wanted to go driving with him. Tilatha asked Boone if he wished her to read to him.

"Please."

He settled himself to watch the play of her face as she read. The book struck him as milk-and-water stuff, but it had become important to him to keep her in the room as long as possible.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHIP FREES HIS MIND

BOONE sat on the porch of the Turley house absorbing sunshine. He was mending rapidly. It is no light thing to have a ton of rock and dirt come plunging thirty feet down a well upon one. Fortunately, most of it had missed him. He could feel strength flowing back into his supple muscles. Soon he would be on his feet again.

Heat bubbles danced in the air as he looked up the street. This was the quietest time of the day in Tough Nut. During the morning Apache Street looked peaceful as old age. The ribald noises of the night had died away. An occasional woman went in or out of a store. Two shoppers stopped to gossip. The upper block, devoted to gaming, drinking, and kindred pursuits, showed no sign of life whatever.

Boone's glance picked up a man moving down the street, one who walked with a long, easy stride. Just then a young woman stepped out upon the porch. She had a glass of milk into which an egg had been beaten. The patient looked at it with humorous despair. He had been forced to surrender to the fiction that he was a convalescent whose appetite must be coaxed. It was true that he had been jarred pretty badly, but already he was acquiring again the healthy hunger of a range rider.

"Drink this," Tilatha ordered.

"Yes'm," he said humbly.

"How are you feelin' this mornin'?"

"Pretty bad. I don't reckon I could fling a two-year-old dogie more'n twenty or thirty feet by the tail. As Mobeetie Bill usta say, 'I'm sure a poor stove-up ol' donker.' I won't hardly make the grade likely."

He drank the milk. As he handed the glass back to Tilatha he saw that her eyes were on the man striding toward them. Boone looked at him. He identified the broad-shouldered figure in the long black coat and wide-rimmed hat. Whip Quinn, and, if Boone was any judge, not taking a stroll for his health.

The gambler turned in from the sidewalk at the Turley house.

The girl's eyes dilated. The heart died under her ribs. What did he want? Had he come to exact delayed vengeance for his imaginary wrongs?

With unwavering gaze the Texan watched the approaching man. The deputy sheriff was unarmed. He felt a hot prickling of the skin in spite of an impassive face. Yet he did not believe Quinn had come to kill him, not while he was still commonly regarded as a sick man. That would not be in character for Whip as Boone read the man. Whatever his faults, the gambler had an arrogant courage that disdained to take such advantage of an enemy.

Quinn's black eyes fastened to those of Boone. Neither of the men spoke. In that long look neither of them yielded so much as the blinking of the lashes.

Tilatha said quietly, suppressing fear, "Will you sit down, Mr. Quinn?"

Then Whip's harsh voice sounded, speaking not to her but to the Texan: "I came to bring a message to this girl from Russ. He wants to see her. Since I'm here, I'll tell you where we stand, fellow. I'd made up my mind to call for a showdown, to sleep on yore trail till we got you. You're a meddler, an' you're a biggity one. We'd put up with a lot from you, but we were through. Texas warriors can't crowd us, I'd have you know. Why, you poor fool, the boys would have got you long ago if I hadn't held them back. You wouldn't be warned. You kept pushin' in, crowdin' yore luck an' headin' straight for Boot Hill. Fellow, yore hour was set."

The steady, watchful gaze of Boone did not relax. He said nothing. As yet he did not want to commit himself, for Quinn's remarks were by way of preliminary. He had not come to the meat of his message.

"Your'e the big auger here now, Texas man, by yore way of it," Quinn went on bitterly. "You whopped a bunch of fools like Curt French an' Brad Prouty, so you got all het up with the idea that you'd beat the Quinns. Why, we hadn't lifted a hand—hadn't begun to fight."

"Why should you fight me?" Boone asked quietly. "I'm not lookin' for trouble with you. I've never done anything against you, unless you claim partnership with the killers an' bad men we've had to round up."

"Are you makin' any charges against me, sir?" Quinn asked, his voice ominously low.

"No, sir, I'm not. We've got no evidence whatever connecting you with any crime. I say only that some of yore friends are bad Injuns."

"Leave my friends alone," the gambler went on darkly. "An' listen, fellow. You're safe, far as we're concerned. When you went down that shaft after Russ you did yoreself a mighty good turn an' us a mighty poor one. Our hands are tied. You're poisonous to me as a sidewinder. I hate every hair of yore head, an' I'd like to fight you at every turn of the road. You're a fourflushin' advertiser, by my way of it. But we can't touch you, me or Russ either, an' I'll see the other boys don't."

“You owe me no more than I do you,” Boone reminded him. “I went down after yore brother. You went down after me. Honours easy.”

“Did you think I’d stay up above an’ let folks think I was a quitter after what you did for Russ?” Quinn demanded fiercely. “Hadn’t been for that, I’d have left you there till you rotted. I’m no soft-headed fool. But it’s not the same. I won’t argue with you. Point is, we can’t touch you. But, by Godfrey, we won’t live in the same town with you—not a day longer than we can help. We’re pullin’ our freight to-morrow, all of us.”

Tilatha cried out, a little exclamation of glad relief; then, to cover it, asked a question. “But the Occidental?”

He looked at her. “Sold out, lock, stock, and barrel. Why not? This town’s on the down grade, anyhow. The mines have passed their peak. I’ve made enough money to burn a wet mule. If I didn’t feel thataway, maybe I’d stay an’ make things interesting for this Texas warrior who is such a wonder.” Abruptly he asked: “You going back with me to Russ now?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Soon as I get my hat.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

TILATHA ANSWERS A QUESTION

BOONE watched Tilatha go with Whip Quinn and made no protest. Yet he was more than a little anxious. What did Russ want to see her for? That the man was in love with her, Boone did not doubt. Very likely he wanted to urge her to marry him before he left town. If so, would she accept?

Russ had the dark good looks, the reckless audacity that might very well captivate a woman. He was arrogant and masterful. Against her judgment Tilatha's heart might long ago have gone out to him.

As though she were not beside him, Whip strode up the street with long, easy steps. She had, as once before, to break into occasional little runs to keep pace with him. Presently the man brought his churning thoughts back and noticed that he was going too fast. He slackened his speed.

"Excuse me," he said. "Forgot about you."

"Do you wear seven-league boots, Mr. Quinn?" she panted.

"Not used to walkin' with ladies. Reckon I got to thinkin' about something."

They turned in at the house where Russ roomed. He was sitting up in bed, pillows propped behind him. Whip brought a chair, and Tilatha sat down.

"I'll be on the porch. Call me when you want me," the older brother said.

"Your brother says you are leavin' to-morrow," the girl said as soon as they were alone. "Are you able to travel yet?"

He brushed her question aside as of no importance, but plunged at once into what he wished to say.

"You said I acted like I thought I was God Almighty or Satan—that when I got hell-bent on a thing, I rode over everyone else roughshod to get it."

Her friendly little smile asked forgiveness. "I said you an' I both."

"It's true. I don't deny it. I'd go through hell an' high water for what I want. The way I look at it, that's the difference between a man an' a mouse. If I ain't willin' to fight for a thing, I don't deserve it."

His deep-set eyes looked at her hungrily out of a hard, reckless face, one harsh and dominant, but certainly not mean. It came to her that the man had endured some kind of change of heart, that he had sent for her to make

renunciation.

“That’s the way I felt then. It’s the way I feel now,” he continued. “But things have come up. We’re no short-card men, Whip or me either. If we stay here, we’ve got to kill that Texas warrior. Well, I can’t kill him now—not after what he did. So we’re pullin’ out. . . . You won’t go with me, Til?”

“I can’t, Russ.” Her low voice held distress, but it left no room for doubt.

“Why not?”

“How can I give reasons? Your ways are not my ways, nor your thoughts mine. A man an’ his wife have to walk together. They have to keep step all through life. They’ve got to be able to talk things out an’ come to a decision that seems right to both.”

“You mean I’m not good enough for you.”

“I don’t mean that at all. But we walk along different roads. Surely you can see that.”

“I’ll admit I’m not good enough in one way of speakin’. I’ve ridden wild trails, sure enough. But any man who is strong can make himself plenty good for any woman if he wants to.” His saturnine face had a touch of wistfulness. “Maybe I’ve learned my lesson, Til—that I’ve got no right to ride down everyone in my way. Maybe if you’d gimme a chance you’d find me more reasonable.”

She shook her head slowly. If he had come to her in this mood soon enough—But, after all, that was the trouble, it was only a mood and not a conviction. Now it was too late, anyhow. There was another man in her life. Still, it distressed her to hurt him.

“I can’t, Russ. I just don’t—care for you that way.”

“Come clean, girl. Is it someone else—that Texan?” he asked brusquely.

“He’s never looked at me twice,” she said.

“You’re not answerin’ my question. I asked if you’re—what folks call in love with him?”

A rich bloom flooded her cheeks. The girl’s honest eyes met Quinn’s steadfastly.

“If he asked me to marry him, I’d say ‘yes,’ ” she replied simply.

“You’re ready to fall off the Christmas tree for him,” he charged bitterly. “Whether he wants you or not. That it?”

It seemed to her that her face was on fire. “That’s it exactly,” she admitted, facing him with a kind of proud shame. Then, moved by swift impulse, “Don’t blame him, Russ. It’s all my fault. He can’t help it if I’m such a fool.”

He looked away from her, out of the window. But he did not see the desert across which the sun's rays streamed to the papier-mâché mountains beyond. Tilatha said no more. A sure instinct told her it was time for silence. He was fighting out once more the battle within himself.

"Don't let him come near me. Don't let me see him," he warned in a low thick voice. "An' about you, girl. 'Nough said. I know when I'm beat."

"I'm sorry, Russ," she said in a small humble voice.

"Don't you be sorry for me," he flung back roughly. "I ain't gonna fade out, you can bet yore boots, because of you or any other woman. Well, *adiós*."

"What about your cousin and Mr. Prouty?" she asked.

"We've talked that out with Brady. He's mighty willin' to turn loose of the bear, that hunter is. He has nothin' on them, anyhow, except jail breakin' an' knockin' out the old jailer. Not a thing else he can prove. The boys can walk out of the calaboose whenever we say the word."

"Will they leave town with you?"

"So they say. They're sull about it, but they're not sorry to go." He added bitterly. "So there will be a clean sweep of the bad men an' riff-raff responsible for the evil in this nice church town."

"I never said that, Russ. I don't believe it. You know I never thought you a bad man. You were my friend."

"Let it go at that, then. They say the best of friends must part," he countered, derision in his voice.

"You'll shake hands, won't you?" she asked.

For a moment she thought he was going to refuse, then he struck his hand in hers. "All right. So long."

She walked out of the house to the porch and joined Whip.

"You needn't go back with me," she said.

Russ Quinn had at least a few minutes when he was first with her. As she went down the street her thoughts were with the man she had left and not with the one she was going to meet.

CHAPTER XL

THE LONG TRAIL

THEY rode the high trails together, Boone and Tilatha. Cochise Head was in front of them, and the sun was dropping behind it. As they moved along the hill shoulder, knee brushed against knee. The only sounds were the occasional clip of a horse's hoof striking a stone or the chuffing of the saddle leather.

On a bluff they stopped to look down on the sweep of rolling country below.

Boone broke the long silence. "Good to be here," he said.

She did not look at him. For it had come to pass with her that in his presence silence was more significant than speech. Then all her secret thoughts went trooping through her mind undisturbed by words.

"Yes," she said at last.

"Good to be here with you," he said more explicitly.

Womanlike, now that the hour she had longed for was at hand, she sought for little barriers to build against it.

"It's such a relief to know that nobody is waitin' for a chance to kill you, that all your enemies have ridden away an' left you unharmed. Sometimes it seems too wonderful to be true. At least, I'd think you'd feel so."

He smiled. "I'm a heap easier in my mind. But I was talkin' about something else. I was talkin' about you an' me."

She flashed one swift glance at him, and then looked at Cochise Head, shining in the distance.

"Are we to travel the long trail together, Tilatha?" he asked simply. "That's what I've been wonderin' a heap."

She evaded an answer. "I thought you didn't like women."

Boone swung from the saddle, dropped the reins, and came to her. "I'm not sayin' anything about women, but about a woman. I like her a lot more than I ever expected to like one."

"Are you—so sure?" she murmured.

He drew her gently from the saddle into his arms. She rested there, content. Only her heart beat against his.

“Certain sure.”

“How long have you known it?”

“Since one night you came over the roofs to save my life.”

“And I—I found out the same day. But I think I always loved you. Don’t you remember how the little red-head kissed you when you rode away into the Indian country, an’ how furious it made you?”

He laughed. “Yes, but I liked the fiery little pest even when I hated her.”

“But will you always—love me, knowing what I’m like?”

“It’s because I know what you’re like that I do—want you.”

“My temper,” she reminded him.

“If it’s a part of you, I’m gonna like that, too.”

“But I don’t think it is, really. I’ve been different lately. I don’t want to have my own way, whether or no. I’ve seen where that leads to. An’ you’re so much wiser than I am,” she went on humbly. “I want to be like you.”

“An’ I want you to be like yoreself an’ no one else.”

He drew her soft tanned cheeks toward him, looked into the lovelit eyes, and kissed her lips. Her supple body made a little motion of abandon as her emotion met his.

The sun had set behind Cochise when once more they started on the long trail they are still riding in happiness and peace.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Texas Man* by William MacLeod Raine]