Blue Pete
Half-Breed

by Luke Allan

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LUKE ALLAN

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF BLUE PETE

Sunshine everywhere, brittle, unclouded, relentless—a glare that, to the very horizon, saturated and palled and blinded. Heat that withered what it touched streamed upward like a wave from the prairie, as well as downward from the dazzling canopy overhead. Not a breath stirred dead yellow grass or sage bush; and the half hidden carpet of prairie flowers—even the softer saffron of the cactus bloom—only reflected the blinding flame of sunlight.

One spot only of moving life was visible: a man, tall and straight, astride a black horse, both fighting grimly the pervading limpness, both preserving something of the air of authority and vigilance that never quite deserts the Mounted Police.

Constable Mahon sat loosely in the saddle, staring vacantly before him, but now and then his head raised, with the untiring instinct of the Force, to search the stretches about, and a tiny furrow came and went between his eyes. After a time the uncanny silence beat in on him, accustomed though he was to every phase of prairie life, and rising in his saddle he peered off to the west where he knew large herds fed, his quick eye picking out on the slope of a depression the small dark objects that told of cattle too languid even to follow into the cooler depths of the coulees their thousands of companions now sleeping through the mid-day heat. Smiling with the frankness of expression that comes to men who live much alone, he chirruped to his horse and struck off more briskly toward the south.

With an unconscious movement of the hand that guided without pulling the rein he slanted off toward a long deep-green line that tempered the sky to the southeast, and half an hour later the Cypress Hills towered over him, a

range of verdant heights that stood incongruous in the surrounding levels, their western end falling away before him in a sudden sweep of half-clad hillside—as indeed the borders of the Hills everywhere dropped strangely into the prairie.

As he pulled up before a long coulee that dived into the trees, he forgot the blazing heat. For several minutes he sat, his hands resting on the pommel, gazing keenly along the edges of the Hills, searching out every shadow and nook. But the Cypress Hills were as dead to the eye as the trail behind him, and Mars, his horse, turned at last to whinny softly its impatience.

"If we only knew half your secrets!" the Policeman exclaimed aloud into the black shadows, and gathering up the reins loped westward to skirt the incline.

From one of the rolling ridges a straggling herd of long horned cattle on the slopes of a watered valley came into view. Years ago their ancestors had been trailed north from Texas, and the beautiful horns were handed down to a vast progeny that gave one of the fanciful touches to the prairie life with which Mahon was in daily contact, adding a little of the variety of outside world for which something within him seemed always to be craving.

A quartet of drowsy cowboys, two of them playing cards, lolled in the grass, their ponies drooping with loose rein in the thin shadow of near-by bushes. One looked lazily up and waved his hand, and Mahon responded, noticing with deepening frown that they ceased their game to watch him. And when, moved by a sudden impulse, he jerked his reins as if to join them, the two who were not playing rose and slouched to their ponies.

With an impatient twist of his arm he turned away. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

Mile after mile of the dead grass of years sped out behind him. He scarcely knew where he was riding—it was all in his beat. The Hills crept to his back. Less than a half hour ahead his way would be barred by the iron posts that marked the Montana boundary—the invisible line dividing two countries of common interests, two districts of common pursuits, putting a sudden and definite end to the jurisdiction of the Mounted Police. On this side eight of them—they were woefully short-staffed—policed a district fifty miles from east to west, a territory with a distinct enough southern border but which to the north stretched into untracked wilds where neither rancher nor farmer lived, and where, therefore, rustlers had no reason to be. And four of the eight were expected to cope with the temptations of the Cypress

Hills section, where the best herds in Canada roamed. South of that scattered line of posts ranged the bad men of the Badlands, a sure retreat from the pursuing punishment of the Mounted Police. Nothing twisted Inspector Parker's face into such fury as his impotence before those iron posts, for the unorganized officialdom of Montana gave him little support.

Thinking of these things as he loped along, resentment akin to anger lined his forehead.

Suddenly a rifle shot, far to the south, quickly followed by a second, brought him stiffly upright in his saddle, his rein-hand clutching to his breast. And as he sat, motionless as the cactus at his feet, two more shots galvanized him and his horse into action. Sweeping into a coulee, Mahon followed it to its end, emerging on the level with foam lathering his horse's sides about the cinch and blowing back to him from panting mouth and nostrils.

Within a stone's throw, peering to the south over a ridge, a man lay loosely on his side, holding a ragged Stetson above his head on a sprig of cactus. Two shots, that whistled over Mahon's head, answered the challenge almost as one. But the stranger only laughed—a jeering laugh—and tossed his Stetson into the air. Mahon jammed spurs into Mars and plunged up the slope, catching from the corner of his eye the stranger's languid, unsurprised turn that mocked his own excitement. In a glance he swept the prairie to the south, where the small bluffs and wooded hills of Montana seemed to justify the dividing line he had for the moment forgotten. It was the stranger reminded him.

"That's Montany, Mountie."

At the unconcealed chuckle in the voice he faced angrily about.

At first glance he thought he had never seen a more ill-favored face. The man was sitting cross-legged, a pair of immense, coarse brown hands hanging limply over his leather-chapped knees. A square, heavy frame, whose looseness failed to belie its strength and agility, was covered by a dirty vest, open save for one button, revealing an equally dirty shirt once khaki in color. A huge-dotted neckerchief was double knotted under one ear, and from beneath his hips as he sat showed a pair of extravagant spurs large enough to impale a horse. Mahon recalled a score of cowboys, most of them novices, who flaunted one or more of these spectacular evidences of the profession, but never off the London stage in the old days back home had he seen a cow-puncher who incorporated so many in one person.

Yet it was the face that interested him most. At a glance he read the Indian strain—the high cheek bones and swarthy color, the latter of a strangely bluish tint. The ancient Stetson was thrust back on tousled hair that had been left to itself for many a day, and underneath there wavered erratically, as if independent of each other, a pair of twinkling eyes which, half closed as they were, missed nothing. And when the mirth of the eyes was continued in an extravagant expanse of mouth that did not open but twisted ridiculously upward at the corners, Mahon felt such an impulse to smile in response that he was forced to take himself in hand. It only increased his anger.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The half-breed's grin continued undisturbed. He was frankly taking in every detail of Policeman and horse; and Mahon saw, but with no satisfaction, a tilt of surprised admiration to his eyebrows.

"S'pose they'd kep' on shootin'?" The voice was as big and coarse as the stranger's body, but with a peculiarly ingratiating flexibility. "Gor-swizzled, ef I think it 'ud made a bit o' diff'runce! . . . Never seen a Mountie before. The jiggers over thar—we know each other mighty well—ain't half the lookers you are. . . . Took hefty chances boltin' up thar like that. They might 'a' fired again—jes' fer luck."

"I'm doing the talking just now." The reminder was as peremptory as authority on the prairie is accustomed to speak in its official moments. "What's your name, and who were they, and what are you doing here?"

The half-breed laughed in the soundless manner of one who has laughed much alone.

"W'ich d'yuh want fust, Gineral?" He seemed to read the Policeman's anger at the veiled irony, for he went on hastily. "Seein' how sweet yuh ast, call me Pete. W'en yuh git to love me, Blue Pete. . . . Nobody ever got furder'n that."

Mahon was mildly interested. He had heard of Blue Pete from visiting cowboys as a vague, half-mythical cow-puncher of the Badlands, who had never before come within range of the Mounted Police.

"What are you doing here?"

The half-breed chuckled. "Heerd o' me, eh? Not the hull truth, I hope. Well, I'm hevin' my fus' conversation with a Mountie—an' savin' my friend's back thar the trouble o' buryin' me—er some o' themselves. . . . Never did take t' the killin' game—that is, not in big doses. . . . Canady—

mebbe Canady now"—he dropped back on his heels and passed a coarse hand across his chin—"mebbe thar's room here fer me. I'm too gor-swizzled chicken-hearted fer Montany—an' dead-sick o' th' everlastin' game. They tell me yer real sassy over here with gunmen. Yer startin' fine, boy."

Mahon, uncomfortably conscious of a strange mingling of irritation and interest, rode nearer. "Who were they, and why were they after you?"

Blue Pete pursed his lips. "U-um! Wot's yer fav-or-ite porridge, so to speak, an' the size o' yer hat, an' who's yer bes' girl?"

The Policeman shut his teeth. "Where's your horse? You're coming with me." The Inspector might try his hand at further questioning.

"An' t' think my fus' friend in Canady's a Mountie! Wudn't my frien's over thar jes' natcherly laugh! Gor-swizzled ef I ain't glad I come!"

He whistled twice, and from the grass a few yards away a pinto clambered to its feet, shook itself on braced legs, and ambled to its master. Mahon watched, fascinated. He must have ridden almost over the ugly little beast. Its blotched sides of dirty yellow, its ragged tail that looked as if something had left off chewing it just before the end, the inquiring tilt to the upper third of one ear, catalogued it in horsedom in the same class as its master among men. And in every movement was the same lazy play of muscles of steel. It bent its head, and the half-breed's hand went up to fondle its ears.

"Whiskers, ole gal, don' get stuck up 'cause I am. But here's one o' them Mounties we've heerd of. Wot yuh think o' that black o' his? Nifty bit o' horseflesh, eh? Give yuh a run in a mile, wudn't he? But in ten—" He broke off with a chuckle and slouched up from the grass. But the movement that landed him in the saddle was like the spring of a trap.

"Now, Gineral, git goin'. An' ef thar's somethin' t' eat at th' end of it, make it hasty. Whiskers 'n' me's did 'bout a hundred miles too much since this time yesterday. Cudn't wait t' 'ave my steaks done as I like 'em."

Mahon untied the extra lunch he always carried, handed it to the half-breed, and pointed northward. Blue Pete, after the first glance of surprised gratitude, hesitated. Then he grinned and led away.

"I'd ride to blazes with a sangwich in my hand jes' now. . . . Yer uncommon decent, boy. Yuh don't happen t'ave a quarter o' beef in yer ves' pocket—er a keg o' Sanson's? Cud take a bite o' my arm, I'm that hungry."

He munched in silence for a time.

"Say, boy," he said over his shoulder, "yuh know I'm goin' 'cause I want tuh, don't yuh? Don't 'member o' goin' anywhar fer any other reason. Ef yuh think I'm tryin' t' escape—"

Mahon pulled his horse alongside, Mars and Whiskers exchanged compliments of a friendly nature. Blue Pete grinned.

"That's better. . . . Yer white. . . . Allus makes me narvus with any one behind me. That ain't the way I ride usually. Guess it's conscience."

The half-breed's eyes roamed in admiration over the country as they passed along.

"Mighty fine ranchin' country?" he volunteered presently, "ef thar's water. Many cattle?"

Mahon found himself absorbed in the turns of the half-breed's mind, in the subtlety with which he conveyed his meaning. Almost involuntarily he shifted their course to the west until they overlooked the herd of Texan steers. A pair of cowboys were dashing down the opposite slope, a mile away, driving before them two half-grown calves. An involuntary movement of the half-breed's hand brought the pinto to a stop, and Mars pulled up in sympathy. Faintly across the ravine came the protests of the unwilling calves. Blue Pete's head moved slowly until he could see the Policeman's face, but Mahon caught it in time and presented the impassive mask of the official.

"Bad day fer ridin'," commented the half-breed. "But any day does—fer that," he added.

"Any day has to." Mahon turned quickly away to hide the worry in his face. And both noted in silence the sudden movement among the cowboys at sight of them.

CHAPTER II

A GLIMPSE OF MIRA STANTON

In silence they rode, Mars, under the spur of a new companionship, cavorting a little and prancing; but the steady, awkward pace of the half-breed's mount was as regular as a machine. The heat was moderating with the setting of the sun, but the air continued dry and harsh and withering, and Mahon's eyelids, heavy as if he had passed through a great fire, for minutes at a time were closed.

"Much rustlin' in these parts?"

The question fitted so completely into the Policeman's troubled thoughts that he scarcely repressed a start.

"Why do you ask?"

"Jes' askin'. Seems t' 'urt."

Mahon felt the searching of the half-breed's eyes and yielded to impulse.

"Rustling? The worst we ever experienced is on right now. . . . But we're going to stop it." He jammed his spurs into Mars' tender sides, for there came to him again the memory of the scene that had oppressed him all afternoon. Only a few hours ago he had come from a conference at Medicine Lodge with Inspector Parker, whose unusual bluntness had sent him and his comrades out with a relentless determination to rebuild the reputation of the Force.

"Better save that fer the rustlers," Blue Pete suggested, looking down on Mars' quivering sides as the surprised horse came under control. Mahon flushed and apologized to Mars by patting its wet neck. "Looks 's if yuh'll need it. . . . Great game yer mixed up in. Need to keep yer eyes peeled for the li'l things. Like—"

Mahon turned fiercely and pointed to the Hills. "There's where the trouble is. Only the rustlers know that tangle. We haven't time to explore—and there's not a ghost of a show for us in there until we do. They can hide a hundred herds where we can't hope to find them."

He stopped abruptly, self-conscious, unable to explain his outburst before a stranger.

The half-breed spoke very quietly. “Cattle don’ wander into the Hills. They’re took thar. Out here on the prairie’s whar the rustlin’s done.”

“Out here on the prairie we have a chance. You couldn’t hide a rabbit here—except in the coulees.”

“Huh!” The exclamation, part question, was a blunt sneer. “Wot kin’ o’ rustlers hev yuh here anyhow?”

Mahon could follow every twist of the half-breed’s mind, but he only lost dignity by exposing the irritation he felt. The effect of the stranger on him was confusing—and so he relapsed into silence, closing his eyes wearily.

He opened them with a sudden sense of alarm and swung about. Mars and he seemed the only living things on the prairie. At a pressure of his knees the horse raced to the nearest rise, but nothing was to be seen. A few hundred yards away was a knoll he knew as the highest point this side of the Hills, and there he stood in his saddle, cursing his carelessness and overconfidence. Then under a hot spur he drove his horse into widening circles, keeping to the ridges, swiftly searching every coulee. He knew he had cut off retreat to the Hills by any coulee the half-breed could have reached in the minute or two of his inattention. And when, prepared for the only means of hiding in that shrubless waste, he sensed an unfamiliar shade in the gray-yellow grass into the eye of the sun, he galloped toward it.

The ungainly figure of the half-breed rose before him, grinning a bit sheepishly.

“Yuh ain’t half bad, boy. But I ain’t a rabbit, mind. An’ ef I’d knowed the lay o’ the land I could ’a’ did it—ef I’d wanted tuh.”

At a double whistle the pinto rose from behind a small sage bush, the yellow blotches on its sides now seeming to defy concealment.

“Right here, right out here on the prairie, boy, thar’s whar things is happenin’, right under yer eyes. Mebbe I’ll larn yuh a thing er two—some day—mebbe. . . . Whose bunch?” he inquired, tossing his thumb over his shoulder.

“Stantons’. Joe and Jim. Biggest ranchers about here.”

“Sure thing!”

“You know them?” Mahon exclaimed suspiciously.

“Sence half ’n hour. Seem to knowed ’em years. Seed thar kind—”

The sudden appearance of a girl on horseback from the draw of a coulee stopped him. The effect on the two men was startling. Involuntarily the half-breed pulled up, and his eyes narrowed; but the transformation in Mahon was more leisurely, though also more marked. It was as if he took a new grip on himself—only that. He did not stop—there was no great movement of any part of him—but his shoulders straightened and tightened, and his rein-hand raised a little. The other hand lifted to sweep off his Stetson as he bowed, a gentle smile transfiguring his face. The half-breed looked from one to the other, wide-eyed, and then his own Stetson came off.

A wild flower the girl was, a prairie-bred maiden with the mind and powers of a man. From her dress one might have inferred objection to her sex, resisted by a nature that would not be silenced. Her blouse was nothing but a man's shirt, but it was open a little at the neck, revealing a skin no man ever possessed, and topped by a handkerchief of an aggressive green. Her skirt was a frank concession to sex—but the green of it shrieked at the green of the neckerchief. Short and full it lay across the horse's back, exposing an exquisitely molded foot and leg which the high tan riding boot failed to conceal. The only other touch of femininity was a red belt, but in every line was grace and suppleness, and shapeliness of bust and limb. From under the edge of her Stetson peeped a wave of ruddy hair whose exposure was sheer rebellion, framing a complexion that had yielded not at all to the dry, parching winds and heat of the prairie summer or the biting storms of winter. Dark it was, but soft as velvet and tender as a rose.

"Gor-swizzle!" breathed the half-breed. And when the girl disappeared again into a coulee at a fast gallop Whiskers had not moved. "Gor-swizzle!" he ejaculated again, galloping to overtake his companion. A nod of his head asked the question in his mind.

"Miss Stanton—Mira Stanton," Mahon told him, and there was something of caress in his tone. "Sister of Joe and Jim."

The half-breed whistled through his teeth. "I wonder whar she comes in. . . . Many like her in these parts?"

"Few like her anywhere."

The other's face wrinkled. "Say, does she know yuh feel that way? Was them love glances she sent yuh?"

"Don't talk rot!"

"They don' grow 'em like that whar I come from," went on the half-breed, undisturbed by the rebuke. "Not in dress, anyway."

Mahon shook his head sadly. “Why on earth she wears those greens—” he began, and stopped.

The half-breed stared at him with a new interest. “Must be awful t’ev ’n eye like that. Whiskers ’n’ me’ll hev to buck up. We ain’t no prize babies, are we, ole gal?” The pinto whinnied agreement.

“Ah!”

The exclamation broke at a scene that opened suddenly before them. The sun was sinking fast, and the air was snapping with the coming prairie evening that sometimes passes into frost in the hollows after an uncomfortably warm day. A herd of browsing cattle was wandering up from their mid-day retreat on the way to new pastures for the night, from their midst arising cries of animal distress. Blue Pete’s head went forward.

“Cows!” he jerked.

Two riders were darting about the herd, trying to keep it bunched, while further back another pair were scouting swiftly about.

“Calves gone,” explained the half-breed, his words chipping off. “How far hev we come?”

“Where from?”

“From the las’ bunch—Stantons’?”

“About ten miles—perhaps more.” Mahon was watching him from beneath his brows.

“Hm-m! Stiff work fer a hot day!”

The Policeman made no reply. He had shifted his eyes to the bawling cows, but after a moment or two heard the half-breed muttering.

“It’s the li’l things, boy—the calves—and the cows. It’s right out here—”

Mahon turned on him fiercely.

“You’re a stranger here. That herd back there’s the Stantons’, the 3-bar-Y herd, I tell you. That’s enough.”

But Blue Pete had the last word.

“An’ Miss Stanton’s,” he grinned, “—Mira’s.”

CHAPTER III

DUTCH HENRY SHOOTS

In the tang of approaching night they rode into the Police Post at Medicine Lodge. Mahon leaped to the ground, throwing his rein loose, and spoke a few whispered words to a uniformed figure watching from the doorway. Then he motioned to the half-breed and the three entered the one large room.

Sergeant Denton, tall and wiry, seemingly little older than Mahon but wearing his stripes with quiet dignity, turned to his comrade with a satisfied smile.

"Well, I hope the Inspector will be satisfied."

Mahon's eyes gleamed. "Got the rustlers?" The sting of jealousy brought a slight flush to his cheek.

"Dutch Henry!" Denton explained proudly.

Blue Pete's chair creaked.

"You knew him?" Denton's question was a command.

"Too damn well. Wasn't wot yuh'd call a puss'nal friend—not at the last. Knew him better once—worked with 'im. . . . Th' only man I ever hed a sneakin' fear of. Ef yuh've got him—but gor-swizzle! I don' believe it."

Denton only smiled.

"Blakey's luck," he told Mahon. "The cuss was unloading two cars of stolen horses at Dunmore to feed them—on their way to Winnipeg—under our very noses. Blakey recognized him and got the drop through his pocket. Dutch threw up his hands quick enough—he knew we had orders to shoot."

"Do' know that I blame 'im," smiled the half-breed. "Funny feelin' them clothes give a felluh. . . . But yer not through with Dutch Henry yet—not ef I know 'im—an' I jes' about ought tuh."

They spent the night in the solitary room together, and not as Police and prisoner. Mahon felt certain the half-breed would not try to escape. "I believe," he said to Denton, "that short of putting him in irons he could get away nearly any time he wanted to. And we've no excuse for arresting him." Denton listened—and locked the three horses in the corral.

Very early next morning they were saddling up for Medicine Hat when the telephone rang and Denton went to answer it. Mahon could hear his voice, excited and abrupt. "Yes, sir," he was saying; and Mahon knew the Inspector was on the other end.

The Sergeant, with one arm thrust into his tunic, threw open the door.

"He's escaped!" he shouted. "Broke out the bars in that rotten cell. He'll sure make for the Hills. Blakey's out already. Thornton and Priest are coming. There's just a chance we can head him off."

Mahon looked at Blue Pete. The half-breed was lolling on his pinto, cowboy fashion.

"Oh, do' min' me," he urged. "Go right along with yer killin'. I'll come along an' see the fun."

Denton caught the sound of a chuckle and looked up from tightening his spurs. "You did know Dutch Henry too damn well—how well we'll find out when we get through this. . . . We're too busy now to bother with you." He disappeared and returned with his rifle, working the mechanism as he ran to the corral. "Take the west," he ordered Mahon. "Make for the end of the Hills until Corporal Blakey comes. Tell him to ride round to the south and you keep close to the northern edge eastward until you see me. I'm going east. Two shots—you're wanted."

He was off in the early light, straight into the sun, and Mahon turned his back on the half-breed and tore to the southwest. Five minutes later he glanced back—to find Blue Pete riding easily a hundred yards behind. The half-breed waved, and something about it pleased the Policeman.

He was not urging Mars. There might be much riding yet before rest, but it surprised him as he looked back now and then how easily the pinto maintained its position. It even came alongside, and together they let the eager horses cut down the miles toward the ever-growing line that marked the Hills.

Suddenly Blue Pete's head went up and the pinto wheeled on its hind legs before Mahon could stop.

"Yer wanted!" shouted the half-breed.

The pinto, lying so low in its stride that its rider seemed to be running on the ground, was already away to the east, and Mahon, though he had not heard the signal, trusted the half-breed's ears and followed. There was no need for spurs, for Mars' ears were back, but when Mahon saw with

irritation how slowly he cut down the pinto's lead he applied them once mercilessly. Mars quivered, stretched out his head, and desperately running was presently head to head with his new friend. But he could get no further, and Blue Pete glanced from horse to horse with a grin.

The next rifle shots Mahon heard distinctly, aware on the instant where they came from. Not far ahead, in a deep coulee with a draw running up to the prairie, was the remains of an old shack probably erected years ago as a center for round-ups; now it was used only by belated travelers caught on the prairie by sudden nightfall or winter storms. He had frequently slept there himself.

In an angle of the hollow out of sight of the shack they came on Sergeant Denton.

"He's in there!" The Sergeant was changing his revolver from holster to belt. "I wondered if you'd hear." Then with a jerk of his tunic—the official touch—he started forward.

Mahon followed, but Denton waved him back. "I'll go alone. He's shooting."

The other bit his lip. Ever since he had been on the Force he had longed to be in on some big capture like this. But he had no thought of disobeying.

The Sergeant moved out into the draw. A rifle shot split the silence, and Mahon heard the whistle of the bullet. Blue Pete hissed through his teeth and unfastened his rifle from the saddle.

Denton did not hesitate.

A furious voice challenged him. "I won't shoot to miss a second time."

"Don't be a fool, Dutch Henry. You'll only make it worse for yourself." And the Sergeant walked on.

"I won't be taken, I tell you," snarled the outlaw.

"You'll be taken all the more certainly if you shoot—only for worse than rustling. Nobody ever escaped us long for that, you know."

Mahon knew Denton was talking against time. Another bullet whistled past, and a third.

Blue Pete was watching the Sergeant with staring eyes. "Gor-swizzle!" he whispered. "He sure do' know Dutchy—an' after them three shots I ain't sure I know 'im myself."

Denton was within fifteen yards of the shack when a fiercely ominous oath came from it. Too late the half-breed shouted a warning. With the report of Dutch Henry's rifle Denton straightened, leaped ahead, halted totteringly, placed both hands to his hip, and with a stifled groan fell.

Mahon, his eyes blazing, was striding forward when bands of steel settled on him from behind and he felt himself lifted from his feet. With a furious movement he twisted—and looked into a pair of crooked eyes in a brown face. Striking out madly, the two men rolled over and over. At last the half-breed managed to speak through panting lips.

"Yuh'd make a fine corpse, you wud. D'yuh think Dutchy wouldn't do the same to you?"

Though he knew the warning was justified, Mahon continued to struggle for several seconds. "But—but the Sergeant's wounded—and Dutchy'll escape."

"He'll escape a damn sight easier when he's put a bullet in you. I'll get him—the Sergeant."

"This is my job." The Policeman threw off the restraining hands. "We don't let strangers risk their lives when there's work like this."

"I've some chance. I don't believe Dutchy'll shoot me. It jes' seems to me your work is Dutchy, not the Sergeant."

Blue Pete walked to the pinto and patted its nose, while Mahon leaned forward where he could see the wounded Sergeant. Denton was on his knees, tremblingly struggling to advance. His left leg moved, but the right hung limp and a trickle of blood was dripping from the stained breeches. With a groan he sank on his face, still clawing forward by the grass.

In the shack all was silence. Great tears flooded Mahon's eyes. Oh, for one of his comrades to keep watch on Dutch Henry that he might attend to the Sergeant! But the half-breed was right: Dutch Henry was his duty.

Denton raised his head and saw him. "Don't come in here. Never—mind me. But don't let him—escape."

Mahon crept up to the level where he could watch the shack and waited, rifle ready, while he made his plans. And Blue Pete, lingering long enough to whisper to the pinto, struck into the draw without his rifle.

"Dutchy!"

A voice tense with surprise replied from the shack.

"Blue Pete! You—! Don't you butt into this or there's sure one for you."

The half-breed laughed. "I ain't takin' no chances with you, Dutchy. I ain't no crazy jigger. We know each other too well to think either of us is fools. All I want is the Mountie. Yuh missed wuss that time than th' others, Dutchy. 'N inch makes a hell of a diff'runce in the hip. It's a dirty murder t'ave on yer hands."

He moved forward.

"Drop that pistol," came the order from the shack. "I know your shot too well to risk it, Pete."

The half-breed, scoffing, took his revolver from his pocket and placed it on the ground. "Guilty conscience, Dutchy. Even a window's safe at eighty yards."

The wounded Sergeant raised his head. "Send the half-breed for help, Mahon," he ordered. . . . "And don't let the devil get away. He's—got me—I guess." With a groan he dropped and lay motionless.

Blue Pete hurried to him.

"Hell, Dutchy!" he stormed. "W'y didn't yuh plug 'im in the heart, 'stead o' murderin' 'im this way?"

"I had to stop him, Pete." There was apology and fear in Dutch Henry's voice. "I know these fellows. I guess I got him higher than I intended, but I can't take chances. That's straight." His voice hardened. "And I've got a bead on you, Pete. You aren't going for that help, are you?"

"This ain't my row," growled the half-breed. "But ef yuh've did for him, look out fer me, Dutchy. Thar wasn't no need fer it. But I'm not goin' to stop you till then."

"I'll take your word."

"Yuh've had tuh manys a time—though we never was over-sweet on each other—" He raised his head, listening.

Dutch Henry, too, heard. From the prairie above came the sound of furious riding. "I'll shoot to kill every Mountie I see now," he snarled. "Let 'em all come!"

Mahon, lying flat on the prairie, turned to the approaching rider hopefully. Then he exclaimed under his breath and slid back into the coulee.

Down the slope a girl careered madly, her dark hair, broken loose in the wind, hanging in one long curl on her neck. One foot had lost the stirrup but she clung with hands and knees. Through her tender skin spots of vivid red showed in her cheeks, and a fearful anxiety—almost horror—stared from her eyes.

As she pulled up, the Policeman seized her in his arms and forcibly lifted her from the saddle. "For God's sake keep down, Miss Parsons. The Sergeant's in there terribly wounded. Dutch Henry did it."

She tore herself from him and pushed the curl under her Stetson. "And you stay out here!"

"That's not fair, Miss Parsons." His cheeks were red as hers. "This is not the man—only the Policeman. My duty is to get Dutch Henry. I'm forced to choose the harder thing. The Sergeant—"

"I know—yes, I know," she interrupted. "It's the soulless Force that must get the criminal whatever happens the Policeman. I'm sorry I hinted at—at other things; I should know you better. I—I do know how it must hurt you to have to leave him there. . . . And he would have shot you too!"

Before he could interpose she had stepped out into the draw toward the shack, half running. He rushed after her.

"Miss Parsons—Helen!"

She turned at the last word, full in view of the shack, and stopped him in mid rush.

"Constable Mahon," she reminded him, "you have a duty elsewhere. Would you dishonor the Force? . . . For a woman?" she added as he came on.

Mahon retired abashed. Not for his wounded comrade but for a woman he had almost broken the rule of the Force. That he had for seconds been in deadly peril and that she had deliberately kept her body between him and the shack did not occur to him. But this time he chose a spot where he could watch both the shack and the unconscious Sergeant.

The girl approached the half-breed where he sat nursing Denton's head, Blue Pete staring at her. Then he glared at the shack.

"Dutchy," he sneered, "here's yer chance fer glory. Shoot now, yuh c'yute!"

But Dutchy did not shoot. The girl swiftly took in the extent of the wound. "Your knife!" Blue Pete drew it and opened the blade; and in two steady, strong-wristed sweeps she cut away the breeches. "Your handkerchief—all you have!"

Blue Pete, confused, saw her draw two from her own pockets. "Ain't got none—'cept this." He pointed to the dirty neckerchief.

With flaming face she ran to a cluster of choke cherries, the half-breed instinctively looking away, and in a moment she was beside him, still flushing, a bundle of white in her hand.

"We'd better carry him back where Constable Mahon can help," she ordered.

With infinite care, with a tenderness incredible in one so rough, the half-breed raised the Sergeant's shoulders while she lifted his feet. Denton, roused by the movement, made not a sound, but his lips were drawn between his teeth in a blue line.

Mahon joined them and together they bound up the wound as best they could, the outlaw for the moment forgotten. Blue Pete left them once and crept up to look out over the prairie, returning without a word. The Sergeant opened his eyes.

"Perhaps it's not so bad as it looks," he whispered through clenched teeth, as he saw the pity in Mahon's face. "Send the half-breed for help. Telephone from the Lodge. Doctor Smith will come in his car. But don't—let that hound escape. . . . I'll be all right till the doctor comes."

"You'll have to stay," the half-breed whispered. "I won't get the Police—but I can the doctor. Len' me yer horse. Mine's had three days of it."

As the thunder of hoofs dimmed away, Mahon turned to the girl, who held her face low over the Sergeant.

"Tell me, He—Miss Parsons, what—"

Denton's face twisted in a spasm of pain.

"Don't mind me," he whispered. "I'm all right. Keep an eye on Dutch Henry."

Mahon's wits returned. He crept out to the draw and carefully looked over until he could see the shack. Neither sound nor movement betrayed the presence of the outlaw, and after watching for minutes he returned anxiously to the Sergeant.

"I'm going round," he told him.

"Careful," warned Denton weakly. "Shoot on sight—if he's going to escape. Don't take—chances."

Mahon glanced at the girl and found her eyes fixed on him. But she dropped them instantly.

"Don't take chances," she repeated, without raising her head. "Hadn't you better wait till help comes? You're—you're leaving me alone—and I don't like the blood. . . . One to nurse is enough for one day."

"I have had one reminder of my duty," he replied, and left her.

On the prairie behind the shack he could see or hear nothing, and he watched impatiently for almost an hour, creeping hurriedly back twice to where the Sergeant lay, his head on the girl's knee.

"Is he there yet?" inquired Denton.

Mahon nodded.

"Have you seen him—do you know?"

Mahon returned to his vigil, worried.

"I'm going to work in under what cover I can," he told the Sergeant on his next flying visit.

"How long have I been here?" And when they told him he tried to raise himself. "Make sure of him, Mahon, hurry! Put my rifle near me—and I'll watch the draw."

Helen, without a word, took Denton's rifle herself.

He ran along the coulee, circled out on the prairie, squirmed his way down an old buffalo trail from the other side, and for a minute lay within ten yards of the shack. Then he charged down the slope with drawn revolver. But even as he rounded the corner he knew the outlaw was gone. With a cry of baffled fury he saw by the tracks about the door that Dutch Henry's horse had been there in the shack with him—and the tracks left as well as entered. Mahon ran up where he could scan the prairie, and shook his fist impotently at the Hills, for any hiding place was too far toward safety for him to hope to overtake the outlaw. Only then did he read the meaning of Blue Pete's hasty departure in the midst of the dressing—when he himself was too shocked with the wound to think of anything else. That was when Dutch Henry had escaped.

To the north he could see the car from Medicine Hat tearing along, and when it started to bump across the prairie from the trail he returned sadly to the Sergeant.

"Gone!" he burst out bitterly.

Denton's lips formed into an exclamation, but his face went suddenly ghastly and he fainted. The car whirled dangerously round the angle and drew up, the half-breed following on Mars. As the doctor deftly worked at the wound, Blue Pete whispered to Mahon.

"He's clear away, you know?"

"You heard him, Pete?"

"I'm not the Police."

"And you'd let him escape—after that!" The tone was as much hurt as angry, and the half-breed hung his head.

"It was a dirty shot. I've warned 'im wot's comin' to 'im ef the Sergeant dies. Thar's only one in these parts kin out-shoot Dutchy."

They lifted the suffering Sergeant into the car. Consciousness had returned.

"The Hills," he muttered, pointing to the south. "Priest and Blakey—there now." And his eyes closed.

Mahon threw himself into the saddle. "Go with the car," he ordered the half-breed. And to the doctor: "Take him to the barracks and tell the Inspector I'll call him up when I get to a telephone. I'll be south of the Hills."

The half-breed followed him with his eyes as he galloped away. "It's a bloody shame," he growled, "t'ave to shoot you felluhs. . . . Ef he croaks—count on me."

CHAPTER IV

THE STEER WITH MANY BRANDS

At Police Headquarters in Medicine Hat Blue Pete announced himself to Inspector Parker by simply opening the door of his office without knocking. The Inspector was seated at his desk staring thoughtfully through the window, and at the unheard of impertinence turned angrily.

"Who in hell are you?"

"The Sergeant's here—over in the hospital." In his subtle way the half-breed solved the situation.

The Inspector raised himself by the arm of his chair. He was a man of no great height but of a girth that told on his mounts in these later years. Also his movements were getting a bit stiff for one who had made a name for himself for activity in his younger days. There remained, however, the old keen mind, and the will that for a surprising length of time could conquer on necessity the handicap of advancing age.

"Mitchell!" he called. A constable entered from the yard. "I'm going to the hospital. The half-breed's staying here till I return." No waste of words, no hesitation.

In a half hour he was back.

"Now," he said abruptly, "you know Dutch Henry."

Blue Pete continued to examine a hat rack made by the Indians from buffalo horns.

"I said, you know Dutch Henry," repeated the Inspector sharply.

"I heerd yuh the fus' time."

"Then why don't you answer?"

"Yuh ain't ast anythin' that I heerd."

The veins in the Inspector's forehead swelled. "Sit down!" he thundered.

"Sure, boss. I'd a did it sooner ef yuh'd ast." He settled himself astride the only vacant chair.

The Inspector glared at him, but his mind was working rapidly. Twice his lips parted and shut, and he got to his feet and paced the floor, pausing at the end of each round to study the half-breed, whose attention seemed to be confined to a pouch of tobacco half spilled on the desk blotter. At the end of a turn the Inspector found him straining across the desk to whiff the fragrant odor. Blue Pete looked up guiltily.

"Gad, boss, ef yuh only knowed the ages since I hed a smoke yuh wudn't be so gor-swizzled temptin' with the stuff."

The Inspector's eyes twinkled as he pushed the pouch over. The half-breed drew from his belt a blackened corncob pipe and hungrily filled it, the Inspector doing the same with his old briar, holding his own match to the corncob.

"Thar, yuh kin git it off yer chest," sighed Blue Pete, watching the trail of smoke lazily climbing upward. "D'yuh want to tell me I look like a felluh that's bin in the cooler—er oughtuh be? I've bin lucky, that's all. Yuh see, I'm a fairish shot, an' Whiskers 'n' me kin cover a lot o' groun' w'en the shootin' ain't good. . . . That's how we're here. Yer man picked us up 'fore we could kick up much row this side o' the border. But gi'me time, gi'me time!"

The Inspector was eying him intently.

"Never mind what you used to be," he said.

"Same here. I don't ask no questions 'bout your past either. . . . But yer not satisfied. Spit it out."

With one of his sudden decisions the Inspector made for the door, nodding to Blue Pete to follow. The half-breed examined his pipe and glanced longingly at the pouch. The Policeman reached to a shelf above the door and tossed over an unbroken package of tobacco, which the half-breed caught, open-mouthed.

They passed across the barracks yard, round the end of the stable, and halted before a strong corral with a padlocked gate which the Inspector opened with a key from his pocket. Inside was but one starved looking steer, its head thrust ravenously into a pile of hay, its tail twitching with satisfaction. Blue Pete's eyes ran over it.

"'Bout five years oughtuh make it fit fer the market," he chuckled, "—unless yer goin' to work it."

"Brought it in two days ago," explained the Inspector. "Pretty near on its last legs, I guess."

"Yuh shud hope it's the last o' them kin' o' legs, er it'll sure hev a hell of a life." His own joke brought the soundless laughter. "Stray?"

The Inspector merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Better on the ranges."

"Better for a certain rancher, I believe. He'd give a whole herd to know that steer was loose again."

He led to the other side of the beast and pointed to an unintelligible mass of brands. The half-breed nodded significantly and stooped to the tangle.

"Looks like HM," he muttered. "'Tended to look like HM, what's more." He stepped back and examined the flank with tilted head. "But 'tain't. . . . Purty fair job fer a mess like that. . . . Two ole brands. . . . One new one. . . . Only one vent. That critter's did some movin' in his day. . . . An' the vent's 'bout a year 'n' 'alf old," he added, bending closer.

The Inspector's pipe was out. "What was the last brand before the new one?"

Blue Pete plucked the skin between finger and thumb and let it flip back suddenly, smoothed it out, stretched it, pinched it. The steer, busy stuffing itself, merely flicked its tail.

"Real nifty bit o' work," he applauded. "Felluh did that's makin' money easy—an' quick."

Whetting the blade of a large claspknife on his chaps, he carefully shaved about the brand and fell to plucking and pinching again, and the Inspector could see the rapid play of shades. Blue Pete closed his eyes and felt slowly over the brands.

"8-inverted-A," he announced, and closed his knife.

A flash of triumph lit the Inspector's face.

"Sure?"

Blue Pete blinked. "Never cud lie wuth a cent. Knowed it from the fust. Was tryin' to make yuh see it yerself. Ef yuh don' believe me, kill it an' soak the hide. A tenderfoot cud see it then. I've knowed the game too long—" he stopped in embarrassment.

"Would you swear to it?"

"I ain't swearin' to nothin', see?" replied the half-breed suspiciously. "Ef yuh don't take my word yuh'd be a damn fool to take my oath. . . . But ef yuh've any brands yuh think kin fool me, trot 'em out. Ef I do' know brands I do' know nothin'. Cud give that felluh p'inters—" He puckered his lips into a little whistle and rubbed his chin sheepishly. "Trouble with me, boss," he grinned, "is I talk too easy."

The Inspector was studying him. "Come inside," he ordered.

As he followed across the yard the half-breed looked swiftly about on the cutbanks surrounding the town. Then he laughed and entered the barracks, and the door of the inner office closed behind them.

CHAPTER V

HELEN PARSONS: MARKSWOMAN

Constable Mahon, after three days of almost sleepless guard about the Hills, reported to Headquarters.

"What are you doing with Blue Pete, sir?" he made bold to inquire of the Inspector.

"Since when did I make reports to you?"

"I was only interested, sir, that's all," replied Mahon, choking back his anger. "I kind of took to him. Seemed straight to me."

Inspector Parker laughed. "Never mind about Blue Pete. . . . He's straight as a string—if you know how crooked a string can be when you wish. Anything doing out by the Hills—any fresh traces of rustling?"

"Nothing since I spoke over the 'phone, sir. . . . But I believe the last lot's still in the Hills. Not a track can we find to the south—and I seem to feel, every time I get in among the trees, that there's much in there it would be well for us to know. I wish—"

"Yes, yes, Mahon." The Inspector was tramping the floor. "I know you'd like to take a fortnight off and make a real exploration. Man alive! It would take ten men a month to uncover every hiding place for a whole herd in there. And I haven't the staff to let even one take the time. I've asked—I've pleaded with the Superintendent to let me have even two more men. But we're short-staffed all over. Lots we need we're not getting. I told headquarters that cell wasn't safe—and to think it was Dutch Henry proved me right! . . . I tell you, boy, I can't spare you. We've just got to do our work outside the Hills. They can't get away without crossing ten miles of open to the south. . . . And yet . . . and yet I can't keep you down there either. . . . I'll promise you this: if the rustling continues you'll have a free hand for a week or so. . . . But I hope we won't need it."

He stopped in his pacing, his eyes fixed on the spilled tobacco pouch that held its customary place of honor on the blotting pad.

"By the way, you'll be leaving again in a couple of hours. Horse all right, I suppose? Well, make for the 3-bar-Y ranch and bring Blue Pete in."

"Blue Pete—at Stantons'! What—"

"The 3-bar-Y ranch *is* Stantons', I believe," interrupted the Inspector pointedly. "The half-breed's working there."

Mahon knew that in that half minute of thought the Inspector had come to one of his sudden decisions, and as usual it impressed him. This grizzled man planned and ordered while the rest of them were wondering.

"On second thoughts"—the Inspector was drawing shapeless scrolls on his blotting pad—"never mind the half-breed just now. I'll let you know when I want him. . . . Now," he smiled, "trot along and present your compliments in town. You've two hours. If it's really serious I might make it another fifteen minutes. . . . She's a nice girl—and don't you forget it."

Mahon passed up the main street over the railway track idly amused at the hint behind his superior's words. That his fellow Policemen twitted him slyly about Helen Parsons did not even make him conscious, and the Inspector had evidently yielded to the rumors in the Force. He liked Helen—had liked her from the time when, a messenger from her cousins, the Stantons, of the 3-bar-Y ranch, he had first met this newcomer to the confined life of the prairies. He liked her unaffected manner, a dignity that did not savor of stiffness, her acquaintance with arts unpracticed in the West, her intellectual attainments, her many ways incongruous with the untamed life in which they lived—even her easy grace and dark hair. But to him it was sufficient proof of entire innocence in their relationship that he had never more than mentioned her in his weekly letters to his mother in England. It almost pleased him, in a careless way, that more should be attached to their acquaintance in the public mind; Helen herself was too gloriously unaffected, he knew, to be disturbed by the gossip that might reach her through the coarse—at least unsubtle—lips of her prairie friends.

Firmly he believed that their mutual attraction lay in their common interest in subjects not popular in those days in Western Canada. Day after day of his duties threw him among men who thought in cattle and horses, whose conversation was round-ups and brands and the prospect of encroaching homesteaders, whose sports were broncho-busting and wild riding and an occasional visit to town, whose sleep was a mental vacuum and whose work entailed little more. He had never been able to satisfy himself with that, proud as he was of his connection with a Force that gave a new value to the much abused word, policeman. It was only natural, then, that his keenest anticipation, his greatest pleasure, was the few hours he was able to spend, during his infrequent visits to town, in the square frame house on the street overlooking the turbulent, muddy South Saskatchewan.

Helen Parsons was no product of the prairie. Only two years ago her father had come from Calgary, driven by a weak throat to relinquish an extensive practice in the larger city for the less fatiguing demands of a town that seldom saw sufficient snow for sleighing yet basked in the beautiful ozone and dryness of elevated Alberta. Helen had spent the school terms East, so that when change of venue failed to counteract her father's affliction, and the cemetery on the hill showed a new stone, prairie life offered the orphan more of the relief of outside interest than the more familiar East. With an aunt who had kept house for them since her mother's death, and a servant brought with them from the East six years before—and with sufficient money to choose her residence—she had continued to live in the house her father built.

In the Mounted Police she found an unexpected congeniality. Men of birth, many of them, and all of them overflowing with the tastes that grow from education, their clean-souled sense of duty and the ease with which they retained their wider interest in life and learning, was a never-failing study to her. Constable Mahon, the youngster of the local division, was her first friend among them. The shyly worded invitation to visit their ranch, that he had brought from the rancher relatives whose eighteen years of comparative isolation on the ranges near the Cypress Hills had almost cut them off from their friends back East, had vividly impressed on her his boyishly frank enthusiasms and his respectful yet dignified courtesies to her sex.

Not unnaturally she had noticed, too, the fair, curly hair of the messenger, his expressive face and clear eye. And on that first memorable visit to the 3-bar-Y ranch—from which she returned profoundly envious of her younger cousin Mira—she was pleased to meet him many times again. In his frank way he had told her the story of the mother back in England, left with a mite on which to rear a restless and ambitious young son. With the sympathy of one who understood she had followed his sketch of the struggle to obtain the education his father had planned for him without leaving the funds for carrying it out. And with a curious eagerness that sometimes puzzled her, she had attempted to provide him with some of the mental stimulus for which she saw he was in almost physical need.

To her, as to Mahon, their intimacy seemed nothing more than the appeal of kindred interests in the midst of mental isolation. Her plentiful leisure she spent in reading books and magazines she knew he would enjoy discussing, and later she took *The Times*, in the belief, that the best in him would be fostered and developed by a continual mental association with his early days

in England. Always he visited her on his flying trips to headquarters; often she saw more of him, though seldom alone, while visiting her cousins. For Helen wasted no time or effort in seizing opportunities for emulating the outdoor skill of her cousin Mira.

Mahon made straight from the Inspector for the Esplanade, on which lived Medicine Hat's four-hundred. The Parsons' house was almost the last on the street, where it began to lose its definition before the free prairie just over the hill. Like all but two of its fellows on the street, the house was frame, rather gaudily painted as an offset to the drabness of the prairie and the insignificant shade cast by the civis trees not yet arrived at a useful size.

As he swung the gate shut behind him he fancied he heard a muffled report from the house, and as he stood on the front step awaiting admission, the report came again, this time plain enough to his experienced ears. So that when a gray-haired woman, the aunt, opened the door, he stepped inside hurriedly.

"What was that?" And he answered himself. "Who's using a revolver?"

The aunt threw her hands up helplessly. "Only Helen doing things with those horrible firearms in the cellar again. Goodness knows I've tried to make her see that these things—shooting, galloping about, and throwing a rope—aren't accomplishments a lady should have. She keeps on—"

Mahon made for the cellar door. Opening it noiselessly, he had descended two steps when an explosion, startling in the confined space, made him stumble. He stooped instinctively to see the target—a row of nails in a post, three of them driven in by bullets. With surprise his eye measured the distance to the markswoman—ten yards at least.

"Don't you know better by this time, auntie, than to come down here while I'm practicing?" laughed the girl. "Some day you'll fall and spoil my aim."

"That would be a shame," he said tersely.

She did not exclaim or start, but the revolver fell from her fingers with a clatter. "You!" she murmured in confusion.

"It would be impudence," he said, "to remind such a shot that dropping a 32 on a cement floor is not generally considered a game for girls to play."

"Both were accidents," she laughed. "I don't shoot like that often."

He saw the marks of scores of bullets in the stone wall. "Will you tell me what it all means? It is the newest addition to the unexpected."

She stooped to collect the remains of a box of cartridges and kicked the empty ones under a work-bench.

"It's only a dilettante at another prairie art," she returned lightly. "I'm jealous of Mira. But you may contemplate my idle sport without fear. I'll never make a shot."

"Your modesty is unconvincing," he said, feeling the ends of the nails. "Besides I have already seen you become a rider—"

"Just so-so."

"—and an outdoor girl of surprising ability."

She started up the steps. "I don't like horses," she threw down to him, "I'm frightened of firearms, and I'm scared to death of cattle. And there's little else in the West outdoors."

"You conceal your terrors almost as well as you shoot," he assured her.

"I wish," appealed the aunt, when they were in the room above, "that you could convince her how unladylike these things are."

"I'm afraid," he sighed, "that my word would have little weight. Miss Parsons has evidently made up her mind to be a cowgirl—or perhaps she's going to join the Police."

The older woman tittered, and Helen disappeared into the kitchen to wash her hands.

"When you two have threshed out this momentous problem," she called back, "perhaps Constable Mahon will give me the latest gossip from the ranges. The monthly edition of the Cypress Hills social notes has no time to direct his attention to events in a town, with two weekly papers."

They ran over lightly then the events of town and prairie of the weeks since he had been in town—the latest industry promised Medicine Hat, the injury to a cowboy thrown from his horse, a case of petty thieving in a small farming section on the Gros Ventre, a new railway station announced for a mushroom village establishing itself on the prairie three miles east of Medicine Hat. And then she inquired about Dutch Henry. He found himself wondering why the tragic incident of only three days ago had not been mentioned sooner.

"We'll get him yet," he fumed. "It isn't just a case of rustling now; surely the Montana authorities will help us at last! . . . It's that maze of Hills that foils us. If we only had force enough to search them out as we know the

prairie we could do something. The Inspector has promised me a chance some day—unless we get them soon."

"It would be very dangerous for a Policeman to roam in there alone, wouldn't it?" she asked, after a moment's silence. "Even if he knew every foot of it." And when he laughed she went on. "Especially dangerous now. Dutch Henry and the other rustlers know what is in store for them. They'll shoot to kill. They have all the advantage in the Hills."

"You forget the psychology of the uniform," he laughed. "Anyway, that's what we're here for. We're going to get 'em. It will mean lots of riding—and some shooting, I suppose. But the sport of it—the excitement!"

She saw the gleam of anticipation in his face and frowned. "You're only a boy yet. No wonder they call you Boy!"

"Let's hope the Boy will ride in some day with Dutch Henry—or his scalp." He gathered up his Stetson and gauntlets. "I'll have a big story then to tell you. He'll come back—we know that. Rustling, like gambling, is too hard for most men to stop. By the way, I'll probably be out at the Stantons' within the next few days. Any message?"

She reflected. "Tell Mira," she said suddenly, "that I'm coming out for a long visit very soon . . . in a day or two. . . . Perhaps I'll go to-morrow."

"Helen Parsons," protested her aunt, "you're not going away out there again so soon! You never said a word about it to me. There's all the—"

But Helen only waved a laughing hand and closed the door after Policeman Mahon.

CHAPTER VI

BLUE PETE'S STRATEGY

In the cool brilliance of early evening, ten days later, Corporal Mahon, too mentally occupied these days to be unduly proud of his new stripes, rode out from the Post. The Inspector wanted Blue Pete at last, and in a hurry. Something grim lay behind it, and his errand assumed the seriousness of an arrest.

He was not happy. With the order had come the depressing news that Sergeant Denton's condition had not materially improved. For days he had been hovering on the brink of death. The bullet had not only shattered his thigh but entered the abdomen in such a way that it would have ended before this the career of any man with a less clean and wholesome record. The doctors feared now that there was only one hope, an operation, but the chances of success were so remote as to postpone it except to forestall death itself.

The grief of it recalled that other sorrow—the escape of Dutch Henry. For three days three of them had scoured the borders of the Hills, and for ten days the prairie to the south had been patrolled night and day, though even in the short Western night a dozen Policemen could not be certain that the rustler did not elude them. At last they had been forced to the conclusion that the outlaw had reached the Badlands. But they knew he would return—they always did.

Mars moved along the indefinite trail without guidance—he had traveled that way too often not to know his destination—and presently, spread below them in a valley that was a rude garden in the surrounding waste, a group of ranch houses appeared.

The largest building, unpainted, ugly, further deformed by the addition of three rude lean-tos—the main ranch house—stood by itself. The other shacks, unsightly, irregular, were scattered without apparent method. Even the four corrals which filled the rest of the valley were surrounded by twisted, dilapidated fences that added to the ugliness of the scene. A slow-moving girl, squatty and unkempt, was stripping a clothes-line near the ranch house. Mahon shuddered at the wretchedness of it all.

And then the whole scene altered. The door of the ranch house opened and another girl bounded out, four huge Russian wolf-hounds crowding her heels. The Policeman sat watching her lithe gambols as she held out her hand to a bounding dog and whirled to interpose her body against the rush that followed, the tinkle of her heart-free laughter making even the lazy servant stop to look. But at sight of the rider against the skyline the girl stiffened. For a second or two she returned his stare and then reëntered the ranch house.

Mahon's eyes wrinkled in speculation. Many a time he had been puzzled by such trivial happenings at the 3-bar-Y ranch. He had advanced but a few yards when a man emerged from the ranch house and without looking up disappeared into the second largest building fifty yards away. Almost immediately two men came out and sauntered off toward the corrals. The sudden burst of movement about the ranch puzzled Mahon the more. As he drew up before the door the girl reappeared, moving out to him slowly, almost shyly, followed in state by the wolf-hounds. The Policeman slipped from his horse, hat in hand, and met her eagerly.

"I was in hopes you needed the Police," he bantered, after a long look at her bent head. "From where I was it had all the appearance of a desperate struggle. I thought—I hoped you might need me."

He did not know which he liked best in Mira, these strange moments of shyness or other moods of cold and repelling indifference which he sometimes saw in her. But always he succumbed to the charm of her beauty and grace, to the scarcely admitted evidence that she was always conscious of his presence.

Her eyes shifted nervously toward the corrals, but the woman of her conquered whatever was in her mind, and her lips pouted in an utterly feminine way.

"The Police have too big an opinion of theirselves," she said.

"The Policeman who is lucky enough to be on hand when you really need him might well feel big."

At the half-serious thread in his banter her hand dropped to the ears of the nearest dog, which nestled closer to her side, nuzzling under her arm.

"I'd rather have these. I understand them better."

"You give them more opportunity." He saw where he was drifting and altered his tone. "We're busy enough, but never too busy to keep an eye on the few women on the ranges."

"And it doesn't make no difference—*any* difference who they are." She had started with an emotion that unaccountably disturbed him, but at the grammatical slip her face flushed and the end came weakly, stammeringly. "Are you learning—teaching other women, too, the right way to say things?"

He did not understand her mood. It was one of his self-imposed duties—never anything but a pleasure, indeed—to lead her gently into forms of speech that jarred less on his sensitive ear than those common to the workaday prairie. Part of her naïve appeal to him was her desire for some of the advantages denied her in her isolated life, and he had lent himself to it eagerly. "Helen don't talk like I do," she had said to him one day. "I don't get no chance here. There's only the boys, and they've lived here near all their lives, and the cowboys." He had purchased for her in town the books he thought she might need—which she refused to use until he accepted payment—and in their limited moments together the lessons were continued, without, Mahon hoped, any one else knowing of it. Why the pleasant task was shrouded in his mind with a strange desire for secrecy after the first few lessons he could never quite work out. Mira had seemed to feel that way and he had fallen in with it.

He tried to turn her remark off lightly.

"I have only time for one," he laughed. "And others would be so very stupid by comparison."

"There's lots of other work for the Police," she broke in.

It was natural that Dutch Henry's escape should come into his mind, and he replied stiffly: "We're doing the best we can, Mira. Don't forget we're short-staffed. I've been in the saddle during the past two months double the hours expected of us."

"And still we've got to look after ourselves—mostly. . . . But I suppose there'll always be rustling where there's cattle."

Looking down on her face hugged in against the dogs, he was sensitive to the beauty of her wild nature as seldom before.

"Perhaps some day—when we've got the rustlers—you'll remember there's always one Mounted Policeman at your call."

She buried her face deeper in the neck of one of the dogs.

"These are my real friends," she murmured. "Ain't—aren't you, Jupiter, and you, Neptune, and Minerva, and Juno?" Her hands passed lovingly from

one to the other. “Pretty names, ain’t they? Helen named them—something from old books. Lots prettier than I’d give them first.” Her face was raised to his.

The rudeness of her language made him wince; he wondered, looking down on the beautiful profile and the curves of her graceful figure if her conversation could ever be brought to match her form. This evening she wore two clamoring shades of pink, vivid and terrible to him; and almost overpowering as was her vitality there arose in his mind unbidden the picture of her gentler, less startling cousin.

It confused him when she went on.

“Helen is here. Did you know? She’s paying us a nice long visit this time. She’s out on the prairie somewhere. We don’t see very much of her. She’s learning to ride, and shoot, and—and do things—things I didn’t think a real lady need know about. But she wants to. Right after breakfast she’s off to the Hills or somewhere, and she’s not often back till dark. When there ain’t things to do here I go with her. It’s lovely in the Hills these days, so cool and dark, and Helen knows the pretty places already.”

Mahon recalled his errand.

“Is Blue Pete around?”

She swung to him suddenly without answering for a moment.

“Don’t know. Likely out on the range. Want to see him? Gret!” The clumsy girl left the clothes-line and lumbered up. “See if Pete’s in the bunkhouse.”

The harshness of the command jarred the Corporal, but the servant did as she was bid without a word. Two men came from the bunkhouse, one the half-breed, the other tall, spare, with a face hard and weather-beaten from riding in every weather, and a sternness about his mouth that seemed to defy anything like a smile. The latter strode forward in long, firm steps, the grimness of him accentuated by the tightly buttoned collarless shirt.

“Hello, Joe—Pete! Everybody taking a holiday?”

Joe Stanton’s lips twitched in what was to him probably a smile. “Did you hope there’d be only women about the place?”

The crude suggestion angered Mahon.

“From what Mira hinted I thought you’d surely be out doing the work the Police have failed at—guarding your herds.”

Joe Stanton glanced quickly at Mira, who laughed awkwardly. The half-breed was watching furtively. And Mahon had that old sense of mystery that irritated while it puzzled him.

"We're hoping for a new man on the division soon," he went on. "We're going to make it hot for the rustlers."

Joe sniffed. "One expects to lose a calf or a stupid doggie now and then. We ain't complaining. Us ranchers should be able to do something for ourselves—and not go blatting to the Police about every little thing."

"Your sister thinks—"

"Mira looks for more than those most interested," the brother jerked.

"Yes, we haven't heard a word from the 3-bar-Y ranch for months," said Mahon carelessly, rubbing his horse's neck. "The rustlers seem to be passing you up."

"Oh, we've lost a few," replied the rancher hastily, "but you might as well try to stop the sun as every bit of rustling in a cattle country."

"An expert like Blue Pete should be some help." Somehow the Corporal knew he should not have said it—it was like a breath of confidence, though he could not figure it out until the events of the next few hours threw a new light on it. Brother and sister turned their eyes on the half-breed, who dropped his head.

"You're to come in to the barracks, Pete," ordered the Corporal. "The Inspector wants you."

An indefinite constraint fell on the group. Mira and Joe were sternly watching the half-breed's confused face. The latter cursed under his breath and expectorated impudently.

"Tell th' Inspector to go to—" He caught himself in time, covering his mouth with his hand and looking in embarrassment at Mira.

But the girl's eyes were anything but shocked, and the grimness in her brother's face lifted. Mahon, startled by the unexpected turn, was flushing to the quick anger of a defied Police order when another figure approached—a man so like Joe Stanton as to leave no doubt of his identity.

Blue Pete went on rapidly.

"Them's my bosses—Joe and Jim Stanton. I'm paid to work for them."

Mahon's anger blazed. It was not only defiance to authority, to the Inspector, but the unfriendliness of a man he had himself discovered and treated as a friend. The veiled mockery in the faces of the two Stantons—even, he imagined, in Mira's—determined his action.

"You're coming, whether you like or not," he warned, and stepped forward.

But Blue Pete was watching. Leaping back he covered the Corporal with a huge revolver and almost instantly fired. A gasp broke from the two brothers. Mira threw herself forward, arms outstretched, a stifled cry on her lips. She saw Mahon's hand raise wonderingly and, half swooning, she reached toward him. But he was still on his feet, a ragged hole showing in the tip of his hat.

The next few seconds were full of action. Before the ring of the shot had died away among the ranch buildings the half-breed's big body hurled itself across the few yards to Mahon's horse, and almost as his fingers clutched the reins Mars was away, Blue Pete bending low over its neck, looking back over his shoulder—waving his hand.

Mahon's revolver and rifle were with the saddle. He rushed to the stables and led out an ugly, yellow-blotched pinto—Whiskers. At the house he paused for a rifle.

By this time the sun was low. The shadow from the Hills was flung out across the prairie, to the east and north as far as he could see, and the clear air tingled with approaching night. Far ahead Mars was running well under a master hand, but a few minutes later the Corporal was surprised—and a bit irritated—to find that the pinto was gaining. In a quarter of an hour he was almost within shot, but the rules of the Service did not permit it, even had it been worth the delay in the growing darkness. Mars did not seem to be trying, and he dug his heels into the pinto in a race with night.

Something moved out suddenly through the gloom and ranged alongside.

"What is it, Corporal?"

"Helen!" In his surprise the pinto missed its stride.

"Not—rustlers?"

Even then he was surprised at her handling of her mount and the sureness of her seat. Her voice was trembling with fear.

"No, no! It's Blue Pete. We want him. Go back. It'll be dark in a few minutes. . . . No, change horses. I hadn't time to saddle."

"No use. Master's too tired. Been out all day. We're both nearly all in."

"Then get back to the ranch. Give me your quirt."

The pinto drew away under the lash.

The sun sank behind the flat horizon suddenly, as if ashamed of having delayed so long, and almost as he marveled at it night had fallen. Ahead lay a coulee with but two outlets. He thrilled with the thought that the half-breed was running himself into a cul-de-sac, and instead of following he cut across toward the other end. But Blue Pete did not reappear. The Corporal drew in and rode downward.

In there it was almost black. He was creeping forward carefully when a peculiar whistle which he found difficult to locate brought Whiskers to a sudden stop. And then it sank to its knees and rolled over to its side, Mahon stepping off. He knew the pinto was not winded and twice he lashed it in vain with the quirt. He left it and walked carefully along the ravine, rifle ready. A familiar double whistle, almost the first thing he connected with the half-breed, made him curse himself for a fool, for the pinto rushed past in the darkness. He fired but missed, tried to follow and fell. And as he was picking himself up a tantalizing laugh came back to him and he could hear the gallop of the pinto out on the prairie. As there was nothing better to do he proceeded to tell himself what manner of fool he was.

"Corporal Mahon!"

Somehow he did not feel surprised that Helen Parsons was there calling down to him through the darkness; but what did touch a chord that responded was the anxiety in her tone. He stumbled up the sloping bank to where she awaited him.

"You'll think I'm a fine Policeman—and with my new stripes," he growled.

"You had no chance at this time of the night," she reassured him gently. "I—I just wanted to tell you here's your horse. He left it."

To the Corporal, furious at his second failure, it was only insult added to injury that the half-breed should think so lightly of him—and rifle and pistol were in their places. He strained his ears into the darkness for any sound to justify continuing the pursuit, but could hear nothing. Helen had moved off to the north and he followed.

At midnight he was speaking to the Inspector over the telephone from Medicine Lodge.

"You darned idiot!" was his reception. Then the older man laughed. "Never mind, Mahon, it was my fault. Forget all about it. I should have known better."

"If you had only told me—if I had had an inkling—"

"There's nothing you need to know," broke in the Inspector in the old voice of authority, "—not yet."

Mahon hung up the receiver thoughtfully. "How was I to know?" he asked himself aloud. "I wonder how he came to suspect."

CHAPTER VII

BLUE PETE MOVES ON

The slanting rays of a dying sun fell across the valley, throwing long shadows from each ranch house. Cold was snapping in the air, prophesying frost in the coulees. The wind had dropped, and the tiny trail of smoke rose unbent from the ranch house. From the bunkhouse drifted the uncertain music of an abused mouthorgan, and occasionally a half-worded song in a voice impatient at the tardiness of the indifferent musician.

From a distant corral came a plaintive bawling, falling at times to a gentle moo.

Joe Stanton slouched from the ranch house and stood listening, hands on hips; and presently his brother joined him.

"Hell of a row for respectable ranchers!" laughed Jim bitterly.

The other shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the open door.

"Better be moving." He pulled out a large silver watch. "We've a good three hours of riding."

They reappeared with short jackets over their vests and rifles across their shoulders, and silently entered the stables. A big ungainly figure stretched on the bare ground before the bunkhouse rolled lazily over and a pair of unsteady eyes followed them through the stable door. The two brothers, leading out their horses, mounted and rode to the ranch house.

At a whistle the door opened and Mira appeared with the four wolf-hounds on leash.

"Down! Down!"

Joe whistled impatiently, and the hounds, released, bounded about the horse.

"Back, Neptune! Back, Juno!"

Two of the dogs whimpered and trotted slowly back to Mira, where they stood in haughty resignation watching their fortunate fellows gamboling over the rise after the disappearing horsemen.

The girl reached down and fondled their ears, speaking to them in cooing, gentle words.

Up on the level of the prairie one of the brothers buttoned his jacket more closely about his neck. "Looks as if it might be June," he muttered, pointing to a bank of fleecy cloud close to the horizon. "Like our luck to have a rainstorm on a big night."

The other shivered. "Feels like April to me. I don't know what's getting into me these nights. I get the shudders. Must be getting scared." He laughed bitterly and lashed out at an excited dog that had leaped against his leg.

Joe made no reply. Miles on their way to the Hills he spoke.

"I feel the same—sometimes. It isn't our style, Jim, that's what. I remember when we'd have been ashamed to think we'd come to this—and not so long ago. I'll be happy as I ever hope to be when they get Dutch Henry and his gang . . . and a decent rancher can live square and honest. As it is—"

He shrugged his shoulders and chirruped to his horse. Into the starlit darkness side by side they galloped.

Back in the valley Mira stared after them, seeing nothing but the upper edges of the bank of clouds. The two dogs, wearying of the silence, nuzzled into her hands. She sighed and went in, but a few minutes later seated herself on a bench before the door, a book in her hand, which she opened carefully and rested on her knees. With twisting lips and frowning brow she began to form rudely shaped letters on its blank pages. But her mind was elsewhere, and presently the pencil dropped from her fingers. The darkness deepened. She leaned her head against the wall behind her and stared into the dotted stars.

One of the cattle in the distant corral broke into sudden complaint, and she looked across through the darkness with a shrug of her shapely shoulders and began to collect pencil and book.

Blue Pete raised himself from before the bunkhouse and came swiftly across the yard. The mouthorgan had ceased long ago, and the intermittent clamor from the corral was still for the moment. A far-away coyote raised its dismal howl and broke off suddenly. In all the world were only the two of them—the graceful girl thoughtfully standing before the ranch house, and the hulking half-breed moving toward her.

"Are you lonesome, miss?"

She started. He was fumbling his ragged Stetson, and she smiled into his dusky face.

"I don't think it's that, Pete. But I did want like blazes to go too. They never take me now—and it is such sport! All I get from the wolf hunts is them."

She pushed the door open and pointed to several gray skins on the floor. The hired girl had lit the shaded lamp and the room looked cozy and soft. Blue Pete craned his neck to see it all, a hungry look in his eyes.

"Come on in, Pete. It's such a still night—spooky. I believe I am lonesome—and Gret is such rotten company. Come in and let me learn you this." She tapped her exercise book.

The half-breed grinned uncomfortably.

"I'll be goin', miss."

"Rats, Pete! Come in. You know the boys have the run of the house. This ain't no—*isn't* no drawing-room. Besides I want to show off my learning. I'm reading fine now—I think. I'm awful proud to-day. I've started a letter to Helen—first I ever wrote. . . . I used to think I didn't want any learning"—her voice was low and plaintive—"but just to ride and ride and ride. I should ought to be a boy."

She sank into a chair beside the table, resting her cheek in her hand. "Ever since ma died I've done a man's work as well as a woman's—better, I guess." She was looking doubtfully about the room.

"You beat anythin' I ever seen," he declared stoutly.

She laughed, and he clutched his hat and edged to the door.

"I like praise, Pete—I need it. I don't take a bit to the learning. Listen to me read. I'm afraid to do it for any one else. The boys would laugh, and Corporal Mahon says—" She stopped, blushing. "I guess he don't think I know much. I'm at the second chapter." She pulled from the table drawer a book carefully covered in brown paper. "It isn't much, I don't think—not exciting—but it's all he had—the Corporal, I mean."

Laboriously the pages turned. "Here it is. It's about an ugly girl with a lot of muff sisters." The book dropped to the table as she turned to the half-breed. "I wonder—perhaps Corporal Mahon thinks I'm ugly."

"Oh, hell, Miss Mira, not ugly!" He clapped his hand to his mouth. "I don't mean hell, I mean—mean fudge."

"You don't know what he thinks," she replied coquettishly as she leaped to her feet and came out into the middle of the room. "What do you think of my new skirt, Pete? Made it all myself."

"I ain't no jedge o' style, Miss Mira," he stammered. "It—it wudn't do to wear on a long ride. Might be fine in town."

"That's what I wanted," she cried, clapping her hands. "I want to look more like Helen. She's the kind men like, not—not cowgirls. A girl like me hasn't no chance with one like Helen."

The half-breed shifted uneasily from foot to foot and then came stumblingly but manfully to her defense. "Lor'! Miss Mira, I'd stake yuh 'gainst the world."

"Oh, you'll spoil me, Pete. You and me—I mean I—has got along pretty well, haven't we? And Joe and Jim like you. They say you're as good as three of the others. We thought we'd saw the last of you the time you let daylight through the Corporal's Stetson. I knew you wasn't trying to do for him. But how did you get off? The boys didn't tell me."

The half-breed squirmed. "Got to th' Inspector fust—got down on my knees and hoped t' God he'd fergive me—an' all that bunk. He didn't want me bad. The Corporal was seein' things."

"But what did he want you for?"

"Oh, fool-questions 'bout my grandad, an' the kin' o' weather gave my uncles rheumatism, an' the len'th o' Whiskers' off ear. A felluh's got to put his innards on the table before the Mounted Police. I've got to be an awful liar, jes' through that."

She laughed but quickly became serious.

"They seem to think we're all rustlers. I suppose that's their business. Nowadays if a rancher isn't real sure every little calf is his he's apt to get a couple of years. It's—it's enough to make us rustlers."

He was moving again toward the door.

"Going, Pete? But I haven't given you that lesson."

"'Tain't no use wastin' time on me, Miss Mira. I don't care a cuss what they think o' me."

He knew by her flaming face that what he said meant more to her than he intended, and he stumbled quickly out. A gentle breeze now wafting down the valley beat pleasantly on his face, and he stood a moment, hat in

hand, looking up at the starlit sky. Into a rough seat before the bunkhouse he threw himself, his hands drooping over his knees.

The light in the building behind him went out. Picking up his hat, he moved noiselessly toward the corrals, from which only at long intervals came the mutterings of the cows. The half-breed leaned against the rails, staring into the dimness full of gently breathing animals, and then, testing the rails with his hands, climbed over and dropped inside. Like one of the shadows he glided to the nearest form and stood beside it for a time, motionless. Gently he laid his fingers on its side. The animal heaved a half-frightened sigh and started to rise, but the half-breed withdrew his hand and waited. And again his fingers crept out and felt carefully over the shoulder. From animal to animal he continued, his experienced fingers reading as well as eyes. When he was through he re-scaled the fence and thoughtfully climbed the hill, giving the bunkhouse a wide berth.

Up there the sharpness of the valley was modified, but the wind was stronger and away to the southwest the clouds were piling fast. With ears strained toward the Hills he stood a long time before throwing himself at last on his back. He did not sleep, but at intervals rolled to his side to listen. The wind became more gusty, and presently a drop of rain struck his cheek, increasing quickly to a heavy shower. But he did not move. A trickle ran from his Stetson to his leather chaps as he sat up. A glimmer in the eastern sky showed that the short Western night was passing. The rain was falling quietly. Blue Pete rose to his knee to look to the south and, slinking back to the bunkhouse, threw himself on the wet ground.

It was still dim morning when a group dropped over the hill at the opposite end of the valley, two weary cows in the lead hastening their gait at sight of their kind in the corrals. As the horses drew nearer, the half-breed, peering over his arm, noticed their lathered sides; even the wolf-hounds trotted with lolling tongues.

"Wonder he don't freeze to death," whispered Joe to his brother. "He sleeps there half the time, rain or wind."

"Must have led a dog's life," returned the other sleepily, sliding from his saddle before the stables.

Blue Pete yawned aloud, rubbed his eyes, raised himself shakily to his feet, and started toward the brothers.

"Get any?" he inquired with another yawn.

The brothers glanced swiftly at each other.

"Not a damn wolf did we see," Jim filled in hurriedly. "Nearly ran our horses to death, too." He picked up a handful of straw and began to rub his horse's thighs.

"Things is gettin' too quiet fer me, too," sympathized the half-breed. "Think I'll move along. Never stuck t' a job so long in my life before."

"What's the matter?" demanded Joe. "Don't we pay you enough?"

"Hell! Wot d'I need with money?" The half-breed drew two ten dollar bills from his pocket and tossed them into the air. One he caught, the other fell to the straw and he recovered it lazily. "I've got to be wanderin', that's all. Yuh cudn't keep me fer five hundred a month. I'll go over to Wampole's —he needs a man. When I git tired I'll move again. Guess I kin fin' a job 'bout here easy 'nough. . . . Mebbe some day I'll come back."

The Stantons, reluctant as they were to lose their best rider, best roper, hardest working cow-puncher and the best shot in the ranching country, recognized the symptoms. It was only the cowboy fever, useless to combat by argument or offer.

"Yuh bin mighty decent," the half-breed went on unsteadily, "an'—an' I'm mighty sorry. I'll do wot I kin fer yuh any time."

And as the puzzled brothers looked into each other's face, he was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

BLUE PETE WINS SOME CIGARS

Wampole welcomed the big half-breed vociferously. Old man Wampole had long envied the Stantons their new puncher whose marvelous skill with the cattle had been discussed in every ranch and bunkhouse about the Hills. Even the ugly little pinto had come in for praise where good horses were neither scarce nor dear. Wampole's large herds ranged to the east of the Stantons', from the Hills northward, a tract of coulee-lined prairie that provided all the shade the prairie offers at its best. At the northern boundary lay the Hills, before them a small lake kept alive throughout the year by sources within the Hills themselves. Except in the dry season a stream ran from it through his range on its way northward to the South Saskatchewan. Wampole was reputed—with the Stantons and a couple more near Maple Creek—to be among the wealthiest prairie citizens.

There Blue Pete remained only a few weeks, varied as was his work, with good pay, pleasant companions and reasonable conditions. Then he asked for what was coming to him and disappeared. During the winter he was not seen in the district. Cowboys and ranchers talked of him and the pinto, and the Police wondered. But in the early spring he was back in Medicine Hat. Inspector Parker talked with him in his office, as he sooner or later talked with every stranger in the district. And the half-breed's first work that year was with a third rancher near the Hills. No one inquired where he had spent the winter. By round-up time he was with another outfit, and before the summer was over two others had eagerly taken him on and reluctantly seen him go.

During the summer the efforts of the Police to stop the rustling met with unusual success. Each month had its record of recovered cattle and horses, and sometimes the captures were so spectacular as to puzzle even the ranchers. While the stealing continued, only a few of the stolen animals got out of the country. Even the Cypress Hills seemed to be yielding to the force of the law. The strange feature of it was their failure to capture the rustlers themselves. More than once the cowboys were thrilled by the sight of the Police galloping toward the Hills; and a day or two later it would be in every one's mouth that another bunch of stolen horses had been recovered for their owners. The rustlers grew more wary. The Inspector, not satisfied with the success of his men, grew more grim.

Blue Pete's fever continued. Between his terms of employment he always disappeared for a week or more, and once he spent a fortnight with a rancher southwest of Lethbridge where the next ranching district began and continued to the foothills of the Rockies. Several short visits to Medicine Hat made him a familiar figure on the streets of that cosmopolitan town, his huge, loose-knit frame, swarthy face and impossible eyes, the daredevil atmosphere about him, providing many a tidbit of thrilling narrative to be carried back East by imaginative tourists.

Medicine Hat was then in the early throes of industrial ambitions. Its natural gas was spreading its fame throughout America and England, and pioneers looking for factory sites were the town's guests from the moment of their arrival. Its unearned reputation across the border as "the breeder of weather" was being fought by a systematic propaganda that was justifying its cost. The moving spirits of the city decided to go in for sports. Professional baseball was discussed, the result being the formation of the Western Canada Baseball League, more commonly known as "The Twilight League," because in the long evenings of the prairie the games were started at seven-thirty. Medicine Hat was out for anything that promised publicity.

Sauntering down the main street on one of his visits, Blue Pete—quirt and chaps and Stetson and gauntlets and dotted neckerchief and all—came on a group of town youths and baseball players listening to the patter of a shooting gallery attendant, a stage creation of a cowboy, wilder and woollier than Blue Pete himself in several striking details. To all the exaggerated marks of hairy chaps, high-crowned Stetson, leather vest, high heels and weather-beaten skin, he had added hair matted with oil, jet black mustache, and spurs that clattered with every move. Even as he leaned over the counter of the open-fronted ramshackle store he towered above the crowd, but his talk lacked the oiliness of experience, though he knew his audience. Blue Pete grinned at the scene.

Across the back of the interior extended the targets—a row of stationary white birds, others that revolved in and out, and tiny white spots that moved up and down, back and forward, with an irregularity that defied any ordinary shot. But most elusive was a ball jerked at the end of a string by some eccentric mechanism.

"Come on, sports," encouraged the cowboy. "Try yer hand. Three shots for a dime—three of 'em, mind you." He held up three spread fingers. "A strike means a seegar—a rattlin', clinkin', gi-me-another seegar, with a mile-long smoke. Between you and me"—he leaned confidentially across the counter—"you'd pay a quarter for its mate in any bar in town. The

moving birds—two seegars. The little disks—five. And as for the ball—the shot who can do that has enough seegars to do him till Christmas—ten o' them. All for one shot—count 'em—ten. Two dollars and a half's worth of seegars for one measly little shot. Try yer hand and show the ladies."

Blue Pete, from his point of observation in the crowd at the end of the counter was watching the darting ball with an amused smile, scarcely listening to the "spieler." Not even the baseball boys wanted to break the ice; and the cowboy, stepping back, performed a few dexterous tricks with the lasso. The half-breed's eyes suddenly shifted from the targets to the whirling rope, then to the black mustache of the performer. The noose, kept full-circle, whirled and squirmed and twisted, now high above the performer's head, now out before him close to the floor, and again with his body as a center. Moving with little apparent effort, it touched no part of his person or the floor as trick sprang from trick with marvelous skill.

Blue Pete rubbed his chin. His squinting eyes began to dance, and he drew further back into the crowd and crouched a little. The cowboy ended the exhibition, seized a rifle from beneath the counter, and turning quickly to the targets pulled the trigger. A black spot appeared on one of the moving birds—another—and another.

"Ye can't miss, ye see," he shouted, facing about and carelessly replacing the rifle beneath the counter. "Have a seegar on me."

A youth, grinning with embarrassment, raised one of the rifles lying on the counter, took nervous aim, and fired. One of the larger stationary birds blackened at its very edge. The cowboy slammed a cigar on the counter, and the successful contestant, rather than risk a reputation thus acquired, passed the rifle to a friend. In two shots the latter missed, but a cigar was handed him as bait.

Three or four of the baseball team tried their hands with little success, but a cigar was handed to each. A Mounted Policeman stopped on the outskirts of the crowd.

"Here, Mountie!" The cowboy reached a rifle toward him. "Show these sports what you can do—how the Police shoot. Come in and join the merry throng."

But the Policeman smiled and passed on. Some one suggested that the cowboy himself try a shot at the jerking ball, a request that was ignored until the crowd took it up and began to jeer.

"Hell!" jerked the cowboy. "I'm not that kin' of a shot. I can tickle its ribs once out of five—no more. Thur's only one man can smash it oftener—p'raps two—and the second ain't travelin' in these parts . . . fer mighty good reasons connected with his health," he added, winking. "Anyway, I don't want to rob myself of ten good seegars." And the crowd was with him again.

Blue Pete sidled up to the end of the counter and, unobserved, picked up a rifle. The shot rang out so unexpectedly that the cowboy whirled, hand to hip. Blue Pete blinked. He had missed. With a snarl he thumped the rifle back on the counter.

"Gor-swizzle!" he growled, and made a sudden movement. There was a loud report, a smoking revolver pointed from his hand—and tiny bits of white strewed the floor. The dancing ball was gone. He shifted his aim and five more shots came in rapid succession, a black smudge showing each time on the smallest moving targets.

Then he quietly shoved the revolver into his pocket, dropped two bits of silver on the counter, and held out his hand. The cowboy was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Thunderin' Moses!" he muttered. "That's one o' the two!"

"Any more o' them balls, Bilsy? An' shove out a *real* rifle."

The cowboy glanced after the Policeman now disappearing up the street. "Drop in this evening and have a smoke, Pete," he invited carelessly, and placed a bundle of cigars on the counter. Turning to the crowd he continued his "spiel." "See how easy it is, boys. Six shots and he carried off nearly a box o' the rattlin'est, clinkin'est seegars in town. A han'ful for every shot. Come along—"

Blue Pete passed up the street, his hands full of cigars, his forehead wrinkled. That night, when the door over the counter of the shooting gallery was down and locked, he lounged along the dilapidated walk to the side door and opened it without knocking. Bilsy, busy among the targets, nodded and continued his work with a whitewash brush. Blue Pete glanced hastily about the room—and picked up the only chair and moved it near the door, where he drew out his corncob pipe and proceeded to fill it. Bilsy, who had stopped to watch, returned to his work briskly.

"Wot's the game, Bilsy?"

"You ain't blind, are you?"

"Sure not! An' I'm seein' with more'n my eyes. I never seen Bilsy doin' nothin' more'n he seemed to be doin'."

Bilsy took up a hammer and rapped at an invisible part of the mechanism. "Then take a good look now, Pete. . . . Lots o' money in this."

"Ain't a millionaire yet, eh, Bilsy? Yuh seem a bit new . . . and narvus."

The half-breed was lazily scratching a match. Bilsy grunted.

"'T's the first time I ever done something I hadn't to keep an eye peeled for the sheriff," he said, after a moment.

"Don't seem a bit natcherel fer yuh to be missin' the fun."

The cowboy laughed and in a burst of confidence dropped his hammer.

"It's you has missed the fun—and we've missed you, Pete. Things ain't the same back thur without you. . . . Most of us didn't think you was scared."

The half-breed's smile was dangerously grim.

"I'd like to see yuh smile w'en yuh say that, Bilsy. Yuh'd be a fool not tuh."

And Bilsy smiled quickly and boisterously. "What d'you flit so sudden for then?"

"Didn' wan' to be in no inquest—with about eighteen o' yuh after me."

"You had yer guns," sneered Bilsy.

Blue Pete slapped his hip. "Same ole gun, me boy. Same ole rifle. Same ole eye. . . . But Whiskers looked best 'bout then. I wasn't shootin' that day. . . . Ef I hed bin, I 'magine the fus' corpse 'ud 'a' bin a young cuss o' the name o' Bilsy. No, do' move: I got me gun in this other pocket to-night—an' the muzzle's lookin' your way. . . . Don't forget, Bilsy, this ain't Montany. Shootin' this side o' the line's another game."

Bilsy's hand dropped and his face broke into a forced smile.

"Oh, blazes! What's the use of us scrapping! We ain't seen each other for a year. W'y didn't you come back? That's what we want to know."

"*Some* o' wot yuh want to know, yuh mean. . . . Some things I natcherl don' take tuh—an' robbin' women's one o' them. Blasted mean rustlin', that, I call it. Anyway, it's more fun over here."

Bilsy winked.

"Want a pal?"

"Thought this shootin' thing was big money—an' it's swindle enough even to suit you."

"Too—too blame tame for me," stammered Bilsy. "An' rustlin's not what it used to be across the line. Too many tender feet breaking into the game. An' the herds is smaller."

Blue Pete picked up a splinter and prodded his pipe. "W'y donchu try over here?"

The other cast him a swift glance beneath his brows but did not reply, and the half-breed completed his task before he continued.

"I do' know yer game, Bilsy, but I'm damn sure it's not this truck. No self-respectin' cowboy'd tumble to it. Ef yuh do' wan' to tell an ole friend, I'm not frettin'." He rose, one hand in his trouser pocket, and stepped backwards to the door.

"Is pertectin' women all you're doing in this country?" asked the cowboy suddenly.

"I jes' natcherl pertec' women, me boy—an' thar's one er two peaches about here, take my word fer it. . . . Well, s'long. How's Dutchy?"

The cowboy started. "Haven't seen him in a month."

"Eye's gone back on yuh, Bilsy? Tell him from me that Sergeant Denton's dyin'. W'en he does, Dutchy's number's up."

He reached about and opened the door, his face to the room, and went out.

From the narrow space between the shooting gallery and the building to the north a Mounted Policeman melted into the darkness.

When Blue Pete's steps had died away Bilsy dropped from his perch and locked the door. A man crawled from behind the targets, cursing under his breath.

"It's what I thought," he snarled.

"W'y didn't ye plug him when he called me a cuss?" fumed Bilsy. "I'd have taken my chances."

The other shrugged. "It's too damned unhealthy for me in this country already. It's not a game I can say I like—shooting a fellow when he isn't looking."

"You heard what he said—it'll be yours when the Sergeant croaks?"

"Perhaps," muttered his companion, "Sergeant Denton won't croak. . . . If he does it'll be fair shooting between Blue Pete and me."

CHAPTER IX

BILSY LEARNS THE TRUTH

Again and again on his visits Blue Pete found the shooting gallery the most conspicuous thing in town. Seldom did it seem busy, but Bilsy was always there, always soliciting business over the front counter from which the whole street, with the Police barracks just across the railway tracks, lay before him.

The half-breed never visited Inspector Parker now. He scarcely even nodded to the Policemen he met in town. Medicine Hat continued to be interested in him, none more than the "spieler" in the shooting gallery. Blue Pete felt that the instant he appeared on the main street. On one visit he reversed their rôles. Wandering round the corner, down a lane between two stores, and through the back door of the harness shop he patronized, he established himself carelessly in the front window. Bilsy was in sight as usual leaning over the counter, leisurely cleaning rifles, shouting, issuing laughing invitations—his eyes ever flitting up and down the street from the post office to the Police barracks.

Blue Pete went out the way he entered and sauntered past the shooting gallery, nodding over to Bilsy and continuing his way toward the barracks. At the corner he swung about suddenly, to find Bilsy watching him intently, but swiftly turning to his rifles when he saw he was observed. The half-breed retraced his steps.

"Millionaire yet, Bilsy?" he asked carelessly.

Bilsy wiped carefully about the hammer of the rifle before he replied. "Things is a bit dull now. Baseball team's on tour. . . . What about yerself? Whur ye working now?"

"Grantham's."

"Like it better than Stantons'—an' Wampole's, an' Fletcher's, an' the rest?"

"Thar all alike to me," growled the half-breed.

The fact was that he had that morning left Grantham's without the pay coming to him, on account of a politic but clear intimation that his services

were no longer desired. It rankled in him, for he knew it was not because his work was unsatisfactory.

"What's got into you since you flitted from the Badlands?" asked Bilsy. "You wasn't like this w'en you was with the Crane outfit, or the Nelson's or more you an' I know."

Something in the tone brought Blue Pete's eyes to his.

"Yer not made for it, Pete," said Bilsy suggestively. "Drop it an' come back to us. Thur's a bunch of us waiting for you to jump in on a big thing. Come on."

Blue Pete leaned dreamily over the counter, fumbling with his pipe.

"Bin thinkin' of it, Bilsy," he muttered.

"Think quick, man. Things is spoiling for you back thur. Dutchy's lonesome."

The half-breed straightened. "Dutchy! Hell! The bloody cur! One hull year o' the wus' kin' o' sufferin' the Sergeant's had now—jus' 'cause Dutchy lost his nerve."

"Dutchy ain't the shot you are, Pete."

"W'en the Sergeant dies," said Blue Pete grimly, "we'll see about that."

The other went back to his targets and moved them about thoughtfully.

"You're coming into the broncho-busting contest next week, I s'pose?" he remarked when he was back at the counter.

Blue Pete knew of the event but had had no intention of entering. Bucking contests had almost disappeared from the list of Western amusements. "Outlaw" horses were becoming scarcer every year, and two or three dismally unexciting exhibitions of late years had warned sport promoters of the danger of incurring heavy expense with the hope of drawing a disgusted public. In addition, there was a growing agitation among the uninformed against what they called a cruel performance, because at the last one in Medicine Hat a wild horse had pitched to its head at touch of the saddle and never moved again.

Something in Bilsy's tone struck the half-breed.

"You goin' in?" he inquired.

"P'raps. Broncho Jack and Slim Rawlins is coming over, an' maybe a bunch o' the boys."

Blue Pete was running his finger in and out of the barrel of a rifle. "Yuh'll miss Dutchy."

Bilsy winked. "Thur getting outlaws from down Lethbridge way, an' a few from Maple Creek, an' all the bad ones from the Hills, they say. Wampole's got two, an' the Stantons one. They'd be easy for you. Might's well come along. You'll know most o' the horses."

Blue Pete snorted. "Look here, Bilsy. You 'n' me'll go in—an' we won't ride horses we know. . . . Er else shut up."

"Righto!" replied Bilsy promptly.

He turned his back to cast a professional eye at his targets, and Blue Pete, after a movement of surprise, strolled up the street.

On the day of the broncho-busting contest every trail, from the Hills to the Red Deer, led toward the new baseball grounds in Medicine Hat. From as far as Calgary dozens came by train. Many a leisurely tourist had disturbed his summer timetable by waiting over for the event or by curtailing his visits to the less spectacular towns—Brandon, Moose Jaw, Regina, even Winnipeg itself. For the one contest of the year had received wide publicity—thanks to the local Secretary of the Board of Trade.

As the promoters looked out over the packed grandstand and the overflow, they grinned and rattled their loose change, since, though fifty per cent. was to go to the local hospital, the other fifty was better even than town lots at the moment. Never in Medicine Hat had such a crowd gathered. All one side of the field was black with spectators, standing space being divided from the riding field by a temporary fence of a single rail. The horses and steers were headed in small corrals along the west side, and groups of picturesque cowboys dotted the open field, arrayed in their most bizarre costumes and trying to seem indifferent to the attention they received.

Blue Pete, on the ugly pinto, entered the grounds late and unobtrusively. Since his near-dismissal from Grantham's he had kept much to himself, seeking no further work on the ranges and disappearing entirely from his old haunts. It did not alter his sudden dislike to publicity that he was to meet at the contest old friends he had not seen for a year, and then over the sights of their rifles. He cantered slowly from the crowd about the gate and drew up just within the frail fence, noting from the corner of his eyes two groups of cowboys who suddenly fell to whispering at his appearance.

For the first rider—who happened to be one of those old friends from the Badlands, Broncho Jack—a well known "outlaw" horse, Scar Head, was led out. Its dirty gray coat and hanging head, as it loped listlessly to the center of the field in tow of a mounted cowboy, made the crowd titter and sit back, prepared for another of the "frosts" a Western crowd was always anticipating. It was a natural suspicion where so much of the money was made by hoodwinking the "tenderfoot." But the touch of the saddle made Scar Head a different horse. Circling, rearing, snorting, kicking forward and backward with equal ease, snapping at everything within reach, it plunged to the end of the rope, almost strangling itself. The cowboys were forced to blindfold it, but after that the placing of the saddle was a simple matter, the one advantage of an outlaw over a wild horse being that it usually knows when it is unsafe to protest longer.

Broncho Jack, having himself attended to the cinch, swung lightly into the saddle, hat in hand, and the instant the coat was jerked from Scar Head's eyes it broke for the barrier that held back the crowd. With a desperate surge it leaped, the crowd scattering before it, exposing too late for horse or rider a small bandstand it had hidden. Broncho Jack had eased himself only for the leap, and the horse had jumped for level ground beyond. So that when Scar Head plunged into the raised floor of the stand, the cowboy struck the pommel and flopped to the ground, a bit dazed. Scar Head, rolling to its feet, cornered itself behind the grandstand, where it was recaptured by the pursuing cowboys.

The next two riders stuck to their mounts through a comparatively mild display of stunts familiar to every cowboy but exciting enough to the uninitiated spectator.

The fourth outlaw horse brought out was a celebrated sorrel from a southern ranch, Rooster by name, a horse that had figured in every bronco-busting contest in five years. Its versatility and resources were always the feature of the shows. It had a puzzling trick of swinging its hind feet about its shoulders and of making lightning lunges with its forefeet, so that the cowboy who attempted the usual method of saddling a troublesome horse—from the shoulder—had some exciting and unexpected moments.

Blue Pete was drawn to ride it.

Having removed his saddle from Whiskers, he approached Rooster with due respect, several cowboys—among them Bilsy—rushing to assist. Blue Pete ran his wavering eyes over them but said nothing, though his face was grave. The adjustment of the saddle was as thrilling as usual, the half-breed

insisting on attending to it alone. His foot was in the stirrup when Bilsy, who was holding Rooster by the head, prematurely released his hold, and the outlaw, skilled in the feel of the rider's seat, leaped like a flash. Blue Pete, largely by luck, was able to release his foot, but the look he cast Bilsy started that cowboy into voluble protestations. At a whistle Whiskers galloped up, and the half-breed, seizing a rope from the nearest cowboy, went barebacked in pursuit.

To the center of the field Rooster returned meekly enough at the end of the lasso, and with Bilsy content this time to look on Blue Pete was soon in the saddle. As he fell into place he felt a heavy tug at the cinch and, looking down, saw it working loose. As Rooster began "swapping ends," the saddle flopping up and down with him from the looseness of the cinch, he knew there was nothing to it but to be "piled." The crowd was screaming with laughter as he bumped about. But with a desperate grip of his powerful thighs the half-breed reached over and jerked the cinch free, and almost with the same movement sprang backward over the outlaw's rump, pulling the saddle with him. It was the most spectacular "piling" Medicine Hat had ever seen, and the crowd cheered the half-breed more than the previous successes.

With grating teeth Blue Pete made for Whiskers, carrying the saddle. As he passed Slim Rawlins, head hanging with shame and fury, he glared suddenly at the slinking cowboy.

"Slim!" he hissed. "Yuh rotten hell-hound! You pulled that cinch. I won't forget."

Rawlins, steadily retreating before him, muttered something.

"Shut up, yuh yellow-livered dog, er I'll twist yer neck right here. . . . This is wot I get fer lettin' you felluhs down easy."

Slim and two of his friends who had heard exchanged glances.

"So it was you, Pete," Bilsy said. "We thought so. No Mountie could find them corrals alone. . . . Dutchy'll be real glad to hear. . . . An' I can close the shooting gallery now. It's guns after this, I guess you know."

The moment it escaped his lips Blue Pete knew the slip he had made, and in his disgust had no reply to make. As he approached the corrals a man in very dirty chaps and unshaved face stood leaning against the fence watching him. Blue Pete stopped with open mouth.

"Dutchy!" he exclaimed under his breath.

The man sneered. “Go on, yell it out! Call the Police! That’s what you’ve come to.”

“Yer a damn liar, Dutchy,” flared the half-breed. “You know I cud ’a’ got yuh a dozen times in the last year ef I’d wanted tuh. I let yuh alone—till I see wot happens Sergeant Denton.”

“You’re mighty interested.”

“Yer right thar.” The half-breed’s head went up boldly. “I’ve fooled you felluhs out of a hundred head er so, eh?”

“We knew it was you, Pete. Bilsy found it out in town. Some day there’ll be a reckoning.”

“You bet—ef the Sergeant dies.”

Defiantly as Blue Pete had gloried to Dutchy in his work of the past year, he mounted the pinto thoughtfully. His whole life was altered in a moment, and somehow the thrill of his detective duties for the Police faded. Every one knew now—not only Dutchy and his friends, but Grantham and the rest of the ranchers. In that light his work for the Police came before him as the meanness of a spy, though he had steadily avoided leading to the capture of any of the rustlers. The only satisfaction in it now was that the excitement of his Police duties would give place to the other excitement of being hunted by the rustlers, in whose code his crime was punishable by death.

He returned to the field. The judges, overborne by the applause of the crowd, insisted on another trial, and Rooster was led out a third time. A half dozen cowboys came forward to assist, but Blue Pete waved them back. The outlaw, encouraged by its successes and thoroughly enraged, fought away from the saddle until it looked a hopeless task for one man. But Blue Pete, clinging to the rope about Rooster’s neck, unwound his lariat and dropped the loops at the horse’s front feet. As it plunged he jerked the loop over one foot and, despite mad struggling, wound the other end twice round its neck. So that when Rooster raised one foot to strike it could not lower it. It reared and the foot went higher. When it tried to buck its imprisoned foot went higher until the strain on its neck brought it to trembling submission. Blue Pete took his time with the saddle. That completed, he exchanged the slip loop about the foot for a loose one and climbed leisurely into place, sitting the cowed horse for several seconds while he grinned about on the gaping cowboys and silent crowd.

At the release of the rope Rooster continued motionless, his muscles numb. He tried his leg, found it free, and proceeded to pile fury on trickery

to square the account. Weaving, twisting, swapping, in the way that had been so often successful as to have established him in his outlaw ways, he whirled until Blue Pete's head swam. But he continued to use his quirt, yelling at the top of his voice. In reckless bravado he even threw the stirrups free and flogged the writhing horse with his Stetson. As Rooster wearied the cowboys, as was their wont, dashed in with yells and cracking quirts. Whereupon Rooster, now blindly furious, started for the eight-foot fence about the grounds.

Blue Pete tugged and strained. Rooster's neck swung sideways but his body kept straight on, and into the three-foot passage between a row of stake-enclosed trees and the fence he dashed, where even a skillfully guided horse and its rider were in danger. Surging from side to side he scraped first one side against the stakes and then the other against the fence, the half-breed saving himself at every plunge only by raising a leg to Rooster's back.

A warning broke from the crowd. Straight ahead loomed the huge, twenty-foot scoreboard placed at an angle to the fence to keep the baseball crowds informed of the score. Blue Pete saw it too late to plan escape. He wondered what part of him would strike first and, foolishly enough, what would happen to the board. As the horse disappeared the crowd gasped and many closed their eyes, the cowboys coming to sudden life to dash to the rescue. Then something appeared at the top of the scoreboard—Blue Pete, grinning and waving his Stetson. Rooster, sensing the danger too late to stop entirely, had pulled up in time for the half-breed to grasp the timbers and swing himself up, the outlaw's head and shoulders jammed in the space beneath the board.

It was the event of the day. The cheer that followed made Bilsy and his friends grind their teeth as they went about the next part of the program.

A bunch of wild horses was turned loose.

While the outlaw, a horse that has resisted the art of the "buster," provides the more certain entertainment and the more skillful exhibition of the art of unseating, the wild horse, the one never yet ridden, is the more uncertain. It may only sulk—or it may go mad. In the latter state it knows no danger, recognizes no master, until it is completely beaten through actual physical impotence.

From the field a half dozen cowboys started in pursuit, Blue Pete and his blotched pinto in the lead. With his eyes rivetted on the gray first to be roped, the half-breed raced down one side of the line of running horses, Bilsy crowding beside him. As the half-breed's rope went out, Bilsy

suddenly drove his mount against Whiskers, and the pinto, lifted from her feet, went down after a brave effort. But in that moment of effort Blue Pete left the saddle with a tremendous flex of his muscles and struck the back of the running gray, clinging and pulling himself up awkwardly with one arm. His rope had gone true, and without turning he whistled, the pinto catching up before the horses had crossed the end of the field. Changing horses in full flight is not the greatest feat a skillful cowboy performs, especially when one of the horses is perfectly trained and the other runs blindly straight. Accordingly by the time the bunch was skirting the fence before the crowd, Blue Pete was seated on Whiskers and the gray stood half choked at the other end of his rope.

Awkwardly the half-breed climbed from the saddle, another cowboy releasing his rope. Awkwardly he rewound it and swung it to place on the pommel. With equal awkwardness he remounted Whiskers and rode from the grounds, deaf to the cheers of the crowd. Ten minutes later he pushed open Inspector Parker's door.

"Whar's that Doctor Smith live, Inspector?"

Inspector Parker examined the half-breed's drawn face.

"What's the matter, Pete?"

"Arm broken, that's all. . . . But, damn it, it's the rest o' the summer fer me . . . an' six months 'fore I kin get even."

CHAPTER X

BLUE PETE DISAPPEARS

Two weeks later Sergeant Denton gave up the fight, yielding only after a brave struggle against fearful odds. That three hours of delay before the doctor could reach him had registered its claim, though he had often seemed to be winning. Twice they operated on the shattered bone, but the wound would not heal.

On the day of the funeral a rancher on his way to town found a wreath of expensive flowers on the trail close to the outskirts of Medicine Hat. On the card attached to it was the dedication:

"For Sergeant Denton
one of the bravest.
Sorry
I had to.
Dutch Henry."

A sealed envelope addressed to the Inspector was enclosed in the box. "I know I'll hit the trail some time for this," wrote the murderer, "but it will be by my own last bullet. Look out for yourselves. The two bullets before the last will be for Corporal Mahon and Blue Pete, your dirty spy."

The half-breed, arm in sling, attended the funeral; and afterwards the Inspector read him the note. For seconds Blue Pete said nothing.

"The Corporal, eh?" he muttered at last. "The bloody cuss! We'll see whose bullet gits thar fust." And never a mention of the one promised for himself.

Next day he disappeared, none knew where. A cowboy, riding at the edge of the Hills, insisted that he caught a fleeting glimpse of the blotched pinto fading into the trees, but no one except the Police cared enough to be interested. And the Police had other things to think of. The Inspector was struggling in private with a phenomenon in the local papers. Whereas the weekly list of strays had always been long, only two or three at the most appeared now, and sometimes none at all. Yet he knew horses and cattle had not altered their ways, and he did not believe punching had improved.

Winter passed. With the first break in the fetters that bound the prairie Blue Pete reappeared, his arm as strong as ever, his eyes as crooked, his rope

as true, his pinto as ugly. He reviewed the field of ranchers about the Hills and applied for work but was turned down. He tried another with like result; and that was enough. One morning he turned up at the Post at Medicine Lodge and told his trouble to his friend.

"They've foun' me out, boy," he growled. "That's wot. Guess I bes' move on."

Mahon pondered. "Why should they refuse to take you on because you've been helping us?"

Blue Pete spat contemptuously. "Ask th' Inspector. He knows. . . . An' I believe you guessed it long ago."

Intimate as the Corporal had become with the strange half-breed he was always reluctant to discuss professional matters with him. Blue Pete had never seemed to him officially more than an invaluable assistant, though he had grown to love him with an unacknowledged intensity.

"Pete," he implored, "don't give it up. What can I—what can we do without you?"

The frankness of the appeal embarrassed the half-breed. Close as his unaffected simplicity and faithfulness had drawn him to the Corporal, he had developed an affection for the youthful Policeman deeper than anything he had felt in his life before. No one had ever been so thoughtful of him. No one of Mahon's class had ever treated him so much as an equal. The unloosed affection of a harsh lifetime had attached itself to this young man who symbolized to him the forces of law and order, and he knew the breach would be more painful to him than to any one else.

"Stay to-night, Pete, anyway," begged Mahon. "I expect the Inspector to-morrow."

Mahon could only hope that something would turn up in the meantime, though no plan was in his mind—only a gnawing disappointment that things had miscarried. The half-breed, by his very origin and career, was barred forever from official connection with the Police. . . .

Blue Pete seemed to read his thoughts. "Never quite a Policeman," he smiled sadly, touching his fingers to his swarthy skin. "An' not much of a 'tective now they all know."

But he remained that night at the Post.

So that he was there when an excited cowboy, weary with long riding, threw himself from his horse before the shack and announced that Grantham

had lost seven horses in one lot—certainly stolen. They had followed the trail towards the Hills and then come for the Police.

Mahon turned to Blue Pete without a word, but the half-breed, pacing restlessly before the door, would not look.

"Pete!"

"Blast it, boy, yuh've wasted two minutes since yuh heerd!" Blue Pete exploded, and made for the corral.

It was a clear morning in early June. The dead prairie grass, flushed to a semblance of life by the luscious growth of spring beneath, lay soft and springy beneath their horses' feet as they galloped east to pick up the trail; and the fresh early-summer resurrection filled their lungs with the clearest ozone in the world. Here and there across the sky tiny flecks of cloud betrayed the month, and rolling up above the horizon a fleecy ball of shaded white held the menace of further rain.

Blue Pete pulled up suddenly and his hand shot out to stop his companion as he wheeled aside and circled carefully about, studying marks scarcely visible to Mahon. Dismounting, he examined the ground, a frown deepening on his forehead. Slowly he climbed back to the saddle and for several seconds sat motionless, looking off toward the Hills. Presently his wavering eyes came back to Mahon's.

"They're in the Hills," he said, "—gone by Windy Coulee. . . . An'—an' I think yuh'd bes' get somebody else."

Mahon's only reply was a steady look before which Blue Pete's eyes fell.

"Come on then," he said grimly.

Mahon could follow the trail now, but his companion's strange manner puzzled him. He was more startled when Blue Pete's extended hand once more brought him to a sudden halt only an instant before Mira Stanton plowed up the steep bank of a coulee ahead. Mahon was dimly conscious of a quick movement of her rein-hand, and then she waved to them and struck off swiftly to the south.

But the half-breed was feeling carelessly for his pipe, and Whiskers was ambling along as if they were only out for a casual ride. Mahon, even while it puzzled him, took his cue. He demanded no explanation, for even had he been able to bring himself to discuss Mira with Blue Pete he knew urging

would be profitless. And presently the half-breed bent their course off until they dipped from sight into a coulee.

Then his manner changed. Leaping from his horse he scrambled up the bank and peeped over the edge toward the Hills, Mahon trying to piece together the scraps of incident of the past few minutes. When the half-breed returned, mumbling fiercely, and jumped into the saddle, he knew there was excitement ahead.

Winding about, turning sharp corners—the corporal knew every foot of that coulee leading to the Hills—they never once rose to the level of the prairie. Mahon had a sense of prying eyes up there and rode bent over, though the level was feet above his head. After a time the horses began to pant. Perspiration ran from Mars, and even the steely pinto ran more loosely.

When the cool green of the trees broke into view, Blue Pete pulled up, removing his saddle and motioning to Mahon to do the same.

"Should we take the time?" the Corporal protested, "—or are you expecting a long chase?"

"We'll need 'em fresh," was all Blue Pete would say.

They threw themselves on the ground, the half-breed's fingers seeking in his belt the beloved corncob pipe, and Mahon lying back, his head resting on his arm, staring off to a tiny bit of fleecy cloud. And presently he drew a letter from his tunic and began to read. Blue Pete shifted his position noiselessly to watch his companion's face.

"Wot's that?" he asked abruptly.

"Letter from mother." Mahon's eyes did not raise.

The half-breed rolled over and stared frankly into the Policeman's face.

"Got a mother, eh?"

"Sure! The best ever." The Corporal smiled his boyish smile at the cloud. "And I believe she thinks as much of me."

"'Tain't no job, this, fer a boy with a mother," the half-breed muttered. . . . "An' I'll bet yer her only one."

Mahon only smiled. He was thinking of the sweet-faced, white-haired woman he had left standing in the low doorway waving her cheery farewell as he disappeared round the hedge of the curving road. And the hollyhocks were framed about the dear face, and the arch of climbing roses over the path. She was very brave—smiling, the little dimple he had always petted

even as a baby showing in her cheeks. Yet he knew he was not out of hearing that day five years ago before her head was in her arms. Canada had seemed to offer him the golden promise of a home to bring her to. But those first few months in the strange land had been lonesome—and not so golden. Opportunities were not hanging so low on the trees, and far up there out of reach they loomed only through a haze of homesickness. It was when the cloud was blackest that the glamor of the Mounted Police had caught him.

Blue Pete reached across and touched the sheet.

"Min'—min' readin' a bit to me?" he stammered. "Never got a letter. . . . Never had no mother—t'I know of."

Mahon opened the letter. "I know them all nearly by heart. Here it is from the beginning: 'My dear boy—'"

"Huh! Calls yuh Boy too, eh?" Blue Pete dropped back and lay staring up at the same bit of fleecy cloud that had sent Mahon's thoughts roaming. "Boy—Boy!" he muttered; and there was a capital to the new meaning it had for him.

"'My dear boy. I was so glad to get your letter only a week late. I always worry so when they are delayed, but I suppose in the thousands of miles that separate us anything may happen to make me wait. Of course I know too that you cannot write the same day each week like I can. You have so much—such big things—to do. I can only live on here waiting for your letters. That is why if they are only a day late I am fretting.'"

"Dear old mater!" sighed the Corporal, with a stab of shame. "I must write more regularly."

"'If they should cease to come, if anything should happen to you away out there with no one to look after you—'"

With a sudden movement Blue Pete clambered to his feet. "Guess—guess that'll do. Got to move now."

He picked up his saddle and whistled Whiskers to him. Mahon, annoyed at the interruption, folded the letter and thrust it into his tunic.

They entered the Hills. The sun was hidden behind a rising cloud that was two hours ago nothing more than a beautiful puff, and within the trees the gloom was deep. Hour after hour they tangled in and out of the wildest medley of hill and valley, rock and forest, Mahon had ever seen, though he had spent more time within the shadows of the Hills during the last two summers than he cared to admit to the Inspector. He knew immediately that

every foot of it was familiar to Blue Pete. A hasty lunch was swallowed in the concealment of a lump of low brush, the horses tied that they should not wander. The Corporal gave himself up to the half-breed's leadership, but kept his eyes about him, for this to him was an experience that would surely be valuable when the time came for the complete inspection of the Hills still hoped for by the Police. The wild growth that crowded in on them was confusing, but each physical feature was engraved on Mahon's memory for future reference. Blue Pete's intimacy with every precipice and ridge, every ravine and stream—even the fallen trees and rugged rocks that blocked their way—was to the Corporal a matter worthy of more consideration. One deduction he drew was that herein lay the explanation of the half-breed's mysterious disappearances.

By isolated glimpses of the sun he kept his sense of direction, as well as by a hitherto unsuspected wood-sense that depended in some vague way on tree trunks and leaves, but how far they had come when darkness began to deepen among the trees he could scarcely guess. Out on the prairie he knew it was still broad daylight, but the slanting rays of the sun only touched the tops of the trees high above his head, and the beautiful spring foliage about him faded into dim outline. Little lakes appeared before them and were skirted by the half-breed without hesitation. Bubbling streams tumbled noisily over picturesque ledges into somber depths, and great trees lay locked in death and rocky heights frowned unexpectedly overhead. Unseen life moved amidst the undergrowth, or broke away more noisily at greater distance with unconcealed crash and clatter. Mahon's knowledge of the Hills was confined to their western end, where Blue Pete's assistance during the previous summer—by which so many stolen herds had been returned to their owners—had directed it. But here was the very heart of the unknown land, untracked and mystifying. Mahon felt like an explorer who has invaded places almost sacred in their mystery.

In the interest of his discoveries and of the strange nature about him the immediate object of their journey had momentarily faded into the background when Blue Pete's hand went up warningly, and he turned aside, to disappear down a slope into a tangle of trees. Far into the gloom he rode and dismounted, and without a word of explanation glided away, waving to the Corporal not to follow.

Mahon thought quickly. Something uncanny about the whole day's proceedings determined him no longer to leave everything to the half-breed. He tied the horses to convenient trees and with every nerve alert crept out on

Blue Pete's trail. But he had gone only a score of yards when his companion blocked the way.

"Yuh've got lots to learn, Boy," whispered the half-breed, "'fore yuh kin trail me on the sly, an' lots more years to live. This thing I'm on ain't a two-man game. Ef you're goin' to do it I'll drop out. Ef I'm to do it I'll do it alone—or it won't be did."

Mahon returned to the horses. Minutes passed . . . an hour. Not a sign of human life reached his ears. Then a distant rifle shot struck through the rustling silence like a blow, and he realized how dark it was. And presently his revolver was covering a blacker shadow blending quietly into the trees.

"Ss-s!"

The half-breed led the pinto up the slope and along a ridge, and down a steep hillside with scarcely a snapping twig. Beside a small lake they made preparations for the night.

"Purty close shave, that," he said at last. "They know we're here—somehow. Won't try to take the bunch across the border for a day or two now. . . . Can't fight 'em in the Hills. . . . Think I turned 'em off. . . . Yer mother nearly missed her nex' letter, Boy."

Mahon lay on his back in the utter relaxation of weary health and momentary relief from duty. In a few hours he seemed to have left a decade behind him the treeless prairie, its glare and heat and uncertain winds. This was another world—of shadow and peace and cool green depths. The weird call of night birds new to him made him tingle with pleasant mystery. Across the lake a pair of owls hooted to each other sleepily, and over his head the lonesome triple honk of wild geese tenanted the eery spaces of the air. Splash of feeding fish succeeded splash in the water before him.

In that dreaminess he ate, the silence of his companion fitting into his romantic mood.

"Better go to sleep," said Blue Pete.

"We mustn't both sleep."

"Go to sleep," insisted Blue Pete. "We're all right." Mahon lay back, but he did not permit himself to sleep. And he knew by his breathing that the half-breed was awake.

"That won't work, Pete," he said. "I'll take first watch."

Blue Pete settled himself. In a moment he spoke.

" 'Member how yuh came? We're 'bout two miles in the Hills—straight in. . . . Ten the way we came. Straight to the north's the neardest way out. South you'd get lost in the lakes and hills."

"I'm not fretting, Pete," laughed the Corporal. "I can see the Hills have few secrets from you."

"Don' trust nobody everythin'. . . . Sometime—sometime yuh may hev to do things over fer yerself. Keep yer head an' yer all right. . . . Yer mother do' need to fret."

Mahon sat listening to the night life with thrills to which he permitted his imagination to give full play. Dimly through the overhanging trees and over the lake he caught glimpses of stars among the gathering clouds, snatches of wonderful scintilla like the twinkling lights of a distant city. Welcoming the illusion he divined the lights into streets—with the bright star for his mother's window. The leaves stirred softly now and then to remind him of the earth, but the inverted starry vault looking up at him from the smooth surface of the lake thrust him back again to the new dream-world he had built for himself.

At one he wakened Blue Pete and sank to sleep in the curve of his saddle. As he drowsed off he heard in a vague way the half-breed's voice.

"Don' forget, Boy, the north's the neardest way out." . . .

He wakened suddenly. He felt something was wrong long before he knew what it was. Broad daylight was about him, glistening over the lake at his feet, lighting the cool depths among the trees at its edge and softening off into romantic dimness in the woods beyond. Mars was munching the luxuriant grass at the water's edge, and across the lake among the trees a pair of deer peeped at him with shy inquisitiveness.

But Blue Pete and Whiskers were not there.

CHAPTER XI

MIRA'S SECRET

Had Helen Parsons expressed herself on life at the 3-bar-Y ranch she would have ascribed to it a fascination that might naturally account for her frequent and extended visits. She realized the ugliness of the valley, the upset of the home, the disorganization that prevailed from ranch house to herds; but after her early association with it its drabness failed to counterbalance the kindness and shy hospitality of its occupants, the thrill of its opportunities for untrammeled outdoor life, and the excitement of great herds and real cowboys. That was as far as the utmost frankness would have permitted her to go even with herself.

With the advance of her ranch education came the new wonders of the Cypress Hills. Day after day she spent where no legal errand had taken man before; but of her trips she spoke in detail to no one. Sometimes Mira went with her, on which expeditions she contented herself with less intricate wanderings, Mira professing no knowledge of the Hill secrets but leaving the lead always to Helen. This summer the two girls were less together. A strange shyness had developed in Mira. She laughed less, talked less, went about her work with a new silence which disturbed her cousin. Helen struggled to take her out of herself by teaching her new home arts, by helping her with her clothes in which the prairie girl never failed to be interested. But while Mira went out on her wild mount more than ever, never this summer had she been in the Hills with Helen. She seemed to have lost interest in them, to seek solitude into which her anxious cousin was unable to penetrate.

June found Helen at the ranch. Welcome as she knew she was, there was a perplexing constraint in the manner of the brothers as well as of Mira. Joe and Jim were much away from home, but the spring round-ups were in plan and hard and continued riding was necessary. There was also a natural anxiety about the cattle and horses after an unusually severe winter. Mira and Helen were thus sometimes—with the maid—alone about the ranch, though Mira's work on the ranges and Helen's wanderings in the Hills did not bring them closer together. Helen began to pay more attention to the housework and to the fostering in Mira of an evident desire to ape more closely the ways of the town women. And Mira was grateful in her embarrassed way but said little.

The brothers had been absent for two days when late one night, long after the girls were in bed, Joe returned and Helen heard him talking to Mira in her room. In the morning he was gone when she appeared at breakfast, and Mira was waiting in her riding clothes with some impatience. Half an hour later she was off, leaving Helen to look after the house and the meals of a few cowboys at work repairing the buildings.

Not until darkness had fallen did Mira return, tired, hungry, silent. But at sight of the house-dress Helen had made for her, with long sleeves and a V-shaped collar edged with three rows of narrow braid, she brightened. She stood before the mirror a long time, testing eagerly its narrow skirt, and admiring the length that made her appear older and more dignified.

"I look like a lady," she said, with awe in her voice. "If I could only do what you ladies do—just as I ride a horse and—and things! . . . If I could cook cakes and make salads, like you do! If I could read and write without pretty near screaming from the strain of it! If—"

"Don't call me a lady, Mira," protested Helen lightly. "I'm a woman—that's all I want to be—like yourself or any one else who's decent. I've more reason to be jealous of you. Everything I do that's worth while you do, when you try, and much you do that I can't."

She sobered, as Mira dreamily shook her head.

"What have years of education and piles of money done for me," she persisted, "more than to teach me to read and write? And here you do both almost as well, though you have lived on the prairie all your life and never spent a day in school."

A sudden thought came to her.

"Who has taught you—for I'm sure Joe and Jim are too busy? You couldn't have picked it up yourself. Who taught you?"

Mira flushed and bent her attention to the rows of braid on the edge of the sleeves.

"I don't tell the boys," she said. "They'd laugh at me—though I guess they know. It was—him, Corporal Mahon."

That one word "him" told Helen what she had long suspected, and she was sorry she had asked. Something about her cousin's confused but frank confession gave her an unfair insight into Mira's private affairs and opened a chapter in the Corporal's life that should have been told only by himself. That was her first feeling, but there followed a great surprise that later

became a pang. Was Mira justified in that soft, meaningful "him"? Helen saw no answer that could satisfy her. Either her innocent young cousin was fondling feelings that must lead to false hopes, or Corporal Mahon— She strained from completing the thought.

"Corporal Mahon is one of the best of the Mounted Police," she told Mira bravely.

"He's—grand! . . . Sometimes I think so, sometimes—" Mira was leaning against the window frame looking out into the black night. "Oh, why didn't they get the rustlers—long ago?" she burst out. "If they only had—if —" She turned frightened eyes to Helen and the color waved into her cheeks and left them pale.

"It's not quite his fault, Mira. They've only four men for the whole district, you know. . . . And they've got back most of the stolen cattle and horses for you. Have you lost many, that you feel so keenly?"

Mira shivered. "No—no," she stammered. "We're all right."

"Even the Police are not infallible."

"If they only had!" Mira murmured, and began to remove the dress. "I know it's not his fault. He's riding all hours—and he's a brave man—and a gentleman. . . . He—he treats me just as if I was a lady, a real lady."

"Don't talk that way, Mira," interrupted Helen impatiently. "Why shouldn't he? You owe him nothing for that. We're all ladies—or women—to him."

"All—ladies? All—the same?" Helen saw the appeal in her eyes with a stab of pain.

"Mira, dear," she said gently, "don't you know that the ladies you want to imitate don't—don't show their feelings so frankly? We can't afford to. We have to wait—to wait until the men—the one man shows it first—and shows it so plainly that there can be no misunderstanding. And there may always be a misunderstanding until—until he speaks, until he tells you—"

"He has told me nothing—nothing. . . . But I know—I know down here"—she pressed her hands to her heart—"that he—he likes me better than any one else—" Her wide eyes swung suddenly to seek Helen's. "Unless it's—you," she added in a whisper. Some prescience warned Helen to hide her face in time.

"Don't, Mira, don't think of such things. Corporal Mahon is only a good friend of mine—he has never thought of me in any other way. . . . And I am

not thinking of him in any other way. So you see," she finished, laughing, "you're imagining miseries for yourself and trying to force on me a man who may or may not think more of you than of any one else but who certainly thinks nothing serious of me."

Mira caught her cousin's eyes and held them.

"If you feel like that then he doesn't, because—because I believe every woman knows."

CHAPTER XII

BLUE PETE IN DANGER

Mahon stared about him, hoping for some sign that Blue Pete would return. The half-breed's lunch tied to his convinced him that his hopes were vain. And then he remembered those last words as he was sinking to sleep: "Don' forget, Boy, the north's the neardest way out." With an exclamation of angry suspicion he threw the saddle on Mars.

In the early afternoon he broke through the last of the tangle into the clearer slopes to the prairie. For hours he had dragged himself and his horse through an encircling net that seemed to enmesh him wherever he turned—a jumble of interlaced trees and bushes, of fallen rocks and sharp cliffs. There was no sun but the sense of location a Policeman must have held him to his course. In an hour he was at the Post reporting to the Inspector, and by six he was back again at the western end of the Hills. There he was more at home. He remembered that Blue Pete had pointed to Windy Coulee as the route of the stolen horses. All there was for him to do now was to pick up the trail and keep on its track. The Inspector was seeking Priest to send him south of the Hills in the faint hope of cutting off escape.

As he hoped, the trail was plain enough here; but among the loose rock washed up by the spring floods he lost it. But there was only one route for horses entering the Hills at this point, and along it he was picking his way when a rattle of rifle shots echoed through the trees. Leaping from his horse he led it forward, avoiding stones and fallen branches. Twilight was settling fast in there and although the sky overhead was bright the clear range of his eyes was limited to a score of yards. As he unslung his rifle a volley of revolver shots told him of a fight at close quarters just over the ridge.

Leaving Mars anchored by the simple act of throwing the rein loose to drag on the ground, he pulled himself carefully up the rise. On the very top lay Whiskers, Blue Pete's pinto, blood still oozing from a wound in the head. But more ominous just then was the half-breed's rifle lying beside it, and a few feet away his big revolver.

Wherever he was Blue Pete was unarmed.

Instinctively Mahon picked up the firearms, uncoiled the lasso from the saddle, and crept swiftly back to Mars. Where Whiskers lay dead was more than ordinary peril. With rapid but stealthy step he led his horse along the slope so that the light western sky should not silhouette him for the dangerous task before him.

As he glided once more up the slope to peer into the hollow from which the shots had come, from the darkness down the incline came the well known voice, recklessly jeering as of old.

"Come out, come out, yuh brave frien's o' mine! Come into th' open, jest fer a second!" Then in an appealing tone: "Won't, please, some un jes' show the tip o' yer ear?"

Even as Mahon puzzled at the challenge of an unarmed man, a flash lit the hollow. Noting its location, he slid his rifle forward and fired.

For a moment silence more thrilling than a dozen volleys filled the darkness with straining eyes and ears. Then Mahon realized the keen sight of the men he was after. Five shots split from before him and whistled over his head, one spattering dust in his eyes. Sudden movement flared in the ravine, the scurrying of running men who still kept under cover.

Dashing the dust from his eyes, Mahon, leaving Blue Pete's arms and lasso where he had been lying, tumbled down the slope to his horse and spurred up the ridge in pursuit. Vaguely he saw the half-breed moving his arm as he passed and heard a shout of warning—and then Mars stiffened with braced feet. A rope had settled over its neck and the trained horse knew better than to rush to a fall. Mahon shouted back furiously, as he reached for his knife.

"What you doing, Pete? Let go!"

"Cut it an' I'll drop yer horse," warned the half-breed. "Yuh dang fool! Yuh ain't got no more chance with them c'yutes in thar in the dark than ef yuh was butter. I didn't sneak away and leave yuh back thar to let yuh stop a bullet here."

Mahon yielded to reason with a stifled oath. Not a sound now betrayed the whereabouts of the rustlers.

"Come in here," whispered Blue Pete peremptorily. "They'll spot yuh yet."

Mahon rode back, his irritation turning quickly to pity as he remembered the fallen pinto. Blue Pete without Whiskers was a picture he could not

imagine.

"They got her, Pete," he breathed pityingly. "Thank God, they didn't get you! She's over there across the ravine. I'll get the saddle for you. You—you needn't come."

Blue Pete swallowed something rising in his throat.

"To blazes with the saddle! That's the one place they'll be watchin'. Let 'er be. She died game."

His hand went up to remove his dirty Stetson.

"Pore ole gal!" he muttered. "Bilsy got yuh fer keeps that time. . . . Yer ragged li'l tail won't whistle behind me in the wind no more. Never lie down side by side no more on the prairie o' nights. Yer through punchin', ole gal. . . . Yer through—everythin'."

His voice caught, and he dashed his hand across his eyes.

"The fust shot got yuh, Whiskers. Yuh cudn't help failin' that way. . . . But yuh threw me safe from the nex' shot—an' a bullet through yer brain. . . . Guess yuh won't mind the wolves to-night, ole gal. Wish I cud give yuh a real funeral, but yuh'll know I'm after Bilsy. . . . Bilsy, too, now!"

He straightened and raised his clenched fists.

"Bilsy, yuh low-down cuss! Yuh won't outlast 'er long ur my eye ain't straight."

He picked up rifle and revolver and strode off into the woods, Mahon following in silence. A mile perhaps they went, and then Blue Pete turned a projecting rock sharply and pulled back a heavy growth of ivy. By the blackness that fell about them and the echoes of the horse's hoofs Mahon knew they were in a cave. A match flickered, the flame attached itself to a candle, and Blue Pete pointed to a recess at the back of the cave, where it was evident a horse had often been stabled before.

"What was it all about, Pete?" pleaded Mahon. "Tell me the whole story."

Blue Pete lifted his eyes absently.

"Ambushed me, damn 'em!" he exploded. "Was makin' back fer you. Feared yuh'd get lost 'thout the sun. . . . Guess yuh got thar 'bout in time, Boy. I was ridin' careless. Wasn't thinkin' o' things."

"Why did you leave me?" It was Mahon's affection, not his curiosity alone, that spoke.

Blue Pete rubbed his chin and shrugged his shoulders.

"Gor-swizzle, this ain't no game fer Boys—not Boys with mothers. Kin' o' reckoned she'd want that nex' letter . . . 'n' the next . . . 'n' the next."

Mahon seized his hand impulsively.

"I knew I could trust you, Pete," he said. "But never again—never again. First of all I'm a Policeman. Don't you think I want my mother to be proud of me? . . . Would you—would you like to hear the rest of the letter now?" he asked shyly.

Blue Pete shook his head. "Not yet, Boy. Reckon I got to git yuh through this fust . . . an' so yer mother kin be proud o' yuh," he added softly. . . . "I'm goin' away fer a while. Back 'fore morning."

The masking ivy fell back and he was gone. A wolf howled. The ivy parted again.

"Thar'll mebbe be shootin' up thar," the half-breed warned. "They've foun' th' ole gal."

Mahon blew out the candle and took his stand outside the cave. The same night-creatures stirred as on the previous night, but there beat through it now and then the shuddering howls of feeding wolves. Mahon followed in his imagination the progress of the half-breed. Then came the rifle shot—and a sharp howl. A second shot and howl. And then only silence. He smiled. Some little revenge had come to the bereaved half-breed already.

Mahon was very tired. He found a box in the cave and carried it outside, and leaned his head against the rock. . . . He was roused by some change in the night sounds that seemed to have been struggling for attention for a long time.

It was voices, violent, argumentative. Running back to his horse he squeezed its nose in the way that meant silence and returned to the front of the cave. He could see nothing, but the tramp of many horses came on, each mounted, he knew by their regular pace. No stolen horses there. He had to make up his mind quickly. He knew these were the rustlers, but he also knew that to attempt to stop or capture even one in the dark was so hopeless as to kill the suggestion instantly. And the steadiness of their advance showed they were on familiar trails.

“Damn it!” growled a subdued voice. “I sure have the flim-flams. Missed him a mile. Couldn’t do no better than get the pinto.”

Some one laughed sharply.

“You needn’t laugh, Slim,” snarled the first voice. “You didn’t get anything, and you had a fine chance at the Policeman.”

A third voice broke in, and at the first note Mahon started. About it was something so bewilderingly familiar that he rapidly ran over in his mind all the rustlers he had ever heard speak.

“Stop your rowing,” it ordered. “And you fellows got to quit this loose shooting business too when you’re with us. We’re after horses, not the Police. No, and not Blue Pete either. When you want to shoot any one just for a personal spite, keep it till you’re alone. Now shut up. There’s no knowing where they are.”

“Stop talking so loud, all of you,” commanded another sharply.

Mahon knew that voice instantly and crept forward, resting his rifle against a tree. The riders came on in silence, but only a few yards away altered their course and mounted the ridge. Mahon dropped his rifle. Even had they been within touch he could have done nothing, for in the darkness they would all look alike. Over the ridge he crept on their trail.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CHASE OF THE RUSTLERS

Daylight had but commenced to outline the tree trunks, when the curtain of ivy parted and Blue Pete entered, leading a steaming horse. Mahon yawned.

"Where'd you get it, Pete?"

The half-breed began to whistle unmusically through his teeth, breaking at last into a rough humming as he led the horse to the back of the cave. Mahon heard him indignantly.

"Why, Pete—" he began in protest.

"Th' ole gal's fooled 'em," Blue Pete burst out, with a noisy joyousness Mahon had never heard him display before. "She's as tough a bit o' flesh as her master."

"Whiskers not dead—not—"

"Divil a bit o' dead 'bout her," chortled the half-breed, and in the darkness Mahon heard his hands rubbing together and broken chuckles coming from his lips.

"When I got up thar whar we heerd the wolves," he explained, "I had the shock o' my young an' innercent life. I found 'er backed into a clump o' trees, a bit silly 'th loss o' blood, an' 'er knees shaky, fightin' off the wolves that ud come up with the smell o' blood. Half dead yuh'd say, but she'd got one hoof home—an' the wolves was fightin' over the one she'd struck. Gorswizzled ef I wasn't tempted to let 'er fight it out, she seemed to be enj'ying herself so."

He chuckled, a burst of almost delirious joy, and Mahon laughed immoderately with him.

"Bruised 'er head a bit," went on the half-breed, "but I guess thar ain't nothin' thar t' 'urt. Lost a gallon o' blood, an' been thar unconscious long enough to forgit what'd happened . . . but she knew I'd be 'long, ef she jest waited. She'll help me git Bilsy yet. 'Tain't his fault she didn't kick the bucket."

"But where did you get the horse you have?"

"At the Post."

"You didn't ride Whiskers all that distance?" Mahon asked, shocked at the thought.

Blue Pete turned on him indignantly.

"Wot d'yuh take me fer? She followed me—same's ever. . . . An' she hed to do some sprintin' to keep up."

Mahon smiled incredulously. "Are you trying to make me believe you've been on foot to the Post? Make it Medicine Hat. No use spoiling a story for a matter of fifty miles or so. Let's see, the Post is eighteen miles from here. Four and a half hours, walking one way—" He shook his head.

"Took an hour to git th' Inspector on the 'phone," Blue Pete said, half apologetically. And Mahon knew he told the truth.

"Why get the Inspector?"

The half-breed shuffled uneasily. "Don't like the game—now."

"Scared?"

"When Bilsy said that," commented the half-breed, "I made him smile."

"I'm smiling, Pete. I'm sorry. But you wouldn't quit now in the middle of the thing, would you?"

"You'll know lots more in a few hours," Blue Pete growled.

Mahon told the story of the rustlers in the darkness.

"We've an hour to sleep," Blue Pete decided. "We've got to git on their trail. Too dark yet."

After a short hour's rest they set out. Where a ravine crossed their course the half-breed examined the ground.

"That's them," he said, and led away at a canter.

Just as a gleam in the trees ahead told of the end of the Hills, he drew up and listened, and the next instant was tearing up the slope. Mahon heard far ahead a horse crashing through the undergrowth, and a few minutes later Blue Pete rejoined him.

"We've got 'em on the run," he said dully. "They're out on the prairie. Big start, but mebbe we kin do it."

As they emerged from the trees into the puffy wind of the open prairie they saw, far ahead, a bunch of galloping horses, led by a large white stallion, a half dozen cowboys spurring them on with voice and quirt. One of the riders glanced back, caught sight of them, and the rustlers redoubled their efforts.

Mahon and Blue Pete were pushing their mounts to their utmost. Straight ahead loomed the dark line of trees that marked the border of the United States, a repetition in miniature of the wilderness they had just left. Beyond lay safety for the rustlers.

Rapidly they cut down the lead. One of the riders, facing about, fired, and a puff of dust spat to one side. Blue Pete's wild laugh told how joyfully now he was entering into the chase.

"Losin' his nerve," shouted the half-breed. But a second shot that struck perilously close, altered his tone. "Got to git him, I guess, 'fore he gits us."

The next shot shrilled close to Mahon's ears.

"Wing him, Pete, if you can."

Blue Pete darted off toward the coulee where the rustler had disappeared after his last shot, and presently Mahon heard his rifle.

"Scare him off?" he inquired anxiously when the half-breed was with him again.

Blue Pete nodded. "Slim Rawlins," he explained grimly. And that was enough for Mahon, for he had heard of the broncho-busting incidents.

As they gained on the rustlers the latter, choosing safety, funked one by one and made for the border, leaving two lone riders madly urging the stolen horses. Up and down the rolling prairie the chase continued, Mahon conscious of a deep respect for the two brave ones who remained.

But the line of trees ahead was coming dangerously close. Blue Pete sat up in his saddle and raised his rifle. Mahon caught the movement from the corner of his eye and swerved Mars into him, shouting, "Don't shoot."

He was too late. At the report Mahon looked ahead, almost hoping Blue Pete's unerring eye had failed for once. What he saw was a wild leap of the white stallion, and then a huddled heap. The rest of the bunch stampeded. For several seconds the two lone riders struggled to keep them in line for the border, losing valuable ground in the attempt, and only at the last moment of safety for themselves did they give up.

Mahon had a sudden vision of those stolen horses gone and of another failure.

"I want them—and alive," he jerked.

"Can't do it."

"I will."

He raised his rifle, took short aim and fired. Blue Pete gasped, and Mahon, suddenly realizing the risk he took, closed his eyes. He opened them when Blue Pete shouted jubilantly.

"By the jumpin' Jupiter! Yer some shot yerself."

One of the mounted horses staggered and plunged to its side. The other, jerked aside to avoid a collision, sank on one knee, pulled itself upright, and stood trembling on three legs. Something had snapped in the sudden twist. Its rider dismounted, and for a moment the two rustlers stood looking into each other's face eight yards apart. The one whose horse had been killed, sank behind it. The other, placing his revolver to his horse's head, pulled the trigger and it dropped almost without a kick.

A hundred yards back Mahon advanced alone. Blue Pete had dashed away to round up the scattering horses. A puff came from behind the nearest dead horse, and Mahon threw himself free as Mars crumpled up. Rifle in hand he advanced, not hastily but deliberately. Two rifles covered him.

"You can't escape," he called. "Two more Police are coming over there. You'll save trouble if you surrender quietly."

"You'll save more trouble if you stop where you are," came the reply; and Mahon puzzled in vain for the rustler with that familiar voice. He kept on.

"You fool!" shouted the voice. "You can't take us. We'll fill you full of lead like Dutch Henry did Denton, if you come five yards nearer."

For a fleeting moment Mahon wondered if what he did was wise, but there was no cover from which he could prevent the escape of the rustlers. Sixty yards lay between him and the nearest rustler peeping over his dead horse.

"Can you shoot him, Jim? I can't."

The Corporal stopped, a wave of incredulous horror sweeping over him. Then grimly he closed his teeth and advanced.

"Can't do it, Joe," came the reply in pathetically hopeless tones. "Guess it's all up this time. Sorry, Joe. It was my fault. . . . But I'm not going to be taken. . . . Good-by, Joe!"

"Jim—Jim! Wait!"

The man behind the nearest dead horse dashed across the intervening eight yards and sank behind the other, and two revolver shots rang as one. Mahon leaped forward.

The sun struggled through a rift in the cloudy sky and a gleam crept across the dull prairie. It reached the upturned faces of the rustlers and clung there as the Corporal looked down on them with reeling head. They lay there, left hands clasped, a small red hole, blackened about the edges, in the side of each forehead. In their right hands revolvers still smoked. One of the dying men opened his eyes and smiled feebly on his lifeless companion and fell back limp. Mahon covered his face with his hands and sank on the dead horse.

Here before him lay two of the rustlers—Joe and Jim Stanton!—educated, wealthy, kindly, preferring death to disgrace, their own deaths to a murder that would have meant escape. These, the brothers of Mira! A groan broke from him.

Something touched him on the shoulder, and he looked up to see Blue Pete standing beside him, fumbling his Stetson. The stolen horses were loping toward the Hills—all but one standing quietly at the end of the half-breed's rope.

"I—I knew. Poor Jim! Poor Joe! Glad I wasn't in at th' end. . . . Poor Miss Mira!"

"Poor Mira!" echoed the Corporal in a whisper.

As they were loping back behind the recaptured horses, Blue Pete spoke again.

"Yuh know now w'y the ranchers won't take me on—w'y thar's bin no strays advertised lately. . . . Not many of the ranchers is over-squeamish, 'n' them as is ain't askin' fer a Police spy to live with 'em. . . . I'm jes' about an outlaw now—an outlaw." He shook his head sadly.

"Boy," he murmured, "reckon I kin hev the res' o' that letter now. Yuh lef' off whar she said, ef anythin' shud happen yuh 'way out thar with no one to look after yuh.' . . . S'pose yuh'll be writin' her soon. Well—well, tell her Blue Pete's lookin' after yuh, Boy."

CHAPTER XIV

MIRA'S DESPAIR

On a day typical of mid-June in the semi-arid belt of Southern Alberta, when the driving rain beat flat everything that would bend save occasional ragged bits of rebellious dead grass lashed before the wind, Mira rode slowly over the sodden prairie, her draggled skirt clinging to the horse's back, her waist sticking to her body in disfiguring lines. From finger tips, hat brim, and the end of her soggy boots the rain ran in unheeded rivulets. Now and then she whistled drearily to the wolf-hounds running behind, their lithe bodies arched against the storm.

"Come, Neptune. . . . Juno! Don't, don't make me scold—now!"

Two drops that were not rain gathered on her eyelids and mingled with the moisture on her cheek, but she wiped them away with a dripping hand and shut her lips firmly.

"Back, Juno!" One of the hounds was looking up into her face. "Not where I can see you, Juno, dear. I couldn't stand it."

At the edge of the Hills she turned to the east, pulling up at last beside a lake to watch the return storm that beat up from the water with the force of the rainfall. A slight uneven mist hung close to the surface, and her eyes strained thoughtfully into it. Glancing guiltily about she drew a carefully wrapped parcel from beneath one arm where she had been holding it tight against her body.

With wet eyes she stared down at the three books it contained, turning over page after page, reading snatches here and there—and all the time protecting them anxiously with her bent head. Suddenly she closed the last one with a bang and, forcing her horse into the water, flung them far from her into the mist. Then she whirled about and rode madly up the slope, the dogs whimpering behind.

In the shadows she dismounted. As the dogs crowded about to nuzzle her hands she shuddered and withdrew them, staring down on the faithful creatures with a rending pain in her eyes.

"No, no, Juno! Down, Jupiter! I mustn't funk it—for your sakes."

She disappeared among the trees, the dogs remaining at her order.

"Neptune, come!"

At the sharp command one of them dashed forward. The report of a revolver struck heavily through the storm, answered by a short yelp . . . and then only the dripping on the leaves and the swishing in the treetops.

"Jupiter, come!"

Another dog obeyed. . . . Another shot and the answering yelp.

"Minerva!"

The two dogs left looked at each other uncertainly. An unfamiliar tone had hardened the voice they loved.

"Minerva, come!"

This time there was no hesitation. One lone dog heard the shot and the cry of bewildered agony, and a stifled whine broke from her.

"Juno!"

Juno strained back and forward at the harsh command, sniffing into the trees, whimpering, the storm roaring louder in the treetops and sending showers of water over her.

"Juno, here!"

But Juno had worked out her own problem. Slinking like a wolf, she faded into the shadows.

Mira appeared, a strange glare in her eyes, one lip bleeding. She did not call again but leaped into the saddle and lashed her horse recklessly through the thinning trees as if fleeing a pursuing wraith. At the very edge of the prairie she pulled up, the ghastly stare gone, her hands trembling on the reins. A tear squeezed through her closed eyes, and with a half articulated cry she threw herself on the wet ground.

"My dogs, my dogs!" she moaned. . . . "And Juno knew! But there ain't nobody cares for any of us now. I've got to leave it all—and I couldn't give you to strangers. . . . There's nobody to put a bullet in me and end it all. I've got to live—I've got to live—and hate. . . . Oh, how I hate!"

Her little fists clenched beneath her head. The horse bent over her and nosed at her damp shoulder; and her hand went up to its ears.

"I can keep you, Toddles. 'Cause I'll need you—to get even. . . . And we *will* get even, won't we, Toddles. . . . Damn them!"

As regardless of the storm as the weeping girl, Blue Pete loped his horse up Windy Coulee into the Hills. Hesitatingly, trembling, he crept toward the strange sounds, so that she did not hear him as he stood helplessly forlorn beside her, his ragged Stetson in his hands.

"Don't, don't, Miss Mira!" he burst out. "Please!"

"Go 'way, Pete, do go 'way," she wailed.

"Ken't I—I do somethin'?"

"Just go 'way," she repeated. "Do leave me alone, Pete."

Obediently he wheeled Whiskers about. "It's—jes' awful fer me," he said.

She heard the clatter of his horse over the rocky ground and looked up after him shyly. Somehow it helped a lot—those stammered words of helpless sympathy. And then Toddles' rubbing nose revived her grief.

Corporal Mahon was out that day as usual, for rain or storm made no difference to the Force. He had been to town and from a long talk with the Inspector was riding back with new phases of the problem in his mind. He scarcely knew why he sloped off to the east and made for the Hills, instead of returning straight to the Post. The utter drabness of things made him depressed; he did not want to meet his companions. Before Windy Coulee he stopped, then slowly drifted up into the trees.

He came on her outstretched in the rain, one arm beneath her head, the other beating the ground in her grief; and the pity of it tore him as few things had affected him before. He had not seen her since the death of her brothers —somehow he did not dare face her after his part in the tragedy. Helen was at the ranch, and from her he had heard something of the wild suffering of the uncontrolled girl. He dismounted beside her, tongue-tied. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, she seemed so alone now, so much in need of the love he was convinced he felt for her. The male of him longed to protect her.

Mira did not raise her head when she heard him, but the violence of her sobs grew less.

"Do leave me alone, Pete," she sobbed. "Ain't I never to do what I feel like any more? Damn it, get out!"

She raised her head in sudden fury.

"You!" she gasped. "You!"

The rudeness of her language brought Mahon to his senses. What he saw now—though his pity remained—was a wild creature of untamed instincts and untrained mind. He realized that her life was bound in chains his best efforts could not break; he saw her bedraggled dress and tousled hair as the symbols of a spirit whose fellowship with the prairie was too intimate for him to share. Every clinging bit of sodden drapery on her blotted out the beautiful lines that had been so essentially Mira.

The reaction came. The snobbery and intolerance of his opening eyes was like sacrilege, the tearing down of an image that had once meant so much to him.

And then he was looking into the black round hole of her revolver.

"I've got you now," she hissed. "You murderer! You killed them. I didn't think I'd get even so soon." A mad snatch of laughter twisted her face. "I've prayed for this . . . and now—" She swallowed, as if the fury in her was a tangible thing crowding into her throat. "You thought—you thought you'd learn me things—to read and write . . . to make me what you think a girl should ought to be. Bah! You're a bloody murderer—a damn bloody murderer!"

There was nothing he could say, but a mist came before his eyes and he shuddered violently.

"Oh!" she sneered, "you ain't so brave when the drop's on you. Now you know what you've did to so many for years. . . . And you'll know what Joe and Jim felt like at the end, you—you—"

The intensity of her fury choked her.

"I don't know what I can say, Miss Stanton," he murmured miserably. The pointed revolver had scarcely entered into the situation for him. "You know the truth."

"Why didn't they shoot you?" she went on. "Just one little bullet and they'd have been alive to-day—they'd have been free. They—shot themselves . . . to let you off. . . . But I won't be so easy. I'm killing things to-day—everything I love." A wave of color flooded her thin dark skin, and Mahon knew that for a fraction of a second his life hung balancing. "And things I hate," she added. "I'm ready to die for it. . . . Life ain't worth living after what you've done to me."

He continued to stand before her, the rein over his arm. A trickle of water fell from the brim of his Stetson and he leaned away that it might fall free.

"Get out your gun," she ordered. "This won't be murder like you did. I'll show you how a woman can shoot. Ten yards'll do. I'll give you a chance."

He made no movement. The pity of her fury drowned every other emotion.

"You're a coward, too, are you?" she taunted. "You'd like me to shoot myself like—like they did." A tear showed in her eyes but she dashed it away and peered up into his face. "You—you ain't really afraid—are you?"

"I am," he replied quietly, "but not of your revolver, Miss Stanton."

"Don't call me Miss Stanton," she cried, stamping her foot. "I'm not your city girl. I'm only a cowgirl, a know-nothing cowgirl who can't read or write—and don't want to. I tell you I don't want to! . . . And what are you afraid of, if it ain't my gun?"

He made no reply but only looked. And presently the pistol wavered and dropped, and with a broken sigh she climbed to the saddle and galloped away.

Blue Pete came out from the trees, shoving his revolver into his belt.

"I'm not a murderer," Mahon stammered, "—a damn—bloody—murderer. A pull of the trigger—and what would have happened to her?"

"I knowed she wudn't shoot," growled the half-breed. "Hed my eyes on hers—'n' my bullet wud 'a' got thar fust." Then he shivered.

"You might at least have told her how unjust she was," protested the Corporal. "You might have set her right a bit."

Blue Pete looked him up and down almost menacingly.

"It's a fair fight," he growled.

CHAPTER XV

BLUE PETE QUITS

Blue Pete, repudiated by the only life he knew, was thrown more and more into the daily work of the Police. Of his altered relationship with the ranchers he made no comment even to Mahon, but he and his little pinto retired more and more into themselves, subdued, restless, unsatisfied. Mahon read the suffering silence, and the Inspector often studied the half-breed with troubled eyes. But when either of them put their sympathy into words, however subtly, Blue Pete only smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Mahon, his daily companion, thought to occupy the half-breed's mind and to widen his resources by teaching him to read and write.

"Wot do I want with writin'?" Blue Pete growled. "Ain't got nobody to write to. . . . Never will. 'Tween eddication an' them purty eyes o' mine I'd be so stuck up I'd—I'd be tryin' to jine the Police next."

That ended it. Mahon knew there could be no official place in the Police for the half-breed, and, besides, he remembered his other prairie pupil and was tempted to agree with Blue Pete that it scarcely paid.

The 3-bar-Y ranch was in the hands of a faithful cowboy who had worked for the Stantons for years. When Mira disappeared, Helen, though she had lived with her for weeks after the tragedy, never explained—for the simple reason, in part, that she could not. Her cousin had bade her good-by with shy affection, refusing to divulge her plans, only promising that Helen would hear from her sometime. And Helen had undertaken to keep an eye on the ranch, though the new manager could be trusted. After she had shown the Corporal that she preferred not to discuss those last weeks at the lonely ranch, Mahon worried in secret, a few abortive attempts to talk about Mira with Blue Pete being met by sullen silence.

With the tragic deaths of Joe and Jim Stanton rustling for a time ceased. Any one less familiar with the ways of the prairie than the Police might have been satisfied, but they knew that the closing of one avenue only meant the opening of others. The Inspector had been through thirty years of it and was no optimist. Besides, Dutch Henry and Bilsy were still at large and their spots would never change.

Three weeks passed. One morning the Inspector opened his mail with the customary annoyance that featured that part of his daily duties. He hated letters—he hated making reports—hated the formal acknowledgments of the Commissioner—hated the letters which kept proving his unfortunate estimate of mankind. The third in the pile that day, an evil-looking square envelope, bore a Montana postmark. Inspector Parker read it and shoved it across to Corporal Mahon, who happened to be there.

"That sneaking cur, Blue Pete," it said, "has done for Slim Rawlins. Now we shoot on sight. Look out for yourselves.

"Dutch Henry and the gang."

Mahon handed it back with a smile.

"You aren't frightened?" commented the Inspector.

"It's not because I don't believe him. We're shooting Dutchy on sight anyway, if he shows resistance. . . . But why send us another warning?"

It was Blue Pete who explained later.

"Dutchy's not bad stuff," he said. "Us felluhs don't shoot on sight 'thout warnin'—least Dutchy 'n' his kin' don't. . . . But don't imagine they're kiddin'. Yuh've got to git the drop fust, that's all. . . . So Slim's gone. I didn't stop to 'vestigate. . . . I only winged him—like Dutchy did Sergeant Denton. . . . That's one." He lifted down his rifle from the wall and cut a mark in it.

The first rustling was reported thereafter from Irvine, a small village on the railway fifteen miles to the east. From a northern ranch a roan mare had disappeared. The inclination was to believe that the rustling had broken out again, but the Inspector shook his head. Dutch Henry and his gang did not deal in single horses, and north of the railway. He sent for Blue Pete.

At the moment the half-breed was entertaining a group of wide-eyed tourists in the barracks shed. His repertoire was extensive. With rope and revolver he was a master hand; nothing he enjoyed more than the exclamations of surprise and alarm, the bursts of awe-struck applause of visitors who had seen nothing more skillful with firearms than rabbit shooting and to whom a rope was simply a bit of hemp. One of his favorite "stunts" was to place the barrel of his huge revolver in his mouth and rapidly snap the cylinder around with the trigger. A hair's breadth greater pressure and—a mutilated corpse. Tourists never failed to gasp—the strongest of them; the women usually screamed.

"Ready for a long ride, Pete?" asked the Inspector.

The half-breed, scenting excitement, grinned.

"May be a week—and then nothing."

"Make it a month, Inspector,—an' then somethin' an' I'm the happiest white Indian in Canady."

Inspector Parker unfolded his suspicions. In Irvine lived a hotelkeeper upon whom the Police had been keeping an eye for a couple of years. He owned a ranch south of the railway and his cowboys were notorious "bad actors." The Police had already run against him for selling liquor in illegal hours, and they felt satisfied that to his many other vices he added a bit of rustling. Several times they had collected evidence enough for a good chance of conviction, but they carefully held their hands until punishment was certain.

Blue Pete and Whiskers moved eastward by the indistinct trail north of the railway, to his right an unbroken, practically unknown country that extended almost two hundred miles northward before it reached the settlements along the railway running eastward from Edmonton. When he came within sight of Irvine he shifted his course to the north. The owner of the lost roan told where the herd was when last the horse was seen; and the rest of the day he spent there ranging about. Some time later the ugly pinto was seen by a cowboy loping southward across the railway several miles further east. And then no word of him for two weeks.

One wild, windy day, when even the small stones on the streets of Medicine Hat swirled in the eddies, and the wires shrilled and whined, Blue Pete rode into the barracks yard. Before him, one arm tied so that fast riding would be extreme agony, rode a sorry looking fellow, what remained of a once impudent cowboy, head hanging, body sagging, humiliation and dejection in every line. And trailing behind Whiskers' rump, arched against the wind, came the roan mare. Ten minutes earlier, just outside the town, Blue Pete had released the rope from the neck of his captive's mount; he was taking no chances. At sight of the group Inspector Parker rubbed his hands.

"The roan mare, I bet my hat," he chortled.

"Yer takin' awful chances," was Blue Pete's sarcastic comment.

Two weeks of almost sleepless riding, the last half of it with a rebellious prisoner on his hands, had left him raw; and the howling wind had not improved his temper.

"Who is he?" The Inspector pointed at the glum prisoner.

"Dunno. Was punchin' fer Peterson w'en he stole the mare."

"Where'd you get him?"

"Down in Montany." The half-breed climbed wearily from the saddle. "I'm goin' to sleep," he jerked, and made for the stable.

The Inspector whistled—and muttered something that sounded like an oath.

"Good lord, man, you didn't bring him across the border?"

"D'yuh think they moved the border fer me to git him over?" jeered the half-breed.

The Inspector considered. "Pete," he pleaded, "are you quite sure? Wasn't it just this side—just a little bit this side of the border you got him?"

Blue Pete turned a withering eye. "Think I do' know Montany by this time? Think it ud take me two weeks ef he was this side? 'Bout thirty-five miles into Montany, that's wot."

The Inspector groaned and came nearer. "Pete," he whispered, "how long do you think it would take you to put 'em back where you got 'em?"

The half-breed angrily raised his head from the cinch.

"Because," explained the Inspector, "I can't keep 'em if you got them over there."

Blue Pete sighed. He glared at the grinning cowboy and made a step toward him—and the grin fled. The half-breed slipped the knots of the rope with a couple of vicious jerks.

"Now skin!" he snarled. "An' mighty quick er they'll take yuh back in a wagon."

He turned to the Inspector. "Thar's the horse anyway. It didn't get over the line. Things was too hot 'bout then fer him to take it along. Yuh tol' me to git him—so I went on." He spat in disgust. "Ef I was as nice 'bout little things like that as you I'd—I'd go preachin', not Policin'. . . . Oh, well," he continued more cheerfully, looking after the rapidly disappearing cowboy, "he'll mean some more work fer me some day. . . . It's bin a purty fair two weeks o' fun. Some o' Dutchy's gang got onto me bein' over thar."

The Inspector, his sense of humor roused almost to the loss of professional dignity, cleared his throat.

"We've lots of work for you, Pete, right away. Dutchy and his gang have broken out again—down to the southeast. . . . And I've told the others as I tell you now—this time we must have the rustlers as well as the cattle . . . that is, if you can get them in Canada. . . . And, by the way, keep your eye open for Mira Stanton. I'm a bit worried about her."

Three days later Blue Pete stalked grimly into the Inspector's office.

"I'm quittin'," he announced.

The Inspector opened his mouth and shut it in his surprise.

"No luck?" he inquired sympathetically.

Blue Pete did not answer for a long time, and the Inspector watched him narrowly.

"I'm quittin', that's all."

"What you need, Pete, is a good square meal. Run up to the Royal and charge it to me. You'll feel better. You look starved."

Blue Pete stumbled out, ate the meal . . . and climbed grimly on his horse and rode away to the south.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOT

Late into the night the Inspector waited for the half-breed's return. At ten he strolled over to the Royal and then went home, where he lay awake half the night. In the early morning he called up the Lodge, but the half-breed had not been there. Corporal Mahon, however, had things of importance to say.

"Give me three days," he pleaded. "I want to poke about in the Hills. Things are happening in there right now—and we ought to know."

The Inspector thought quickly. "Go ahead. I'll send Mitchell down to take your place. It's quiet just now around the Creek."

That was how Mahon, with three all too short days ahead for the fulfillment of a long cherished desire, came to be one of the thousands of mysterious living things that moved about in the unexplored depths of the Cypress Hills. Following a long alkali flat that extended along one side of Elk Lake, he entered the Hills by a depression where his movements were concealed from the prairie.

The expedition might mean much or nothing, and he did not minimize the dangers. Yet back in his mind was an unexpressed hope that counted almost as much as the possibility of uncovering the hiding places of the rustlers. The Hills had long symbolized to him the unraveling of every prairie mystery, especially since he had discovered Blue Pete's familiarity with them. Now it was Mira. Like every one else who thought of her disappearance, he could not associate her with any other place in the world than the prairie where she was raised. And of late he had convinced himself that Mira knew more of the secrets of the Hills than she chose to admit.

Hidden within the Hills he paused to consider his course. The one spot he knew well was Blue Pete's cave. All else seemed in his mind to lead to and leave that focus. But an unreasoned reluctance to intrude into a secret hiding place to which the half-breed had led him in a time of stress was increased by the temporary uncertainty of Blue Pete's whereabouts and plans. At any rate he was not there to find his dusky friend. Accordingly he turned eastward.

At first he kept to the clearer ridges, riding slowly and avoiding rocks and fallen boughs. He had no thought of coming on the rustlers unawares—that was impossible under the conditions—but he did hope to uncover their retreats, the hiding places of the stolen animals, and marks that might guide them in future chases. In this he was to some extent successful. He discovered unmistakable signs not only of pathways but of temporary halts of many horses and some cattle. The manner in which these petered out into trackless wilds convinced him of the care with which the rustlers handled the bunches. Once in the Hills they could take their time to break the herds up and drive them in devious separate routes that left the minimum of trail and disappeared entirely under conditions of ground plentiful enough where there was so much rock and such tangled depths of brush and fallen trees.

Darkness had fallen before he gave up for the day with an annoyed sense of defeat. Trail after trail had faded out before his eyes, most of them old enough to defy tracking. It was a still, ghostly night, with the glimmer of an abortive moon through the overhanging trees. He had an illusion of not being so much alone as the silence implied, and for an hour after he lay down, horse and rifle close at hand, he strained eyes and ears into the surrounding gloom. Gradually he came to believe that the very silence—where he knew was so much night life—supported his instinct that other beings or things, unassociated as he with the ordinary life of the Hills, were abroad. Sometimes far away he heard the sounds he expected—night birds, water creatures—and once the long-drawn howl of a wolf. More startling than the silence then was the answering howl close at hand, a howl that differed in a way that puzzled him. There was something dog-like about it, and it ended abruptly as if cut off by force or sudden alarm.

He rose with a curious sense of being watched, and crept fifty yards away until he felt behind him the backing of an upright rock. He had no sense of fear. His move had been rather from merely being under observation than from fear. And lying against the rock he went to sleep.

When he awoke he saw how well he had protected himself in the darkness. The rock overhung for twenty feet above his head and about him grew a thicket. He peeped carefully out, with memories of the night before, but the ravine before him was unbroken woodland, with a faint gleam of quiet water flickering up through the crowding brush and dead-fall. His horse was quietly drinking. He laughed, stretched himself, and reached for his breakfast.

But the box in which was carried every scrap of food for his three days' trip was gone, though he distinctly remembered unfastening it from the

saddle to bring it with his rifle with him on his quiet retreat from the Thing that seemed to be watching him. With sudden thought he looked about for his rifle. It too was missing, though he never moved without placing it in touch with some part of his body. His pistol was still in his belt where he kept it when out of the saddle.

Disgust, rather than alarm, made him exclaim beneath his breath. To his sense of defeat of the previous day's investigations was added the knowledge that some one was on his track—clever and daring enough to rob him while he slept. That it was only robbery might mean little or much. Impatient to be moving, he stepped out to his horse. As he reached for the rein, a mark in the soggy ground beside the creek caught his eye, but at that moment the horse blotted it out with heavy hoof. The picture that remained as he closed his eyes in a desperate effort to retain it was of a small foot. A close search proved that its owner had taken only the one false step.

He had no thought of giving up because his food was gone; and his rifle mattered little. He still had his revolver. And as he rode he thought. More and more it came to him that the motive of the one who had robbed him was to turn him from his purpose rather than to do him bodily harm. The essentials for advance had been taken but not the means of retreat. And that mark of a small foot—high-heeled, high-arched! He began to weave curious deductions about it, deductions he followed somewhat whimsically until at last he almost convinced himself that some mental process had deceived his eyes.

He knew better when, at the end of a long avenue through the trees, he saw her facing him. Her horse was turned as if for flight, and on her face was a sneer that hurt his self-respect. He spurred to her, and she waited for him.

"Mira! I've—we've been anxious about you. What are you doing here? I thought—"

She had not taken her cold eyes from him, her head thrown back, flashing at him through drooping eyelids.

"You're anxious too late," she sneered. "If you'd thought of it sooner it would have did me some good. . . . And whose business is it what I'm doing here? I guess these hills is free. . . . And—nobody cares anyway."

She had started so bravely for so weak an ending! He was thinking at first how queenly she looked in her scorn—and yet how lonely in there in the shadows. And when the break came to her voice his heart throbbed for her.

"You know I care, Mira," he said feelingly. "You know I would give an arm to—to be able to save you this suffering."

She was stooping now over the pommel fingering the rope, and a tinge of color came and went where he could see her neck.

"Mira!" he burst out. "Won't you come back to the old life?"

"If I was you," she broke in breathlessly, "I'd keep away from the Hills. There's them that would like to get you here."

"That's why I'm here," he said, brought suddenly back to his duty.

"Come," she said, "I'll go back with you. I'll show you the shortest way."

She was beside him, her skirt brushing his knee. The soft submission of the beautiful girl was overwhelming—almost.

"I can't go back now," he said formally. "I'm here on duty."

The color deepened in her cheeks and her head went back in a taunting laugh.

"Words—words! You always was good at them," she hurled at him, and spurred into the trees.

He listened to the wild course of her flight. Then he remembered the little mark in the soft ground and thoughtfully gathered up the rein.

The urge of his thoughts made his riding reckless. Where he had before been trying to ride softly, he now scorned to turn aside, leaping rocks and trees and noisily crackling through the brush and dead-fall. His mind was only half on his work. The horse gathered itself to leap a fallen tree. Something slipped smoothly over Mahon's head and fell about his arms. He spread them with a convulsive movement and ducked his head. But just then the horse jumped and he was jerked from the saddle, his head striking the tree.

His painfully opening eyes rested on a pair of evil countenances he knew well. But mental effort was agony. His head ached down the back like an open wound—he knew it was a wound. Ah, yes, one was Dutch Henry, the other—he recalled it now—the cowboy of the shooting gallery. He could hear other voices behind him where he could not see—and one of them seemed to be a woman's. But he was only half conscious—it was probably only a twist in his dreams. He struggled to turn his stiff neck, but arms and

ankles were tied and he fell over. But he could see now—and Mira was not there.

Bilsy was sneering down at him.

"You Police pup, you! Thought you'd make a big scoop all alone, eh? Wanted to be a hero, eh? Well—y'are . . . only thur's nobody here to put it in the papers. What ye've scooped, youngster, is a short bit of rope tied to a tree. Dutchy, here, favors a little hole there." He jabbed a brutal finger into the helpless Corporal's forehead. "P'raps ye'd rather have yer head shot off with yer own rifle—accidental-like, or suicide. Ha, ha! Guess Dutchy wins. Sort o' perfaired the rope myself at first—"

"Close your trap, Bilsy," broke in Dutchy, pushing roughly between him and the Corporal. "I want to tell you, Mountie, why you're going to kick the bucket. We've kept you for that. It's Slim Rawlins. A dead mate calls for revenge. You're the first . . . and then it'll be that damn half-breed."

Mahon raised his aching head and smiled.

"There's one thing it will do, Dutchy. It'll give us the help we need in these parts with you ruffians. That's what we've wanted for years to get you fellows. It'll take only one bullet to rush a dozen Policemen down here. Your finish is certain anyway as daylight—so it won't make much difference to you—you bloody murderer!"

Even as the rustler swore and kicked him, Mahon enjoyed his application of the borrowed epithet.

"What you wanted, Dutch Henry, was to see a Mounted Policeman quail. When are you going to start to try?"

Dutch Henry swung away furiously, and Mahon heard a whispered discussion proceeding out of his sight. It grew warmer—and he was certain a woman's voice was protesting. He knew, too, that it was Mira, and the knowledge did not soothe him. Bilsy came over, jerked him brutally to a sitting position and dragged him back against a tree. He could see them then, four angry men holding their rifles half poised.

But Mira suddenly rushed before them, her straight figure held to its every inch, her rifle in their faces and her finger on the trigger.

"You shan't shoot him! You shan't!" she cried. "The first to raise his gun I'll kill."

The rustlers glowered on her, fingering their rifles nervously. But she had forgotten Bilsy, for whose return from placing the Corporal the others were

waiting. His voice came from behind her, drawling, half teasing, but unmistakably determined. “Drop it, Mira! I’ve got ye covered. Yer a little fury sometimes, but we ain’t taking it this time.”

Mahon strained to see what would happen. Something had to come quickly. What did happen was as startling to him as to the rustlers. A report burst from the trees beyond, and with a yell Bilsy dropped his rifle and sprang back. Like the figures in a dream every rustler disappeared, Mira with them, scarcely a sound betraying their course.

Mahon kept his eyes on the shadows from which he thought the rifle shot had come. But it was, not from there Blue Pete stepped out; and his eyes too seemed to be searching in the same direction as the Corporal’s. He cut the ropes without a word.

“Like a play, weren’t it?” he laughed at last. “Blood-’n’-thunder dramar, with you the hero an’ me—”

“You’re mixing the characters, Pete.” Mahon rose stiffly and stretched himself. “You’re the hero. I’m only the simple fool, the dunderhead the hero’s always rescuing.”

“Rats! I didn’t rescue you.”

“What? Then who did?”

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders. “All I kin guess is it must ’a’ bin a friend.” He picked up the rifle Bilsy had dropped and examined it. “Hm-m! The felluh that did this sure has an eye.” He pointed to the mark of the bullet on the side of the barrel.

“But why didn’t you shoot, Pete? You’ll never have a chance like that again—Dutch Henry. . . . And I thought you were after Bilsy.”

“Seems to me,” said the half-breed slowly, “that you ’n’ me do’ want no inquest on this li’l affair. . . . Thar seems to be three of us do’ want to tell wot we saw here.”

The Corporal was frowning at the ground.

“Gad, Pete, what does it mean? Is she—” He chose not to finish the question.

“All you need bother about, Boy, is that they’re in love with you, that’s wot.”

Mahon laughed bitterly.

“Mira in love with me. You should have seen us a few hours ago. I tried to make love to her, I believe. . . . And she scoffed at me—scoffed at me. . . . And now—she’s saved my life. . . . I wonder if I could make her love me.”

Blue Pete only sighed.

CHAPTER XVII

BLUE PETE IN COURT

For the first time Mahon was sorely tempted to exclude something from his report. He tried to convince himself that Mira's share in the incident justified her protection to the extent of silence, that it entitled her to protection from the suspicions of those who knew her less well than he. But the very temptation insured finally that the Inspector heard everything. And it was the Inspector himself who let it go no further.

The one great gain from Mahon's experience was that it proved that the Hills were still the base of the rustlers' operations. The information simplified the work of the Police and enabled them to utilize their small staff to better advantage by ignoring immaterial incidents happening elsewhere on the prairie.

Inspector Parker asked no questions of Blue Pete. He recognized that the half-breed had passed—and was passing—through troubles of mind in which he could not share. He had his own ideas of what these were, but he discussed them with no one. Only he watched with concern the half-breed's growing silence and surliness. The immediate point that counted was that his presence, and the unexpected offer of the cowboy Blue Pete had pulled across the border, enabled the Police to complete their evidence against Peterson, the Irvine hotelkeeper and rancher.

The case was being hurried on. The Police, anxious after two years of suspicion to secure a conviction, wished to present their evidence when the proofs were fresh and their special witnesses were on hand. The one big difficulty was the tangle of brands now marking the hip of the roan mare. Peterson had done his work well, and the case was further complicated by the fact that he had at one time owned the mare, his brand appearing rightfully enough mixed with several others, some of them obviously vented and other uncertain.

It was, therefore, more on Blue Pete's uncanny knowledge of brands than on his part in the capture that the Inspector relied; the latter was simple fact, though the half-breed refused at first to enter the witness box. But the Police had not counted on politics. On the bench that day was to sit a new judge, a lawyer whose previous record in criminal cases had frequently brought him into conflict with the Police. His political activities had earned

for him the new distinction. Yet it was not until the Inspector saw the cunning face behind the desk on the platform, now weighted with exaggerated dignity and importance, that he even mentally questioned his administration of the law. Still he pinned his hopes to Blue Pete.

The record of the mare was traced, and a cowboy declared that he had recognized the animal in a small bunch encountered on its way south. Then Blue Pete was called. He lounged into the box in his loose way, his squint eyes darting about the courtroom, and seated himself lazily on the edge of the railing.

"Your name?" demanded the clerk.

"Pete."

"Your full name, please."

The half-breed hesitated. "Blue Pete," he said.

"Now, now," broke in the harsh voice of the judge, "don't play with the court. We want your full name—your surname."

The crowded courtroom was interested. For the first time many of them began to suspect revelations when the name came. The smile had passed from Blue Pete's face and he glanced at the Inspector, his hand fumbling at his chin. Inspector Parker was quietly fuming.

"Your name, your name!" repeated the clerk impatiently. "Don't waste the time of the court."

"Maverick. Pete Maverick. Augustus Charles Pete—Peter Maverick."

His face was solemn but it did not prevent the titter than ran through the court at the impudent use of a term familiar to every rancher present, and at the ridiculous application of it to the half-breed.

"Order, order!" shouted the sheriff.

Every one except the judge was smiling—his experience was too limited to make him sure of himself and the court—but he noted the laugh and glared at the witness. The crown prosecutor rose hastily and opened his questioning. With few preliminaries he plunged Blue Pete into the part of the evidence where his knowledge would count. And the half-breed began to feel better; the frank interest of audience and court rather pleased him. He told as well as he could how he determined brands and their dates, the kinds of irons used, the little touches that exposed to the experienced the intentions of the branders. Color, condition of scar and skin, the length of

hair and its coarseness, the feel and wrinkle of the skin under pressure, the story of the heat of the iron used and the care of the brander—all these and a score of other details puzzling to more than half the court even in a ranching country came easily but in untrained phrasing from his lips. He told when the original branding was done, when the vents, and when the more recent alterations intended to conceal the older marks. Not one in the room doubted that, when it came to brands, Blue Pete was in a class by himself. Inspector Parker rubbed his hands.

But when Paddy Norton, the big criminal lawyer from Calgary, rose and gave the famous preliminary tug to his ragged gown, things began to look different. Norton preferred a hard case. That was why he was in demand all over the West at some hundreds of dollars a day. Several seconds of strained silence followed his clumsy lurch, as he lifted a fat foot to the chair beside him and leaned on it facing the witness. Paddy loved silences; he knew their value.

"How long have you been with the Police?" he shot at the half-breed.

"'Bout a year or two."

Norton sniffed. "And all that time you and that atrocious pinto of yours have been sneaking about among honest ranchers trying to fasten crime on them. That's your sort, eh?"

At first Blue Pete was bewildered. He raised himself from the railing and faced Norton squarely.

"Sneakin' nothin'! The differunce 'tween you an' me is I've bin tryin' to *stop* the rustlin'. . . . The honest rancher ain't afeard."

Norton's experience of witnesses who turned on him was limited, for he had always been granted unfair liberties in the court. His huge body stiffened against the rustle of laughter in the courtroom.

"Quite a pretty little speech!" he sneered. "And now where were you before you came to this side and joined the Police?"

The crown prosecutor objected, but the judge upheld the question.

"In the States."

"And where were you in that large area called the United States?"

"Montany."

"And what were you doing there?"

"Cow-punchin'."

Norton made one of his famous pauses before the next question. He hitched his gown further on his shoulders and pulled it about the knee bent above the chair. Even the Inspector waited in fear.

"Now I want you to tell the court whether you were or were not rustling."

Blue Pete looked at the Inspector, the crown prosecutor protesting vigorously. It was not the career of the witness that was in question but a mere matter of fact. Was the defense able to prove Blue Pete's description of the brands incorrect? Was it not obvious that he was right? What the witness did years ago had no bearing on the case. But Judge Ritchie saw his chance of paying back old scores against the Police and turned on the protester fiercely; and the latter sat down with a helpless flutter of his hands.

"Were you or were you not rustling in Montana?" repeated Norton.

"I was."

"Ah!" Norton did not gloat. The exclamation merely meant that he knew all about this man and it was due to law and order that the court too should know. The crowd drew a long breath.

"How long were you a rustler?"

Blue Pete was seated once more on the railing, carelessly twirling his Stetson. In his voice as he replied was a suggestion of pride.

"Ten years I rustled with the biggest outfits in the Badlands."

"Who were they?"

"Crane Brothers, Sidney and Conn, Nanton's, Hughson. . . . Want more?"

A gasp ran through the courtroom. Every outfit mentioned most of them knew at least by name, every one a prominent rancher across the border.

Norton broke in quickly. "No, no. That'll do."

"Thought it might," grinned the half-breed. "They've paid you many a good dollar fer wot yer tryin' to do to-day."

The Judge misunderstood Norton's flush.

"Don't tell the court, Peter—Peter Maverick," he said sternly, "that Crane Brothers, and Sidney and Conn, and the rest you named are rustlers. We all know them here."

"And yuh all knew the Stantons and Peterson here, and—and lots others I cud name ef I wanted."

Norton went on hastily with his examination.

"So that's how you know all about brands? I suppose you had a lot of brand-switching to do yourself?"

"Lots of us takes money fer wot we don't brag about," was the pointed reply.

"I suppose you could alter a horse, by brand or otherwise—even beautify your leprous pinto—so that its owner would never recognize it?"

"Got a horse yuh want to lose?" grinned Blue Pete.

"If I had a horse of any kind I'd certainly lock it up when you were about."

The half-breed dropped his eyes at the laughter in the court. "Ef I did steal it," he growled, "all I'd need to do wud be to get a big crooked lawyer from Calgary to git me off." The laugh was against Norton.

Norton looked at the Judge, who responded to the hint by storming at the crowd and the witness.

"You might tell us how you'd go about altering a horse," suggested Norton.

"Ain't yuh makin' 'nough money in the game yer in?" asked Blue Pete innocently.

"It takes years of the life you've led," sneered the lawyer, "to make a successful rustler. After all, I don't believe you know so much as you try to make the court believe. What, now, would you do with a horse to change it? Prove this wonderful knowledge of yours to justify any value being attached to your evidence."

Blue Pete bridled. He started slowly, uncertainly, but after the first few words what he had to say came freely, and in two minutes he had the oldest rancher in the room open-mouthed. He told of doping eyes, of the possibilities of carbolic acid and dyes, of tampering with nerves, of temporarily changing action and the hang of the head, tail and ears; of beating up lumps, filing teeth, altering color by certain injuries and scars; of the use of drugs and of artificial tug and collar marks to make a working horse; of galls by shaving; of clipping, roaching, docking, bishoping.

Norton kept his eyes on the Judge, nodding significantly now and then. Judge Ritchie lifted a shocked hand to stop the flow.

"Do you expect this court to take the evidence of this man?" he demanded of the crown prosecutor. "A man who admits brazenly, even boastfully, that he has been a rustler for ten years? I can't do it. No one is going to be convicted in this court on the evidence of such a man. More, I feel it my duty to express my amazement that the Police should employ such a confessed criminal. If the examination is finished I will call the next witness."

Blue Pete's expression had been passing through many phases as the Judge talked. From bewilderment it changed to confusion, then to anger.

"D'yuh mean I'm lyin'?" he demanded.

"That will do," ordered the Judge. "Bring the next witness."

But Blue Pete was not through.

"Judge," he said, "fer ten years I rustled, not 'cause I liked rustlin' but 'cause it was part o' the ranchin' business whar I rode. Two years ago I drifted across the line. Since then I've got back a few hundred cattle 'n' horses that never wud have been got but fer me. Thar ain't a rancher here but made out o' me bein' here. I like the work. I've bin straight—ev'ry day o' that two years, and I ain't got no reason fer lyin'. Ef I had I'd 'a' lied 'bout that rustlin'. Ask th' Inspector. . . . Ef yuh turn me down like that, Judge"—he drew a fluttering breath—"I might's well go back to the rustlin'. It's in your hands, Judge."

"Next witness!" shouted Judge Ritchie.

Blue Pete stumbled from the box. Inspector Parker, purple with rage, was swearing under his breath, and Corporal Mahon stepped out boldly and laid a friendly hand on the half-breed's shoulder.

"Don't take it that way, Pete," he pleaded, in a voice that carried through the courtroom. "*We* know you're honest. If you knew what we know you wouldn't mind what some people say."

Judge Ritchie opened his mouth, his eyes blazing, but the Inspector stood up just behind the rail and glared straight into his eyes. And the Judge thought better of it.

Blue Pete worked his way down the crowded courtroom to the door, his lips working.

Next morning a boy brought to the barracks his spare horse, his riding boots, even the remnants of a pouch of tobacco the Inspector had given him. The Inspector knew what it meant and cursed things in general. Then he gave orders to his men to round up the half-breed and bring him in. . . .

It was months before a Police hand touched him, and then—

CHAPTER XVIII

BLUE PETE TAKES A PARTNER

There followed the hardest work the Police in the Medicine Hat district had ever been called upon to do. At intervals cattle and horses disappeared, and day and night Mahon and his fellows scoured the prairie and the section of the Hills they knew. But there was now no Blue Pete to pick up trails, no Blue Pete to lead them confidently through the maze of the Hills to hidden vales where cattle might feed unsuspected a score of yards away, no little mottled pinto to show the way and pilot her master with uncanny instinct. Twice the Police were shot at from hiding, and they took to riding in pairs about the Hills. It meant unguarded trails elsewhere.

Mahon, with the scar of a rustler's bullet in his shoulder to add to the one on the back of his head, missed Blue Pete more than he admitted to his comrades. The ugly half-breed had become to him a pal on whose companionship he could always rely. Without his dark friend his success was not so great. Two or three small bunches he had recaptured, but always his success was shorn of its triumph by the escape of the rustlers.

Ever he was on watch for the familiar crossed eyes and ragged Stetson, for the spotted pinto that seemed to hide or flare as her master wished, for he knew the half-breed was in the Hills. That he would not return to his old life in the Badlands he was as certain as that Dutch Henry and his gang would continue to the end to work in Canada. But more than ever he was determined not to take advantage of his knowledge of the cave behind the ivy. Some day they would meet without that.

In there in the Hills new associations and new stories were in the forming. In a deep green valley, where a gentle stream gurgled into unreality all the strain of the past few months, Blue Pete and Mira met. Neither expressed surprise. She held out her hand, and he looked from it to her face with an inquiring twinkle in his uncertain eyes before accepting it gingerly like a fragile toy.

"*You* don't think such awful things of me, Pete?" she pleaded.

"Not on yer life. W'y shud I?"

"You know why. You saw me—that day."

"I'm leavin' that to the Police," he laughed. "Corporal Mahon seen yuh too—an' th' Inspector knows. . . . But wot I didn't see was who fired that shot."

"The one that got Bilsy's rifle? Wasn't it you?"

He shook his head.

"Wasn't there other Police around? Are you sure?"

"I got on the trail fer a minute while the Corporal was huntin' fer things . . . an' ef I hadn't seed yuh thar with my own eyes I'd swear it was your marks."

She laughed. "Perhaps it was—I was all over there—but somebody fired that shot who wanted to save Corporal Mahon and yet wouldn't kill Bilsy. . . . Wonder if there was a cowboy—or other rustlers around."

She had no other explanation, and of what Blue Pete might think he said nothing further.

"I heard about the trial, Pete," she said gently after a time. "One of the boys was there and heard the Judge."

He gritted his teeth at the memory her words roused.

"And what are you going to do?"

He caught her keen glance, held it an instant, and nodded; and her laugh was sharp—almost coarse.

"They'll have their hands full now, d-damn 'em!"

Blue Pete frowned. "Stop it, gal. Leave the cuss words out. They don't sound right. An' yuh don' like 'em any better'n I do."

She hung her head.

"Pete," she confided, "I'm sick o' the gang. I—I don't like it—I don't like them. Let me come with you."

He drew away, startled. Whiskers plunged, surprised, and he pulled her up clumsily.

"With—me?"

"They're so rough," she pleaded, "—Bilsy and Dutchy and the gang."

He threw back his head with a harsh guffaw that was startling in one whose laugh was always so silent.

"Rough! An' Blue Pete, the half-breed, such a beaut—so smooth an' gentle-like! Oh, lord! Things is sartin to be so nice 'n' sweet whar I am fer the nex' few months! Yuh'd enj'y yerself real pleasant-like with me—ef yuh foun' Dutchy an' the gang rough! Oh, lord!"

She pouted, driving his laugh away.

"You and me can rustle more in a week than the gang can in a month," she said. "And Juno can help. She's still scared of me a little, but she'll come back."

He was shaking his head doggedly. "The rustlin' I'm in fer ain't no lady's game. It ain't real rustlin'. Ef Bilsy an' the gang was rough yuh'd fin' my life real hell—real hell, gal. It ain't jes' plain rustlin' I'm startin'—not 'zackly. . . . It's a gor-swizzled sight more dang'rous. I'll be sarved lead fer breakfus' an' dinner—an' it'll mean some slick work not to eat it. . . . Besides, yuh'd be in the way."

"Pete—Peter Maverick," she coaxed, "you know I can ride as well as you—and pretty near shoot as well. Pete, you wouldn't leave me with them rude fellows, would you?"

"Yuh kin take care o' yerself," he said, staring at her anxiously. "I know yuh—an' so do they. An' I know you *will*. Ef yuh come with me alone thar'll be blazes to pay 'mong yer friends. Can't yuh see that? Yer safer with the gang."

"I'm coming with you," she persisted.

"Not ef I know it."

He wheeled Whiskers into the trees. For a moment she thought of following, then sat listening with wet cheeks to the crash of his passage.

After that came some of the weirdest rustling experienced in the West. Almost under the noses of the cowboys cattle and horses seemed to vanish. Several times suspected rustlers were seen in the distance near the Hills, and more than once they seemed to be struggling among themselves. Reports of the little pinto drifted in. The ranchers fumed, and the Police rode until they dropped from fatigue. Two rustlers were captured. It meant the thinning of the gang, and a sigh of relief went up. But the rustling diminished little. Judge Ritchie, with money in Grantham's ranch, complained rudely to the Inspector.

"You'll find out," snapped the Inspector, "how much easier it is to make a rustler than to catch one."

Mahon, learning more about trails, began to notice a peculiar uncertainty in the movements of the stolen bunches. He found them cross and recross, now going north, now south; and sometimes he read sudden stampede. Twice he followed into the Hills and came on secluded glens where bunches had rested and fed—and then been stampeded into scattered flight. He pondered over it.

Blue Pete, from his hiding place in the Hills, was upsetting life in general. Unseen, he watched every move of Mira and the rustlers and at unexpected and disturbing moments sent Dutchy and his fellows into paroxysms of helpless rage. They tried to trap him, ambush him, trail him and Whiskers, but the elusive half-breed was too much for them. Mira, keeping much to herself, secretly laughed at their furious defeats—a bitter laugh so different from the old care-free ripple; and more than once, for a change, she gave herself cause for deeper amusement by outwitting Blue Pete.

The half-breed sought her out and scowled on her like an older brother.

"Yer real smart," he sneered. "Yuh hev the goods on me w'en it comes to buckin' 'gainst a woman. But some sweet day yuh'll fin' yerself in the cooler with a couple o' years to think it over. That's how smart you are."

"You wouldn't take me in," she said, tossing her head. "Sure I know I'll be caught some day. They always get us sooner or later. . . . And I hope it'll please you to know I'm down there in Lethbridge jail all because you made me work with Dutchy and the gang."

"So yer tryin' to be caught, eh?" he growled. "A Stanton ud look fine in stripes, wudn't she?"

"A Stanton can't do much more to soil the name," she replied, stubbornly. "It'll be dirtier if you don't let me come with you."

"But—but yuh'd only be in the road fer wot I'm doin'. You know I'm not jes' rustlin'. Somehow I can't go back to th' ole game. Things look diff'runt now. Did yuh ever feel—" He pulled himself up.

"You bet I have. That's how I've been feeling ever since—oh, ever so long. . . . I used to be just a common cowgirl. Now I'm—I'm all running loose."

There was pain in his squinting eyes.

"I can't, Miss Mira, I jes' can't. I—I cudn't bear to see yuh dodgin' everybody like Whiskers an' me hev to—an' mebbe gettin' the bullet that's waitin' fer me behin' every tree."

Something shone in her face as she came closer to him; and her dark skin was flushing.

"For him, too," she whispered, "there's a bullet waiting behind every tree in here. And—and he takes such foolish chances. Only two days ago he was riding right into a trap. I led him off, but he'd have got me for my pains if I didn't know the Hills so well. Never mind about me, Pete, but—for his sake we'd better work together."

He considered that.

"Guess yuh'd better come along," he said presently. "Yuh kin ef yuh larn me to write. Think yuh kin?"

Her face clouded.

"I don't want to learn nobody to write. I I don't want to know how myself. I threw away all my books. I hate him! I hate him!"

CHAPTER XIX

MAHON'S LONE TRAIL

Inspector Parker never ceased to hope that Blue Pete would return, but the only sign he gave was repeated orders to his men to look out for the half-breed. He noticed the changes in the rustlers' methods and decided that he and his men were working wrong trails. Four men below his quota sometimes wrought him up to the point of putting it squarely to the Commissioner that he could no longer assume responsibility for the Cypress Hills district; but always the honor of the Police intervened in time. A normal strength of a thousand men in the West was down to six hundred, and he must bear his share of the strain. The fifty cents a day allowed a Constable was no inducement for the class of men they required, and had it not been for the glamor and excitement of the life the Mounted Police would have faded away as a power both in numbers and caliber.

The first clue to give definite form to his new methods came from a rancher who had settled in the great open country far to the north on the Red Deer River. That wide but shallow river, sweeping diagonally through the prairie sixty miles north of Medicine Hat, watered a great valley whose fertility had been seized of late years by a half dozen pioneer ranchers. About them, for sixty miles southward and a hundred miles to the north, lay untouched prairie, much of it as yet unvisited by man.

One of these ranchers, on his monthly visits to town for supplies and mail, casually mentioned that he had seen in the distance, twenty-five miles north of the railway, a bunch of horses. It came to the Inspector's ears, and after a talk with Mahon and Mitchell he concluded that the new route of the rustlers was northward out of the range of the district, then southward through other parts where they were not suspected. The two Policemen took a flying trip north without results, and twice thereafter Mahon roamed about alone. On the last occasion he picked up an old trail and followed it for miles before it evaded him.

On his return the Inspector, scarcely listening to his report, sent him hurriedly to the Hills. Fortune favored him. He managed to round up the stolen herd and with it one rustler, making three now awaiting the fall assizes. His success was so startling and daring that Dutchy and his men seemed to lose their courage and for days there was no further rustling.

An extra man was added to the force, and the assistance put new life into the Police. Mahon especially redoubled his efforts. He took to sleeping on the prairie where night overtook him, brooding in silence over Blue Pete and Mira and the other secrets of the Hills. His only relief was the Friday night visit of the mail buckboard to the Lodge, with its almost unfailing letter from his mother.

One day the buckboard brought him a second letter, unsigned, the rude address on the envelope straggling off toward an upper corner.

"You ant safe in the Hills," it ran. "Let sumwun els do it who Dutch ant aftur. Thayl shoot you."

He knew who wrote it—but when Blue Pete disappeared he was unable to read and write his own name, and had even refused to learn. The warning in the letter meant nothing to the Corporal, but that the illiterate half-breed had learned to write meant so much that his eyes dimmed in a great rush of affection.

Three days later the Inspector relieved himself in one breath of the results of these last weeks of cogitation.

"It's Blue Pete, Mahon," he said, and his grizzled head shook gloomily. "Gad, if we could have kept him! . . . And now, since a crooked judge lost him to us, we've got to take him as a prisoner. . . . There isn't another man in the country could tangle things up like this."

He drummed on the table a moment.

"I don't want to put you on him, Mahon, for I know what a friend he was. I'm giving you other work for the time being and putting Mitchell in your place around the Hills till we get him. But I know you won't forget your duty, boy—Blue Pete must be taken wherever met. . . . I'm sending you north. The trail you struck there last week may lead to anything. Take a day or two among the ranches east and west and then stick to the north as long as there's anything to find out."

Mahon, touched by Inspector Parker's thoughtfulness, determined to repay it by finding out all the north had to tell. His preliminary investigation along the railway rewarded him with proof that stolen horses were going north. It was a bright day in August when he struck northward into two hundred miles of prairie entirely untenanted save for the few thin miles along the Red Deer. Accustomed though he was to solitary riding, and buoyed by his discoveries, he felt a tinge of awe as he bade good-by to the last rancher along the railway. In those thousands of square miles before him

anything might have happened—might happen—without the world being the wiser.

Avoiding the slim trail back to the ranches on the Red Deer, he rode straight east until a small tributary of the South Saskatchewan blocked his way. It was while searching for a ford that he stumbled on a much trampled stretch of muddy bank, and across the stream he recovered it and followed. When he worked it out at last that the trail stuck closely to the lowlands he moved more confidently. The drinking places were plain enough, and late in the afternoon he dropped over a rise and came on a strong corral. It was empty but signs of occupation sent him on as long as the trail was visible. The few hours of darkness he spent resting on the higher levels where it was warmer than in the hollows, and in the early morning was again in the saddle. All day he kept it up, irritated by much delay in search that sometimes led him far away. Not until late in the afternoon, at sight of the second corral, did he complete what he knew to be the normal day's journey of the stolen herds, but a few hours of lucky trailing thereafter brought him to the third just as darkness fell.

He was convinced then that he was on the track of organized rustling that had taken advantage of the untraveled nature of the north to erect even its own corrals—durable ones that pointed to confidence in the future. It was hard to believe that within a day's ride of headquarters the rustlers had been operating in this cool way. The most tedious and laborious part of their work they had overcome by building corrals for each night's stop, which, with the convenience of watering places, meant that one or two riders could do the work of a half dozen in the old way. After a time he noticed that the tracks were only of larger animals, not the average run of a ranch.

There Mahon's deductions were for the time blocked. For two days he lost the trail, a couple of weeks old when he took it up. Almost in despair he dropped the search and made for the Red Deer, and after replenishing his supplies at a ranch house began a careful inspection of the banks of the river. His reward was a well-developed trail leading to the water, and, risking a strange and uncertain ford, he picked it up again on the far side.

The absence of evidence of recent use of the trail decided him to wait there. Northward it might lead anywhere, and if the rustlers did not come within the next couple of days he could then resume his tracking.

For the two days he had allowed himself he waited, pitching his lone camp beneath a cluster of cottonwood trees in a near-by ravine. Cold nights were succeeded by beautifully bright and uncomfortably warm days when

the shade of the trees was pleasant. On the third day he recrossed the river for the companionship of the nearest ranch. In a week he had seen only a woman at a ranch house. For almost three days not a sound had broken the prairie silence but the gurgle of the river, and the shuddering yapping of the coyotes by night; and nothing had moved within the vast stretches of his vision but an occasional gopher, a few slinking coyotes, and one antelope on a distant rise.

Accordingly he did not at first believe his eyes when, a mile over the river, seated on a pile of blanched buffalo bones, Mira Stanton laughed into his surprised face. He made no effort to unravel the mystery of her presence there. All he felt was a great joy that she was before him, that he was talking to her, that the old arch look and graceful lines remained. Once more he felt that he must love her—everything seemed to declare that he should. She was the living spirit of the wilds he had been in alone for days. One straight beautiful arm drooped gracefully over the skull of what had once been a mighty buffalo bull, and she looked up at him as coquettishly as ever she did in the old care-free days.

"Mira!"

The tone of it, the look that went with it and the yearning bend of his body, told the story behind the single word. She flushed, and her smile wavered, and he imagined she drooped a little. No discordant note in dress or language touched him; and she could be naught but graceful. After his desolate week she came as a gift from the gods.

"You see," he smiled, "you're not intended to escape me."

Her eyes dropped to the grass where her fingers were weaving it in and out.

"There are other things one wants to escape," she said. "I—haven't enough friends now to really want to escape them."

"It is ages since—" He stopped, picturing her as he had seen her last lying on the wet ground; the difference was too marked to risk referring to it. There were traces of moisture in her eyes and Mahon wanted only to remember her as she was at her best—sensitive at such unexpected moments, demanding his approval when she responded to his efforts to teach her the things she wanted to know, appealing so overpoweringly for his sympathy when she made mistakes. It seemed to him as he looked at her that he was responsible for the change in her life.

"You don't need many, Mira," he declared, dismounting and holding out his hands. "Won't you let me make up somehow for what I've done?"

She stared at him with lips parted and hands clasped over her bosom. . . . His horse reached out and mumbled at the edge of his Stetson and the simple movement seemed to awaken her. With a laugh that was sharp and mocking she stepped away from him.

As the sound of her laughter broke on his tight-strung sentiment, something seemed to snap inside. He drew himself up, inhaling like one risen from a long dive, and waited for her to explain.

"Yes," she jeered, "you pity me. It's only another way you have of making me hate you. You think it's love. Bah!" She snapped her fingers. "I ain't in your class, and you know it—or you wouldn't dare pity me. You wouldn't be happy with me a month . . . and you'd know too if you stopped to think. I wouldn't be happy with you either, even if I—I loved you. You've never had reason to think I—I thought anything of you. I didn't—never! . . . I wouldn't—come to you even if I did," she added in a low voice. "Don't you know a girl couldn't marry a man who'd killed her brothers? . . . Some time I'd knife you when you was asleep."

He was cool now, pitying her but nothing more. He saw that she understood life better than he, inexperienced as she was, that her attraction for him was too uncertain to last. He did not despise anything about her now—indeed, he probably appreciated her innocence and beauty and womanliness more sincerely than ever before.

"You are Mira Stanton," he said with dignity. "What that means to me is a woman who would make the man she chose happy, whatever class he was—and thank Heaven! there is no class in Canada. But you are right. Perhaps this is not love; for I do not believe real love is one-sided. Wherever you go and whatever you do, Mira, I would like you to remember me as you thought of me two months ago."

She touched the revolver at her belt.

"I've forgot enough not to shoot you on sight, but there's too much happened since to remember—that."

She waited no longer but stalked up the rise and out of sight beyond; and he did not follow. Only when he heard the gallop of her horse did he realize that the situation called for more than a declaration of love and a withdrawal. But it was not until her little form was fading into the distance that the almost certain meaning of her presence there struck him. His

suspicions were verified when he came on a corral he had previously missed, about it fresh tracks of horses. Mira had disappeared. For a moment he imagined he caught a fleeting glimpse of movement to the northeast, but it was gone too quickly to be certain. Chagrined and distressed he hastened to the ranch house to fill his lunch box and drinking flask.

He picked up the trail again at the corral and rode as fast as he dared. It continued north to the Red Deer, skirted off behind the cutbank past the ford he had been watching, and crossed a mile lower down. Sometime during the last two days, while he was keeping his lonely vigil at the ford they had always used, the rustlers had gone round him by a new ford. And Mira's part of it was to delay his pursuit as long as possible.

With night falling fast he decided to use his old camping ground under the cottonwood trees. Lying there on his back, staring into the stars, he solved the problem of the rustlers' new route. Far up to the north, only a few miles from the old railway, a second railway was under construction, the contractors for which were running standing advertisements in the prairie press for heavy horses.

It was so very simple.

CHAPTER XX

INSPECTOR PARKER GIVES ADVICE

At the glimmer of dawn Mahon was in the saddle. He was aware that the strain of the past week was telling on him—the monotonous food, the uncertain water, the cold night winds and the lonesomeness. And last night he had scarcely slept at all. He found it hard to concentrate, and consciousness of his condition, when so much depended on a clear head, did not improve matters.

The rustlers too had made more than a little effort to hide their trail; for they turned abruptly at unexpected places and sought the harder ground of dried alkali flats and broken banks. Often he would find himself riding off from the trail; and by night he had made such slow progress that only twenty miles separated him from the river. At that rate he could never hope to overtake them. He was too uncertain of his deductions to make straight for the construction camps, two days of hard riding; there was always the possibility that the trail might still bend round to the south, as the Inspector thought.

His doubt was unexpectedly relieved.

The rustlers must have felt confident that they had thrown him off their track, for on the second day he was able to follow at a lope all forenoon. On in the afternoon his horse lifted its head suddenly and he had just time to lean over and stifle its whinny. He pulled up and looked about him.

The sixth sense that comes to men of much solitude told him that he was not alone; and he was not surprised when, far to the east, outlined against the sky, he saw a horse and rider. The Corporal sat motionless watching, but the distance was too great to be certain whether the strange rider was aware of him or not. Moving as inconspicuously as he could he rode straight toward the stranger until a coulee hid him, thereafter riding fast as long as he was out of sight. Forced to higher ground after a time, the other horseman had vanished; but a moment later he reappeared at about the same distance as before. Again Mahon dived into a coulee and tried to approach without giving his intentions away. But again when he came out on the level the strange rider was standing without acknowledging his existence. And thereupon he rode straight forward in the open.

There was no concealment then of the chase. By night they had come within sight of the cutbanks along the valley of the Red Deer, and Mahon pressed on over the ford in a darkness that made the crossing dangerous. He did not dare go further, for he felt certain his quarry was not trying to do more than keep beyond his reach. It was, therefore, a relief when some one rode up through the darkness and called to him. It was Sergeant Blakey, sent by an anxious Inspector to look him up. Having by chance called at the ranch house where Mahon had obtained his supplies, he was making for the ford when they met.

Mahon, utterly wearied with his long strain, sank into a slumber that ignored everything but his need of it, Blakey keeping guard on the nearest height. Next morning Mahon found pinned to his blanket a dirty piece of paper.

"If I had bin Bilsy," it said.

Nothing more—not even a signature—but Mahon understood. It meant that his worst fears were realized—Blue Pete was rustling again. It also revealed the trick that was defeating him. First Mira kept him engaged while Blue Pete made off with the horses; and when his pursuit grew hotter the half-breed had led him away south while Mira drove the horses in another direction.

The Policemen picked up the trail and held it long enough to assure themselves that Blue Pete had kept straight on across the railway toward the Cypress Hills. Whereupon they turned aside to the barracks and told the story to the Inspector.

"I'll wire Townsend; it's up in his district. What we have to do here is to capture Blue Pete." Inspector Parker paced the room, stopping at last before Mahon. "It can't be helped. You know the Hills best. Will you take the job?"

Mahon would have preferred another way, but it would be a fair chase, for the half-breed knew now they were after him.

"One thing I cannot do," he qualified, "—make use of my knowledge of the location of his cave. Anything else I'll do as I would against any criminal."

The Inspector nodded.

"Lord, boy," he said suddenly, "you've had a narrow escape. If you hadn't run her brothers to earth—if the glamor of her hadn't been rubbed off a bit by her temper and—and faithfulness—" He paused. "Well, you'd be plugging along through the rest of your life with your teeth gritted—with a

picture on your hands you couldn't hang in the parlor and wouldn't insult by putting in the kitchen. . . . Boy, boy, you're pretty much of a fool—we all are at your age."

He laid his hand on the Corporal's shoulder.

"Let me pass on to you what one of my best friends told me once—during those later years of his, after—after we'd stopped exchanging confidences like cigarettes—for reasons I'm going to give. His calf days happened to come when there wasn't a white woman within a day's ride, and he succumbed to the temptation that was too much for a lot of the boys out here in those days. He married a squaw—the prettiest, sweetest Indian girl in the West, I believe. . . . We were sitting one night over a little fire in a hole in a waste of snow, our fur mitts and coats crackling in the cold that ran somewhere about fifty below. It was a five-hundred mile chase we were on, after a squaw who had killed her papoose. . . . Only an ugly, little Indian kid—but the Police don't make exceptions. Ahead of us was a night that promised more than discomfort—two of us alone, four days out already, not enough wood within fifty miles to boil a kettle of water—what little we had we'd carried on our snowshoes all day—and goodness knows how many days yet of it ahead of us without any other bed than the snow, and our food kept from freezing only by our bodies. . . . And things we hadn't mentioned before seemed to choke to get out. . . . Tom and I had been such chums until—he married."

He dropped into his chair, staring into pictures of his own. Mahon heard the loud buzz of a fly against the window and longed to get up and crush it—for its unnatural resistance to an atmosphere of fifty below in a hole in the snow without enough fire to boil a kettle.

The Inspector went on.

"'Bill,' he said to me—and I can see the cold flare of his pipe in the darkness of the hole we had gouged in the drift—'Bill, marrying's the most solemn thing in life . . . and the one we youngsters tackle most lightly out in this country. . . . Don't be in a hurry, Bill. Wait a year or two.' And then he sat silent for minutes, but I could make him out looking off through the opening into the swirling snow that was about all we'd been able to see for days. . . . 'There'll be more women out here then—women who can rear children of your own kind—in the way you like. The women then can't love you a whit better—they can't, perhaps won't be as faithful. . . . But they'll save you many a dark hour when you sit alone looking back on the days you had ambitions—and knew girls you would be proud of as well as love. It'll

save you a lot of—of wondering, Bill.' . . . That was all. And here I had been half envying him, with a sort of home to go to, and the prettiest squaw in a country where they raised a lot of them before the Indian got so lazy it began to show in his kids' faces. . . . I waited, boy. I'm not sorry. . . . And remember, boy, the West isn't going to be always the wild thing it is even today—and you'll want to grow up with it. . . . I don't suppose you want my advice, though. Nobody does—in the biggest problem in life. It's the one event we know nothing about until it's too late to use for ourselves what we know. I'm glad things happened in time, boy."

CHAPTER XXI

THE SECRET CAVE

On a rough pile of rock, where his motley garb melted into the background and left him free to see without being seen, Blue Pete sat whittling thoughtfully. Obviously the whittling was only a diversion, for his hand would stop midway while his forehead puckered. At a glance he appeared unconscious of his surroundings, but every movement was almost uncannily noiseless, and his fluttering eyes raised now and then like those of a wild animal instinctively on guard.

A gentle trickle of sunlight filtered through the trees overhead to the pile of rock, and he watched it creeping nearer and nearer. When it touched him he moved beyond its reach. A soft breeze was humming in the treetops, and below him an elusive tinkle located a merry little stream winding through the tangle of growth. A bird called low from a near-by tree, and the half-breed raised his eyes to it and his face brightened.

In some indefinable way he had altered during the past month. The hard-knit muscles that had held his body so taut while seemingly so loose had relaxed their grip; his movements had lost some of their springiness; the careless, twinkling lines about his strange eyes had settled into permanent furrows. Even his sombrero, once carelessly tilted after the manner of the reckless cowboy, was firmly placed on his better trained hair.

He had been sitting there an hour when his head lifted. Then he stooped, swiftly gathered up the shavings he had cut, and glided like a shadow into the brush. In a moment Mira Stanton appeared on horseback, and after stopping in motionless attention before the pile of stones, circled her horse softly about and down the slope, to disappear behind a mass of ivy hanging over the face of a high rock. The half-breed, from his hiding place among the trees, moved noiselessly after her.

Within the cave a dog growled and Mira turned with a start.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Pete. It makes me creepy, I never know where you are."

He bent his head before the petulance in her voice, fumbling his Stetson —more humble than the big wolf-hound nosing the girl's hand.

"Can't help it, Miss Mira. 'T's wot I was brung up to. Don' believe I cud make a noise ef I tried. . . . That's why I'm alive yet."

Her irritation fled before his humility. "I guess I'm nervous," she said gently. "I'm seeing things behind every tree. It's horrible." She pressed her hands to her eyes.

His head shook sadly.

"Hev any trouble?"

She drew a wallet from the breast of her blouse and tossed it on the table, where it lay unheeded by both.

"Not a bit—of that kind. Torrance took them without a word. Told him it might be our last. He offered ten dollars a head more. Thinks he's been getting into us all the time. . . . He tried to—to take my hand. I came near giving him my quirt over the face. But there was a crowd and I let him have it on the arm."

The half-breed's eyes flamed. "Got fresh, eh? I'll hev a word to say to him."

"Never mind, Pete." Her voice was lifeless and a little weary. "Never mind. His kind don't frighten me. I'd just like to have left a mark for the sake of the next decent girl, that's all."

She went to the rear of the cave and dipped a basin in a pool of water kept filled from a trickle through an invisible crevice, and proceeded to wash her face. Blue Pete made quietly for the entrance and passed out, while she stood staring at the gentle swaying of the ivy behind him, a budding smile fluttering the corners of her lips. She knew he would not return for an hour —without explanation or assurance he had thrust that privacy on her after every return to the cave. She divested herself of her clothing and bathed.

She was busy about the stove when he returned. In the light of the two candles stuck on the ledge behind the stove annoyance and uncertainty were expressed in her puckered brow as she stooped over the frying pan, holding her head away to escape the spattering grease. At his entrance she pushed the pan back, wiped her hands, and started to lay the table.

Blue Pete, astride a block of wood near the entrance, watched her furtively, making sudden noises now and then that his presence might not seem "creepy" to her. Once he caught himself in the middle of a sigh and cleared his throat instead. He ached to be doing the things she did so clumsily, for he had always done for himself and could not bear that she

should work for him. Then he lost himself in the picture of it—the puckered face with the lines so black in the candlelight, the firm little hands that could curb the wildest horse yet fumbled the simplest housework, the tripping lightness of her passage between table and stove, the appraising scrutiny of her dark eyes as she contemplated the frying pan. It was too much for him; he turned his eyes firmly away.

"Ding-a-ling-a-ling!" she chimed, imitating a bell. "Supper's ready, Pete." A frank taste of the contents of the pan satisfied her. "Come and have the first civilized meal you've had, I bet, for many a day. I hope you'll like it. . . . Don't you think I'm—I'm doing pretty well, Pete?"

She was the young housewife anxious for the praise of her lord, and when he grinned his reply she read the pure delight of it and laughed girlishly. Awkwardly he placed a stool for her and waited for her to seat herself. For days he had been working on that stool early and late, with only an ax and a pocketknife.

She noted it right away and gurgled with pleasure.

"Why, Pete, it's grand. I didn't know you was a carpenter too. We'll soon have a real housekeeping outfit, won't we?" She seated herself elaborately. "It's so comfy, too. A birthday present, I guess. . . . Did you know yesterday was my birthday . . . my twentieth?" With cheek resting in her hand she stared at the plate before her. "My twentieth! I'm getting old, Pete. . . . And yet I'm so young—there's such a long life ahead!"

He tried to rally her, noisily, un-Pete-like.

"Gor-swizzled, Miss Mira, ef yuh don' look good fer a hunderd years more!"

"A hundred more!" she muttered. . . . "A hundred—of what?"

That was beyond him, and he gulped a lump of scorching meat and ignored its seething passage down his throat.

"See any one on the way?" he asked presently.

"No. I kept to the west. . . . Didn't want to see nobody."

He tried to fill the succeeding silence with noisy eating, but her own plate was untouched. When she saw the direction of his eyes she picked up her fork and toyed with the meat.

"Did he follow you far?" she inquired suddenly. And to his nod: "It means we've got to get rid of them some place else. . . . I wouldn't do what I

did again for anything." She shuddered. Presently she went on simply. "He ast me marry him, you know. . . . To—marry him! And me all the time just holding him off for you to get away with the horses! It wasn't—just—right, Pete."

He was moving restlessly, his own appetite as dead as hers.

"I didn't want him to tell me that," she continued, red showing in her face.

"An' yuh didn't take him?"

Something in his tone drew her eyes to his.

"No, Pete," she told him gently.

He grabbed a chunk of bread and bit into it viciously.

"Ef yuh feel like that w'y didn't yuh grab him w'en yuh hed the chance?" he asked bitterly. "Yuh'd 'a' got wot yuh've bin hankerin' fer fer years."

A swift flush crowded to her cheeks.

"You're right, Pete. I believe I have been—been half hoping things I should have known couldn't happen." She was looking him straight in the eyes. "But I want to tell you, Pete, that I'm glad now—I know. I don't think it ever was real love—not love as I think it ought to be. He's a real gentleman—and I suppose it all looked so fine to me. He treated me like a city lady—and I didn't care for more than that. It kind of took me off my feet, I guess—me just a cowgirl, and his uniform, and his kindness."

She laughed—a sharp breathless kind of laugh.

"You want to get rid of me, Pete—you're tired of my cooking."

"Aw, hell!" he exploded, and fell to gorging.

She carried his plate to the frying pan for more, and as she stood behind him with the filled plate laughed again and patted his shoulder. And when he shrugged away her laugh came more naturally.

"Pete, Pete," she said—and from behind his chair she was watching what was visible of his face—"you don't want any one else to have me—and you don't want me yourself."

His hand stopped on the way to his mouth, and he moved his head that she might not see his face. And the smile left hers and she returned hastily to the stove.

"Yuh kin get him any time," he growled, "an' I sure won't butt in."

"Think so, Pete?"

"Think so? Bah! He's fair loony over yuh."

"Think—so?" she repeated dreamily. "D'you think he won't forget? 'Cause if that's so I—I've just got to make him stop—stop thinking that way."

She sank onto the stool he had made for her and leaned her chin in her cupped hands.

"I've got to, that's all. It'll spoil his life—keeping on. . . . And there's Helen, loving him fit to throw herself in the river, I believe . . . and she's his sort. . . . It's the only decent thing to do—to make him hate me."

She glanced at Blue Pete as she finished, and something in his face made her breath come quickly.

"Pete," she said in a low voice, and her hand crept out to his. "Isn't there—another way? I'd rather he didn't hate me, you know. Will you help me, Pete? Look at me. . . . You ought to, you know," she whispered. "It ain't quite—decent the way we live alone here."

Her hand was working its way coaxingly into his, and the big half-breed trembled at the touch.

"Pete, dear, will you take me?"

His head rose slowly. A gray pallor was touching the bluish shadows of his swarthy skin and his eyes were steady at last. And what she read in them made her blush and tug at her hand. The fire in the stove gave a dying crackle that broke startlingly on the silence that fell between them; a tender rustling drifted to them from the ivy before the entrance.

"No, no!" he cried. "No, no!" Suddenly he withdrew his hand and threw his arms up helplessly. "I'm only a half-breed, Miss Mira. I ain't even got a name to give yuh. I—"

"But that doesn't matter," she pleaded gently, "—in our world."

"No, no!"

He stumbled to his feet and she watched him moving uncertainly to the entrance, a hesitating smile tugging at her lips. She thought he would turn, but he passed through and was gone without a look. And one look would have saved her. Biting her lip, she began to clear the table.

“But it doesn’t mean, dear fellow, that you don’t love me,” she told herself. “Isn’t that so, Juno?”

When he returned the dishes were washed and out of sight, and fresh candles were stuck on the ledges, beneath one of which she labored clumsily to mend a rent in her skirt.

“Then it means, Pete,” she said gravely, “that I’ve got to—to do the other thing?”

His only answer was to cram the tobacco into his corncob pipe. There was just a moment’s hesitation, and then he went to the back of the cave to prepare the horses for the night.

CHAPTER XXII

MIRA MAKES A DECISION

"They've flitted sure, Miss Mira," said Blue Pete. "That last round-up o' the Corporal's sure took the starch out o' them. D—darn sneakin' rats! Ain't got the guts of a hen!"

They were riding abreast in the Hills, their going and conversation recklessly noisy. At a rubble of rocks fallen from a cliff he pulled in to let her precede.

"I guess that's right, Pete. Juno hasn't found them for days."

There were several minutes of silence.

"Guess I got to shift camp, Miss Mira," he said; and he would not look at her.

"Shift camp? You don't mean you're leaving the Hills?"

"Nothin' else fer it. How else kin I get Dutchy an' Bilsy?"

"If they stay away you don't care, Pete," she said lightly.

"Got a debt to pay. . . . Sergeant Denton an' this scar here on Whiskers."

"But you've had a hundred chances to pay in the last month—and you wouldn't even scare them real bad."

"'Cause they was doin' my work," he explained. "I cud wait. . . . But ef they've gone—why—jes' natcherl Blue Pete's got to go whar they are."

"Wud you come too, Miss Mira?" he asked after a pause.

"My work's here, Pete," she replied firmly.

"Wot's that?"

"Oh, nothing, Pete. But I've been raised here—and I wouldn't know what to do anywhere else."

"I'd come back after I got Dutchy 'n' Bilsy," he promised.

"But my work won't wait."

They rode on to the edge of Windy Coulee before either broke the silence.

"I'm waitin'—here," he told her.

Her comment came minutes later.

"Then you've got to give up being so squeamish and do real rustling," she stipulated.

The cave was unusually silent that evening. He sat in his old corner near the entrance where his smoke would not trouble her, while she worked about the stove in her absent-minded way. Watching her from beneath his eyebrows, he missed the fretful frowns and exclamations that punctuated her household duties. To-night she worked in silence, making the old mistakes so patiently that a sense of impending disaster made him shudder.

Presently his mind ran to other things.

"It sure was a great life," he muttered, apropos of nothing she had said for hours, "—the rustlin'."

"You can't make the Police believe you've only been rustling rustled stuff," she said. "It'll be all the same when they get you."

"But they ain't got me," he grinned. "But wot about you?" he added in sudden alarm.

"Oh, they'll get me sometime—they always do."

"Don' know wot's got intuh yuh lately, Miss Mira. Yuh don't seem to care ef they ketch yuh. Yuh'd 'a' bin caught that las' time ef I hedn't led 'em off. They near got me. Ef yuh get into trouble thar'll sure be shootin', that's wot. I won't see yuh took."

She had finished the cooking and they seated themselves beside the table in silence.

"Where was the horses of the 7-inverted-P outfit when you seen them last?" she asked thoughtfully.

He glowered at her. "Yuh ain't goin' to rustlin', Miss Mira? Don't. An' the 7-inverted-P bunch has the bes' riders in the West—an' right under the nose of the Police. . . . I won't tell yuh whar they are—an' I'll stop yuh on any fool-job like that."

"I suppose you'll tell the Police?" she jeered. "Besides, you know you'd be the first to try to save me."

"I'll hang right on tuh yer heels," he warned her doggedly. "I'll—I'll tie yuh, ef I got tuh."

"Pete," she begged, "I've just got to for—for every one's sake."

He did not pretend to understand a woman; he had known so few in his rough life. But he kept doggedly to his purpose. For three days more they searched the Hills, visiting all the old haunts of the rustlers, but not a mark was fresher than a week old, not once did Whiskers lift her limp ear in the old way that told of the proximity of her former friends. The Hills were as innocent as before the herds came to the prairies.

"I'm tired of this," Mira blurted out at the end of the third day. "Go where you like—do what you like. I'm for the prairie."

"Wot fer?" He had pulled Whiskers across her path so that she was forced to stop.

"To pick cactus flowers and bathe in the pretty streams," she jeered. "We need a new boquet for the parlor table—and I haven't had a real bath in a month."

She was in a different mood when they reached the cave. For some reason she did not clear the table after the meal but merely shoved the dirty dishes back.

"Hadn't I better give you another lesson?" she suggested gently. "You haven't had one for so long now—and you were getting on so fine. You won't need many more that I can give you. Then I'll throw the books away again."

He and Whiskers had traveled over two hundred miles, far down into Montana, for those books, and the thought of such an end oppressed him with the old fear of something impending. For a half hour they worked, he struggling to gain her approval, she under too much strain to notice. Her mind kept wandering, too, and he tried in subtle ways to draw it back. Presently she went to the entrance and drew aside the ivy, her slim body outlined against the sky above the treetops. Slowly she returned to the back of the cave where the horses were stabled.

"I think I'll take a ride," she said carelessly. "It's stifling in here tonight."

He watched her saddle the horse and attach quirt and rifle, the ordinary paraphernalia of their daily rides. But when the sound of her horse's hoofs was dying away he rushed to Whiskers and saddled her. But Mira was waiting for him.

"I knew you would," she sighed.

His eyes dropped before her, but he remained stubbornly where he was.

“Don’t yuh think things is jes’ as stiflin’ fer me?” he asked. “Besides, I wasn’t follerin’ yuh. I was going away off thar. Go whar yuh darn please.” And he struck spurs into Whiskers and galloped away.

And Mira made straight for the west and the prairie.

CHAPTER XXIII

MIRA'S DESPERATE STRATEGY

When Mira came out from the trees an hour of the long prairie day remained, and, keeping to the lower levels, she rode toward the Police Post at Medicine Lodge, dismounting after darkness in a coulee where a clump of straggly bulberry bushes hung over the bed of a dried-up stream. Far to the left the clustered lights of the nearest ranch were decreased in size but little in brightness by the five miles of clear Alberta night, and as she saw them her heart yearned to her own ranch. The mouthorgan would be playing there now in the bunkhouse and Gret's clumsy steps in the kitchen would record the course of her nightly duties.

The stillness oppressed her. She could not recall another such breathless night on the heights at that time of the year; it made her shudder. The one sound of life about her, her horse moving restlessly in the bulberry bushes, she turned her back on and struck resolutely but cautiously toward a nearer cluster of lighted windows that marked the Police Post. Her hands against her breast, she cowered a moment beneath one of the windows before she could muster courage to look within.

Two Policemen were there, coatless, lounging in easy chairs beside a table, their heads buried in the latest newspapers. Into every shadow and corner of the room she peered, and a sigh of satisfaction broke from her. The two Policemen moved but did not raise their eyes, and with a fluttering breath she glided back to her horse.

She did not see a third Policeman ride up to the door and dismount while she was still in the coulee.

When out of hearing she galloped to the southeast, skirting the ranch lights, until the deeper darkness of a valley appeared before her. There she pulled in, listening intently to the gentle noises of a night bunch of horses feeding below her. A hungry smile came to her lips as she heard. And her eyes went back to the Police Post and off to the Hills, and her hand reached to the pommel of the saddle as if her courage were failing her.

A restlessness was audible among the feeding horses, and distant galloping told her that the rider nighthawks were having a busy time. She crept nearer, to locate the outskirts of the herd and to satisfy herself that all

the cowboys were on the other side of the valley. Some of the nearest horses raised their heads to examine her carelessly as she gently worked her mount in among them. Then she began to bear outward, a half dozen of the herd moving slowly before her.

Across the valley her ears strained to the sounds of the night herders. When at last she heard one approaching, she crowded the horses before her into a slow walk. The oncoming cowboy seemed to divine the movement, for he spurred faster. In a minute he would know. Pressing spurs into her horse, the bunch broke into a trot, then into an easy gallop; and she urged them no faster.

The cowboy, circling wide that his haste might not stampede them, uttered an exclamation as she loomed through the darkness. Immediately she fired, the flash cutting above his head. It stopped him, as she intended, and with a shout across to his companions he made full speed for assistance.

Mira had worked it all out. He would make the ranch in twelve minutes and telephone the Police. In twenty minutes at the most they would be on her track—not the slightest chance for her, even with a half dozen to help, to get eight or ten stolen horses into the Hills, fifteen miles away. A faint tinge on the top of Mount Abbot, the highest peak in the Hills, told her that in less than an hour it would be daylight out there on the prairie.

Yet she did not hurry. . . . Now the cowboy would be alarming the ranch . . . now the Police were at the telephone . . . now commencing the chase. Well, the fates favored her—Corporal Mahon was not there to be in at the end. She smiled wanly and looked up into the dawning day with a strange new interest.

The horses stopped to browse in a coulee, and she drew up behind them, watching back toward the Post. When she caught the movement there, a moment of panic seized her. A tear stole down her cheek, but she dashed it away and started the horses on again.

When he knew he was out of hearing, Blue Pete turned and rode northwest. In such darkness none but he could have held such a pace, scorning trails and clearings, aiming always for the prairie to the northwest where he knew Mira had gone. And even he, when he broke from the trees, showed marks of his reckless ride, for his face was dripping, and a big rent in his chaps told of the risks he had taken. Growling to himself, he saw with alarm that Whiskers was so fagged he must let her rest. When he resaddled a

glimmer of light was touching the prairie. With straining eye and ear he started aimlessly northward, and presently the gallop of distant horses sent him into the cover of a roll in the prairie, where he waited. But not until he made out the thunder of the pursuing Police was he really alarmed. Hastily peering over, he took but one quick look and then dug his great spurs into Whiskers' sides.

"She's a devil—a devil—a devil!" he drummed aloud to the pounding of his rush. "An' I didn't guess! I'm a fool—a fool—a fool!"

Nearer came the running horses—so near that where he lay he could have roped Mira as she passed. But his eyes were fixed on two racing Policemen less than a half mile behind. A sudden plan took shape in his mind. Riding up until another foot would expose him, he removed his vest and took it firmly in both hands, and as the first Policeman tore along within twenty yards he suddenly spurred over the rise, waving his vest furiously. So swift and timely was his move that he had to swing aside to avoid a collision. The Police horse, terrified, leaped to one side, stumbled, and plunged away riderless.

Blue Pete, merely glancing at the unhorsed Policeman, turned his attention to his companion a hundred yards away. With a groan he recognized Corporal Mahon. One quick glance he threw after Mira, then shifted his rifle to his left hand and raised it unsteadily. As he pulled the trigger his eyes closed and a wave of dizziness seized him, so that he clung to the pommel, the pinto shifting about uneasily all the time as if in protest at what her master was doing. When he saw that he had missed, for a terrible moment the rifle pointed steadily at the khaki coat. But numbness seemed to seize his arms, and the rifle fell nervelessly.

"God help her!" he groaned. "She's got to take her chances."

The fallen Policeman was limping after his horse. Blue Pete's eyes were rivetted on the chase, every move of it reflected in his face. He saw Mira look back and, as if struck by a sudden terror, madly apply quirt and spurs. Before that Blue Pete knew that she was not trying to escape.

"She's saw him," he breathed. "God, oh, God!" It was like a prayer.

He drew the back of his hand across his eyes as Corporal Mahon's fresher horse gained rapidly. Mira bent over her horse's neck whispering to it for the last effort that responds only to the human voice, but Mahon was riding hard, reckless of badger holes and cactus. Blue Pete fancied the crowding Policeman would have welcomed a fall that would relieve him of the awful duty ahead.

Mira's weary horse stumbled, as if in its weariness it had been unable to avoid a badger hole in the way, swayed in its stride, and at the very edge of the trees, with a hundred hiding places only a few yards away, gave a choking gasp and fell. Mira leaped from the saddle and ran, but a big bay horse plowed across her path. For a second or two she faced the Corporal, defiant, her breath coming in gasps.

"Oh!" she moaned then. "Oh!" And that was all.

His own suffering flooded his eyes so that she could not fail to see it. And suddenly she threw herself on the ground and hid her face in her arm, sobbing hysterically.

"I thought—you were away. I—I didn't want you—to have to do it. Oh! . . . Oh! . . ."

CHAPTER XXIV

ALONE

The old cave behind the drooping vines was different now. Blue Pete raised the veil of green with hesitating hand and looked in, as if half expecting proof that he had been dreaming out there through that terrible half hour on the prairie.

Standing on the threshold, he peered everywhere about the cave so crowded with memories of the only real friends he ever knew. He saw the dishes on the table as she had pushed them back for their last lesson, and his roving eyes lighted on a bright green skirt hanging on the rocky wall. Her stool—the one he had labored so hard to make for her—stood against the table as she had risen from it. With working lips he turned to drop the ivy.

But Whiskers, impatient at his back, whinnied and darted past to the stable she knew best; and he listened eagerly as she nosed among the remains of last night's feed. Hat in hand, he let the vines fall behind him and stood reverently inside, his face bent to the ground as if in worship.

He could not bear to look yet on these mute evidences of her presence there such a few short hours ago—the little tasks awaiting her ready but unaccustomed hand, the green skirt she had torn so badly and spent so many weary hours to repair, the stool she loved, the books lying as they had ended their last communion.

A whimper from the darkness at the rear recalled him. Juno was there waiting—waiting for one who would never return now. Surely she must know, else she would have met him in the usual stately way. It was as if the cave were too sacred for noisy demonstrations, too full of crowding memories of joy that would never return.

With a spasmodic, half-blind movement, he seized the green skirt and buried his face in its folds, and a sigh like a sob heaved his shoulders. Gathering it carefully in a roll he placed it in a box where she had kept her few clothes. The dishes he collected in a pan, just as they were, and hid them behind the stove. The chair—her chair—he stood looking down on for a long time, and then left it as she had risen from it last. The funny new tins she had made him purchase he stacked along the walls; he would need only the old bent teapot and the frying pan now. From the ledge, back in the

deeper shadows, he drew reverently a bit of charred stick. A score of times a day he was always picturing it—a little thing, but a brilliant spot in his uncouth life. They had been sitting one evening after supper, she working at the torn skirt, he saying little but thinking and watching much. And when he drew his old corncob pipe from his belt and filled it, she leaned back to the stove with a laugh that thrilled him, and handed to him a lighted splinter of wood.

With a pang he realized how much like real housekeeping their life there had been—as he had never pictured for himself in his wildest dreams. It swept over him, the keenest agony he had ever felt, that he would never see her again; for he knew what was awaiting the rustler at the hands of the law. Two years at least! Two years! His hands pressed over his eyes and a groan burst from him. And Juno came to him and rubbed against his side with unaccustomed affection.

He began mechanically to light the fire in the stove, and in the act tried to imagine he was doing it for her as of old—bits of bark to catch the flame of the match, then the smaller wood, and above it the larger. A score of times she had watched him with knitted brows, smiling hopelessly when it was finished and the blaze broke swiftly and clear—smiling again when a vagrant breeze drove back the smoke into the cave and half smothered them; smiling still when the cheerful warmth radiated into the cave and the thought of a hot supper kindled her ready appetite.

But to-day the fire would not light, though he tried twice, the little flame flickering and dying before his eyes.

It was a message to him. With a sigh he picked up the saucepan and kettle and left the cave, Juno whimpering after him. And in a beautiful little glade where a stream bubbled at his feet and the thick green of the trees crowded out the sky, he built his fire—as he had built it a thousand times in the old life when he lived alone.

For a week he lived in the open, returning to the cave only for supplies and to feed Whiskers. The little pinto seemed to fret now away from the cave, and Blue Pete yielded unquestioningly and left her to the rocky stall behind the ivy screen, though every visit to Mira's old haunts rent his tender heart with memories. And Juno, very subdued and plaintive now, nuzzled close to Whiskers in the gloom of the cave rather than share the dreary life of her human comrade.

There were moments in those days when the half-breed's face went blacker, and he fingered his rifle grimly; but the fire always died from his

eyes, leaving them pathetic and wandering. For hours at a time he lay outstretched on the ground in the chill autumn air, now rapidly settling into winter, his head hidden in the bend of his elbow, only to leap to his feet and pace among the trees.

For the first time in his life he was helpless; his great strength and endurance, his cunning, his desperate courage and utter recklessness on occasion, were balked before the wall of the law.

CHAPTER XXV

MIRA STANTON: RUSTLER

In a few days later the fall assizes opened in Medicine Hat, four rustlers facing the judge as the trophies of the Police after a summer of unprecedented strain. One of them was Mira Stanton—caught in the act, and with other moments in her career that would tell against her at the trial.

She was last on the list, and the two years' sentence on the three tried before her precluded any hope she might have had of leniency. The worst crime of a cattle country was to be punished in her small body, though among the spectators were a score not less guilty and with less excuse. But the law and the people draw a defined line between the horse thief by profession and the rancher who has no qualms about an unbranded colt or calf. Every rancher free to come was there to gloat over the sternness of the law.

It was early October, when the nights show white, though the sun drives down during the day with its midyear brilliance. The trails were inches deep in dust, and every prairie traveler was gray with it. The wind caught the faded black powder and swirled it into town—even into the courtroom itself, and the sun shone through it like a mist. The court officials, in their moments of leisure, drew designs in the dust on their desk tops.

In breathless silence every eye was fixed on the door at the back of the courtroom as Mira's name was called. A Policeman entered first, behind him the forlorn little figure, untidy with months of careless riding and nights of ceaseless tossing, shrinking before the staring crowd. Another Policeman followed and took his stand before the door, staring at the wall of the courtroom above the heads of the spectators.

She entered the dock, an elevated, railed-in enclosure, with stumbling steps. And as the gate closed behind her with a sharp click her hand went pitifully to her eyes to shut out the gaping faces. One fleeting glance she cast at the second seat of Policemen where Corporal Mahon sat, and then turned her face to the floor at the judge's feet.

The Inspector cleared his throat, and Mahon sank deeper and deeper in his seat, such a gush of pity sweeping over him that he could have cried out. Yet it was only pity the Inspector saw there when he turned once to examine

his subordinate's face. For Corporal Mahon, bringing in Mira Stanton a prisoner that day, had handed in his resignation. The Inspector had pointed without a word to the motto of the Force hanging over his desk: "Maintiens le droit," and Mahon had bowed his head submissively.

Nevertheless he found it in him now to wish she had escaped—that he could have fled across the border to escape giving evidence against her. She was still to him the woman he had once thought he loved, and that was partly the pity of her now. This shrinking creature, with soiled skirt and crushed blouse, with grimy face and uncombed hair, was only the dregs of what he had once admired. The terror in her eyes made her to him a poor hunted creature scarcely responsible for her actions. And he could not forget his share in her downfall—he could not blot out the memory of what she was before the death of her brothers. As always when she shocked him, pictures of Helen rose in his mind by contrast.

Of the early stages of the trial he was scarcely conscious, for his own evidence loomed before him now like a hideous betrayal. A new judge sat on the bench, one upon whose kindliness the Inspector in secret relied to lighten Mira's sentence. Judge Ritchie, a failure as a lawyer, a greater failure as a judge, had been raised to higher planes in the Government.

Constable Priest told only of events up to the moment of his unseating by Blue Pete's waving vest.

"Who is this Blue Pete?" inquired the judge. "He's the one should be in the dock."

"If your honor," said the Inspector impatiently, "can suggest any short cut to the best rider and shot and trailer in the country, and the one man who knows every nook and cranny in the Hills, the Police will be glad to try it. May I inform your honor that Blue Pete was turned from a Police detective to a rustler by a judge who—" He stopped and cleared his throat.

"Order! Order!" shouted the sheriff at the surprised crowd.

When Mahon heard his name his ears rang as if he were going to faint. To him was to fall the part of giving the evidence that would send Mira to jail; for Sergeant Priest's story blocked any plan he might have had for giving a twist to his words that would lighten her crime. As he passed the Inspector he heard the grizzled man mutter the motto of the Force, and with firmer step mounted to the witness box.

Had they turned to each other then they would have been face to face, but he knew her eyes were still fixed on the floor, and he would not have

looked at her for worlds. In a dull voice, never once moving his eyes from the opposite window where the frosting had worn away, he narrated the incidents of the chase, but said nothing of the bullet that whistled past his back or of Mira's disjointed cries when he cut her off from the safety of the Hills.

Only at the end did he look at her. She was watching him with her little fists gripped over the edge of the railing, in her face wonder and anger, and a little contempt. In her world his conduct was inexcusable—it came to him as another spur to his conviction that their sympathies were so wide apart that had she yielded to his appeals it would have brought life-long misery to both.

As he stepped from the witness box the calling of the next witness startled him.

"Helen Parsons!"

Bewildered, he leaned forward in his seat as she took her place in the box. He had kept firmly aloof from the preparation of the case for the Police and knew nothing of Helen's subpœna—knew no evidence she could give that would be of the slightest value. Helen herself was uncomfortable, and the Inspector squirmed under her indignant eyes. She knew where the Inspector had obtained the information on which she was called to testify against her shrinking cousin; when she had taxed him with it he admitted that one of the half-breed's last aids to the Police had been to tell him in private something of her interest in the Hills.

What was to be drawn from her she could only guess. At first the questions of the prosecuting attorney were confined to her knowledge of the Hills. Mahon knew she had ridden there a great deal, but he had never thought of it as more than a recreation. And as a recreation the prosecution tried to picture it. But as the evidence progressed Mahon was rapidly collecting and associating snatches of memory—her industry in learning to ride, her surprising marksmanship that day in the cellar, her repeated concern for him in the unknown perils of the Hills, her persistent absence from the ranch on his visits.

"You were there," he heard the prosecution ask, "when Corporal Mahon was for a time in the hands of the rustlers—Dutch Henry, Bilsy, and other admitted horse thieves?"

"Yes."

Her voice was low, for the question had come as a surprise; she had no idea any one else in the world knew her part in that incident.

"They were all admitted rustlers, were they not? And as such, the mere fact of being one of the group is sufficient proof of rustling, don't you think?"

"Would what I think be evidence?" she countered, catching his point instantly.

The lawyer smiled. "You saw the prisoner there?"

Helen's head went up. "I did not."

The prosecuting attorney looked at the Inspector, puzzled.

"You are on oath, Miss—" He began, in his habit with evasive witnesses. "I beg your pardon," he apologized hastily. "You repeat, do you, that you did not see the prisoner on that occasion?"

"I said so," she insisted firmly.

The lawyer consulted his notes and shook his head.

"I do not understand," he said. "You were there—you fired the shot that struck the rifle of one of the rustlers from his hand, did you not?"

"Yes."

Mahon was gaping with eyes and mouth. He had thought nothing could happen to surprise him concerning Helen. And hers was the wonderful shot that had saved his life that day!

"Why did you fire it?"

"To—to disturb his aim."

"At whom? Must we call other witnesses to prove what you should be able to settle for us?"

Helen flushed. "I did not see at whom. I didn't look—purposely."

"And why wouldn't you look?"

Although Helen was a Crown witness she had passed almost from the start to a hostile one. It was the lawyer for the defense who objected; and the other lawyer changed his wording.

"You knew the prisoner was there—that she was the one whom you fired to save."

"I did not see her," persisted Helen. "Could anything I *thought* be taken as evidence?"

Her questioner yielded with a laugh and a flutter of hands, and Helen, whom the defending lawyer naturally forbore to question, retired. As she passed out of the room Mahon whispered to the Inspector and followed. He caught her in the hall, while her cheeks were still flushed. Tears were gathering in her eyes and her hand was trembling as she tried to adjust her hat.

When she saw him a sob broke from her lips and the red deepened.

"Helen!" he whispered, though there was a crowd of men standing above them on the landing. "I think I know."

"It—it was terrible for both of us," she breathed, her lips puckering like a child's fighting back the tears.

"I'm coming with you," he said. "Come up on the cutbanks—where we can be alone."

CHAPTER XXVI

BLUE PETE ATTEMPTS A RESCUE

Behind a grim Policeman still suffering from the memory of his overthrow by Blue Pete's waving vest, Mira Stanton crept timidly from her bare cell in the Medicine Hat barracks and looked hungrily about over the cutbanks. This one satisfaction was to come to Constable Priest, that he would hand her over to the jailer at Lethbridge. There was little sentiment in Priest's makeup; first, last, and always he was a defender of the law. He might be a little more considerate of a woman criminal, but the ordinary rules of precaution made her as sexless as she had made herself by her crime.

One of his concessions to her sex was to board the train—which was made up at Medicine Hat for its run down the Crow's Nest branch line—long before the arrival of the usual curious crowd. A few passengers examined them covertly as they entered and passed to their seats, whispering to each other but leaving more detailed inspection to a more opportune moment on the journey. The brakeman came in to shout the destination of the train, nodding to Priest but carefully avoiding even a glance at the cowering prisoner.

Mira's brain was whirling. Her last concentrated idea had been hatred of Corporal Mahon, but this was dimming before her failure to think consecutively since. Back in her mind lingered the knowledge that her contempt and anger were unjustified—that his part was, indeed, only what she had faced all this disgrace and mental suffering to effect. Any of her friends—scores of cowboys—would have lied for her, would have considered it a matter of honor to mitigate or deny her crime; and into her wandering mind came the vague conception of how different he was in this as in much else. She had laughed with him, eaten with him, ridden with him, studied with him—flirted with him; but it was all drowned in the honor of the Force. As her jumbled thoughts lined up she felt a new admiration that was unprejudiced by the old attraction he had for her. That attraction seemed to have died suddenly in the courtroom, an event that registered itself in momentary anger and contempt.

When the train started her eyes roamed ceaselessly about on the beautiful out-of-doors she was to give up for six long months. Six months!

The judge had been lenient—she knew that—but six months absent from her beloved prairie! Six months to look only through iron bars—to be associated with the worst criminals of the West—six months with common rustlers!

And no one would miss her—none but Blue Pete. Her open eyes did not see the prairie out there, nor the prison ahead, nor the hurried glances of the passengers—only a dark, leathery face full of grim but kindly lines, squinting eyes that brimmed with affection and merriment, a lumbering figure that could spring so easily to withes of agility and strength. Out there alone, somewhere along that dark line on the southern horizon, he was missing her. She knew that—she knew it best by the way she felt herself. Never before had she realized how much he was to her. . . . Those two months of housekeeping! . . . His kindliness and patience through all her mistakes. . . . His impatience that she should work for him. . . . His subtle submission to her sex in so many unexpressed ways. . . .

It would be his dinner time now. Would he eat in the old famished way that had thrilled her with pride at her cooking? Would he use the dishes she had made him buy? The cave would be so big and lonesome. She recalled the one night she had spent there alone, when she had left him just before delivering the horses to the construction camp up north—ordered back by him that she might not have to face the rough railwaymen. He would have one hundred and eighty such nights. When she came out into the open air again spring would be budding on the prairie, the breathless little spring that is only a door to summer. She knew he would wait there for her. Night after night he would sit shivering in the big drafty cave, his dirty old corncob pipe and Juno his only companions. The chair would be there for her—the chair she knew he had molded with such labor.

A tear dripped through her eyelids and she turned her head from her guard.

"I wouldn't do that," whispered Priest gently. "It'll only make them look the harder. . . . You'll be warm—it'll be winter, you know—and they'll give you lots to eat."

She swept out both hands with a yearning movement.

"It's that—that—the prairie!" she moaned. "My prairie!"

"Lord love us, miss, it won't be any one's while you're—down there. You'll be out again as soon as it's fit to ride on. Only we Police have to shiver out there while you're—down there. You'd better be thinking how lenient the judge was—not more than if you'd lifted a watch. . . . It might have been ten years."

They had long since passed Dunmore, where the Crow's Nest line leaves the main line, and some new passengers had been added. From their seat at the rear of the car Mira and her guard looked into the backs of the dozen strangers before them as they ran along through a stretch of prairie broken sparingly by small bluffs of trees and cutbanks and chalky-edged sloughs. Grassy Lake was behind them only a mile or two when the sudden application of the emergency brakes threw them forward in their seats, and with a few dragging jerks the train came to a stop between high cutbanks.

The passengers scrambled out, but Constable Priest only leaned across Mira to investigate from the window. He could see nothing except a steep gravelly bank rising twenty feet beside the train, but a passenger returned with the information that a slide had occurred and would delay them twenty minutes, throwing himself into a seat with the disgusted comment that this was the only bit of cutbank on the line before the foothills. Priest and Mira waited. A second passenger came in and yawned to his seat.

The door behind Priest opened again, and the Policeman yawned. And his yawn was stifled by a rope falling over his head and binding his arms to his sides before he could move. He heaved forward, but a pair of irresistible hands pressed him back.

"This is a real lariat, Mountie," jeered a voice at his back, "an' yer tied to the seat. The rest o' yuh"—for the passengers had turned in alarm—"jes' keep yer faces to th' other end o' the car an' yer all right."

Mira had not even moved her head. She knew the voice, and from the corner of her eye saw what had happened to Priest. Then a pair of strong arms reached over and lifted her clear of the seat and set her on her feet, and she looked into Blue Pete's blue-black cheeks from a distance of only a few inches. She closed her eyes.

"Ef yuh'll open yer peepers," he said drily, "it'll be easier fer both of us."

Her wrist held in his steely hand, they raced back the track to the end of the cutbank and climbed up to the prairie. In a bluff were Whiskers, and a horse for herself, and Mira knew with a surge of delicious excitement that she was to have one more ride at least. Whiskers whinnied a welcome and reached out to nose her hands.

Oh, it was good, it was good! To ride straight into the teeth of the wind, her blouse fluttering, her short skirt flapping rhythmically against her horse's sides—that was joy and freedom, and she urged her horse into its best stride and laughed hysterically.

"You shouldn't 'a' did it, Pete, dear, you shouldn't," she panted. But she knew she loved him for doing it—loved the daring of it, its success; and her heels dug into the racing horse.

He grinned, and she noticed how wan and peaked his face was, how loose his clothes hung. A cloud came before her eyes and her hand moved out to him.

"Shudn't nothin'!" he laughed. "Ain't I got yuh back? That's enough fer me."

In sheer joy he jerked his Stetson off and clapped the pinto's flanks as in broncho-busting, and Whiskers did a mild buck in response. Blue Pete felt that some slight exultation was coming to him.

She knew they were making for the Hills—the old cave, the one place no rustler had found and only one Policeman, and he would never tell. If they were not safe there, Montana was only a few short miles away; and no one would care for them over the border. Off to the southeast lay their haven, a mere twenty-five miles or so. In two hours, or a trifle more, they would make them—and safety. She could almost smell the damp door of the ivy before the cave, and hear the tinkling ripple of the leaping streams. The cave —their home!

"We've a quarter of an hour start," cheered Blue Pete. "It'll take them that long to get back to Grassy Lake to wire."

But he was wrong. A passenger cut the rope binding Priest as soon as Blue Pete's footsteps had faded away; but the Policeman saw only the running horses when he reached the top of the cutbank. There was, however, help nearer than Grassy Lake. Priest sought out the conductor, found a telephone connection on board, threw it over the wires beside the track, and was in touch with Inspector Parker within five minutes.

Mira and Blue Pete rode on, and an hour later, with the dark line of the Hills softened into a deep green, drew up to let their mounts rest. When they started again they noticed with concern that Mira's horse was limping. A mile back it had stumbled but had recovered and continued its way as if nothing had happened; but now it could only hobble on three legs. Instinctively Blue Pete raised himself in the saddle and scanned the prairie between them and the Hills.

It was Mira saw them first. With a trembling laugh she pointed out, five or six miles away, mere specks on the prairie, two riders moving swiftly across from the east to intercept them. And when Blue Pete turned to the

west two more were riding there. The telephone had done its work well. With fresh mounts escape would still have been possible, but now the half-breed looked down on Mira's horse with shaking head.

"You make for it, Pete," she urged, smiling her gratitude for his brave attempt, and stooping to kiss Whiskers' ears. "You can do it easily alone."

But he only frowned and raised his rifle to examine it, thrusting two more cartridges in the magazine.

"We're not caught yet," he grated. "I've two bits o' lead here fer each o' them—an' it usually only takes one."

But she shook her head. "No, Pete. We can't do it. . . . It was foolish of us to try, but—but it was grand while it lasted. . . . You just can't shoot."

Blue Pete looked about him. Several miles back to the west was the deep valley of a small river, in whose depths he knew a line of cottonwood trees grew. It was their only retreat, and with night coming on anything might happen.

As they pulled about and made for the west the Police bent their course more to the north, always verging nearer, but the early October day was drawing quickly to its close as Pete turned on the brink of the ravine to study his pursuers.

"I dunno," he said hopefully. "Mebbe we kin yet."

When they dropped over the bank they noticed with throbbing hearts that it was much darker than out on the prairie, and Blue Pete laughed recklessly. Deep into the cluster of ugly, gnarled, wind-twisted trunks they urged their horses, and there he left her while he returned to the edge of the open and lay down with ready rifle. He had not long to wait. A Stetson appeared, then a second, and his rifle slid forward. But it was struck aside even as he pointed it.

"No, no, Pete. You mustn't." Mira was lying beside him, her voice filled with a fear he had never heard there before. "I couldn't—couldn't think of you as a—murderer. I couldn't bear to remember you that way."

His heart thumping, he strove vainly to read her face in the dark. She couldn't bear. . . . She couldn't bear. . . . She couldn't bear. It kept tumbling over in his whirling brain.

"Don't, Pete, please."

The appeal in her trembling voice made every nerve go limp, and he could just stare and stare into the gloom where her face was. Presently she crept away a few feet. But he knew she was watching, and he went to her and whispered:

"I won't shoot to kill, Miss Mira—not yet. But I got to scare them." And he returned to his post and fired twice close above the heads of the Policemen.

At a peremptory order from behind them they stopped and slowly retraced their steps. Blue Pete knew they would not come again till daylight. Four of them could surround the clump of trees and prevent their escape in the dark, leaving their capture to the daylight. He rolled on his side and began to plan.

"It's only six months, Pete." The whisper came pleadingly to him through the darkness. "It's only six months."

He felt her hand touch his shoulder and move down his arm until it reached his hand, where it lay soft and warm and confiding. He did not know what to do with it. He wanted to grip it madly, to crush it to him.

"I'll come back then," she breathed, "—to the cave—to the chair you made me—to you, Pete, dear fellow."

His big fist closed spasmodically over her hand in a grip that must have hurt, but she only nestled her head against his shoulder and lay there; and for a delirious moment he heard her faltering breath, felt it on his cheek; and a lock of hair waved across his forehead. One big hand went out blindly before him, trembling.

"You'll marry me then, Pete, won't you?" she was whispering into his ear. "And we can live on, our own life, without the Police and the rustling and the other worries."

He found his voice then—or was it his voice? All the harshness had left it; a deeper, fuller tone welled up from depths that had never before been stirred.

"Don't, Mira, don't! I can't—stand it, girl. I know—I know I must be dreamin' again, 'cause it can't—be true. Don't move, Mira. Let me dream."

She snuggled down into his arms and sighed as she reached up and rubbed her smooth cheek against his rough one.

"Only six months!" she whispered. "The spring will be coming, and the prairie peeping from the snow, and the calves running with the joy of it. . . .

And so will we, Pete."

His arms closed convulsively about her and then dropped away as he pushed her from him almost brutally.

"Goin' to see whar they are," he said abruptly, and left her.

Something about it she did not understand made her unhappy, but because she did not understand—because she knew nothing of love as the world knew it—she did not try to work it out.

Twenty yards from her Blue Pete lay with his head buried in his arms. At the very moment when a joy too great to feel all at once had come to him he had remembered what she had forgotten. He could never return to the honest life again until he had paid the penalty for his crimes. The Police were after him and he must serve his time—and nothing so easy as six months. He strove to smother it all in the memory of those brief moments when she lay against his shoulder, breathing into his ear, but the picture blurred and ran into a jumble of drabness.

When he returned to her he threw himself on the ground beside her in silence—just out of reach of her hand. She thought she understood then.

"It doesn't matter, Pete. If we got away they'd only get me sometime and put me in jail longer. It's best as it is, dear Pete. Don't fret."

For a long time they lay side by side, silent. Over the river they heard a sound that told of the Police watching to cut them off in that direction. Far away, all over the prairie, the yapping of coyotes seemed to mock them and the world, and the stars shone so coldly that Mira shuddered and turned to the shadows about her.

"Now," she said at last, "you must go."

He raised himself fiercely, but she felt about until she could still his protestations with her warm hand.

"You must, Pete. You mustn't get caught, too. Can't you see that we both can't get away with only one horse? . . . Besides, Pete, I'm not going to try. No, I'm not. When I get out it'll be all over and I can come back to you without fear. . . . Now go. . . . And, Pete, dear, don't forget—never, never, never!—that I love you."

He felt her soft lips press his hand, and for one overwhelming moment he had her in his arms. Then he crept away, a great ache tearing him. But in a moment he was back. "Yuh'll hear a c'yute up thar 'long the bank—three yelps an' a howl—that's me."

She reached out in the dark and pulled his head down and kissed him on the forehead, and with bared head he crawled away, her benediction burning into him.

She heard the yelps and shuddering howl on the cutbank, and with a smile of peace and love and hope pillowed her head in one round arm.

But as she sank to sleep, two piercing whistles split the darkness from a great distance. Something moved quietly close to her, and against the skyline Whiskers' little body loomed, as the pinto crept carefully through the trees. A few moments later a burst of galloping hoofs broke from the top of the cutbank, and a succession of rifle shots. But the hoofs kept on. She smiled sleepily. Whiskers had gone to join her master.

And when the sun was beginning to trickle into the tops of the cottonwood trees, she walked out and up the bank to the waiting Police.

"You see, I didn't run away," she laughed. "Take me back."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HALF-BREED'S SACRIFICE

Despair and desperation threatened the lives of many people, good and bad, that autumn. There were times when Blue Pete's emotion almost overcame him. Lonely, living an unnatural existence, driven by memories and goading impotence, two plans came frequently to his twisted mind. Standing among the outer shadows of the Hills, he fumed at the Mounted Police and the suffering the law had brought to Mira, until his fingers hugged his rifle with a menace they could never have suspected. At other times he commenced to pack his limited possessions for a riot of blood over in Montana where Dutchy and Bilsy and their fellows had retired before approaching winter.

It was really the pinto decided the course of his life through the gripping months when the prairies lay in the clutch of ice and snow. Sensitive to her every mood, the half-breed felt her reluctance to leave the Hills—even to desert the cave where her nights had so long been spent. In her fondness for the familiar scenes Blue Pete read little but equine affection for the woman whose love was almost driving him insane; and that he felt he must respect.

So that when whistling gales and driving snow drove him from the open, he clenched his fists and retreated to the old cave and its haunting ghosts of happy days. Juno languished, whining quietly in the long evenings, and Whiskers seemed to have lost her old lazy playfulness; but the winter passed with more pleasant sadness than would have faced him anywhere else, he knew.

Spring found him altered more in body than mind. His physique—that great bundle of muscle and bone that had never failed him, yet never been a care—had paid the penalty of his brooding and careless meals. His cheeks were fallen in and hung flabby, his eyelids were heavy and swollen, his clothes sagged and were draggled from much sleeping in the open and wandering in the storms.

To a day he had worked out when Mira would be free, and each morning, as the time approached, he eagerly sought the open to scan the sky for signs of spring. Experience taught him that when it came it would appear almost unannounced, but he trembled lest the frost would outlast the April day when she would have paid the cost of her sacrifice. And in late March,

when a final chinook blew down from the Rockies and released the grip of winter, he almost laughed into the roaring treetops and gurgling streams that filled the Hills. The prairie would be open and green to welcome her, the tree buds would droop over their cave in merry smiles at her return.

He would have gone to Lethbridge to receive her from the prison gates had he dared, but he knew she would come straight there where they had spent those gleaming weeks of joyous excitement and dawning love. He would wait for her—Juno and Whiskers and he, and the horse he helped himself to from her own ranch. So intense were his expectations that the cave became more unbearably crowded with her presence, and he again sought the open while the ground was still damp and the cold waters flowed from the sides of Mount Abbot.

The old instincts were still alive in him, the uncanny sense of danger and of the unusual. As he lay on his back one day staring through the budding trees, a sound he had not heard for many long months broke the silence of the Hills—horses on the move, and mounted horses at that. A quick whispered order sent Juno slinking back to the cave, and very quietly Blue Pete glided into the shadows, floating over the damp leaves and twigs like a ghost. Now running as fast as he dare, now creeping on his knees, now darting into deeper thickets, he rapidly approached the disturbing sound and at last threw himself on the edge of a ravine, only his eyes above the ridge.

They were coming on with an assurance that betrayed no idea of onlookers, and his eyebrows knit in perplexity. But a glance told him that they were not Mounted Police, not chance cowboys on the trail of strays, not even merely one or two rustlers returning to scenes of former successes. There were ten of them to renew the old campaign of lawlessness. He counted them more than once before he tried to distinguish them. Then as he deliberately and in turn studied their faces, he drew further and further back in the shadows.

It was not fear—he had never felt that in his life; and a grim smile was twisting his face. Yet a shiver ran through him as he looked and recognized, and his rifle slid forward and covered the eye of the leader—moved back to the third and returned—and dropped without firing. Before him rode his two sworn enemies, Dutch Henry and Bilsy, but he did not fulfill his vow at this moment when they were helpless before him. They had brought with them eight of the most daring rustlers of the Badlands, and he wanted to know their game.

• • • • •

Such a band of rustlers had never combined before on either side of the line, and they quickly made their presence felt. So fast did rumor follow rumor that at first the Police were almost disorganized in the pursuit of them. The Inspector gave his opinion bluntly to Mahon.

"It's his revenge for the capture of Mira," he said, gnawing his mustache.

"It's the work of a gang, not of one man," Mahon made bold to qualify.

"He's joined the old crowd," guessed the Inspector.

Mahon had considered that but had always turned it down. He did so now.

"I think we know Blue Pete better than to think he'd go back to the old crowd at the old game."

An additional Policeman came down from the north to assist, a keen fellow who had proven his worth in many a long trail and many a fight, and the Force undertook an ambitious plan. Now thoroughly roused, the ranchers were at last joining hands with the Police, and, as April advanced and the rustlers grew bolder, it was decided to confine attention to the Hills, the new plan being to place a system of patrols—cowboys, ranchers, and Police—all about the Hills, night and day.

The first real evidence that the rustlers were in the Hills came from a cowboy who had seen four of them emerge and retire in the early morning light. The single telephone line was monopolized by the Police for the next two hours, and a cordon was drawn about the entire western end of the Hills. Sergeant Blakey was already named for another district, and Corporal Mahon swelled one day with an unexpected promotion as his successor. To him was given charge of the chase, because he knew the Hills best and had had the most success in the detection and capture of the rustlers.

Throwing five Policemen in a line through the Hills from north to south a few miles from their western end—it was the post of danger—he stationed some cowboys and the rest of the force, the entire division being centered there for the time being, between the Hills and the Montana border. The north he left in care of ranchers and cowboys. On the very first night he knew he had the outlaws cornered; they tried to break through to the south, were fired at, and fled back into the Hills.

The discovery of a few scattered spots of blood where the firing had occurred decided Mahon's next move. Calling up the new man, whose experience had been among the woods of the north, he started to trail the

blood stains, leaving instructions with the two remaining Police on the south to keep close to the Hills that they might respond to any unusual movement there.

The half-breed's training in following trails came now to Mahon's service as never before. All he had to draw him on were the scattered spots of blood and here and there slight signs of passing horses. Corrigan, his companion, useful as he was in bush trailing, watched Mahon go about his task with great respect. Right into the deepest shadows of the trees, now almost in full leaf the blood led, Corrigan's duty being to watch for ambush while Mahon concentrated on the trail. Deeper and deeper they plunged where so much danger lurked and where so much neither of them had ever seen made their going half blind. But after a time the trail led into clearer places and their progress was faster.

Several times as he moved along Mahon imagined slight sounds from the shadows about him, and once or twice Corrigan crept away to reconnoiter, but they could find nothing to support their fancies. It was not a position for trifling with, since any one of the ten outlaws, armed and expert shots, would not hesitate to kill if his safety from capture depended upon it. Indeed, Inspector Parker had solemnly warned them that Dutchy and his fellows would probably shoot now on sight. But it seemed against all reason that they would risk hanging on the trail of the Police following the blood spots.

Down to the edge of a small lake—the very one beside which he had spent with Blue Pete his first night in the Hills—Mahon led, but there the trail escaped him. Probably the wounded man had bathed the wound and bound it up, and Mahon and Corrigan seated themselves on opposite sides of a tree to talk the situation over. There, screened by overhanging foliage and placed so that nothing could approach them, they were more conscious than ever of being watched, even of being in dire peril.

Neither of them thought of the safe way out—perhaps the wise one—retreat. The very placidity and silence about them laughed at flight. The lake lay as peaceful as a child asleep, and the big trees drooped with only a lazy rustle in their tops. Mahon wondered if it was this very silence, where so much was always happening, that gave him such a sense of brooding watchfulness. It was agreed that they should skirt the lake in opposite directions, meeting on the other side.

Mahon set out, keeping to the tangle of green beyond the open shore, eyes and ears strained. To the right was the lake. To the left, in that trackless

forest, was always something that seemed to compel attention in spite of himself. Sometimes he was convinced that it moved along there within a few yards, keeping silent pace with him; and yet he dare not risk investigation until the opportune moment. He tried to relieve the strain of half caught sounds by telling himself it was only imagination, and often he stopped suddenly that his ears might satisfy him that he was alone. At a clearing across the way he lay several minutes waiting, but nothing happened.

He was debating whether he should not rush boldly into the trees and take his chances to expose what was there, when a sharp hiss sent him crouching back into deepest cover. It was the instinct of warning; and the reaction of surprise was to raise his head warily to peer about.

As he came above the bush he found himself looking into the barrel of a rifle before a malevolent face not twenty yards away.

His first thought was that this was not the something that had been tracking him; it was in a different direction. He had but an instant to note that the face was Bilsy's, a bandage about his right arm pointing to the source of the bloodstains he had been following. And then something hurled itself from the bushes to his left with a loud cry, and two rifles blazed. The awful broken gurgle that came from Bilsy's lips Mahon knew to be his death cry; but it was to the other, his savior, he turned.

As he looked a loose, ungainly figure stumbled from the trees and sank in sickening jerks to the edge of the water, and with a gasp of horror Mahon stared down on the twisting features of his half-breed friend, Blue Pete.

Without a thought of the dangers about him, Mahon raised the contorted face. The eyes opened heavily and stared blankly up at him a second, then widened into a twisted smile as they fixed themselves on the Policeman's white face.

"Thank God!" whispered the half-breed. "'T's all right. Bilsy didn't get you. I—I didn't see him till near too late."

Mahon was feeling swiftly for the source of the stain deepening on Blue Pete's breast. As he opened the shirt the half-breed smiled wanly.

"Never min' me, Boy. Th' ain't nothin' yuh kin do. Bilsy—near got me—this time. . . . But I've paid—fer wot he done to th' ole gal."

In his face was not a quiver of pain, not a sign of regret or fear or sorrow. Mahon's voice caught as he tried to speak.

"Why didn't you let me take my chance, Pete? Oh, Pete!"

A weak smile lifted the corners of Blue Pete's mouth, and in his eyes was a world of affection.

"Bilsy—don't miss, Boy. Yuh hedn't no chance. . . . It's—fer yer mother. . . . She wants—them letters. No, let it be. Get out o' here, Boy, quick! Thar's more after yuh."

He raised himself with a burst of strength.

"Don' stop me," he muttered hurriedly. "Ken't talk—much. Sort o' fizzles out—in here. They're under the big pine in Pine Hollow. You know it. Get 'em—to-night. Now go—quick!"

Mahon started to the lake for water. As he raised himself something crashed against his head and he dropped like a log. But even as he fell he had a dim vision of the half-breed leaning over him to feel his heart—and then a crashing of bushes and Blue Pete was gone, blood dripping horribly behind him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SCORES SETTLED—AND OPENED

Corrigan, coming at full speed at the rifle shots, found the Sergeant lying unconscious in a pool of blood, little of it his own. After dashing a hatful of water in Mahon's face, he dragged him into the trees and awaited the help he knew would come. To hurry it and to guide the Policemen listening just south of the Hills for such a signal, he fired his own rifle twice, and then turned his attention to the battered head of his Sergeant. To such good effect did he set about it that when the other Policemen arrived Mahon was sitting dizzily against a tree trying to recall what had happened. Bilsy's body they found in the brush as it had fallen from Blue Pete's unerring bullet.

Two hours later Sergeant Mahon, his head bandaged, was planning a coup.

He knew Pine Hollow and the big pine, for he and Blue Pete had used it more than once as a rendezvous during their excursions into the Hills. It was a natural hiding place, fringed with thick bushes and so overhung with trees that, save in heavy rains, the ground was never wet.

Late in the afternoon, while the sun still shone brightly out on the prairie but gloom was thickening among the trees of the Hills, seven Policemen converged noiselessly on Pine Hollow, with orders to close in warily to within a hundred yards and there to lie until seven-thirty, when darkness would make further advance less dangerous. At thirty yards they were to await developments.

Blakey, as Mahon's superior in point of service, ordered Mahon to remain behind, for the blanched face and wild eyes warned him of coming collapse, postponed only by the excitement of the moment and the grit of the sufferer. But Mahon grimly reminded him who was in charge, and as dusk fell, with his head playing him uncanny tricks, he was crawling through the trees to his allotted place in the tightening cordon of Police.

At the appointed time he embarked on the more perilous part of the adventure, his ears keyed to the faint rustlings of his fellow Policemen on either hand. His part of the plan was not to stop at thirty yards, but to go on and see what Pine Hollow had to show. For some time he had heard subdued voices from the hollow, and as he crouched at the edge of the protecting

bushes the faint glow and crackle of a fire came to him, solving at once the problem of the darkness. From the earnestness of their conversation he gathered a difference of opinion, and when he came nearer found it concerned the wisdom of a fire. It was Dutch Henry himself who growled that he did not intend any longer to go without something hot to drink.

Inch by inch Mahon wormed his way into the bushes. Dimly then in flickering moments he could make out the flames through the foliage, and as he arrived at the edge of the open saw Dutch Henry proceeding with the preparation of tea. Gathering himself together he leaped into the hollow.

There was a wild rush, some to escape, some to their rifles, and even as Mahon's rifle covered them the hands of several of the outlaws were gripping their firearms.

"It's all up, boys," he warned in a quiet voice. "You will drop your rifles and line up on the other side of the fire."

Three half raised rifles hesitated; six men stopped in mid-flight. Nine pairs of eyes glared up at the khaki-clad figure outlined in the light of the fire.

Mahon stepped forward and paused for them to obey, but only a couple of them made a movement to fall into line. Nine reckless outlaws—nine gunmen of notoriety on both sides of the line—hesitated to obey the commands of one, even before a pointed rifle.

"At the first move, boys," Mahon continued, "you will never move again. You're surrounded."

Swift as a flash one rifle at the edge of the group leaped up.

"Damn it!" shrieked Dutch Henry, "there'll be one less of you anyway —"

Mahon whirled, conscious on the instant that he was too late with a gunman like Dutch Henry. But even as the muzzle covered him, a jet of flame burst from the thicket and Dutch Henry's bullet sped harmlessly over his head. On the instant the hollow was full of Policemen, and eight rustlers lined up behind the fire with lifted hands.

Dutch Henry lay huddled on his side, one hand loosely grasping his rifle, the other pressed against his forehead, from which a slight trickle of blood oozed. And the Police were asking each other who fired the shot. Mahon's head began its dizzy tricks again, as he sank against a tree.

It was a record round-up. Dutch Henry and Bilsy had paid the penalties of their crimes, and eight international outlaws were on the way to long prison terms. And the only Police casualty was Sergeant Mahon who, when it was all over, collapsed and was carried to the Post, where for two days he lay in semi-coma, babbling of Blue Pete and Bilsy and Dutch Henry. If others figured in his sick dreams it was never recorded.

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Mira emerged from Lethbridge prison into the bright glare of a typical prairie spring day. Uncertain of her future, with no plans or hopes, she nevertheless refused the assistance eagerly offered by the kind-hearted Mounted Police. Her first thought was of Blue Pete, then of the 3-bar-Y ranch, yet to neither was she prepared to return immediately. The shock of freedom itself was all she could bear as yet. Her instinct was to escape from Lethbridge, and without more thought than that she would there be unknown and able to recover somewhat from the shuddering prison memories before facing her friends, she bought a ticket for Calgary.

And while Blue Pete wondered and suffered back there in the Hills, longing for her return, yet vaguely understanding the delay, she spent a lonely fortnight in a strange city. Blue Pete had at least the relief of action, where his old enemies were engaged in an organized outlawry he was undecided how to treat, torn between his hatred of the law and of the leaders of the rustlers.

At last Mira could stand her inactivity and isolation no longer. Slinking into a train for Medicine Hat, she alighted at a small station before reaching the town, only the Mounted Police aware, in an indefinite way, of her movements.

• • • • •

On the third day after the capture of the rustlers Mahon came partly to himself. And it was not his wound that troubled him then, but his mind. His muddled thoughts kept trying to concentrate on something he dimly knew to demand immediate attention; but he could not determine what it was. On the fourth day he was in the saddle with Priest, feverishly anxious, hoping against hope.

Straight to the cave in the Cypress Hills he led, and pulled back the screen of vines. When his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw how things had changed since he knew it. The old box was replaced by a table of rough boards, and near it stood a crudely made chair that was a model of comfort compared with the stumps that once served. Mahon

stepped inside on tiptoe, suddenly conscious of a pool of blood before the entrance. Another great pool was before a box from which a soiled green skirt was partly pulled. Within the box were a knife, fork and spoon, two tiny handkerchiefs, two books, and a pair of small, worn-out, high-heeled woman's riding boots.

But Blue Pete was not there. Mahon, leaning heavily against the table, picked up a bit of paper which covered an open letter he recognized as an old one to him from his mother. In some way the half-breed must have found it during the days when they rode much together. A spot of blood on the corner of the upper paper made him shudder with foreboding, as he tried to read it with wet eyes.

"My dear Boy," it ran, in trembling lines, just as his mother used to address him. "I no youl find this when I dont turn up. Bilsy got me whur it hurts and I cant seem to think rite, hop yer all rite fur yer mothers sake, tell her I dun my best, tell Mira if I dont pull thro that I love her." The drop of blood had fallen there and below it the wounded half-breed had scrawled: "cant breeth rite. I try fur the pine tree but I dont no. if I dont make it good by Boy. Maybe they ant got Blue Pete yet."

Mahon pressed a hand dizzily against the stone wall of the cave, and Priest tiptoed out.

The trail of blood was not hard to follow, heavy brown stains showing where Blue Pete had been forced to rest. As they approached the circle of brush about Pine Hollow, Mahon shrank from knowing the truth. In there, where he had seen that spitting jet of fire that saved his life, must be the body of his best friend, the best friend man could have. Nothing else could come of the wound he had seen, the blood trail he had followed.

Shrinking at the last, he sent Priest ahead, and sat down in a faintness that left him scarcely strength to realize his sorrow. Dimly he heard Priest moving among the bushes and at last stop and call. Mahon found him bending over a stained impression in the soft ground. For long a body had lain there bleeding, helpless to move. Mahon sank to his knees, then the instinct of his calling turned his eyes about him on the ground.

There was no mistaking the signs he read—a woman's tracks. He knew intuitively whose they were.

The next night Inspector Parker found the explanation in his mail.

"There is no use looking for Blue Pete's body," wrote Mira Stanton. "I found him. He aint one of the Police and never was and I aint going to let

the Police bury him. I loved him and he is mine to the end. You wont see us again."

The Inspector read it through several times, examined it all over, placed it back on his desk, and picked it up to read it again. And for a long time he sat in silent thought. Suddenly he rang his desk bell and Mitchell entered.

"Sergeant Mahon—send him here," he ordered.

"Sit down, Mahon," he began, when the Sergeant stood before him, weak and pale. "What d'you think of this?"

He read the letter aloud.

"It explains everything, sir," replied Mahon. "She's come on his body and buried it herself rather than let us have him, dead or alive."

"Hm-m!" The Inspector looked off through the window into the broad sunlight of the street. "You think so? . . . Are you still going to set up that cenotaph, Boy?"

"It's the least I can do, sir, after what he meant to me—what he did for me."

"Don't you think . . . you'd better wait till you find his body?"

"When I do, sir, I will bury it beside the stone I am setting up."

The older man rattled his fingers on the top of the desk before replying.

"Anyway, it's a fine enough sentiment," he muttered. . . . "And I don't know. By the way, did you find Whiskers?"

Mahon frowned. "That puzzles me a bit, sir. . . . But Mira's taken her, don't you see?"

"Very simple," growled the Inspector.

• • • • •

In Windy Coulee, just where the old trail enters the Cypress Hills, Mahon set up a slab of unhewn marble. Back against the Hills its three sides stood massive and rough as they came from the quarry. And on the other, looking out across the prairie, was this simple inscription:

"Greater Love
from
Boy."

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 *Blue Pete: Half-Breed* by Luke Allan]