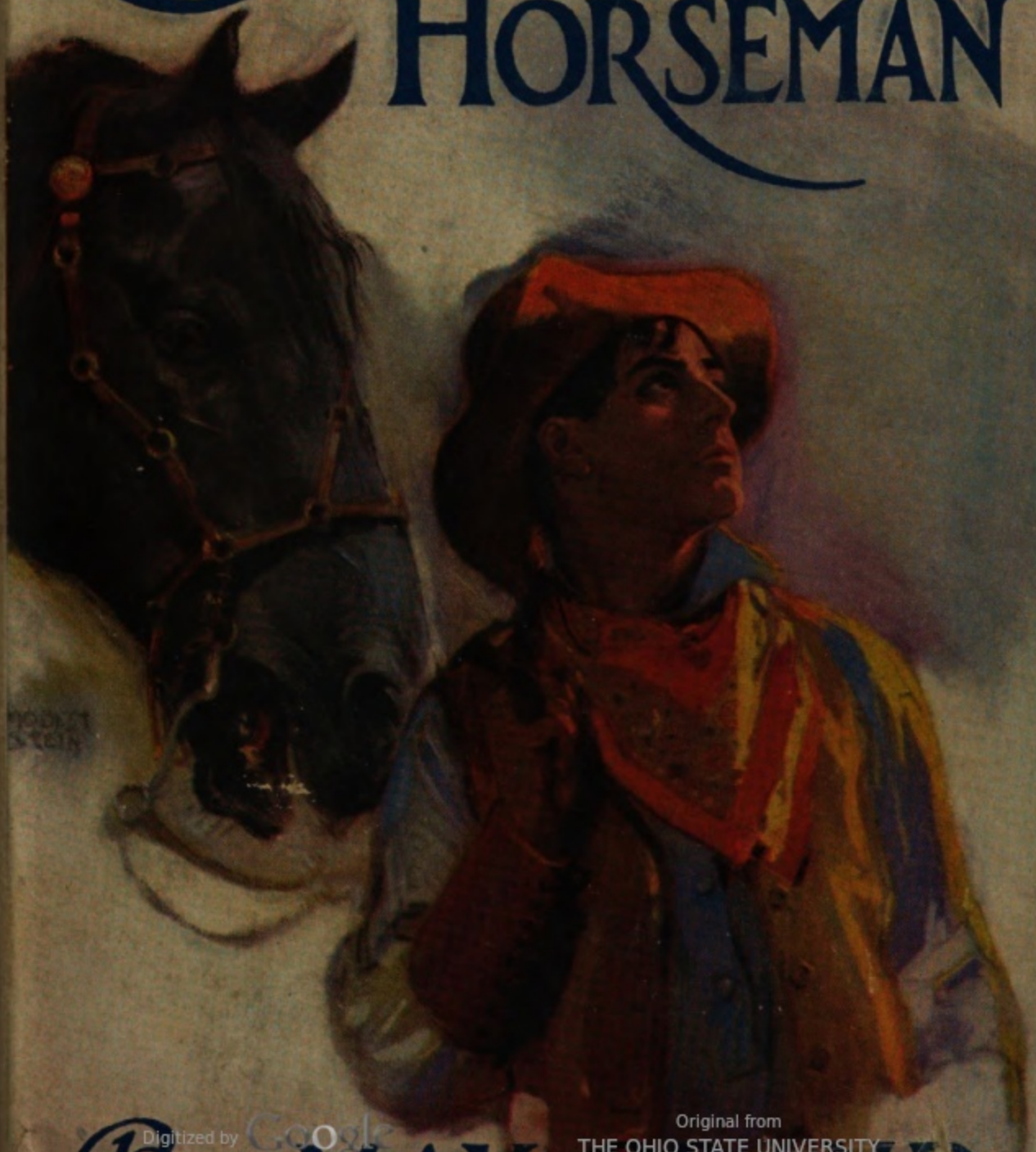
By the Author of "THE UNTAMED"

The NIGHT HORSEMAN



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A Tale of Wild-Riding Herdsmen and Outlaws, and Their Deeds of Daring and Deviltry

The Night Horseman

BY MAX BRAND

The author of "The Untamed" and "Trailin'," in this novel, draws a vivid picture of wild adventure in the West, where skillful riding and quick shooting were the faculties which counted in the struggle for life.

Randall Byrne, a doctor by profession, finds himself obliged to make a change in his method of life, on account of a breakdown in health.

Arriving at a small town in a ranching country, he is practically carried off to attend a sick man at a distant ranch and there comes in touch with "Whistlin' Dan," the mysteriously powerful silent man who controls human beings and animals by his wonderful physical strength and weird mental power.

There are desperate adventures and hair-breadth escapes, which keep the reader on edge.

At the end, "Whistlin' Dan" and Kate Cumberland depart on the call of the wild geese.

It is a story of unpacified hate, of deadly fights, of wild riding by night, of fierce, passionate and overwhelming love, and is written in a way thrilling in its reality, and makes a powerful appeal to lovers of an exciting story.

Other Books by Max Brand:

THE UNTAMED
TRAILIN'

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers - New York

Ralph B. Emery
25 Main Street
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THE NIGHT HORSEMAN

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Author of
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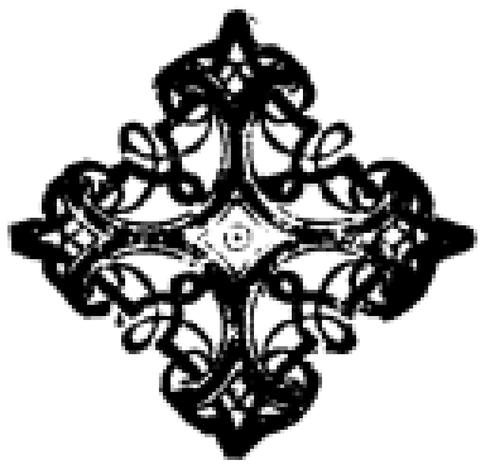

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THE NIGHT HORSEMAN

CHAPTER I

THE SCHOLAR

At the age of six Randall Byrne could name and bound every state in the Union and give the date of its admission; at nine he was conversant with Homeric Greek and Cæsar; at twelve he read Aristophanes with perfect understanding of the allusions of the day and divided his leisure between Ovid and Horace; at fifteen, wearied by the simplicity of Old English and Thirteenth Century Italian, he dipped into the history of Philosophy and passed from that, naturally, into calculus and the higher mathematics; at eighteen he took an A.B. from Harvard and while idling away a pleasant summer with Hebrew and Sanscrit he delved lightly into biology and its kindred sciences, having reached the conclusion that Truth is greater than Goodness or Beauty, because it comprises both, and the whole is greater than any of its parts; at twenty-one he pocketed his Ph.D. and was touched with the fever of his first practical enthusiasm—surgery. At twenty-four he was an M.D. and a distinguished

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diagnostician, though he preferred work in his laboratory in his endeavor to resolve the elements into simpler forms; also he published at this time a work on anthropology whose circulation was limited to two hundred copies, and he received in return two hundred letters of congratulation from great men who had tried to read his book; at twenty-seven he collapsed one fine spring day on the floor of his laboratory. That afternoon he was carried into the presence of a great physician who was also a very vulgar man. The great physician felt his pulse and looked into his dim eyes.

"You have a hundred and twenty horsepower brain and a runabout body," said the great physician.

"I have come," answered Randall Byrne faintly, "for the solution of a problem, not for the statement thereof."

"I'm not through," said the great physician. "Among other things you are a damned fool."

Randall Byrne here rubbed his eyes.

"What steps do you suggest that I consider?" he queried.

The great physician spat noisily.

"Marry a farmer's daughter," he said brutally

"But," said Randall Byrne vaguely.

"I am a busy man and you've wasted ten minutes of my time," said the great physician, turning back to his plate glass window. "My secretary will send you a bill for one thousand dollars. Good-day."

And therefore, ten days later, Randall Byrne sat in his room in the hotel at Elkhead.

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He had just written (to his friend Swinnerton Loughburne, M.A., Ph.D., L.L.D.): "Incontrovertibly the introduction of the personal equation leads to lamentable inversions, and the perceptive faculties when contemplating phenomena through the lens of ego too often conceive an accidental connotation or manifest distortion to be actuality, for the physical (or personal) too often beclouds that power of inner vision which so unerringly penetrates to the inherent truths of incorporeity and the extramundane. Yet this problem, to your eyes, I fear, not essentially novel or peculiarly involute, holds for my contemplative faculties an extraordinary fascination, to wit.: wherein does the mind, in itself a muscle, escape from the laws of the physical, and wherein and wherefore do the laws of the physical exercise so inexorable a jurisdiction over the processes of the mind, so that a disorder of the visual nerve actually distorts the asomatous and veils the pneumatoscopic?

"Your pardon, dear Loughburne, for these lapses from the general to the particular, but in a lighter moment of idleness, I pray you give some careless thought to a problem now painfully my own, though rooted inevitably so deeply in the dirt of the commonplace.

"But you have asked me in letter of recent date for the particular physical aspects of my present environment, and though (as you so well know) it is my conviction that the physical fact is not and only the immaterial is, yet I shall gladly look about

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me—a thing I have not yet seen occasion to do—and describe to you the details of my present condition."

Accordingly, at this point Randall Byrne removed from his nose his thick glasses and holding them poised he stared through the window at the view without. He had quite changed his appearance by removing the spectacles, for the owlish touch was gone and he seemed at a stroke ten years younger. It was such a face as one is glad to examine in detail, lean, pale, the transparent skin stretched tightly over cheek-bones, nose, and chin. That chin was built on good fighting lines, though somewhat over-delicate in substance and the mouth quite colourless, but oddly enough the upper lip had that habitual appearance of stiff compression which is characteristic of highly strung temperaments; it is a noticeable feature of nearly every great actor, for instance. The nose was straight and very thin and in a strong sidelight a tracery of the red blood showed through at the nostrils. The eyes were deeply buried and the lower lids bruised with purple—weak eyes that blinked at a change of light or a sudden thought—distant eyes which missed the design of wall paper and saw the trees growing on the mountains. The forehead was Byrne's most noticeable feaure, pyramidal, swelling largely towards the top and divided in the centre into two distinct lobes by a single marked furrow which gave his expression a hint of the wistful. Looking at that forehead one was strangely conscious of the brain beneath. There

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seemed no bony structure; the mind, undefended, was growing and pushing the confining walls further out.

And the fragilitiy which the head suggested the body confirmed, for he was not framed to labor. The burden of the noble head had bowed the slender throat and crooked the shoulders, and when he moved his arm it seemed the arm of a skeleton too loosely clad. There was a differing connotation in the hands, to be sure. They were thin—bones and sinews chiefly, with the violet of the veins showing along the backs; but they were active hands without tremor—hands ideal for the accurate scalpel, where a fractional error means death to the helpless.

After a moment of staring through the window the scholar wrote again: "The major portion of Elkhead lies within plain sight of my window. I see a general merchandise store, twenty-seven buildings of a comparatively major and eleven of a minor significance, and five saloons. The streets ____"

The streets, however, were not described at that sitting, for at this juncture a heavy hand knocked and the door of Randall Byrne's room was flung open by Hank Dwight, proprietor of Elkhead's saloon—a versatile man, expert behind the bar or in a blacksmith shop.

"Doc," said Hank Dwight, "you're wanted."

Randall Byrne placed his spectacles more firmly on his nose to consider his host.

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"What——" he began, but Hank Dwight had already turned on his heel.

"Her name is Kate Cumberland. A little speed, doc. She's in a hurry."

"If no other physician is available," protested Byrne, following slowly down the stairs, "I suppose I must see her."

"If they was another within ten miles, d'you s'pose I'd call on you?" asked Hank Dwight.

So saying, he led the way out onto the veranda, where the doctor was aware of a girl in a short riding skirt who stood with one gloved hand on her hip while the other slapped a quirt idly against her riding boots.

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CHAPTER II

"HERE'S a gent that calls himself a doc," said Hank Dwight by way of an introduction. "If you can use him, Miss Cumberland, fly to it!"

And he left them alone.

Now the sun lay directly behind Kate Cumberland and in order to look at her closely the doctor had to shade his weak eyes and pucker his brows; for from beneath her wide sombrero there rolled a cloud of golden hair as bright as the sunshine itself—a sad strain upon the visual nerve of Doctor Randall Byrne. He repeated her name, bowed, and when he straightened, blinked again. As if she appreciated that strain upon his eyes she stepped closer, and entered the shadow.

"Doctor Hardin is not in town," she said, "and I have to bring a physician out to the ranch at once; my father is critically ill."

Randall Byrne rubbed his lean chin.

"I am not practicing at present," he said reluctantly. Then he saw that she was watching him closely, weighing him with her eyes, and it came to the mind of Randall Byrne that he was not a large

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man and might not incline the scale far from the horizontal.

"I am hardly equipped——" began Byrne.

"You will not need equipment," she interrupted. "His trouble lies in his nerves and the state of his mind."

A slight gleam lighted the eyes of the doctor.

"Ah," he murmured. "The mind?"

"Yes."

He rubbed his bloodless hands slowly together, and when he spoke his voice was sharp and quick and wholly impersonal. "Tell me the symptoms!"

"Can't we talk those over on the way to the ranch? Even if we start now it will be dark before we arrive."

"But," protested the doctor, "I have not yet decided—this precipitancy——"

"Oh," she said, and flushed. He perceived that she was on the verge of turning away, but something withheld her. "There is no other physician within reach; my father is very ill. I only ask that you come as a diagnostician, doctor!"

"But a ride to your ranch," he said miserably. "I presume you refer to riding a horse?"

"Naturally."

"I am unfamiliar with that means of locomotion," said the doctor with serious eyes, "and in fact have not carried my acquaintance with the equine species beyond a purely experimental stage. Anatomically I have a superficial knowledge, but on the one occasion on which I sat in a saddle I observed that

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the docility of the horse is probably a poetic fallacy."

He rubbed his left shoulder thoughtfully and saw a slight tremor at the corners of the girl's mouth. It caused his vision to clear and concentrate; he found that the lips were, in fact, in the very act of smiling. The face of the doctor brightened.

"You shall ride my own horse," said the girl. "She is perfectly gentle and has a very easy gait. I'm sure you'll have not the slightest trouble with her."

"And you?"

"I'll find something about town; it doesn't matter what."

"This," said the doctor, "is most remarkable. You choose your mounts at random?"

"But you will go?" she insisted.

"Ah, yes, the trip to the ranch!" groaned the doctor. "Let me see: the physical obstacles to such a trip while many are not altogether insuperable, I may say; in the meantime the moral urge which compels me towards the ranch seems to be of the first order." He sighed. "Is it not strange, Miss Cumberland, that man, though distinguished from the lower orders by mind, so often is controlled in his actions by ethical impulses which override the considerations of reason? An observation which leads us towards the conclusion that the passion for goodness is a principle hardly secondary to the passion for truth. Understand that I build the hypothesis only tentatively, with many reservations, among which——"

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He broke off short. The smile was growing upon her lips.

"I will put together a few of my things," said the doctor, "and come down to you at once."

"Good!" said the girl, "I'll be waiting for you with two horses before you are ready."

He turned away, but had taken hardly a step before he turned, saying: "But why are you so sure that you will be ready before I——" but she was already down the steps from the veranda and stepping briskly down the street.

"There is an element of the unexplainable in woman," said the doctor, and resumed his way to his room. Once there, something prompted him to act with the greatest possible speed. He tossed his toilet articles and a few changes of linen into a small, flexible valise and ran down the stairs. He reached the veranda again, panting, and the girl was not in sight; a smile of triumph appeared on the grave, colourless lips of the doctor. "Feminine instinct, however, is not infallible," he observed to himself, and to one of the cowboys, lounging loosely in a chair nearby, he continued his train of thoughts aloud: "Though the verity of the feminine intuition has already been thrown in a shade of doubt by many thinkers, as you will undoubtedly agree."

The man thus addressed allowed his lower jaw to drop but after a moment he ejaculated: "Now what in hell d'you mean by that?"

The doctor already turned away, intent upon his thoughts, but he now paused and again faced the

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cowboy. He said, frowning: "There is unnecessary violence in your remark, sir."

"Duck your glasses," said the worthy in question, "You aint talkin' to a book, you're talking to a man."

"And in your attitude," went on the doctor, "there is an element of offense which if carried farther might be corrected by physical violence."

"I don't foller your words," said the cattleman, "but from the drift of your tune I gather you're a bit peeved; and if you are——"

His voice had risen to a ringing note as he proceeded and he now slipped from his chair and faced Randall Byrne, a big man, brown, hard-handed. The doctor crimsoned.

"Well?" he echoed, but in place of a deep ring his words were pitched in a high squeak of defiance.

He saw a large hand contract to a fist, but almost instantly the big man grinned, and his eyes went past Byrne.

"Oh, hell!" he grunted, and turned his back with a chuckle.

For an instant there was a mad impulse in the doctor to spring at this fellow but a wave of impotence overwhelmed him. He knew that he was white around the mouth, and there was a dryness in his throat.

"The excitement of imminent physical contest and personal danger," he diagnosed swiftly, "causing acceleration of the pulse and attendant weakness of

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the body—a state unworthy of the balanced intellect."

Having brought back his poise by this quick interposition of reason, he went his way down the long veranda. Against a pillar leaned another tall cattleman, also brown and lean and hard.

"May I inquire," he said, "if you have any information direct or casual concerning a family named Cumberland which possesses ranch property in this vicinity?"

"You may," said the cowpuncher, and continued to roll his cigarette.

"Well," said the doctor, "do you know anything about them?"

"Sure," said the other, and having finished his cigarette he introduced it between his lips. It seemed to occur to him instantly, however, that he was committing an inhospitable breach, for he produced his Durham and brown papers with a start and extended them towards the doctor.

"Smoke?" he asked.

"I use tobacco in no form," said the doctor.

The cowboy stared with such fixity that the match burned down to his fingertips and singed them before he had lighted his cigarette.

"'S that a fact?" he queried when his astonishment found utterance. "What d'you do to kill time? Well, I been thinking about knocking off the stuff for a while. Mame gets sore at me for having my fingers all stained up with nicotine like this."

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He extended his hand, the first and second fingers of which were painted a bright yellow.

"Soap won't take it off," he remarked.

"A popular but inexcusable error," said the doctor. "It is the tarry by-products of tobacco which cause that stain. Nicotine itself, of course, is a volatile alkaloid base of which there is only the merest trace in tobacco. It is one of the deadliest of nerve poisons and is quite colourless. There is enough of that stain upon your fingers—if it were nicotine—to kill a dozen men."

"The hell you say!"

"Nevertheless, it is an indubitable fact. A lump of nicotine the size of the head of a pin placed on the tongue of a horse will kill the beast instantly."

The cowpuncher pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"This is worth knowin'," he said, "but I'm some glad that Mame ain't heard it."

"Concerning the Cumberlands," said the doctor, "I——"

"Concerning the Cumberlands," repeated the cattleman, "it's best to leave 'em to their own concerns." And he started to turn away, but the thirst for knowledge was dry in the throat of the doctor.

"Do I understand," he insisted, "that there is some mystery connected with them?"

"From me," replied the other, "you understand nothin'." And he lumbered down the steps and away.

Be it understood that there was nothing of the

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gossip in Randall Byrne, but now he was pardonably excited and perceiving the tall form of Hank Dwight in the doorway he approached his host.

"Mr. Dwight," he said, "I am about to go to the Cumberland ranch. I gather that there is something of an unusual nature concerning them."

"There is," admitted Hank Dwight.

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"I can."

"Good!" said the doctor, and he almost smiled. "It is always well to know the background of a case which has to do with mental states. Now, just what do you know?"

"I know——" began the proprietor, and then paused and eyed his guest dubiously. "I know," he continued, "a story."

"Yes?"

"Yes, about a man and a hoss and a dog."

"The approach seems not quite obvious, but I shall be glad to hear it."

There was a pause.

"Words," said the host, at length, "is worse'n bullets. You never know what they'll hit."

"But the story?" persisted Randall Byrne.

"That story," said Hank Dwight, "I may tell to my son before I die."

"This sounds quite promising."

"But I'll tell nobody else."

"Really!"

"It's about a man and a hoss and a dog. The

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man ain't possible, the hoss ain't possible, the dog is a wolf."

He paused again and glowered on the doctor. He seemed to be drawn two ways, by his eagerness to tell a yarn and his dread of consequences.

"I know," he muttered, "because I've seen 'em all. I've seen"—he looked far, as though striking a silent bargain with himself concerning the sum of the story which might safely be told—"I've seen a hoss that understood a man's talk like you and me does—or better. I've heard a man whistle like a singing bird. Yep, that ain't no lie. You jest imagine a bald eagle that could lick anything between the earth and the sky and was able to sing—that's what that whistlin' was like. It made you glad to hear it, and it made you look to see if your gun was in good workin' shape. It wasn't very loud, but it travelled pretty far, like it was comin' from up above you."

"That's the way this strange man of the story whistles?" asked Byrne, leaning closer.

"Man of the story?" echoed the proprietor, with some warmth. "Friend, if he ain't real, then I'm a ghost. And they's them in Elkhead that's got the scars of his comin' and goin'."

"Ah, an outlaw? A gunfighter?" queried the doctor.

"Listen to me, son," observed the host, and to make his point he tapped the hollow chest of Byrne with a rigid forefinger, "around these parts you know jest as much as you see, and lots of times you

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don't even know that much. What you see is sometimes your business, but mostly it ain't." He concluded impressively: "Words is worse'n bullets!"

"Well," mused Byrne, "I can ask the girl these questions. It will be medically necessary."

"Ask the girl? Ask her?" echoed the host with a sort of horror. But he ended with a forced restraint: "That's *your* business."

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CHAPTER III

THE DOCTOR RIDES

HANK DWIGHT disappeared from the doorway and the doctor was called from his pondering by the voice of the girl. There was something about that voice which worried Byrne, for it was low and controlled and musical and it did not fit with the nasal harshness of the cattlemen. When she began to speak it was like the beginning of a song. He turned now and found her sitting a tall bay horse, and she led a red-roan mare beside her. When he went out she tossed her reins over the head of her horse and strapped his valise behind her saddle.

"You won't have any trouble with that mare," she assured him, when the time came for mounting. Yet when he approached gingerly he was received with flattened ears and a snort of anger. "Wait," she cried, "the left side, not the right!"

He felt the laughter in her voice, but when he looked he could see no trace of it in her face. He approached from the left side, setting his teeth.

"You observe," he said, "that I take your word at its full value," and placing his foot in the stirrup, he dragged himself gingerly up to the saddle. The mare stood like a rock. Adjusting himself, he wiped a sudden perspiration from his forehead.

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"I quite believe," he remarked, "that the animal is of unusual intelligence. All may yet be well!"

"I'm sure of it," said the girl gravely. "Now we're off."

And the horses broke into a dog trot. Now the gait of the red roan mare was a dream of softness, and her flexible ankles gave a play of whole inches to break the jar of every step, the sure sign of the good saddle-horse; but the horse has never been saddled whose trot is really a smooth pace. The hat of Doctor Byrne began to incline towards his right eye and his spectacles towards his left ear. He felt a peculiar lightness in the stomach and heaviness in the heart.

"The t-t-t-trot," he ventured to his companion, "is a d-d-d-dam——"

"Dr. Byrne!" she cried.

"Whoa!" called Doctor Byrne, and drew mightily in upon the reins. The red mare stopped as a ball stops when it meets a stout wall; the doctor sprawled along her neck, clinging with arms and legs. He managed to clamber back into the saddle.

"There are vicious elements in the nature of this brute," he observed to the girl.

"I'm very sorry," she murmured. He cast a side-long glance but found not the trace of a smile.

"The word upon which I——"

"Stopped?" she suggested.

"Stopped," he agreed, "was not, as you evidently assumed, an oath. On the contrary, I was merely

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remarking that the trot is a damaging gait, but through an interrupted—er—articulation——"

His eye dared her, but she was utterly grave. He perceived that there was, after all, a certain kinship between this woman of the mountain-desert and the man thereof. Their silences were filled with eloquence.

"We'll try a canter," she suggested, "and I think you'll find that easier."

So she gave the word, and her bay sprang into a lope from a standing start. The red mare did likewise, nearly flinging the doctor over the back of the saddle, but by the grace of God he clutched the pommel in time and was saved. The air caught at his face, they swept out of the town and onto a limitless level stretch.

"Sp-p-p-peed," gasped the doctor, "has never been a p-p-passion with me!"

He noted that she was not moving in the saddle. The horse was like the bottom of a wave swinging violently back and forth. She was the calm crest, swaying slightly and graciously with a motion as smooth as the flowing of water. And she spoke as evenly as if she were sitting in a rocking chair.

"You'll be used to it in a moment," she assured him.

He learned, indeed, that if one pressed the stirrups as the shoulders of the horse swung down and leaned a trifle forward when the shoulders rose again, the motion ceased to be jarring; for she was truly a matchless creature and gaited like one of those fabu-

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lous horses of old, sired by the swift western wind. In a little time a certain pride went beating through the veins of the doctor, the air blew more deeply into his lungs, there was a different tang to the wind and a different feel to the sun—a peculiar richness of yellow warmth. And the small head of the horse and the short, sharp, pricking ears tossed continually; and now and then the mare threw her head a bit to one side and glanced back at him with what he felt to be a reassuring air. Life and strength and speed were gripped between his knees—he flashed a glance at the girl.

But she rode with face straightforward and there was that about her which made him turn his eyes suddenly away and look far off. It was a jagged country, for in the brief rainy season there came sudden and terrific downpours which lashed away the soil and scoured the face of the underlying rock, and in a single day might cut a deep arroyo where before had been smooth plain. This was the season of grass, but not the dark, rank green of rich soil and mild air—it was a yellowish green, a colour at once tender and glowing. It spread everywhere across the plains about Elkhead, broken here and there by the projecting boulders which flashed in the sun. So a great battlefield might appear, pock-marked with shell-holes, and all the scars of war freshly cut upon its face. And in truth the mountain desert was like an arena ready to stage a conflict—a titanic arena with space for earth-giants to struggle—and there in the distance were the specta-

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tor mountains. High, lean-flanked mountains they were, not clad in forests, but rather bristling with a stubby growth of the few trees which might endure in precarious soil and bitter weather, but now they gathered the dignity of distance about them. The grass of the foothills was a faint green mist about their feet, cloaks of exquisite blue hung around the upper masses, but their heads were naked to the pale skies. And all day long, with deliberate alteration, the garb of the mountains changed. When the sudden morning came they leaped naked upon the eye, and then withdrew, muffling themselves in browns and blues until at nightfall they covered themselves to the eyes in thickly sheeted purple—Tyrian purple—and prepared for sleep with their heads among the stars.

Something of all this came to Doctor Randall Byrne as he rode, for it seemed to him that there was a similarity between these mountains and the girl beside him. She held that keen purity of the upper slopes under the sun, and though she had no artifice or careful wiles to make her strange, there was about her a natural dignity like the mystery of distance. There was a rhythm, too, about that line of peaks against the sky, and the girl had caught it; he watched her sway with the gallop of her horse and felt that though she was so close at hand she was a thousand miles from him. She concealed nothing, and yet he could no more see her naked soul than he could tear the veils of shadow from the mountains. Not that the doctor phrased his emo-

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tions in words. He was only conscious of a sense of awe and the necessity of silence.

A strange feeling for the doctor! He came from the region of the mind where that which is not spoken does not exist, and now this girl was carrying him swiftly away from hypotheses, doubts, and polysyllabic speech into the world—of what? The spirit? The doctor did not know. He only felt that he was about to step into the unknown, and it held for him the fascination of the suspended action of a statue. Let it not be thought that he calmly accepted the sheer necessity for silence. He fought against it, but no words came.

It was evening: the rolling hills about them were already dark; only the heads of the mountains took the day; and now they paused at the top of a rise and the girl pointed across the hollow. "There we are," she said. It was a tall clump of trees through which broke the outlines of a two-storied house larger than any the doctor had seen in the mountain-desert; and outside the trees lay long sheds, a great barn, and a wide-spread wilderness of corrals. It struck the doctor with its apparently limitless capacity for housing man and beast. Coming in contrast with the rock-strewn desolation of the plains, this was a great establishment; the doctor had ridden out with a waif of the desert and she had turned into a princess at a stroke. Then, for the first time since they left Elkhead, he remembered with a start that he was to care for a sick man in that house.

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"You were to tell me," he said, "something about the sickness of your father—the background behind his condition. But we've both forgotten about it."

"I have been thinking how I could describe it, every moment of the ride," she answered. Then, as the gloom fell more thickly around them every moment, she swerved her horse over to the mare, as if it were necessary that she read the face of the doctor while she spoke.

"Six months ago," she said, "my father was robust and active in spite of his age. He was cheerful, busy, and optimistic. But he fell into a decline. It has not been a sudden sapping of his strength. If it were that I should not worry so much; I'd attribute it to disease. But every day something of vitality goes from him. He is fading almost from hour to hour, as slowly as the hour hand of a clock. You can't notice the change, but every twelve hours the hand makes a complete revolution. It's as if his blood were evaporating and nothing we can do will supply him with fresh strength."

"Is this attended by irritability?"

"He is perfectly calm and seems to have no care for what becomes of him."

"Has he lost interest in the things which formerly attracted and occupied him?"

"Yes, he minds nothing now. He has no care for the condition of the cattle, or for profit or loss in the sales. He has simply stepped out of every employment."

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"Ah, a gradual diminution of the faculties of attention."

"In a way, yes. But also he is more alive than he has ever been. He seems to hear with uncanny distinctness, for instance."

The doctor frowned.

"I was inclined to attribute his decline to the operation of old age," he remarked, "but this is unusual. This—er—inner acuteness is accompanied by no particular interest in any one thing?"

As she did not reply for the moment he was about to accept the silence for acquiescence, but then through the dimness he was arrested by the lustre of her eyes, fixed, apparently, far beyond him.

"One thing," she said at length. "Yes, there is one thing in which he retains an interest."

The doctor nodded brightly.

"Good!" he said. "And that——?"

The silence fell again, but this time he was more roused and he fixed his eyes keenly upon her through the gloom. She was deeply troubled; one hand gripped the horn of her saddle strongly; her lips had parted; she was like one who endures inescapable pain. He could not tell whether it was the slight breeze which disturbed her blouse or the rapid panting of her breath.

"Of that," she said, "it is hard to speak—it is useless to speak!"

"Surely not!" protested the doctor. "The cause, my dear madame, though perhaps apparently remote

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from the immediate issue, is of the utmost significance in diagnosis."

She broke in rapidly: "This is all I can tell you: he is waiting for something which will never come. He has missed something from his life which will never come back into it. Then why should we discuss what it is that he has missed."

"To the critical mind," replied the doctor calmly, and he automatically adjusted his glasses closer to his eyes, "nothing is without significance."

"It is nearly dark!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "Let us ride on."

"First," he suggested, "I must tell you that before I left Elkhead I heard a hint of some remarkable story concerning a man and a horse and a dog. Is there anything——"

But it seemed that she did not hear. He heard a sharp, low exclamation which might have been addressed to her horse, and the next instant she was galloping swiftly down the slope. The doctor followed as fast as he could, jouncing in the saddle until he was quite out of breath.

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CHAPTER IV

THE CHAIN

THEY had hardly passed the front door of the house when they were met by a tall man with dark hair and dark, deep-set eyes. He was tanned to the bronze of an Indian, and he might have been termed handsome had not his features been so deeply cut and roughly finished. His black hair was quite long, and as the wind from the opened door stirred it, there was a touch of wildness about the fellow that made the heart of Randall Byrne jump. When this man saw the girl his face lighted, briefly; when his glance fell on Byrne the light went out.

"Couldn't get the doc, Kate?" he asked.

"Not Doctor Hardin," she answered, "and I've brought Doctor Byrne instead."

The tall man allowed his gaze to drift leisurely from head to foot of Randall Byrne.

Then: "H'ware you, doc?" he said, and extended a big hand. It occurred to Byrne that all these men of the mountain-desert were big; there was something intensely irritating about their mere physical size; they threw him continually on the defensive and he found himself making apologies to himself and summing up personal merits. In this case there

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was more direct reason for his anger. It was patent that the man did not weight the strange doctor against any serious thoughts.

"And this," she was saying, "is Mr. Daniels. Buck, is there any change?"

"Nothin' much," answered Buck Daniels. "Come along towards evening and he said he was feeling kind of cold. So I wrapped him up in a rug. Then he sat some as usual, one hand inside of the other, looking steady at nothing. But a while ago he began getting sort of nervous."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. I just *felt* he was getting excited. The way you know when your hoss is going to shy."

"Do you want to go to your room first, doctor, or will you go in to see him now?"

"Now," decided the doctor, and followed her down the hall and through a door.

The room reminded the doctor more of a New England interior than of the mountain-desert. There was a round rag rug on the floor with every imaginable colour woven into its texture, but blended with a rude design, reds towards the centre and blue-greys towards the edges. There were chairs upholstered in green which looked mouse-coloured where the high lights struck along the backs and the arms —shallow-seated chairs that made one's knees project foolishly high and far. Byrne saw a cabinet at one end of the room, filled with sea-shells and knicknacks, and above it was a memorial cross surrounded by a wreath inside a glass case. Most of

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the wall space thronged with engravings whose subjects ranged from Niagara Falls to Lady Hamilton. One entire end of the room was occupied by a painting of a neck and neck finish in a race, and the artist had conceived the blooded racers as creatures with tremendous round hips and mighty-muscled shoulders, while the legs tapered to a faun-like delicacy. These animals were spread-eagled in the most amazing fashion, their fore-hoofs reaching beyond their noses and their rear hoofs striking out beyond the tips of the tails. The jockey in the lead sat quite still, but he who was losing had his whip drawn and looked like an automatic doll—so pink were his cheeks. Beside the course, in attitudes of graceful ease, stood men in very tight trousers and very high stocks and ladies in dresses which pinched in at the waist and flowed out at the shoulders. They leaned upon canes or twirled parasols and they had their backs turned upon the racetrack as if they found their own negligent conversation far more exciting than the breathless, driving finish.

Under the terrific action and still more terrific quiescence of this picture lay the sick man, propped high on a couch and wrapped to the chest in a Navajo blanket.

"Dad," said Kate Cumberland, "Doctor Hardin was not in town. I've brought out Doctor Byrne, a newcomer."

The invalid turned his white head slowly towards them, and his shaggy brows lifted and fell slightly—a passing shadow of annoyance. It was a very stern

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face, and framed in the long, white hair it seemed surrounded by an atmosphere of Arctic chill. He was thin, terribly thin—not the leanness of Byrne, but a grim emaciation which exaggerated the size of a tall forehead and made his eyes supernally bright. It was in the first glance of those eyes that Byrne recognized the restlessness of which Kate had spoken; and he felt almost as if it were an inner fire which had burned and still was wasting the body of Joseph Cumberland. To the attentions of the doctor the old man submitted with patient self-control, and Byrne found a pulse feeble, rapid, but steady. There was no temperature. In fact, the heat of the body was a trifle sub-normal, considering that the heart was beating so rapidly.

Doctor Byrne started. Most of his work had been in laboratories, and the horror of death was not yet familiar, but old Joseph Cumberland was dying. It was not a matter of moment. Death might be a week or a month away, but die soon he inevitably must; for the doctor saw that the fire was still raging in the hollow breast of the cattleman, but there was no longer fuel to feed it.

He stared again, and more closely. Fire without fuel to feed it!

Doctor Byrne gave what seemed to be an infinitely muffled cry of exultation, so faint that it was hardly a whisper; then he leaned closer and pored over Joe Cumberland with a lighted eye. One might have thought that the doctor was gloating over the sick man.

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Suddenly he straightened and began to pace up and down the room, muttering to himself. Kate Cumberland listened intently and she thought that what the man muttered so rapidly, over and over to himself, was: "Eureka! Eureka! I have found it!"

Found what? The triumph of mind over matter!

On that couch was a dead body. The flutter of that heart was not the strong beating of the normal organ; the hands were cold; even the body was chilled; yet the man lived.

Or, rather, his brain lived, and compelled the shattered and outworn body to comply with its will. Doctor Byrne turned and stared again at the face of Cumberland. He felt as if he understood, now, the look which was concentrated so brightly on the vacant air. It was illumined by a steady and desperate defiance, for the old man was denying his body to the grave.

The scene changed for Randall Byrne. The girl disappeared. The walls of the room were broken away. The eyes of the world looked in upon him and the wise men of the world kept pace with him up and down the room, shaking their heads and saying: "It is not possible!"

But the fact lay there to contradict them.

Prometheus stole fire from heaven and paid it back to an eternal death. The old cattleman was refusing his payment. It was no state of coma in which he lay; it was no prolonged trance. He was vitally, vividly alive; he was concentrating with a

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bitter and exhausting vigour day and night, and fighting a battle the more terrible because it was fought in silence, a battle in which he could receive no aid, no reinforcement, a battle in which he could not win, but in which he might delay defeat.

Ay, the wise men would smile and shake their heads when he presented this case to their consideration, but he would make his account so accurate and particular and so well witnessed that they would have to admit the truth of all he said. And science, which proclaimed that matter was indestructible and that the mind was matter and that the brain needed nourishment like any other muscle—science would have to hang the head and wonder!

The eyes of the girl brought him to halt in his pacing, and he stopped, confronting her. His excitement had transformed him. His nostrils were quivering, his eyes were pointed with light, his head was high, and he breathed fast. He was flushed as the Roman Conqueror. And his excitement tinged the girl, also, with colour.

She offered to take him to his room as soon as he wished to go. He was quite willing. He wanted to be alone, to think. But when he followed her she stopped him in the hall. Buck Daniels lumbered slowly after them in a clumsy attempt at sauntering.

"Well?" asked Kate Cumberland.

She had thrown a blue mantle over her shoulders when she entered the house, and the touch of boyish self-confidence which had been hers on the ride was gone. In its place there was something even more

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difficult for Randall Byrne to face. If there had been a garish brightness about her when he had first seen her, the brilliancy of a mirror playing in the sun against his feeble eyes, there was now a blending of pastel shades, for the hall was dimly illumined and the shadow tarnished her hair and her pallor was like cold stone; even her eyes were misted by fear. Yet a vital sense of her nearness swept upon Byrne, and he felt as if he were surrounded—by a danger.

"Opinions," said the doctor, "based on so summary an examination are necessarily inexact, yet the value of a first impression is not negligible. The best I can say is that there is probably no immediate danger, but Mr. Cumberland is seriously ill. Furthermore, it is *not* old age."

He would not say all he thought; it was not yet time.

She winced and clasped her hands tightly together. She was like a child about to be punished for a crime it has not committed, and it came vaguely to the doctor that he might have broached his ill tidings more gently.

He added: "I must have further opportunities for observance before I give a detailed opinion and suggest a treatment."

Her glance wandered past him and at once the heavy step of Buck Daniels approached.

"At least," she murmured, "I am glad that you are frank. I don't want to have anything kept from me, please. Buck, will you take the doctor up to his

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room?" She managed a faint smile. "This is an old-fashioned house, Doctor Byrne, but I hope we can make you fairly comfortable. You'll ask for whatever you need?"

The doctor bowed, and was told that they would dine in half an hour, then the girl went back towards the room in which Joe Cumberland lay. She walked slowly, with her head bent, and her posture seemed to Byrne the very picture of a burden-bearer. Then he followed Daniels up the stairs, led by the jingling of the spurs, great-rowelled spurs that might grip the side of a refractory horse like teeth.

A hall-light guided them, and from the hall Buck Daniels entered a room and fumbled above him until he had lighted a lamp which was suspended by two chains from the ceiling, a circular burner which cast a glow as keen as an electric globe. It brought out every detail of the old-fashioned room—the bare, painted floor; the bed, in itself a separate and important piece of architecture with its four tall posts, a relic of the times when beds were built, not simply made; and there was a chest of drawers with swelling, hospitable front, and a rectangular mirror above with its date in gilt paint on the upper edge. A rising wind shook the window and through some crack stirred the lace curtains; it was a very comfortable retreat, and the doctor became aware of aching muscles and a heavy brain when he glanced at the bed.

The same gust of wind which rattled the window-pane now pushed, as with invisible and ghostly

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hand, a door which opened on the side of the bedroom, and as it swung mysteriously and gradually wide the doctor found himself looking into an adjoining chamber. All he could see clearly was a corner on which struck the shaft of light from the lamp, and lying on the floor in that corner was something limp and brown. A snake, he surmised at first, but then he saw clearly that it was a chain of formidable proportions bolted against the wall at one end and terminating at the other in a huge steel collar. A chill started in the boots of the doctor and wriggled its uncomfortable way up to his head.

"Hell!" burst out Buck Daniels. "How'd *that* door get open?" He slammed it with violence. "She's been in there again, I guess," muttered the cowpuncher, as he stepped back, scowling.

"Who?" ventured the doctor.

Buck Daniels whirled on him.

"None of your——" he began hotly, but checked himself with choking suddenness and strode heavily from the room.

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CHAPTER V

THE WAITING

THE doctor removed his coat with absent-minded slowness, and all the time that he was removing the dust and the stains of travel, he kept narrowing the eye of his mind to visualise more clearly that cumbersome chain which lay on the floor of the adjoining room. Now, the doctor was not of a curious or gossipy nature, but if someone had offered to tell him the story of that chain for a thousand dollars, the doctor at that moment would have thought the price ridiculously small.

Then the doctor went down to the dinner table prepared to keep one eye upon Buck Daniels and the other upon Kate Cumberland. But if he expected to learn through conversation at the table he was grievously disappointed, for Buck Daniels ate with an eye to strict business that allowed no chatter, and the girl sat with a forced smile and an absent eye. Now and again Buck would glance up at her, watch her for an instant, and then turn his attention back to his plate with a sort of gloomy resolution; there were not half a dozen words exchanged from the beginning to the end of the meal.

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After that they went in to the invalid. He lay in the same position, his skinny hands crossed upon his breast, and his shaggy brows were drawn so low that the eyes were buried in profound shadow. They took positions in a loose semi-circle, all pointing towards the sick man, and it reminded Byrne with grim force of a picture he had seen of three wolves waiting for the bull moose to sink in the snows: they, also, were waiting for a death. It seemed, indeed, as if death must have already come; at least it could not make him more moveless than he was. Against the dark wall his profile was etched by a sharp highlight which was brightest of all on his forehead and his nose; while the lower portion of the face was lost in comparative shadow.

So perfect and so detailed was the resemblance to death, indeed, that the lips in the shadow smiled—fixedly. It was not until Kate Cumberland shifted a lamp, throwing more light on her father, that Byrne saw that the smile was in reality a forcible compression of the lips. He understood, suddenly, that the silent man on the couch was struggling terribly against an hysteria of emotion. It brought beads of sweat out upon the doctor's tall forehead; for this perfect repose suggested an agony more awful than yells and groans and struggles. The silence was like acid; it burned without a flame. And Byrne knew, that moment, the quality of the thing which had wasted the rancher. It was this acid of grief or yearning which had eaten deep into him and was now close to his heart. The girl had said that for

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six months he had been failing. Six months! Six eternities of burning at the stake!

He lay silent, waiting; and his resignation meant that he knew death would come before that for which he waited. Silence, that was the key-note of the room. The girl was silent, her eyes dark with grief; yet they were not fixed upon her father. It came thrilling home to Byrne that her sorrow was not entirely for her dying parent, for she looked beyond him rather than at him. Was she, too, waiting? Was that what gave her the touch of sad gravity, the mystery like the mystery of distance?

And Buck Daniels. He, also, said nothing. He rolled cigarettes one after another with amazing dexterity and smoked them with half a dozen Titanic breaths. His was a single-track mind. He loved the girl, and he bore the sign of his love on his face. He wanted her desperately; it was a hunger like that of Tantalus, too keen to be ever satisfied. Yet, still more than he looked at the girl, he, also, stared into the distance. He, also, was waiting!

It was the deep suspense of Cumberland which made him so silently alert. He was as intensely alive as the receiver of a wireless apparatus; he gathered information from the empty air.

So that Byrne was hardly surprised when, in the midst of that grim silence, the old man raised a rigid forefinger of warning. Kate and Daniels stiffened in their chairs and Byrne felt his flesh creep. Of course it was nothing. The wind, which had shaken the house with several strong gusts before dinner,

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had now grown stronger and blew with steadily increasing violence; perhaps the sad old man had been attracted by the mournful chorus and imagined some sound he knew within it.

But now once more the finger was raised, the arm extended, shaking violently, and Joe Cumberland turned upon them a glance which flashed with a delirious and unhealthy joy.

"Listen!" he cried. "Again!"

"What?" asked Kate.

"I hear them, I tell you."

Her lips blanched, and parted to speak, but she checked the impulse and looked swiftly about the room with what seemed to Byrne an appeal for help. As for Buck Daniels, he changed from a dark bronze to an unhealthy yellow; fear, plain and grimly unmistakable, was in his face. Then he strode to the window and threw it open with a crash. The wind leaped in and tossed the flame in the throat of the chimney, so that great shadows waved suddenly through the room, and made the chairs seem afloat. Even the people were suddenly unreal. And the rush of the storm gave Byrne an eerie sensation of being blown through infinite space. For a moment there was only the sound of the gale and the flapping of a loose picture against the wall, and the rattling of a newspaper. Then he heard it.

First it was a single note which he could not place. It was music, and yet it was discordant, and it had the effect of a blast of icy wind.

Once he had been in Egypt and had stood in a

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corridor of Cheops' pyramid. The torch had been blown out in the hand of his guide. From somewhere in the black depths before them came a laugh, made unhuman by echoes. And Byrne had visioned the mummied dead pushing back the granite lids of their sarcophagi and sitting upright.

But that was nothing compared with this. Not half so wild or strange.

He listened again, breathless, with the sharp prickling running up and down his spine. It was the honking of the wild geese, flying north. And out of the sound he builded a picture of the grey triangle cleaving through the cold upper sky, sent on a mission no man could understand.

"Was I right? Was I right?" shrilled the invalid, and when Byrne turned towards him, he saw the old man sitting erect, with an expression of wild triumph. There came an indescribable cry from the girl, and a deep throated curse from Buck Daniels as he slammed down the window.

With the chill blast shut off and the flame burning steadily once more in the lamp, a great silence besieged the room, with a note of expectancy in it. Byrne was conscious of being warm, too warm. It was close in the room, and he was weighted down. It was as if another presence had stepped into the room and stood invisible. He felt it with unspeakable keenness, as when one knows certainly the thoughts which pass in the mind of another. And, more than that, he knew that the others in the room felt what he felt. In the waiting silence he saw that

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the old man lay on his couch with eyes of fire and gaping lips, as if he drank the wine of his joyous expectancy. And big Buck Daniels stood with his hand on the sash of the window, frozen there, his eyes bulging, his heart thundering in his throat. And Kate Cumberland sat with her eyes closed, as she had closed them when the wind first rushed upon her, and she still smiled as she had smiled then. And to Byrne, more terrible than the joy of Joseph Cumberland or the dread of Buck Daniels was the smile and the closed eyes of the girl.

But the silence held and the fifth presence was in the room, and not one of them dared speak.

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CHAPTER VI

THEN, with a shifting of the wind, a song was blown to them from the bunk-house, a cheerful, ringing chorus; the sound was like daylight—it drove the terror from the room. Joe Cumberland asked them to leave him. That night, he said, he would sleep. He felt it, like a promise. The other three went out from the room.

In the hall Kate and Daniels stood close together under a faint light from the wall-lamp, and they talked as if they had forgotten the presence of Byrne.

"It had to come," she said. "I knew it would come to him sooner or later, but I didn't dream it would be as terrible as this. Buck, what are we going to do?"

"God knows," said the big cowpuncher. "Just wait, I s'pose, same as we've been doing."

He had aged wonderfully in that moment of darkness.

"He'll be happy now for a few days," went on the girl, "but afterwards—when he realises that it means nothing—what then, Buck?"

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The man took her hands and began to pat them softly as a father might soothe a child.

"I seen you when the wind come in," he said gently. "Are you going to stand it, Kate? Is it going to be hell for you, too, every time you hear 'em?"

She answered: "If it were only I! Yes, I could stand it. Lately I've begun to think that I can stand anything. But when I see Dad it breaks my heart—and you—oh, Buck, it hurts, it hurts!" She drew his hands impulsively against her breast. "If it were only something we could fight outright!"

Buck Daniels sighed.

"Fight?" he echoed hopelessly. "Fight? Against him? Kate, you're all tired out. Go to bed, honey, and try to stop thinkin'—and—God help us all!"

She turned away from him and passed the doctor —blindly.

Buck Daniels had set his foot on the stairs when Byrne hurried after him and touched his arm; they went up together.

"Mr. Daniels," said the doctor, "it is necessary that I speak with you, alone. Will you come into my room for a few moments?"

"Doc," said the cattleman, "I'm short on my feed and I don't feel a pile like talkin'. Can't you wait till the morning?"

"There has been a great deal too much waiting, Mr. Daniels," said the doctor. "What I have to say to you must be said now. Will you come in?"

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"I will," nodded Buck Daniels. "But cut it short."

Once in his room the doctor lighted the lamp and then locked the door.

"What's all the mystery and hush stuff?" growled Daniels, and with a gesture he refused the proffered chair. "Cut loose, doc, and make it short."

The little man sat down, removed his glasses, held them up to the light, found a speck upon them, polished it carefully away, replaced the spectacles upon his nose, and peered thoughtfully at Buck Daniels.

Buck Daniels rolled his eyes towards the door and then even towards the window, and then, as one who accepts the inevitable, he sank into a chair and plunged his hands into his pockets, prepared to endure.

"I am called," went on the doctor dryly, "to examine a case in which the patient is dangerously ill —in fact, hopelessly ill, and I have found that the cause of his illness is a state of nervous expectancy on the part of the sufferer. It being obviously necessary to know the nature of the disease and its cause before that cause may be removed, I have asked you to sit here this evening to give me whatever explanation you may have for it."

Buck Daniels stirred uneasily. At length he broke out: "Doc, I size you up as a gent with brains. I got one piece of advice for you: get the hell away from the Cumberland Ranch and never come back again!"

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The doctor flushed and his lean jaw thrust out.

"Although," he said, "I cannot pretend to be classed among those to whom physical fear is an unknown, yet I wish to assure you, sir, that with me physical trepidation is not an overruling motive."

"Oh, hell!" groaned Buck Daniels. Then he explained more gently: "I don't say you're yellow. All I say is: this mess ain't one that you can straighten out—nor no other man can. Give it up, wash your hands, and git back to Elkhead. I dunno what Kate was thinkin' of to bring you out here!"

"The excellence of your intention," said the doctor, "I shall freely admit, though the assumption that difficulty in the essential problem would deter me from the analysis is an hypothesis which I cannot leave uncontested. In the vulgar, I may give you to understand that I am in this to stay!"

Buck Daniels started to speak, but thinking better of it he shrugged his shoulders and sat back, resigned.

"Well," he said, "Kate brought you out here. Maybe she has a reason for it. What d'you want to know?"

"What connection," said the doctor, "have wild geese with a man, a horse, and a dog?"

"What in hell d'you know about a horse and a man and a dog—and wild geese?" inquired Buck in a strained voice.

"Rumour," said the doctor, "has been in this instance, unfortunately, my only teacher. But, sir, I have ascertained that Mr. Cumberland, his daughter,

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and you, sir, are all waiting for a certain thing to come to this ranch, and that thing I naturally assume to be a man."

"Doc," said the cowpuncher sarcastically, "there ain't no doubt you got a wonderful brain!"

"Mockery," pronounced the man of learning, "is a use of the mental powers which is both unworthy and barren and does not in this case advance the argument, which is: Who and what is this man for whom you wait?"

"He came," said Buck Daniels, "out of nowhere. That's all we know about who he is. What is he? I'll tell you easy: He's a gent that looks like a man, and walks like a man, and talks like a man—but he *ain't* a man."

"Ah," nodded the philosopher, "a crime of extraordinary magnitude has, perhaps, cut off this unfortunate fellow from communication with others of his kind. Is this the case?"

"It ain't," replied Buck. "Doc, tell me this: Can a wolf commit a crime?"

"Admitting this definition: that crime is the breaking of law, and that law is a force created by reason to control the rational, it may be granted that the acts of the lower animals lie outside of categories framed according to ethical precepts. To directly answer your not incurious question: I believe that a wolf cannot commit a crime."

Buck Daniels sighed.

"D'you know, doc," he said gravely, "that you remind me of a side-hill goat?"

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"Ah," murmured the man of learning, "is it possible? And what, Mr. Daniels, is the nature of a side-hill goat?"

"It's a goat that's got the legs of one side shorter than the legs on the other side, and the only way he can get to the top of a hill is to keep trottin' around and around the hill like a five per cent. grade. He goes a mile to get ten feet higher."

"This fact," said Byrne, and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "is not without interest, though I fail to perceive the relation between me and such a creature, unless, perhaps, there are biologic similarities of which I have at present no cognition."

"I didn't think you'd follow me," replied Buck with an equal gravity. "But you can lay to this, Doc; this gent we're waitin' for ain't committed any more crimes than a wolf has."

"Ah, I see," murmured the doctor, "a man so near the brute that his enormities pass beyond——"

"Get this straight," said Buck, interrupting with a sternly pointed finger: "There ain't a kinder or a gentler man in the mountain-desert than him. He's got a voice softer than Kate Cumberland's, which is some soft voice, and as for his heart—Doc, I've seen him get off his horse to put a wounded rabbit out of its pain!"

A ring of awe came in the throat of Daniels as he repeated the incredible fact.

He went on: "If I was in trouble, I'd rather have him beside me than ten other men; if I was sick I'd rather have him than the ten best doctors in

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the world; if I wanted a pal that would die for them that done him good and go to hell to get them that done him bad, I'd choose him first, and there ain't none that come second."

The panegyric was not a burst of imagination. Buck Daniels was speaking seriously, hunting for words, and if he used superlatives it was because he needed them.

"Extraordinary!" murmured the doctor, and he repeated the word in a louder tone. It was a rare word for him; in all his scholastic career and in all of his scientific investigations he had found occasion to use so strong a term not more than half a dozen times at the most. He went on, cautiously, and his weak eyes blinked at Daniels: "And there is a relation between this man and a horse and dog?"

Buck Daniels shuddered and his colour changed.

"Listen!" he said, "I've talked enough. You ain't going to get another word out of me except this: Doc, have a good sleep, get on your hoss to-morrow mornin', and beat it. Don't even wait for breakfast. Because, if you *do* wait, you may get a hand in this little hell of ours. You may be waiting, too!" A sudden thought brought him to his feet. He stood over the doctor. "How many times," he thundered, "have you seen Kate Cumberland?"

"To-day, for the first time."

"Well," said Daniels, growling with relief, "you've seen her enough. I *know*." And he turned towards the door. "Unlock," he commanded. "I'm tired out—and sick—of talking about *him*."

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But the doctor did not move.

"Nevertheless," he stated, "you will remain. There is something further which you know and which you will communicate to me."

Buck Daniels turned at the door; his face was not pleasant.

"While observing you as you talked with the girl," Byrne said, "it occurred to me that you were holding information from her. The exact nature of that information I cannot state, but it is reasonable to deduct that you could, at the present moment, name the place where the man for whom Mr. Cumberland and his daughter wait is now located."

Buck Daniels made no reply, but he returned to his chair and slumped heavily into it, staring at the little doctor. And Byrne realised with a thrill of pleasure that he was not afraid of death.

"I may further deduct," said the doctor, "that you will go in person to the place where you know this man may be found and induce him to come to this ranch."

The silent anger of Daniels died away. He smiled, and at length he laughed without mirth.

"Doc," he said, "if you knew where there was a gun, would that make you want to put it up agin your head and pull the trigger?"

But the doctor proceeded inexorably with his deductions: "Because you are aware, Mr. Daniels, that the presence of this man may save the life of Mr. Cumberland, a thought, to be sure, which might not be accepted by the medical fraternity, but which

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may without undue exaggeration devolve from the psychological situation in this house."

"Doc," said Daniels huskily, "you talk straight, and you act straight, and I think you *are* straight, so I'll take off the bridle and talk free. I know where Whistling Dan is—just about. But if I was to go to him and bring him here I'd bust the heart of Kate Cumberland. D'you understand?" His voice lowered with an intense emotion. "I've thought it out sideways and backwards. It's Kate or old Joe. Which is the most important?"

The doctor straightened in the chair, polished his glasses, and peered once more at the cowpuncher.

"You are quite sure, also, that the return of this man, this strange wanderer, might help Mr. Cumberland back to health?"

"I am, all right. He's sure wrapped up in Whistlin' Dan."

"What is the nature of their relations; what makes him so oddly dependent upon the other?"

"I dunno, doc. It's got us all fooled. When Dan is here it seems like old Cumberland jest nacherally lives on the things Dan does and hears and sees. We've seen Cumberland prick up his ears the minute Dan comes into the room, and show life. Sometimes Dan sits with him and tells him what he's been doin'—maybe it ain't any more than how the sky looks that day, or about the feel of the wind—but Joe sits with his eyes dreamin', like a little kid hearin' fairy stories. Kate says it's been that way since her dad first brought Dan in off'n the range. He's

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been sort of necessary to old Joe—almost like air to breathe. I tell you, it's jest a picture to see them two together."

"Very odd, very odd," brooded the doctor, frowning, "but this seems to be an odd place and an odd set of people. You've no real idea why Dan left the ranch?"

"Ask the wild geese," said Buck bitterly. He added: "Maybe you'd better ask Dan's black hoss or his dog, Bart. They'd know better'n anything else."

"But what has the man been doing since he left? Have you any idea?"

"Get a little chatter, now and then, of a gent that's rid into a town on a black hoss, prettier'n anything that was ever seen before.

"It's all pretty much the same, what news we get. Mostly I guess he jest wanders around doin' no harm to nobody. But once in a while somebody sicks a dog on Bart, and Bart jest nacherally chaws that dog in two. Then the owner of the dog may start a fight, and Dan drops him and rides on."

"With a trail of dead men behind him?" cried the doctor, hunching his shoulders as if to shake off a chill.

"Dead? Nope. You don't have to shoot to kill when you can handle a gun the way Dan does. Nope, he jest wings 'em. Plants a chunk of lead in a shoulder, or an arm, or a leg. That's all. They ain't no love of blood in Dan—except——"

"Well?"

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"Doc," said Buck with a shudder, "I ain't goin' to talk about the exceptions. Mostly the news we gets of Dan is about troubles he's had. But sometimes we hear of gents he's helped out when they was sick, and things like that. They ain't nobody like Dan when a gent is down sick, I'll tell a man!"

The doctor sighed.

He said: "And do I understand you to say that the girl and this man—Whistling Dan, as you call him—are intimately and sentimentally related?"

"She loves him," said Daniels slowly. "She loves the ground he walks on and the places where he's been."

"But, sir, it would seem probable from your own reasoning that the return of the man, in this case, will not be unwelcome to her."

"Reason?" broke out Daniels bitterly. "What the hell has reason got to do with Whistling Dan? Man, man! if Barry was to come back d'you suppose he'd remember that he'd once told Kate he loved her? Doc, I know him as near as any man can know him. I tell you, he thinks no more of her than—than the wild geese think of her. If old Joe dies because Dan is away—well, Cumberland is an old man anyway. But how could I stand to see Barry pass Kate by with an empty eye, the way he'd do if he come back? I'd want to kill him, and I'd get bumped off tryin' it, like as not. And what would it do to Kate? It'd kill her, Doc, as sure as you're born."

"Your assumption being," murmured the doctor,

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"that if she never sees the man again she will eventually forget him."

"D'you forget a knife that's sticking into you? No, she won't forget him. But maybe after a while she'll be able to stand thinkin' about him. She'll get used to the hurt. She'll be able to talk and laugh the way she used to. Oh, doc, if you could of seen her as I've seen her in the old days——"

"When the man was with her?" cut in the doctor.

Buck Daniels caught his breath.

"Damn your eternal soul, doc!" he said softly.

And for a time neither of them spoke. Whatever went on in the mind of Daniels, it was something that contorted his face. As for Byrne, he was trying to match fact and possibility and he was finding a large gap between the two; for he tried to visualise the man whose presence had been food to old Joe Cumberland, and whose absence had taken the oil from the lamp so that the flame now flickered dimly, nearly out. But he could build no such picture. He could merely draw together a vague abstraction of a man to whom the storm and the wild geese who ride the storm had meaning and relationship. The logic which he loved was breaking to pieces in the hands of Randall Byrne.

Silence, after all, is only a name, never a fact. There are noises in the most absolute quiet. If there is not even the sound of the cricket or the wind, if there are not even ghost whispers in the house, there is the sigh of one's own breathing, and in those moments of deadly waiting the beat of the heart may

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be as loud and as awful as the rattle of the death-march. Now, between the doctor and the cow-puncher, such a silence began. Buck Daniels wanted nothing more in the world than to be out of that room, but the eye of the doctor held him, unwilling. And there began once more that eternal waiting, waiting, waiting, which was the horror of the place, until the faint creakings through the windshaken house took on the meaning of footsteps stalking down the hall and pausing at the door, and there was the hushing breath of one who listened and smiled to himself! Now the doctor became aware that the eye of Buck Daniels was widening, brightening; it was as if the mind of the big man were giving way in the strain. His face blanched. Even the lips had no colour, and they moved, gibberingly.

"Listen!" he said.

"It is the wind," answered the doctor, but his voice was hardly audible.

"Listen!" commanded Daniels again.

The doctor could hear it then. It was a pulse of sound obscure as the thudding of his heart. But it was a human sound and it made his throat close up tightly, as if a hand were settling around his windpipe. Buck Daniels rose from his chair; that half-mad, half-listening look was still in his eyes—behind his eyes. Staring at him the doctor understood, intimately, how men can throw their lives away gloriously in battle, fighting for an idea; or how they can commit secret and foul murder. Yet he was more afraid of that pulse of sound than of

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the face of Buck Daniels. He, also, was rising from his chair, and when Daniels stalked to the side door of the room and leaned there, the doctor followed.

Then they could hear it clearly. There was a note of music in the voice; it was a woman weeping in that room where the chain lay on the floor, coiled loosely like a snake. Buck Daniels straightened and moved away from the door. He began to laugh, guarding it so that not a whisper could break outside the room, and his silent laughter was the most horrible thing the doctor had ever seen. It was only for a moment. The hysteria passed and left the big man shaking like a dead leaf.

"Doc," he said, "I can't stand it no longer. I'm going out and try to get him back here. And God forgive me for it."

He left the room, slamming the door behind him, and then he stamped down the hall as if he were trying to make a companion out of his noise. Doctor Randall Byrne sat down to put his thoughts in order. He began at the following point: "The physical fact is not; only the immaterial is." But before he had carried very far his deductions from this premise, he caught the neighing of a horse near the house; so he went to the window and threw it open. At the same time he heard the rattle of galloping hoofs, and then he saw a horseman riding furiously into the heart of the wind. Almost at once the rider was lost from sight.

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CHAPTER VII

JERRY STRANN

THE wrath of the Lord seems less terrible when it is localised, and the world at large gave thanks daily that the range of Jerry Strann was limited to the Three B's. As everyone in the mountain-desert knows, the Three B's are Bender, Buckskin, and Brownsville; they make the points of a loose triangle that is cut with canyons and tumbled with mountains, and that triangle was the chosen stamping ground of Jerry Strann. Jerry was not born in the region of the Three B's and why it should have been chosen specially by him was matter which the inhabitants could not puzzle out; but they felt that for their sins the Lord had probably put his wrath among them in the form of Jerry Strann.

He was only twenty-four, this Jerry, but he was already grown into a proverb. Men of the Three B's reckoned their conversational dates by the visits of the youth; if a storm hung over the mountains someone might remark: "It looks like Jerry Strann is coming," and such a remark was always received in gloomy silence; mothers had been known to hush their children by chanting: "Jerry Strann will get you if you don't watch out." Yet he was not an

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ogre with a red knife between his teeth. He stood at exactly the perfect romantic height; he was just six feet tall; he was as graceful as a young cottonwood in a windstorm and he was as strong and tough as the roots of the mesquite. He was one of those rare men who are beautiful without being unmanly. His face was modelled with the care a Praxiteles would lavish on a Phœbus. His brown hair was thick and dark and every touch of wind stirred it, and his hazel eyes were brilliant with an enduring light—the inextinguishable joy of life.

Consider that there was no malice in Jerry Strann. But he loved strife as the young Apollo loved strife —or a pure-blooded bull terrier. He fought with distinction and grace and abandon and was perfectly willing to use fists or knives or guns at the pleasure of the other contracting party. In another age, with armour and a golden chain and spurs, Jerry Strann would have been—but why think of that? Swords are not forty-fives, and the Twentieth Century is not the Thirteenth. He was, in fact, born just six hundred years too late. From his childhood he had thirsted for battle as other children thirst for milk: and now he rode anything on hoofs and threw a knife like a Mexican—with either hand—and at short range he did snap shooting with two revolvers that made rifle experts sick at heart.

However, the men of the Three B's, as everyone understands, are not gentle or long-enduring, and you will wonder why this young destroyer was allowed to range at large so long. There was a vital

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reason. Up in the mountains lived Mac Strann, the hermit-trapper, who hated everything in the wide world except his young brother, the beautiful, wild, and sunny Jerry Strann. And Mac Strann loved his brother as much as he hated everything else; it is impossible to state it more strongly. It was not long before the men of the Three B's discovered how Mac Strann felt about his brother. After Jerry's famous Hallowe'en party in Buckskin, for instance, Williamson, McKenna, and Rath started out to rid the country of the disturber. They went out to hunt him as men go out to hunt a wild mustang. And they caught him and bent him down—those three stark men—and he lay in bed for a month; but before the month was over Mac Strann came down from his mountain and went to Buckskin and gathered Williamson and McKenna and Rath in one public place. And when the morning came Williamson and McKenna and Rath had left this vale of tears and Mac Strann was back on his mountain. He was not even arrested. For there was a devilish cunning about the fellow and he made his victims, without exception, attack him first; then he destroyed them, suddenly and surely, and retreated to his lair. Things like this happened once or twice and then the men of the Three B's understood that it was not wise to lay plots for Jerry Strann. They accepted him, as I have said before, as men accept the wrath of God.

Let it not be thought that Jerry Strann was a solitary like his brother. When he went out for a

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frolic the young men of the community gathered around him, for Jerry paid all scores and the red-eye flowed in his path like wine before the coming of Bacchus; where Jerry went there was never a dull moment, and young men love action. So it happened that when he rode into Brownsville this day he was the leader of a cavalcade. Rumour rode before them, and doors were locked and windows were darkened, and men sat in the darkness within with their guns across their knees. For Brownsville lay at the extreme northern tip of the triangle and it was rarely visited by Jerry; and it is well established that men fear the unfamiliar more than the known.

As has been said, Jerry headed the train of revellers, partially because it was most unwise to cut in ahead of Jerry and partially because there was not a piece of horseflesh in the Three B's which could outfoot his chestnut. It was a gelding out of the loins of the north wind and sired by the devil himself, and its spirit was one with the spirit of Jerry Strann; perhaps because they both served one master. The cavalcade came with a crash of racing hoofs in a cloud of dust. But in the middle of the street Jerry raised his right arm stiffly overhead with a whoop and brought his chestnut to a sliding stop; the cloud of dust rolled lazily on ahead. The young men gathered quickly around the leader, and there was silence as they waited for him to speak—a silence broken only by the wheezing of the horses,

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and the stench of sweating horseflesh was in every man's nostrils.

"Who own's that hoss?" asked Jerry Strann, and pointed.

He had stopped just opposite O'Brien's hotel, store, blacksmith shop, and saloon, and by the hitching rack was a black stallion. Now, there are some men who carry tidings of their inward strength stamped on their foreheads and written in their eyes. In times of crises crowds will turn to such men and follow them as soldiers follow a captain; for it is patent at a glance that this is a man of men. It is likewise true that there are horses which stand out among their fellows, and this was such a horse. He was such a creature that, if he had been led to a barrier, the entire crowd at the race track would rise as one man and say: "What is that horse?" There were points in which some critics would find fault; most of the men of the mountain-desert, for instance, would have said that the animal was too lightly and delicately limbed for long endurance; but as the man of men bears the stamp of his greatness in his forehead and his eyes, so it was with the black stallion. When the thunder of the cavalcade had rushed upon him down the street he had turned with catlike grace and raised his head to see; and his forehead and his eyes arrested Jerry Strann like a levelled rifle. Looking at that proud head one forgot the body of the horse, the symmetry of curves exquisite beyond the sculptor's dream, the arching neck and the steel muscles; one was only conscious

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of the great spirit. In human beings we refer to it as "personality."

After a little pause, seeing that no one offered a suggestion as to the identity of the owner, Strann said, softly: "That hoss is mine."

It caused a stir in the crowd of his followers. In the mountain-desert one may deal lightly with a man's wife and lift a random cow or two and settle the score, at need, with a snug "forty-five" chunk of lead. But with horses it is different. A horse in the mountain-desert lies outside of all laws—and above all laws. It is greater than honour and dearer than love, and when a man's horse is taken from him the men of the desert gather together and hunt the thief whether it be a day or whether it be a month, and when they have reached him they shoot him like a dog and leave his flesh to the buzzards and his bones to the merciless stars. For all of this there is a reason. But Jerry Strann swung from his mount, tossed the reins over the head of the chestnut, and walked towards the black with hungry eyes. He was careless, also, and venturing too close—the black whirled with his sudden, catlike agility, and two black hoofs lashed within a hair's breadth of the man's shoulder. There was a shout from the crowd, but Jerry Strann stepped back and smiled so that his teeth showed.

"Boys," he said, but he was really speaking to himself, "there's nothing in the world I want as bad as I want that hoss. Nothing! I'm going to buy him; where's the owner?"

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"Don't look like a hoss a man would want to sell, Jerry," came a suggestion from the cavalcade, who had dismounted and now pressed behind their leader.

Jerry favoured the speaker with another of his enigmatic smiles: "Oh," he chuckled, "he'll sell, all right! Maybe he's inside. You gents stick out here and watch for him; I'll step inside."

And he strode through the swinging doors of the saloon.

It was a dull time of day for O'Brien, so he sat with his feet on the edge of the bar and sipped a tall glass of beer; he looked up at the welcome click of the doors, however, and then was instantly on his feet. The good red went out of his face and the freckles over his nose stood out like ink marks.

"There's a black hoss outside," said Jerry, "that I'm going to buy. Where's the owner?"

"Have a drink,' said the bartender, and he forced an amiable smile.

"I got business on my hands, not drinking," said Jerry Strann.

"Lost your chestnut?" queried O'Brien in concern.

"The chestnut was all right until I seen the black. And now he ain't a hoss at all. Where's the gent I want?"

The bartender had fenced for time as long as possible.

"Over there," he said, and pointed.

It was a slender fellow sitting at a table in a cor-

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ner of the long room, his sombrero pushed back on his head. He was playing solitaire and his back was towards Jerry Strann, who now made a brief survey, hitched his cartridge belt, and approached the stranger with a grin. The man did not turn; he continued to lay down his cards with monotonous regularity, and while he was doing it he said in the gentlest voice that had ever reached the ear of Jerry Strann: "Better stay where you are, stranger. My dog don't like you."

And Jerry Strann perceived, under the shadow of the table, a blacker shadow, huge and formless in the gloom, and two spots of incandescent green twinkling towards him. He stopped; he even made a step back; and then he heard a stifled chuckle from the bartender.

If it had not been for that untimely mirth of O'Brien's probably nothing of what followed would have passed into the history of the Three B's.

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CHAPTER VIII

"Your dog is your own dog," remarked Jerry Strann, still to the back of the card-laying stranger, "but this ain't your back-yard. Keep your eye on him, or I'll fix him so he won't need watching!"

So saying he made another step forward, and it brought a snarl from the dog; not one of those high-whining noises, but a deep guttural that sounded like indrawn breath. The gun of Jerry Strann leaped into his hand.

"Bart," said the gentle-voiced stranger, "lie down and don't talk." And he turned in his chair, pulled his hat straight, and looked mildly upon the gun-man. An artist would have made much of that picture, for there was in this man, as in Strann, a singular portion of beauty. It was not, however, free from objection, for he had not the open manliness of the larger of the two. Indeed, a feminine grace and softness marked him; his wrists were as round as a girl's, and his hands as slender and as delicately finished. Whether it be the white-hot sun of summer or the hurricane snows of winter, the climate of the mountain-desert roughens the skin, and it cuts away spare flesh, hewing out the face in angles; but

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with this man there were no rough edges, but all was smoothed over and rounded with painful care; as if nature had concentrated in that birth to show what she could do. Such fine workmanship, perhaps, would be appreciated more by women than by men; for men like a certain weight and bulk of bone and muscle—whereas this fellow seemed as light of body as he was of hand. He sat now watching Strann with the utmost gravity. He had very large brown eyes of a puzzling quality; perhaps that was because there seemed to be no thought behind them and one caught the mystery and the wistfulness of some animals from a glance at him.

The effect of that glance on Strann was to make him grin again, and he at once banished the frown from his forehead and put away his gun; the big dog had slunk deeper into the shadow and closer to his master.

"I'm Strann. Maybe you've heard of me."

"My name is Barry," said the other. "I'm sorry that I haven't heard of you before."

And the sound of his voice made Jerry Strann grin again; it was such a low, soft voice with the velvet of a young girl's tone in it; moreover, the brown eyes seemed to apologise for the ignorance concerning Strann's name.

"You got a hoss out in front."

A nod of agreement.

"What's your price?"

"None."

"No price? Look here," argued Strann, "every-

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thing's got a price, and I got to have that hoss, understand? *Got* to! I ain't bargaining. I won't try to beat you down. You just set a figger and I'll cover it. I guess that's square!"

"He ain't a gentle hoss," said Barry. "Maybe you wouldn't like him.'

"Oh, that's all right about being gentle," chuckled Strann. Then he checked his mirth and stared piercingly at the other to make out if there were a secret mockery. It could not, however, be possible. The eyes were as gravely apologetic as ever. He continued: "I seen the hell-fire in him. That's what stopped me like a bullet. I like 'em that way. Much rather have 'em with a fight. Well, let's have your price. Hey, O'Brien, trot out your red-eye; I'm going to do some business here!"

O'Brien came hastily, with drinks, and while they waited Strann queried politely: "Belong around these parts?"

"No," answered the other softly.

"No? Where you come from?"

"Over there," said Barry, and waved a graceful hand towards half the points of the compass.

"H-m-m!" muttered Strann, and once more he bent a keen gaze upon his companion. The drinks were now placed before them. "Here," he concluded, "is to the black devil outside!" And he swallowed the liquor at a gulp, but as he replaced the empty glass on the table he observed, with breathless amazement, that the whiskey glass of the stranger was still full; he had drunk his chaser!

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"Now, by God!" said Strann in a ringing voice, and struck a heavy hand upon the top of the table. He regained his control, however, instantly. "Now about that price!"

"I don't know what horses are worth," replied Barry.

"To start, then—five hundred bucks in cold cash—gold!—for your—what's his name?"

"Satan."

"Eh?"

"Satan."

"H-m-m!" murmured Strann again. "Five hundred for Satan, then. How about it?"

"If you can ride him," began the stranger.

"Oh, hell," smiled Strann with a large and careless gesture, "I'll *ride* him, all right."

"Then I would let you take him for nothing," concluded Barry.

"You'd—what?" said Strann. Then he rose slowly from his chair and shouted; instantly the swinging doors broke open and a throng of faces appeared at the gap. "Boys, this gent here is going to give me the black—ha, ha, ha!—if I can ride him!" He turned back on Barry. "They've heard it," he concluded, "and this bargain is going to stick just this way. If your hoss can throw me the deal's off. Eh?"

"Oh, yes," nodded the brown-eyed man.

"What's the idea?" asked one of Jerry's followers as the latter stepped through the doors of the saloon onto the street.

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"I dunno," said Jerry. "That gent looks kind of simple; but it ain't my fault if he made a rotten bargain. Here, you!"

And he seized the bridle-reins of the black stallion. Speed, lightning speed, was what saved him, for the instant his fingers touched the leather Satan twisted his head and snapped like an angry dog. The teeth clicked beside Strann's shoulder as he leaped back. He laughed savagely.

"That'll be took out of him," he announced, "and damned quick!"

Here the voice of Barry was heard, saying: "I'll help you mount, Mr. Strann." And he edged his way through the little crowd until he stood at the head of the stallion.

"Look out!" warned Strann in real alarm, "or he'll take your head off!"

But Barry was already beside his horse, and, with his back towards those vicious teeth, he drew the reins over its head. As for the stallion, it pricked one ear forward and then the other, and muzzled the man's shoulder confidingly. There was a liberal chorus of astonished oaths from the gathering.

"I'll hold his head while you get on," suggested Barry, turning his mild eyes upon Strann again.

"Well," muttered the big man, "may I be eternally damned!" He added: "All right. Hold his head, and I'll ride him without pulling leather. Is that square?"

Barry nodded absently. His slender fingers were patting the velvet nose of the stallion and he was

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talking to it in an affectionate undertone—meaningless words, perhaps, such as a mother uses to soothe a child. When Strann set his foot in the stirrup and gathered up the reins the black horse cringed and shuddered; it was not a pleasant thing to see; it was like a dog crouching under the suspended whip. It was worse than that; it was almost the horror of a man who shivers at the touch of an unclean animal. There was not a sound from the crowd; and every grin was wiped out. Jerry Strann swung into the saddle lightly.

There he sat, testing the stirrups. They were too short by inches but he refused to have them lengthened. He poised his quirt and tugged his hat lower over his eyes.

"Turn him loose!" he shouted. "Hei!"

And his shrill yell went down the street and the echoes sent it barking back from wall to wall; Barry stepped back from the head of the black. But for an instant the horse did not stir. He was trembling violently, but his blazing eyes were fixed upon the face of his owner. Barry raised his hand.

And then it happened. It was like the release of a coiled watch-spring; the black whirled as a top spins and Strann sagged far to the left; before he could recover the stallion was away in a flash, like a racer leaving the barrier and reaching full speed in almost a stride. Not far—hardly the breadth of the street—before he pitched up in a long leap as if to clear a barrier, landed stiff-legged with a sickening jar, whirled again like a spinning top, and darted

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straight back. And Jerry Strann pulled leather—with might and main—but the short stirrups were against him, and above all the suddenness of the start had taken him off guard for all his readiness. When the stallion dropped stiff-legged Jerry was thrown forward and an unlucky left foot jarred loose from the stirrup; and when the horse whirled Strann was flung from the saddle. It was a clean fall. He twisted over in the air as he fell and landed in deep dust. The black stallion had reached his master and now he turned, in that same catlike manner, and watched with pricking ears as Strann dragged himself up from the dust.

There was no shout of laughter—no cheer for that fall, and without a smile they watched Strann returning. Big O'Brien had seen from his open door and now he laid a hand on the shoulder of one of the men and whispered at his ear: "There's going to be trouble; bad trouble, Billy. Go for Fatty Matthews—he's a deputy marshal now—and get him here as quick as you can. Run!"

The other spared time for a last glance at Strann and then hurried down the street.

Now, a man who can lose and smile is generally considered the most graceful of failures, but the smile of Jerry Strann as he walked slowly back worried his followers.

"We all hit dust sometime," he philosophized. "But one try don't prove nothin'. I ain't near through with that hoss!"

Barry turned to Strann. If there had been mock-

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ery in his eyes or a smile on his lips as he faced Jerry there would have been a gun play on the spot; but, instead, the brown eyes were as dumbly apologetic as ever.

"We didn't talk about two tries," he observed.

"We talk about it now," said Strann.

There was one man in the crowd a little too old to be dangerous and therefore there was one man who was in a position to speak openly to Strann. It was big O'Brien.

"Jerry, you named your game and made your play and lost. I guess you ain't going to turn up a hard loser. Nobody plays twice for the same pot."

The hazel eye of Strann was grey with anguish of the spirit as he looked from O'Brien to the crowd and from the crowd to Satan, and from Satan to his meek-eyed owner. Nowhere was there a defiant eye or a glint of scorn on which he could wreak his wrath. He stood poised in his anger for the space of a breath; then, in the sharp struggle, his better nature conquered.

"Come on in, all of you," he called. "We'll liquor, and forget this."

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CHAPTER IX

O'Brien pressed close to Barry.

"Partner," he said rapidly, "you're clear now—you're clear of more hell that you ever dream. Now climb that hoss of yours and feed him leather till you get clear of Brownsville—and if I was you I'd never come within a day's ride of the Three B's again."

The mild, brown eyes widened.

"I don't like crowds," murmured Barry.

"You're wise, kid," grinned the bartender—"a hell of a lot wiser than you know right now. On your way!"

And he turned to follow the crowd into the saloon. But Jerry Strann stood at the swinging doors, watching, and he saw Barry linger behind.

"Are you coming?" he called.

"I got an engagement," answered the meek voice.

"You got another engagement here," mocked Strann. "Understand?"

The other hesitated for an instant, and then sighed deeply. "I suppose I'll stay," he murmured, and walked into the bar. Jerry Strann was smiling in the way that showed his teeth. As Barry passed

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he said softly: "I see we ain't going to have no trouble, you and me!" and he moved to clap his strong hand on the shoulder of the smaller man. Oddly enough, the hand missed, for Barry swerved from beneath it as a wolf swerves from the shadow of a falling branch. No perceptible effort—no sudden start of tensed muscles, but a movement so smooth that it was almost unnoticeable. But the hand of Strann fell through thin air.

"You're quick," he said. "If you was as quick with your hands as you are with your feet——"

Barry paused and the melancholy brown eyes dwelt on the face of Strann.

"Oh, hell!" snorted the other, and turned on his heel to the bar. "Drink up!" he commanded.

A shout and a snarl from the further end of the room.

"A wolf, by God!" yelled one of the men.

The owner of the animal made his way with unobtrusive swiftness the length of the room and stood between the dog and a man who fingered the butt of his gun nervously.

"He won't hurt you none," murmured that softly assuring voice.

"The hell he wont!" responded the other. "He took a pass at my leg just now and dam' near took it off. Got teeth like the blades of a pocket-knife!"

"You're on a cold trail, Sam," broke in one of the others. "That aint any wolf. Look at him now!"

The big, shaggy animal had slunk to the feet of

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his master and with head abased stared furtively up into Barry's face. A gesture served as sufficient command, and he slipped shadow-like into the corner and crouched with his head on his paws and the incandescent green of his eyes glimmering; Barry sat down in a chair nearby.

O'Brien was happily spinning bottles and glasses the length of the bar; there was the chiming of glass and the rumble of contented voices.

"Red-eye all 'round," said the loud voice of Jerry Strann, "but there's one out. Who's out? Oh, it's *him*. Hey O'Brien, lemonade for the lady."

It brought a laugh, a deep, good-natured laugh, and then a chorus of mockery; but Barry stepped unconfused to the bar, accepted the glass of lemonade, and when the others downed their fire-water, he sipped his drink thoughtfully. Outside, the wind had risen, and it shook the hotel and carried a score of faint voices as it whirred around corners and through cracks. Perhaps it was one of those voices which made the big dog lift its head from its paws and whine softly! surely it was something he heard which caused Barry to straighten at the bar and cant his head slightly to one side—but, as certainly, no one else in the bar-room heard it. Barry set down his glass.

"Mr. Strann?" he called.

And the gentle voice carried faintly down through the uproar of the bar.

"Sister wants to speak to you," suggested O'Brien to Strann.

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"Well?" roared the latter, "what d'you want?"

The others were silent to listen; and they smiled in anticipation.

"If you don't mind, much," said the musical voice, "I think I'll be moving along."

There is an obscure little devil living in all of us. It makes the child break his own toys; it makes the husband strike the helpless wife; it makes the man beat the cringing, whining dog. The greatest of American writers has called it the Imp of the Perverse. And that devil came in Jerry Strann and made his heart small and cold. If he had been by nature the bully and the ruffian there would have been no point in all that followed, but the heart of Jerry Strann was ordinarily as warm as the yellow sunshine itself; and it was a common saying in the Three B's that Jerry Strann would take from a child what he would not endure from a mountain-lion. Women loved Jerry Strann, and children would crowd about his knees, but this day the small demon was in him.

"You want to be moving along" mimicked the devil in Jerry Strann. "Well, you wait a while. I aint through with you yet. Maybe——" he paused and searched his mind. "You've given me a fall, and maybe you can give the rest of us—a laugh!"

The chuckle of appreciation went up the bar and down it again.

"I want to ask you," went on the devil in Jerry Strann, "where you got your hoss?"

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"He was running wild," came the gentle answer. "So I took a walk, one day, and brought him in."

A pause.

"Maybe," grinned the big man, "you creased him?"

For it is one of the most difficult things in the world to capture a wild horse, and some hunters, in their desperation at seeing the wonderful animals escape, have tried to "crease" them. That is, they strive to shoot so that the bullet will barely graze the top of the animal's vertebræ, just behind the ears, stunning the horse and making it helpless for the capture. But necessarily such shots are made from a distance, and little short of a miracle is needed to make the bullet strike true—for a fraction of an inch too low means death. So another laugh of appreciation ran around the bar-room at the mention of creasing.

"No," answered Barry, "I went out with a halter and after a while Satan got used to me and followed me home."

They waited only long enough to draw deep breath; then came a long yell of delight. But the obscure devil was growing stronger and stronger in Strann. He beat on the bar until he got silence. Then he leaned over to meet the eyes of Barry.

"That," he remarked through his teeth, "is a damned—lie!"

There is only one way of answering that word in the mountain-desert, and Barry did not take it. The melancholy brown eyes widened; he sighed, and

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raising his glass of lemonade sipped it slowly. Came a sick silence in the bar-room. Men turned their eyes towards each other and then flashed them away again. It is not good that one who has the eyes and the tongue of a man should take water from another—even from a Jerry Strann. And even Jerry Strann withdrew his eyes slowly from his prey, and shuddered; the sight of the most grisly death is not so horrible as cowardice.

And the devil which was still strong in Strann made him look about for a new target; Barry was removed from all danger by an incredible barrier. He found that new target at once, for his glance reached to the corner of the room and found there the greenish, glimmering eyes of the dog. He smote upon the bar.

"Is this a damned kennel?" he shouted. "Do I got to drink in a barnyard? What's the dog doin' here?"

And he caught up the heavy little whiskey glass and hurled it at the crouching dog. It thudded heavily, but it brought no yelp of pain; instead, a black thunderbolt leaped from the corner and lunged down the room. It was the silence of the attack that made it terrible, and Strann cursed and pulled his gun. He could never have used it. He was a whole half second too late, but before the dog sprang a voice cut in: "Bart!"

It checked the animal in its very leap; it landed on the floor and slid on stiffly extended legs to the feet of Strann.

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"Bart!" rang the voice again.

And the beast, flattening to the floor, crawled backwards, inch by inch; it was slavering, and there was a ravening madness in its eyes.

"Look at it!" cried Strann. "By God, it's mad!"

And he raised his gun to draw the bead.

"Wait!" called the same voice which had checked the spring of the dog. Surely it could not have come from the lips of Barry. It held a resonance of chiming metal; it was not loud, but it carried like a brazen bell. "Don't do it, Strann!"

And it came to every man in the bar-room that it was unhealthy to stand between the two men at that instant; a sudden path opened from Barry to Strann.

"Bart!" came the command again. "Heel!"

The dog obeyed with a slinking swiftness; Jerry Strann put up his gun and smiled.

"I don't take a start on no man," he announced quite pleasantly. "I don't need to. But—you yaller hearted houn'—get out from between. When I make my draw I'm goin' to kill that damn wolf."

Now, the fighting face of Jerry Strann was well known in the Three B's, and it was something for men to remember until they died in a peaceful bed. Yet there was not a glance, from the bystanders, for Strann. They stood back against the wall, flattening themselves, and they stared, fascinated, at the slender stranger. Not that his face had grown ugly by a sudden metamorphosis. It was more beautiful than ever, for the man was smiling. It was his eyes

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which held them. Behind the brown a light was growing, a yellow and unearthly glimmer which one felt might be seen on the darkest night.

There was none of the coward in Jerry Strann. He looked full into that yellow, glimmering, changing light—he looked steadily—and a strange feeling swept over him. No, it was not fear. Long experience had taught him that there was not another man in the Three B's, with the exception of his own terrible brother, who could get a gun out of the leather faster than he, but now it seemed to Jerry Strann that he was facing something more than mortal speed and human strength and surety. He could not tell in what the feeling was based. But it was a giant, dim foreboding holding dominion over other men's lives, and it sent a train of chilly weakness through his blood.

"It's a habit of mine," said Jerry Strann, "to kill mad dogs when I see 'em." And he smiled again.

They stood for another long instant, facing each other. It was plain that every muscle in Strann's body was growing tense; the very smile was frozen on his lips. When he moved, at last, it was a convulsive jerk of his arm, and it was said, afterward, that his gun was all clear of the leather before the calm stranger stirred. No eye followed what happened. Can the eye follow such speed as the cracking lash of a whip?

There was only one report. The forefinger of Strann did not touch his trigger, but the gun slipped down and dangled loosely from his hand. He made

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a pace forward with his smile grown to an idiotic thing and a patch of red sprang out in the centre of his breast. Then he lurched headlong to the floor.

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CHAPTER X

"SWEET ADELINE"

FATTY MATTHEWS came panting through the doors. He was one of those men who have a leisurely build and a purely American desire for action; so that he was always hurrying and always puffing. If he mounted a horse, sweat started out from every pore; if he swallowed a glass of red-eye he breathed hard thereafter. Yet he was capable of great and sustained exertions, as many and many a man in the Three B's could testify. He was ashamed of his fat. Imagine the soul of a Bald Eagle in the body of a Poland China sow anl you begin to have some idea of Fatty Matthews. Fat filled his boots as with water and he made a "squnching" sound when he walked; fat rolled along his jowls; fat made his very forehead flabby; fat almost buried his eyes. But nothing could conceal the hawk-line of his nose or the gleam of those half-buried eyes. His hair was short-cropped, grey, and stood on end like bristles, and he was in the habit of using his panting breath in humming—for that concealed the puffing. So Fatty Matthews came through the doors and his little, concealed eyes darted from face to face. Then he kneeled beside Strann.

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He was humming as he opened Jerry's shirt; he was humming as he pulled from his bag—for Fatty was almost as much doctor as he was marshal, cow-puncher, miner, and gambler—a roll of cotton and another roll of bandages. The crowd grouped around him, fascinated, and at his directions some of them brought water and others raised and turned the body while the marshal made the bandages; Jerry Strann was unconscious. Fatty Matthews began to intersperse talk in his humming.

"You was plugged from in front—my beauty—was you?" grunted Fatty, and then running the roll of bandage around the wounded man's chest he hummed a bar of:

"Sweet Adeline, my Adeline,
At night, dear heart, for you I pine."

"Was Jerry lookin' the other way when he was potted?" asked Fatty of the bystanders. "O'Brien, you seen it?"

O'Brien cleared his throat.

"I didn't see nothin'," he said mildly, and began to mop his bar, which was already polished beyond belief.

"Well," muttered Fatty Matthews, "all these birds get it. And Jerry was some overdue. Lew, you seen it?"

"Yep."

"Some drunken bum do it?"

Lew leaned to the ear of the kneeling marshal and whispered briefly. Fatty opened his eyes and

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cursed until his panting forced him to break off and hum.

"Beat him to the draw?" he gasped at length.

"Jerry's gun was clean out before the stranger made a move," asserted Lew.

"It aint possible," murmured the deputy, and hummed softly:

"In all my dreams, your fair face beams."

He added sharply, as he finished the bandaging: "Where'd he head for?"

"No place," answered Lew. "He just now went out the door."

The deputy swore again, but he added, enlightened: "Going to plead self-defense, eh?"

Big O'Brien leaned over the bar.

"Listen, Fatty," he said earnestly, "There aint no doubt of it. Jerry had his war-paint on. He tried to kill this feller Barry's wolf."

"Wolf?" cut in the deputy marshal.

"Dog, I guess," qualified the bar-tender. "I dunno. Anyway, Jerry made all the leads; this Barry simply done the finishing. *I* say, don't put this Barry under arrest. You want to keep him here for Mac Strann."

"That's *my* business," growled Fatty. "Hey, half a dozen of you gents. Hook on to Jerry and take him up to a room. I'll be with you in a minute."

And while his directions were being obeyed he trotted heavily up the length of the bar-room and out the swinging doors. Outside, he found only

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one man, and in the act of mounting a black horse; the deputy marshal made straight for that man until a huge black dog appeared from nowhere blocking his path. It was a silent dog, but its teeth and eyes said enough to stop Fatty in full career.

"Are you Barry?" he asked.

"That's me. Come here, Bart."

The big dog backed to the other side of the horse without shifting his eyes from the marshal. The latter gingerly approached the rider, who sat perfectly at ease in the saddle; most apparently he was in no haste to leave.

"Barry," said the deputy, "don't make no play when I tell you who I am; I don't mean you no harm, but my name's Matthews, and——" he drew back the flap of his vest enough to show the glitter of his badge of office. All the time his little beady eyes watched Barry with bird-like intentness. The rider made not a move. And now Matthews noted more in detail the feminine slenderness of the man and the large, placid eyes. He stepped closer and dropped a confidential hand on the pommel of the saddle.

"Son," he muttered, "I hear you made a clean play inside. Now, I know Strann and his way. He was in wrong. There aint a doubt of it, and if I held you, you'd get clear on self-defense. So I aint going to lay a hand on you. You're free: but one thing more. You cut off there—see?—and bear away north from the Three B's. You got a boss that *is*, and believe me, you'll need him before

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you're through." He lowered his voice and his eyes bulged with the terror of his tidings: "Feed him the leather; ride to beat hell; never stop while your hoss can raise a trot; and then slide off your hoss and get another. Son, in three days Mac Strann'll be on your trail!"

He stepped back and waved his arms.

"Now, *vamos!*"

The black stallion flicked back its ears and winced from the outflung hands, but the rider remained imperturbed.

"I never heard of Mac Strann," said Barry.

"You never heard of Mac Strann?" echoed the other.

"But I'd like to meet him," said Barry.

The deputy marshal blinked his eyes rapidly, as though he needed to clear his vision.

"Son," he said hoarsely. "I c'n see you're game. But don't make a fall play. If Mac Strann gets you, he'll California you like a yearling. You won't have no chance. You've done for Jerry, there aint a doubt of that, but Jerry to Mac is like a tame cat to a mountain-lion. Lad, I c'n see you're a stranger to these parts, but ask me your questions and I'll tell you the best way to go."

Barry slipped from the saddle.

He said: "I'd like to know the best place to put up my hoss."

The deputy marshal was speechless.

"But I s'pose," went on Barry, "I can stable him over there behind the hotel."

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Matthews pushed off his sombrero and rubbed his short fingers through his hair. Anger and amazement still choked him, but he controlled himself by a praiseworthy effort.

"Barry," he said, "I don't make you out. Maybe you figure to wait till Mac Strann gets to town before you leave; maybe you think your hoss can outrun anything on four feet. And maybe it can. But listen to me: Mac Strann ain't fast on a trail, but the point about him is that he never leaves it! You can go through rain and over rocks, but you can't never shake Mac Strann—not once he gets the wind of you."

"Thanks," returned the gentle-voiced stranger. "I guess maybe he'll be worth meeting."

And so saying he turned on his heel and walked calmly towards the big stables behind the hotel and at his heels followed the black dog and the black horse. As for deputy marshal Matthews, he moistened his lips to whistle, but when he pursed them, not a sound came. He turned at length into the bar-room and as he walked his eye was vacant. He was humming brokenly:

"Sweet Adeline, my Adeline,
At night, dear heart, for you I pine."

Inside, he took firm hold upon the bar with both pudgy hands.

"O'Brien," he said, "red-eye."

He pushed away the small glass which the bar-

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tender spun towards him and seized in its place a mighty water-tumbler.

"O'Brien," he explained, "I need strength, not encouragement." And filling the glass nearly to the brim he downed the huge potion at a single draught.

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CHAPTER XI

THE BUZZARD

Most animals have their human counterparts, and in that room where Jerry Strann had fallen a whimsical observer might have termed Jerry, with his tawny head, the lion, and O'Brien behind the bar, a shaggy bear, and the deputy marshal a wolverine, fat but dangerous, and here stood a man as ugly and hardened as a desert cayuse, and there was Dan Barry, sleek and supple as a panther; but among the rest this whimsical observer must have noticed a fellow of prodigious height and negligible breadth, a structure of sinews and bones that promised to rattle in the wind, a long, narrow head, a nose like a beak, tiny eyes set close together and shining like polished buttons, and a vast Adam's apple that rolled up and down the scraggy throat. He might have done for the spirit of Famine in an old play; but every dweller of the mountain-desert would have found an apter expression by calling him the buzzard of the scene. Through his prodigious ugliness he was known far and wide as "Haw-Haw" Langley; for on occasion Langley laughed, and his laughter was an indescribable sound that lay somewhere between the braying of a mule and the cawing of

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a crow. But Haw-Haw Langley was usually silent, and he would sit for hours without words, twisting his head and making little pecking motions as his eyes fastened on face after face. All the bitterness of the mountain-desert was in Haw-Haw Langley; if his body looked like a buzzard, his soul was the soul of the vulture itself, and therefore he had followed the courses of Jerry Strann up and down the range. He stuffed his gorge with the fragments of his leader's food; he fed his soul with the dangers which Jerry Strann met and conquered.

In the bar-room Haw-Haw Langley had stood turning his sharp little eyes from Jerry Strann to Dan Barry, and from Dan Barry back to Strann; and when the shot was fired something like a grin twisted his thin lips; and when the spot of red glowed on the breast of the staggering man, the eyes of Haw-Haw blazed as if with the reflection of a devouring fire. Afterwards he lingered for a few minutes making no effort to aid the fallen man, but when he had satisfied himself with the extent of the injury, and when he had noted the froth of bloody bubbles which stained the lips of Strann, Haw-Haw Langley turned and stalked from the room. His eyes were points of light and his soul was crammed to repletion with ill-tidings.

At the hitching rack he stepped into the saddle of a diminutive horse, whirled it into the street with a staggering jerk of the reins, and buried the spurs deep in the cow-pony's flanks. The poor brute snorted and flirted its heels in the air, but Langley

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wrapped his long legs around the barrel of his mount and goaded it again.

His smile, which began with the crack of Barry's gun in O'Brien's place, did not die out until he was many a mile away, headed far up through the mountains; but as he put peak after peak behind him and as the white light of the day diminished and puffs of blue shadow drowned the valleys, the grin disappeared from Haw-Haw's face. He became keenly intent on his course until, having reached the very summit of a tall hill, he came to a halt and peered down before him.

It was nearly dusk by this time and the eyes of an ordinary man could not distinguish a tree from a rock at any great distance; but it seemed that Haw-Haw was gifted with eyes extraordinary—the buzzard at the top of its sky-towering circles does not see the brown carcass far below with more certainty than Haw-Haw sensed his direction. He waited only a few seconds before he rolled the rowel once more along the scored flanks of his mustang and then plunged down the slope at a reckless gallop.

His destination was a hut, or rather a lean-to, that pressed against the side of the mountain, a crazy structure with a single length of stove pipe leaning awry from the roof. And at the door of this house Haw-Haw Langley drew rein and stepped to the ground. The interior of the hut was dark, but Haw-Haw stole with the caution of a wild Indian to the entrance and reconnoitered the interior,

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probing every shadowy corner with his glittering eyes. For several long moments he continued this examination, and even when he was satisfied that there was no one in the place he did not enter, but moved back several paces from the door and swept the sides of the mountains with an uneasy eye. He made out, a short distance from the door, a picketed horse which now reared up its head from the miserable scattering of grass on which it fed and stared at the stranger. The animal must have bulked at least twice as large as the mount which had brought Langley to the mountain-side. And it was muscled even out of proportion to its bulk. The head was so tremendously broad that it gave an almost square appearance, the neck, short and thick, the forelegs disproportionately small but very sturdy; and the whole animal was built on a slope towards the hind quarters which seemed to equal in massiveness all the rest of the body. One would have said that the horse was a freak meant by nature for the climbing of hills. And to glance at it no man could suppose that those ponderous limbs might be moved to a gallop. However, Haw-Haw Langley well knew the powers of the ugly beast, and he even made a detour and walked about the horse to view it more closely.

Now he again surveyed the darkening landscape and then turned once more to the house. This time he entered with the boldness of a possessor approaching his hearth. He lighted a match and with this ignited a lantern hanging from the wall to the

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right of the door. The furnishings of the dwelling were primitive beyond compare. There was no sign of a chair; a huddle of blankets on the bare boards of the floor made the bed; a saddle hung by one stirrup on one side and on the other side leaned the skins of bob-cats. lynx, and coyotes on their stretching and drying boards. Haw-Haw took down the lantern and examined the pelts. The animals had been skinned with the utmost dexterity. As far as he could see the hides had not been marred in a single place by slips of the knife, nor were there any blood stains to attest hurried work, or careless shooting in the first place. The inner surfaces shone with the pure white of old parchment. But Haw-Haw gave his chief attention to the legs and the heads of the skins, for these were the places where carelessness or stupidity with the knife were sure to show; but the work was perfect in every respect. Until even the critical Haw-Haw Langley was forced to step back and shake his head in admiration. He continued his survey of the room.

In one corner stood a rifle and a shot-gun; in another was a pile of provisions—bacon, flour, salt, meal, and little else. Spices and condiments were apparently unknown to this hermit; nor was there even the inevitable coffee, nor any of the molasses or other sweets which the tongue of the desert-mountainer cannot resist. Flour, meat, and water, it seemed, made up the entire fare of the trapper. For cookery there was an unboarded space in the very centre of the floor with a number of rocks

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grouped around in the hole and blackened with soot. The smoke must rise, therefore, and escape through the small hole in the centre of the roof. The length of stove-pipe which showed on the roof must have been simply the inhabitant's idea of giving the last delicate touch of civilisation; it was like a tassel to the cap of the Turk.

As Haw-Haw's observations reached this point his sharp ear caught the faint whinny of the big horse outside. He started like one caught in a guilty act, and sprang to the lantern. However, with his hands upon it he thought better of it, and he placed the light against the wall; then he turned to the entrance and looked anxiously up the hillside.

What he saw was a form grotesque beyond belief. It seemed to be some gigantic wild beast—mountain lion or great bear, though of a size beyond credence—which slowly sprawled down the slope walking erect upon its hind feet with its forelegs stretched out horizontal, as if it were warning all who might behold it away. Haw-Haw grew pale and involuntarily reached for his gun as he first beheld this apparition, but instantly he saw the truth. It was a man who carried a burden down the mountain-side. The burden was the carcass of a bear; the man had drawn the forelegs over his shoulders—his jutting elbows making what had seemed the outstretched arms—and above the head of the burden-bearer rose the great head of the bear. As the man came closer the animal's head flopped to one side and a red tongue lolled from

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its mouth. Haw-Haw Langley moved back step by step through the cabin until his shoulders struck the opposite wall, and at the same time Mac Strann entered the room. He had no ear for his visitor's hail, but cast his burden to the floor. It dropped with a shock that shook the house from the rattling stove-pipe to the crackling boards. For a moment Mac Strann regarded his prey. Then he stooped and drew open the great jaws. The mouth within was not so red as the bloody hands of Mac Strann; and the big, white fangs, for some reason, did not seem terrible in comparison with the hunter. Having completed his survey he turned slowly upon Haw-Haw Langley and lowered his eyebrows to stare.

So doing, the light for the first time struck full upon his face. Haw-Haw Langley bit his thin lips and his eyes widened almost to the normal.

For the ugliness of Mac Strann was that most terrible species of ugliness—not disfigured features but a discord which pervaded the man and came from within him—like a sound. Feature by feature his face was not ugly. The mouth was very large, to be sure, and the jaw too heavily square, and the nose needed somewhat greater length and less width for real comeliness. The eyes were truly fine, being very large and black, though when Mac Strann lowered his bush of brows his eyes were practically reduced to gleams of light in the consequent shadow. There was a sharp angle in his forehead, the lines of it meeting in the centre and shelving up

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and down. One felt, unpleasantly, that there were heavy muscles overlaying that forehead. One felt that to the touch it would be a pad of flesh, and it gave to Mac Strann, more than any other feature, a peculiar impression of resistless physical power.

In the catalogue of his features, indeed, there was nothing severely objectionable; but out of it came a feeling of *too much strength!* A glance at his body reinsured the first thought. It was not normal. His shirt bulged tightly at the shoulders with muscles. He was not tall—inches shorter than his brother Jerry, for instance—but the bulk of his body was incredible. His torso was a veritable barrel that bulged out both in the chest and the back. And even the tremendous thighs of Mac Strann were perceptibly bowed out by the weight which they had to carry. And there was about his management of his arms a peculiar awkwardness which only the very strongest of men exhibit—as if they were burdened by the weight of their mere dangling hands.

This giant, having placed his eyes in shadow, peered for a long moment at Haw-Haw Langley, but very soon his glance began to waver. It flashed towards the wall—it came back and rested upon Langley again. He was like a dog, restless under a steady stare. And as Haw-Haw Langley noted this a glitter of joy came in his beady eyes.

"You're Jerry's man," said Mac Strann at length.

There was about his voice the same fleshy quality that was in his face; it came literally from his stomach, and it made a peculiar rustling sound such,

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as comes after one has eaten sticky sweet things. People could listen to the voice of Mac Strann and forget that he was speaking words. The articulation ran together in a sort of glutinous mass.

"I'm a friend of Jerry's," said the other. "I'm Langley."

The big man stretched out his hand. The hair grew black, down to the knuckles; the blood of the bear still streaked it; it was large enough to be an organism with independent life. But when Langley, with some misgiving, trusted his own bony fingers within that grasp, in was only as if something fleshy, soft, and bloodless had closed over them. When his hand was released he rubbed it covertly against his trowser leg—to remove dirt—restore the circulation. He did not know why.

"Who's bothering Jerry?" asked Mac Strann. "And where is he?"

He went to the wall without waiting for an answer and took down the saddle. Now the cowpuncher's saddle is a heavy mass of leather and steel, and the saddle of Mac Strann was far larger than the ordinary. Yet he took down the saddle as one might remove a card from a rack. Haw-Haw Langley moved towards the door, to give himself a free space for exit.

"Jerry's hurt," he said, and he watched.

There was a ripple of pain on the face of Mac Strann.

"Hoss kicked him—fall on him?" he asked.

"It weren't a hoss."

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"Huh? A cow?"

"It weren't no cow. It weren't no animal."

Mac Strann faced full upon Langley. When he spoke it seemed as if it were difficult for him to manage his lips. They lifted an appreciable space before there was any sound.

"What was it?"

"A man."

Langley edged back towards the door.

"What with?"

"A gun."

And Langley saw the danger that was coming even before Mac Strann moved. He gave a shrill yelp of terror and whirled and sprang for the open. But Mac Strann sprang after him and reached. His whole body seemed to stretch like an elastic thing, and his arm grew longer. The hand fastened on the back of Langley, plucked him up, and jammed him against the wall. Haw-Haw crumpled to the floor.

He gasped: "It weren't me, Mac. For Gawd's sake, it weren't me!"

His face was a study. There was abject terror in it, and yet there was also a sort of grisly joy, and his eyes feasted on the silent agony of Mac Strann.

"Where?" asked Mac Strann.

"Mac," pleaded the vulture who cringed on the floor, "gimme your word you aint goin' to hold it agin me."

"Tell me," said the other, and he framed the face of the vulture between his large hands. If he press-

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ed the heels of those hands together bones would snap, and Haw-Haw Langley knew it. And yet nothing but a wild delight could have set that glitter in his little eyes, just as nothing but a palsy of terror could have set his limbs twitching so.

"Who shot him from behind?" demanded the giant.

"It wasn't from behind," croaked the bearer of ill-tidings. "It was from the front."

"While he wasn't looking?"

"No. He was beat to the draw."

"You're *lyin'* to me," said Mac Strann slowly.

"So help me God!" cried Langley.

"Who done it?"

"A little feller. He aint half as big as me. He's got a voice like Kitty Jackson, the school-marm; and and he's got eyes like a starved pup. It was him that done it."

The eyes of Mac Strann grew vaguely meditative.

"Nope," he mused, in answer to his own thoughts, "I won't use no rope. I'll use my hands. Where'd the bullet land?"

A fresh agony of trembling shook Langley, and a fresh sparkle came in his glance.

"Betwixt his ribs, Mac. And right on through. And it come out his back!"

But there was not an answering tremor in Mac Strann. He let his hands fall away from the face of the vulture, and he caught up the saddle. Langley straightened himself. He peered anxiously at Strann, as if he feared to miss something.

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"I dunno whether he's livin' right now, or not," suggested Haw-Haw.

But Mac Strann was already striding through the door.

. . . . . .

Sweat was pouring from the lather-flecked bodies of their horses when they drew rein, at last, at the goal of their long, fierce ride; and Haw-Haw slunk behind the broad form of Mac Strann when the latter strode into the hotel. Then the two started for the room in which, they were told, lay Jerry Strann.

"There it is," whispered Haw-Haw, as they reached the head of the stairs. "The door's open. If he was dead the door would be closed, most like."

They stood in the hall and looked in upon a strange picture, for flat in the bed lay Jerry Strann, his face very white and oddly thin, and over him leaned the man who had shot him down.

They heard Dan Barry's soft, gentle voice query: "How you feelin' now, partner?"

He leaned close beside the other, his fingers upon the wrist of Jerry.

"A pile better," muttered Jerry Strann. "Seems like I got more'n a fightin' chance to pull through now."

"Jest you keep lyin' here quiet," advised Dan Barry, "and don't stir around none. Don't start no worryin'. You're goin' to live 's long as you don't lose no more blood. Keep your thoughts quiet. They ain't no cause for you to do nothin' but jest keep

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your eyes closed, and breathe, and think of yaller sunshine, and green grass in the spring, and the wind lazyin' the clouds along across the sky. That's all you got to think about. Jest keep quiet, partner."

"It's easy to do it now you're with me. Seems like they's a pile of strength runnin' into me from the tips of your fingers, my frien'. And—I was *some* fool to start that fight with you, Barry."

"Jest forget all that," murmured the other. "And keep your voice down. I've forgot it; you forget it. It aint never happened."

"What's it mean?" frowned Mac Strann, whispering to Haw-Haw.

The eyes of the latter glittered like beads.

"That's him that shot Jerry," said Haw-Haw. "Him!"

"Hell!" snarled Mac Strann, and went through the door.

At the first sound of his heavy footfall, the head of Barry raised and turned in a light, swift movement. The next instant he was on his feet. A moment before his face had been as gentle as that of a mother leaning over a sick child; but one glimpse of the threat in the contorted brows of Mac Strann set a gleam in his own eyes, an answer as distinct as the click of metal against metal. Not a word had been said, but Jerry, who had lain with his eyes closed, seemed to sense a change in the atmosphere of peace which had enwrapped him the moment before. His eyes flashed open; and he saw his burly brother.

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But Mac Strann had no eye for any saving Dan Barry.

"Are you the creepin', sneakin' snake that done —this?"

"You got me figured right," answered Dan coldly.

"Then, by God——" began the roaring voice of Mac, but Jerry Strann stirred wildly on the bed.

"Mac!" he called, "Mac!" His voice went suddenly horribly thick, a bubbling, liquid sound. "For God's sake, Mac!"

He had reared himself up on one elbow, his arm stretched out to his brother. And a foam of crimson stood on his lips.

"Mac, don't pull no gun! It was me that was in wrong!"

And then he fell back in the bed, and into the arms of Mac, who was beside him, moaning: "Buck up, Jerry. Talk to me, boy!"

"Mac, you've finished the job," came the husky whisper.

Mac Strann raised his head, and his terrible eyes fixed upon Dan Barry. And there was no pity in the face of the other. The first threat had wiped every vestige of human tenderness out of his eyes, and now, with something like a sneer on his lips, and with a glimmer of yellow light in his eyes, he was backing towards the door, and noiselessly as a shadow he slipped out and was gone.

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CHAPTER XII

FINESSE

"A MAN talks because he's drunk or lonesome; a girl talks because that's her way of takin' exercise."

This was a maxim of Buck Daniels, and Buck Daniels knew a great deal about women, as many a school marm and many a rancher's daughter of the mountain-desert could testify.

Also Buck Daniels said of women: "It aint what you say to 'em so much as the tune you put it to."

Now he sat this day in O'Brien's hotel dining-room. It was the lazy and idle hour between three and four in the afternoon, and since the men of the mountain-desert eat promptly at six, twelve, and six, there was not a soul in the room when he entered. Nor was there a hint of eating utensils on the tables. Nevertheless Buck Daniels was not dismayed. He selected a corner-table by instinct and smote upon the surface with the flat of his hand. It made a report like the spat of a forty-five; heavy footsteps approached, a door flung open, and a cross-eyed slattern stood in the opening. At the sight of Buck Daniels sitting with his hands on his hips and his sombrero pushed back to a good-natured distance on his head the lady puffed with rage.

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"What in hell d'you think this is?" bellowed this gentle creature, and the tone echoed heavily back from all four walls. "You're three hours late and you get no chuck here. On your way, stranger!"

Buck Daniels elevated himself slowly from the chair and stood at his full height. With a motion fully as deliberate he removed his sombrero and bowed to such a depth that the brim of the hat brushed the floor.

"Lady," he said humbly, "I was thinkin' that some gent run this here eatin' place. Which if you'll excuse me half a minute I'll ramble outside and sluice off some of the dust. If I'd known you was here I wouldn't of thought of comin' in here like this."

The lady with the defective eyes glared fiercely at him. Her judgment wavered two ways. Her first inclination was to hold that the fellow was jibing at her covertly, and she followed her original impulse far enough to clasp a neighboring sugar-bowl in a large, capable hand. A second and more merciful thought entered her brain and stole slowly through it, like a faint echo in a great cave.

"You don't have to make yourself pretty to talk to me," she said thoughtfully. "But if you're here for chow you're too late."

"Ma'am,' said Buck Daniels instantly, "when I come in here I was hungry enough to eat nails; but I'll forget about chuck if you'll sit down an' chin with me a while."

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The large hand of the cross-eyed lady stole out once more and rested upon the sugar-bowl.

"D'you mind sayin' that over agin?" she queried.

"Lonesomeness is worse'n hunger," said Buck Daniels, and he met her gaze steadily with his black eyes.

The hand released the sugar-bowl once more; something resembling colour stole into the brown cheeks of the maiden.

She said, relentingly: "Maybe you been off by yourse'f mining, stranger?"

Buck Daniels drew a long breath.

"Mines?" he said, and then laughed bitterly. "If that was all I been doin'——" he began darkly—and then stopped.

The waitress started.

"Maybe this here is my last chance to get chuck for days an' days. Well, let it go. If I stayed here with you I'd be talkin' too much!"

He turned slowly towards the door. His step was very slow indeed.

"Wait a minute," called the maiden. "There ain't any call for that play. If you're in wrong somewhere—well, stranger, just take that chair and I'll have some ham-and in front of you inside of a minute."

She had slammed through the door before Buck turned, and he sat down, smiling pleasantly to himself. Half of a mirror decorated the wall beside his table, and into this Buck peered. His black locks were sadly disarrayed, and he combed them into

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some semblance of order with his fingers. He had hardly finished this task when the door was kicked open with such force that it whacked against the wall, and the waitress appeared with an armful of steaming food. Before Buck's widening eyes she swiftly set forth an array of bread, butter in chunks, crisp French-fried potatoes, a large slab of ham on one plate and several fried eggs on another, and above all there was a mighty pewter cup of coffee blacker than the heart of night. Yearning seized upon Buck Daniels, but policy was stronger than hunger in his subtle mind. He rose again; he drew forth the chair opposite his own.

"Ma'am," said Buck Daniels, "aint you going to favor me by sittin' down?"

The lady blinked her unfocused eyes.

"Ain't I what?" she was finally able to ask.

"I know," said Buck Daniels swiftly, "that you're terrible busy; which you ain't got time to waste on a stranger like me."

She turned upon Buck those uncertain and wistful eyes. It was a generous face. Mouth, cheekbones, and jaw were of vast proportions, while the forehead, eyes, and nose were as remarkably diminutive. Her glance lowered to the floor; she shrugged her wide shoulders and began to wipe the vestiges of dishwater from her freckled hands.

"You men are terrible foolish," she said. "There aint no tellin' what you mean by what you say."

And she sank slowly into the chair. It gave voice in sharp protest at her weight. Buck Daniels re-

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treated to the opposite side of the table and took his place.

"Ma'am," he began, " don't I look honest?" So saying, he slid half a dozen eggs and a section of bacon from the platter to his plate.

"I dunno," said the maiden, with one eye upon him and the other plunging into the future. "There aint no trusting men. Take 'em by the lot and they're awful forgetful."

"If you knowed me better," said Buck sadly, disposing of a slab of bread spread thick with the pale butter and following this with a pile of fried potatoes astutely balanced on his knife. "If you knowed me better, ma'am, you wouldn't have no suspicions."

"What might it be that you been doin'?" asked the girl.

Buck Daniels paused in his attack on the food and stared at her.

He quoted deftly from a magazine which had once fallen in his way: "Some day maybe I can tell you. There's something about your eyes that tells me you'd understand."

At the mention of her eyes the waitress blinked and stiffened in her chair, while a huge, red fist balled itself in readiness for action. But the expression of Buck Daniels was as blandly open as the smile of infancy. The lady relaxed and an unmistakable blush tinged even her nose with colour.

"It ain't after my nature to be askin' questions," she announced. "You don't have to tell me no more'n you want to."

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"Thanks," said Buck instantly. "I knew you was that kind. It ain't hard," he went on smoothly, "to tell a lady when you see one. I can tell you this much to start with. I'm lookin' for a quiet town where I can settle down permanent. And as far as I can see, Brownsville looks sort of quiet to me."

So saying, he disposed of the rest of his food by an act akin to legerdemain, and then fastened a keen eye upon the lady. She was in the midst of a struggle of some sort. But she could not keep the truth from her tongue.

"Take it by and large," she said at length, "Brownsville is as peaceable as most; but just now, stranger, it's all set for a big bust." She turned heavily in her chair and glanced about the room. Then she faced Daniels once more and cupped her hands about her mouth. "Stranger," she said in a stage whisper, "Mac Strann is in town!"

The eyes of Buck Daniels wandered.

"Don't you know him?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Never heard of him?"

"Nope."

"Well," sighed the waitress, "you've had *some* luck in your life. Take a cross between a bulldog and a mustang and a mountain-lion—that's Mac Strann. He's in town, and he's here for killin'."

"You don't say, ma'am. And why don't they lock him up?"

"Because he aint done nothin' yet to be locked up about. That's the way with him. And when

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he does a thing he always makes the man he's after pull his gun first. Smart? I'll say he's just like an Indian, that Mac Strann!"

"But who's he after?"

"The feller that plugged his brother, Jerry."

"Kind of looks like he had reason for a killing, then."

"Nope. Jerry had it comin' to him. He was always raising trouble, Jerry was. And this time, he pulled his gun first. Everybody seen him."

"He run into a gunman?"

"Gunman?" she laughed heartily. "Partner, if it wasn't for something funny about his eyes, I wouldn't be no more afraid of that gunman than I am of a tabby-cat. And me a weak woman. The quietest lookin' sort that ever come to Brownsville. But there's something queer about him. He knows that Mac Strann is here in town. He knows that Mac Strann is waiting for Jerry to die. He knows that when Jerry dies Mac will be out for a killin'. And this here stranger is just sittin' around and waitin' to be killed! Can you beat that?"

But Buck Daniels had grown strangely excited.

"What did you say there was about his eyes?" he asked sharply.

She grew suddenly suspicious.

"D' you know him?"

"No. But you was talkin' about his eyes?"

"I dunno what it is. I aint the only one that's seen it. There aint no word you can put to it. It's just there. That's all."

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The voice of Buck Daniels fell to a whisper.

"It's sort of fire," he suggested. "Ain't it a kind of light *behind* his eyes?"

But the waitress stared at him in amazement.

"Fire?" she gasped. "A light *behind* his eyes? M'frien', are you tryin' to string me?"

"What's his name?"

"I dunno."

"Ma'am," said Daniels, rising hastily. "Here's a dollar if you'll take me to him."

"You don't need no guide," she replied. "Listen to that, will you?"

And as he hearkened obediently Buck Daniels heard a strain of whistling, needle-sharp with distance.

"That's him," nodded the woman. "He's always goin' about whistling to himself. Kind of a nut, he is."

"It's him!" cried Buck Daniels. "It's him!"

And with this ungrammatical burst of joy he bolted from the room.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE whistling came from behind the hotel, and although it ended as soon as he reached the veranda of the building, Buck Daniels hurried to the rear of the place. There were the long, low sheds of the barn, and behind these, he knew, must be the corrals. He raced around the corner of the shed and there came to a halt, for he saw a thing that turned his blood to ice.

One of those rare rains of the mountain-desert had recently fallen and the corrals behind the barn were carpeted with a short, thick grass. In the small corral nearest him he beheld, rolling on that carpet of grass, a great wolf—or a dog as large and as rough-coated as a wolf, and a man; and they were engaged in a desperate and silent struggle for mastery. Their movements were so lightning fast that Buck Daniels could not make out distinct forms from the tangle. But he saw the great white teeth of the wolf flash in the sun one instant, and the next the man had whirled on top. It was Dan and Bart at play.

No outcry from Dan; no growl from the wolf. Buck felt the old chill which never left him when

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he saw the fierce game of the wolf and the wolf-man. All this passed in the twinkling of an eye, and then Dan, by a prodigious effort, had thrown the great beast away from him, so that Bart fell upon its back. Dan leaped with outstretched arms upon the fallen animal, and buried his clutching hands in the throat of the beast.

Yet still there was a thrill to add to these, for now a black horse appeared in the picture, a miracle of slender, shimmering grace—and he rushed with flattened ears upon the two twisting, writhing, prostrate figures. His teeth were bared—he was more like a prodigious dog than a horse. And those teeth closed on the back of the man's neck—or did they merely pinch his shirt?—and then Dan was dragged bodily away from the wolf and thrown through the air by a flirt of the stallion's head.

Horrible! Buck Daniels shuddered and then he grinned shamefacedly in apology to himself.

"The three of 'em!" he grunted, and stepped closer to the fence to watch.

The instant the man was torn away by the intercession of the horse, the wolf regained its feet and rushed upon him; but Dan had landed from his fall upon his feet, with cat-like agility, and now he dodged the rush of the wolf and the arrowy spring of the creature, and sprang in his turn towards the stallion.

The black met this attack by rearing, his ears flattened, his teeth bared, his eyes terrible to behold. As the man raced close the stallion struck

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with lightning hoofs, but the blow failed of its mark—by the breadth of a hair. And the assailant, swerving like a will-o'-the-wisp, darted to the side of the animal and leaped upon its back. At the same instant the wolf left the ground with terribly gaping mouth in a spring for the rider; but Dan flattened himself along the shining back of his mount and the wolf catapulted harmlessly past.

After this failure the wolf-dog seemed to desire no further active part in the struggle, but took up a position to one side, and there, with lolling tongue and red-stained eyes, watched the battle contiuue. The stallion, to be sure, kept up the conflict with a whole-hearted energy. Never had Buck Daniels in a long and varied career seen such wild pitching. The black leaped here and there, doubling about with the sinuous speed of a snake, springing high in the air one instant, and landing the next on stiff legs; dropping to the ground the next second, and rolling to crush the rider; up again like a leaf jerked up by a gale of wind, and so the fierce struggle continued , with the wild rider slapping the neck of the horse as if he would encourage it to more terrible efforts, and drumming its round barrel with vindictive heels. His hair blew black; his face flushed; and in his eyes there was the joy of the sailor, long land-bound, who climbs at last the tallest mast and feels it pitch beneath him and catches the sharp tang of the travelled wind.

The struggle ceased as if in obedience to an inaudible command. From the full frenzy of motion

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horse and man were suddenly moveless. Then Dan slipped from his seat and stood before his mount. At once the ears of the stallion, which had been flat back, pricked sharply forward; the eyes of the animal grew luminous and soft as the eyes of a woman, and he dropped the black velvet of his muzzle beneath the master's chin. As for Dan Barry, he rewarded this outburst of affection with no touch of his hand; but his lips moved, and he seemed to be whispering a secret to his horse. The wolf in the meantime had viewed this scene with growing unrest, and now it trotted up and placed itself at the side of the man. Receiving no attention in this position, it caught the arm of the man between its great fangs and drew his hands down. The stallion, angered by this interruption, raised a delicate fore-foot to strike, and was received with a terrific snarl —the first sound of the entire scene.

"Bart," said the man, and his voice was not raised or harsh, but came as softly as running water, "if you aint going to be a gentleman, I got to teach you manners. Get up on Satan's back and lie down till I tell you to get off."

The wolf received this command with a snarl even more blood-curdling than before, but he obeyed, slinking sidewise a reluctant pace or two, and then springing to the back of the stallion with a single bound. There he crouched, still snarling softly until his master raised a significant forefinger. At that he lowered his head and maintained a fiercely observant silence.

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"Dan!" called Buck Daniels.

The other whirled.

"Speakin' of pets," observed Buck Daniels, "I heard tell once about a gent that had a tame lion. Which you got the outbeatingest pair I ever see, Dan. Gentle, ain't they, like a stampede of cows!"

But Barry left this remark unanswered. He ran to the tall fence, placed his hand on the top rail, and vaulted lightly over it. Then he clasped the hand of the larger man, and his face lighted.

"Buck," he said, "I been sort of lonesome. It feels pretty good to see you agin."

"Oh man," answered Buck Daniels, "speakin' of bein' lonesome——" He checked himself. "How about steppin' inside and havin' a talk?"

The other started forward agreeably, but stopped almost at once.

"Heel!" he called, without turning his head.

Black Bart left the back of the stallion in a long bound that carried him half way to the fence. His next leap brought him over the rail and beside his master. Buck Daniels moved back a step involuntarily.

"Bart," he said, "d'you know me?"

He stretched out his hand; and was received with a sudden baring of the fangs.

"Nice dog!" said Buck sarcastically. "Regular house-pet, ain't he?"

The other apparently missed the entire point of this remark. He said in his gentle, serious way: "He used to be real wild, Buck. But now he don't

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mind people. He let the cook feed him a chunk o' meat the other day; and you remember he don't usually touch stuff that other men have handled."

"Yep," grunted Buck, "it's sure disgustin' to have a dog as tame as that. I'd bet he ain't killed another dog for a whole day, maybe!"

And still Barry saw no irony in this.

He answered, as gravely as before: "No, it was the day before yesterday. Somebody come to town and got drunk. He had two dogs, and sicked 'em on Bart."

Buck Daniels controlled an incipient shudder.

"Both dead?"

"I was inside the house," said Dan sadly, "and it took me a couple of seconds to get outside. Of course by that time Bart had cut their throats."

"Of course. Didn't the drunk guy try to pot Bart?"

"Yes, he got out his gun; but Mr. O'Brien, the bar-tender, persuaded him out of it. I was glad there wasn't no trouble."

"My God!" exclaimed Buck Daniels. And then: "Well, let's go inside. We'll take your man-eater along, if you want to."

A shadow came in the eyes of Barry.

"Can't we talk jest as well out here?"

"What's the matter with findin' some chairs?"

"Because I don't like to get inside walls. You know how four walls seem like so many pairs of eyes standin' around you?"

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"No," said Buck bluntly, "I don't know nothin' of the kind. What d'you mean?"

"I dunno," answered Barry, depressed. "It jest seems that way. Ain't you noticed how sort of close it is in a house? Hard to breath? Like you had on a shirt too small for you."

"We'll stay out here, then."

The other nodded, smiled, and made a gesture to the dog behind him. Black Bart crouched on the ground, and Dan Barry sat down cross-legged, his shoulders leaning against the shaggy pelt of Bart. Daniels followed the example with less grace. He was thinking very hard and fast, and he rolled a Durham cigarette to fill the interlude.

"I s'pose you're bustin' to find out the news about the folks," he said dryly, at last.

The other sat with his hands loosely clasped in his lap. His wide eyes looked far away, and there was about his lips that looseness, that lack of compression, which one sees so often in children. He might have sat, in that posture, for the statue of thoughtlessness.

"What folks?" he asked at last.

Buck Daniels had lighted a match, but now he sat staring blank until the match burned down to his fingers. With an oath he tossed the remnant away and lighted another. He had drawn down several long breaths of smoke to the bottom of his lungs before he could speak again.

"Some people you used to know; I suppose you've forgotten all about 'em, eh?" His eyes narrowed;

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there was a spark of something akin to dread in them. "Kate Cumberland?" he queried.

A light came in the face of Dan Barry.

"Kate Cumberland?" he repeated. "How is she, Buck? Lately, I been thinkin' about her every day."

A trembling took the body and the voice of Daniels; his errand, after all, might meet some success.

"Kate?" he repeated. "Oh, ay, she's well enough. But Joe Cumberland ain't."

"No?"

"He's dyin', Dan."

And Dan replied calmly. "He's kind of old, I s'pose."

"Old?" said Buck, with a sort of horror. "Yes, he's old, right enough. D'you know why he's dying? It's because you went away the way you done, Dan. That's what's killin' him."

Something of thought came in the face of Barry.

"Maybe I understand," he said slowly. "If I was to lose Satan, or Bart——" here the great dog whined at the mention of his name, and Barry dropped a slender hand across the scarred forehead of his servant. "If I was to lose 'em, I'd sort of mourn for 'em, maybe."

Buck Daniels set his teeth.

"I don't suppose it seems possible," he said, "that a man could miss another man the way you could miss your—dog, eh? But it is! Joe Cumberland is dying for you, Dan, as sure as if you'd put a bullet in his bowels."

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The other hesitated and then frowned and made a gesture of vague dismissal.

"Don't you figure on doin' nothing about it?" asked Buck softly.

"What could I do?"

"My God A'mighty, aint you got no human feelin's?"

"I dunno what you mean," said the soft voice.

"This! Can't you git on your hoss and ride back with me to Cumberland Ranch? Stay with the old man till he gets back on his feet. Ain't that easy to do? Is your time so damned valuable you can't spare a few days for that?"

"But I *am* goin' back," answered Dan, in a rather hurt voice. "They ain't no need for cussin' me, Buck. I been thinkin' of Kate, every day, almost."

"Since when?"

"I dunno." Dan stirred uneasily. He looked up, and far above Buck, following the direction of Dan's eyes, saw a pattern of wild geese. "I been sort of driftin' North towards the Cumberland Ranch and Kate," went on Dan. He sighed: "I been thinkin' of her eyes, which is blue, Buck, and her hair, and the soft sound of her voice. They been hangin' in my ears, stayin' behind my eyes, lately, and I been driftin' up that way steady."

"Why, man," cried Buck, "then what's there to keep you here? Jump on your hoss, and we'll head North in ten minutes."

"I will!" said Dan, full as eagerly. "We'll start full speed."

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"Come on, then."

"Wait a minute!" said Dan, his voice growing suddenly cold. "I been forgettin' something."

Buck Daniels turned and found his companion strangely changed. There was a set expression of coldness about his face, and a chill glitter in his eyes.

"I got to wait here for something."

"What's that?"

"They's a man in town that may want to see me."

"Mac Strann! I've heard about him. Dan, are you goin' to let Joe Cumberland die because you want to stay here and fight it out with a dirty cut-throat?"

"I don't want to fight," protested Barry. "No, there ain't nothin' I like less than fightin'!"

Buck Daniels cursed softly and continuously to himself.

"Dan," he said, "can you sit there and lie like that to me? Ain't I seen you in action? Don't I remember the way you trailed Jim Silent? Don't I remember how we all got down and prayed you to keep away from Jim? Don't I remember how you threw everything to hell so's you could get your hands on Jim? My God A'mighty, man, didn't I see your face when you had your fingers in Silent's throat?"

An expression of unutterable revulsion rippled over the face of Dan Barry.

"Stop!" he commanded softly, and raised his slender hand. "Don't keep on talkin' about it. It makes me sick—all through. Oh, Buck, they's a

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tingle in the tips of my fingers still from the time I had 'em in his throat. And it makes me feel unclean—the sort of uncleanness that won't wash out with no kind of soap and water. Buck, I'd most rather die myself than fight a man!"

A vast amazement overspread the countenance of Buck Daniels as he listened to this outburst; it was as if he had heard a healthy man proclaim that he had no desire for bread and meat. Something rose to his lips, but he swallowed it.

"Then it looks kind of simple to me," he said. "You hate fightin'. This gent Mac Strann likes it; he lives on it; he don't do nothing but wait from day to day hungerin' for a scrap. What's the out? Jest this! You hop on your hoss and ride out with me. Young Jerry Strann kicks out—Mac Strann starts lookin' for you—he hears that you've beat it—he goes off and forgets about you. Ain't that simple?"

The old uneasiness returned to the far-seeing eyes of Dan Barry.

"I dunno," he said, maybe——"

Then he paused again.

"Have you got anything to say agin it?" urged Buck, arguing desperately.

"I dunno," repeated Barry, confused, "except thaf I keep thinking what a terrible disappointment it'll be to this Mac Strann when his brother dies and I ain't around."

Buck Daniels stared, blinked, and then burst into unmelodious laughter. Satan trotted across the cor-

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ral and raised his head above the fence, whinnying softly. Barry turned his head and smiled up to the horse.

Then he said: "Seems like if Jerry Strann dies I owe somebody something. Who? Mac Strann, I reckon. I sort of got to stay and give him his chance."

"I hope to God," burst out Daniels, smashing his hands together, "that Mac Strann beats you to a pulp! That's what I hope!"

The eyes of Dan Barry widened.

"Why d'you hope that?" he asked gently.

It brought Daniels again to speechlessness.

"Is it possible?" he growled to himself. "Are you a human bein' and yet you think more of your hoss and your damned wolf-dog than you do of the life of a man? Dan, I'm askin' you straight, is that a square thing to do?"

The fragile hands went out to him, palm up.

"Don't you see, Buck? I don't want to be this way. I jest can't help it!"

"Then the Lord help poor old Joe Cumberland—him that took you in out of the desert—him that raised you from the time you was a kid—him that nursed you like you was his own baby—him that loved you more'n he loved Kate—him that's lyin' back there now with fire in his eyes, waitin', waitin', waitin', for you to come back. Dan, if you was to see him you'd go down on your knees and ask him to forgive you!"

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"I s'pose I would," murmured Barry thoughtfully.

"Dan, you're goin' to go with me!"

"I don't somehow think its my time for movin', Buck."

"Is that all you got to say to me?"

"I guess maybe it is, Buck."

"If I was to beg you to come for old-time's sake, and all we been through together, you and me, wouldn't it make no difference to you?"

The large, gentle eyes focused far beyond Buck Daniels, somewhere on a point in the pale, hazy blue of the spring sky.

"I'm kind of tired of talkin', Buck," he said at length.

And Buck Daniels rose and walked slowly away, with his head fallen. Behind him the stallion neighed suddenly and loud, and it was so much like a blast of defiant triumph that Buck whirled and shook his clenched fist at Satan.

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CHAPTER XIV

MUSIC FOR OLD NICK

A THOUGHT is like a spur. It lifts the head of a man as the spur makes the horse toss his; and it quickens the pace with a subtle addition of strength. Such a thought came to Buck Daniels as he stepped again on the veranda of the hotel. It could not have been an altogether pleasant inspiration, for it drained the colour from his face and made him clench his broad hands; and next he loosened his revolver in its holster. A thought of fighting—of some desperate chance he had once taken, perhaps.

But also it was a thought which needed considerable thought. He slumped into a wicker chair at one end of the porch and sat with his chin resting on his chest while he smoked cigarette after cigarette and tossed the butts idly over the rail. More than once he pressed his hand against his lips as though there were sudden pains there. The colour did not come back to his face; it continued as bloodless as ever, but there was a ponderable light in his eyes, and his jaws became more and more firmly set. It was not a pleasant face to watch at that moment, for he seemed to sit with a growing resolve.

Long moments passed before he moved a muscle, but then he heard, far away, thin, and clear,

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whistling from behind the hotel. It was no recognisable tune. It was rather a strange improvisation, with singable fragments here and there, and then wild, free runs and trills. It was as if some bird of exquisite singing powers should be taken in a rapture of song, so that it whistled snatches here and there of its usual melody, but all between were great, whole-throated rhapsodies. As the sound of this whistling came to him, Buck raised his head suddenly. And finally, still listening, he rose to his feet and turned into the dining-room.

There he found the waitress he had met before, and he asked her for the name of the doctor who took care of the wounded Jerry Strann.

"There ain't no doc," said the waitress. "It's Fatty Matthews, the deputy marshal, who takes care of that Strann—bad luck to him! Fatty's in the barroom now. But what's the matter? You seem like you was hearin' something?"

"I am," replied Daniels enigmatically. "I'm hearin' something that would be music for the ears of Old Nick."

And he turned on his heel and strode for the barroom. There he found Fatty in the very act of disposing of a stiff three-fingers of red-eye. Daniels stepped to the bar, poured his own drink, and then stood toying with the glass. For though the effect of red-eye may be pleasant enough, it has an essence which appalls the stoutest heart and singes the most leathery throat; it is to full-grown men what castor oil is to a child. Why men drink it is a mystery

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whose secret is known only to the profound soul of the mountain-desert. But while Daniels fingered his glass he kept an eye upon the other man at the bar.

It was unquestionably the one he sought. The excess flesh of the deputy marshal would have brought his nickname to the mind of an imbecile. However, Fatty was humming softly to himself, and it is not the habit of men who treat very sick patients to sing.

"I'll hit it agin," said Fatty. "I need it."

"Have a bad time of it to-day?" asked O'Brien sympathetically.

"Bad time to-day? Yep, an' every day is the same. I tell you, O'Brien, it takes a pile of nerve to stand around that room expectin' Jerry to pass out any minute, and the eyes of that devil Mac Strann followin' you every step you make. D'you know, if Jerry dies I figure Mac to go at my throat like a bull-dog."

"You're wrong, Fatty," replied O'Brien. "That ain't his way about it. He takes his time killin' a man. Waits till he can get him in a public place and make him start the picture. That's Mac Strann! Remember Fitzpatrick? Mac Strann followed Fitz nigh onto two months, but Fitz knew what was up and he never would make a move. He knowed that if he made a wrong pass it would be his last. So he took everything and let it pass by. But finally it got on his nerves. One time—it was right here in my barroom, Fatty——"

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"The hell you say!"

"Yep, that was before your time around these parts. But Fitz had a couple of jolts of red-eye under his vest and felt pretty strong. Mac Strann happened in and first thing you know they was at it. Well, Fitz was a big man. I ain't small, but I had to look up when I talked to Fitz. Scotch-Irish, and they got fightin' bred into their bone. Mac Strann passed him a look and Fitz come back with a word. Soon as he got started he couldn't stop. Wasn't a pretty thing to watch, either. You could see in Fitz's face that he knew he was done for before he started, but he wouldn't let up. The booze had him going and he was too proud to back down. Pretty soon he started cussing Mac Strann.

"Well, by that time everybody had cleared out of the saloon, because they knowed that them sort of words meant bullets comin'. But Mac Strann jest stood there watchin', and grinnin' in his ugly way—damn his soul black!—and never sayin' a word back. By God, Fatty, he looked sort of hungry. When he grinned, his upper lip went up kind of slow and you could see his big teeth. I expected to see him make a move to sink 'em in the throat of Fitz. But he didn't. Nope, he didn't make a move, and all the time Fitz ravin' and gettin' worse and worse. Finally Fitz made the move. Yep, he pulled his gun and had it damned near clean on Mac Strann before that devil would stir. But when he *did*, it was jest a flash of light. Both them guns went off, but Mac's bullet hit Fitz's hand and knocked the gun out of it

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—so of course his shot went wild. But Fitz could see his own blood, and you know what that does to the Scotch-Irish? Makes *some* people quit cold to see their own blood. I remember a kid at school that was a whale at fightin' till his nose got to bleedin', or something, and then he'd quit cold. But you take a Scotch-Irishman and it works just the other way. Show him his own colour and he goes plumb crazy.

"That's what happened to Fitz. When he saw the blood on his hand he made a dive at Mac Strann. After that it wasn't the sort of thing that makes a good story. Mac Strann got him around the ribs and I heard the bones crack. God! And him still squeezin', and Fitz beatin' away at Mac's face with his bleedin' hand.

"Will you b'lieve that I stood here and was sort of froze? Yes, Fatty, I couldn't make a move. And I was sort of sick and hollow inside the same way I went one time when I was a kid and seen a big bull horn a yearlin'.

"Then I heard the breath of Fitz comin' hoarse, with a rattle in it—and I heard Mac Strann whining like a dog that's tasted blood and is starvin' for more. A thing to make your hair go up on end, like they say in the story-books.

"Then Fitz—he was plumb mad—tried to bite Mac Strann. And then Mac let go of him and set his hands on the throat of Fitz. It happened like a flash—I'm here to swear that I could hear the bones crunch. And then Fitz's mouth sagged open and

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his eyes rolled up to the ceiling, and Mac Strann threw him down on the floor. Just like that! Damn him! And then he stood over poor dead Fitz and kicked him in those busted ribs and turned over to the bar and says to me: 'Gimme!'

"Like a damned beast! He wanted to drink right there with his dead man beside him. And what was worse, I had to give him the bottle. There was a sort of haze in front of my eyes. I wanted to pump that devil full of lead, but I knowed it was plain suicide to try it.

"So there he stood and ups with a glass that was brimmin' full, and downs it at a swallow—gurglin' —like a hog! Fatty, how long will it be before there's an end to Mac Strann?"

But Fatty Matthews shrugged his thick shoulders and poured himself another drink.

"There ain't a hope for Jerry Strann?" cut in Buck Daniels.

"Not one in a million," coughed Fatty, disposing of another formidable potion.

"And when Jerry dies, Mac starts for this Barry?"

"Who's been tellin' you?" queried O'Brien dryly. "Maybe you been readin' minds, stranger?"

Buck Daniels regarded the bartender with a mild and steadfast interest. He was smiling with the utmost good-humour, but there was that about him which made big O'Brien flush and look down to his array of glasses behind the bar.

"I been wondering," went on Daniels, "if Mac

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Strann mightn't come out with Barry about the way Jerry did. Ain't it possible?"

"No," replied Fatty Matthews with calm decision. "It ain't possible. Well, I'm due back in my bear cage. Y'ought to look in on me, O'Brien, and see the mountain-lion dyin' and the grizzly lookin' cn."

"Will it last long?" queried O'Brien.

"Somewhere's about this evening."

Here Daniels started violently and closed his hand hard around his whiskey glass which he had not yet raised towards his lips.

"Are you sure of that, marshal?" he asked. "If Jerry's held on this long ain't there a chance that he'll hold on longer? Can you date him up for to-night as sure as that?"

"I can," said the deputy marshal. "It ain't hard when you seen as many go west as I've seen. It ain't harder than it is to tell when the sand will be out of an hour glass. When they begin going down the last hill it ain't hard to tell when they'll reach the bottom."

"Ain't you had anybody to spell you, Fatty?" broke in O'Brien.

"Yep. I got Haw-Haw Langley up there. But he ain't much help. Just sits around with his hands folded. Kind of looks like Haw-Haw *wanted* Jerry to pass out."

And Matthews went humming through the swinging door.

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