

THE LONE TRAIL

LUKE ALLAN

THE LONE TRAIL

LUKE ALLAN



The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Lone Trail

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Lone Trail

Author: Luke Allan

Release date: April 13, 2022 [eBook #67823]

Language: English

Original publication: United Kingdom: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922

Credits: Al Haines

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LONE
TRAIL ***

THE LONE TRAIL

BY
LUKE ALLAN

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
3 YORK STREET LONDON SW.1

A
HERBERT
JENKINS'
BOOK

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

CONTENTS

- I. [THE MURDER AT THE T-INVERTED R](#)
- II. [MORTON STAMFORD: TENDERFOOT](#)
- III. [CORPORAL FAIRCLOTH ARRIVES](#)
- IV. [THE SHOTS FROM THE BUSHES](#)
- V. [DAKOTA RUNS AMOK](#)
- VI. [STAMFORD MAKES A DECISION](#)
- VII. [AT THE H-LAZY Z](#)
- VIII. [A LAMB AMONG THE LIONS](#)
- IX. [COCKNEY'S MYSTERIOUS RIDE](#)
- X. [STAMFORD'S SURPRISES COMMENCE](#)
- XI. [THE FOSSIL-HUNTERS](#)
- XII. [STAMFORD GOES FOSSIL-HUNTING](#)
- XIII. [THE CONSPIRACY](#)
- XIV. [RIDERS OF THE NIGHT](#)
- XV. [ONE MYSTERY LESS](#)
- XVI. [AN ADVENTURE IN THE MOONLIGHT](#)

- XVII. [THE HOWL OF STRANGE DOGS](#)
- XVIII. [A CATCH OF MORE THAN FISH](#)
- XIX. [TWO PAIRS](#)
- XX. [THE SECRET VALLEY](#)
- XXI. [THE RAFT IN THE CANYON](#)
- XXII. [PINK EYE AND THE ENGLISH SADDLE](#)
- XXIII. [PREPARATIONS TO FLIT](#)
- XXIV. [THE FIGHT IN THE RANCH-HOUSE](#)
- XXV. [COCKNEY'S STORY](#)
- XXVI. [THE CHASE AMONG THE CLIFFS](#)
- XXVII. [THE BATTLE OF THE CLIFFS](#)

THE LONE TRAIL

CHAPTER I

THE MURDER AT THE T-INVERTED R

Inspector Barker, of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, raised his frowning eyes from the weekly report he was scrawling, to watch absent-mindedly the arrival of the Calgary express as it roared out from the arches of the South Saskatchewan bridge and pulled up at the station.

It was a morning ritual of the Inspector's. Three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, relatively at the same hour—if Rocky Mountain slides, foothill floods, and prairie snowstorms permitted—the same train broke in on the mid-forenoon dullness of the "cow-town" of Medicine Hat; and the same pair of official eyes followed it dully but with the determination of established convention, clinging to it off and on during its twenty minutes' stop for a fresh engine and supplies to carry it on its four days' run eastward.

But on Mondays the transcontinental was favoured with a more concentrated attention. On that morning Inspector Barker prepared his weekly report. A pile of letters and staff reports scattered his desk; a smaller pile, the morning's mail, was within reach of his left hand. His right clumsily clutched a fountain pen. Thirty years of strenuous Mounted Police duties, from Constable to Inspector, during a period when Indians, rustlers, cattle-thieves, and the scum of Europe and Eastern Canada, were held to a semblance of order only by the stern hand of the "red-coats," had robbed his chirography of any legibility it ever possessed.

His iron-grey hair was rumpled by frequent delvings of his left hand, and the left needle of his waxed moustache was sadly out of line. His tunic was open—he never removed it when on duty—more in capitulation to mental than to physical discomfort, though Medicine Hat can startle more records in July than in the depth of winter, cold-blooded official reports to the contrary notwithstanding. His pipe lay cold beside the half-spilled tobacco pouch that always adorned the corner of his blotting pad.

Over on the station platform before his window the crowd thinned. A man ran along the top of the cars with a hose, thrusting it into a tiny trap-door, flicking up a slide in the nozzle, holding it a moment till the tanks below filled, flicking the slide down again, and then on to the next-trap door. A butcher's boy with a heavy basket on his arm scrambled down Main Street, crossed the track, and galloped with shuffling feet along the platform to the diner. The conductor drew his watch, examined it critically, raised his hand,

and the fresh engine started noisily for its relief at the next divisional point, Swift Current.

Any morning that the Inspector was on duty the arrival of the Calgary express produced a similar scene in and out of the Police barracks—except a few of the trimmings indicative of mental irritation; any *Monday* morning you would find trimmings and all.

Yet throughout the tangle of that summer's special Police task Inspector Barker's mind reverted in his moments of leisure to the passing of an innocent daily train.

He was lowering his eyes reluctantly to the completion of his weekly irritation, when the desk telephone rang sharply, peremptorily. He jerked it to him.

"Yes, yes!"

"I'm sorry, sir, to have to report——"

"Drop the palaver, Faircloth!" snapped the Inspector. "I take that for granted."

"A murder was——"

"Hold on, hold on! Hold the line a minute!"

The Inspector dropped the receiver, scrawled an illegible but well-known "Barker, Inspector," at the bottom of the sheet before him, jammed it into an envelope and sealed it. At least he would have a week of freedom for the task implied by Corporal Faircloth's interrupted disclosure.

"Now!" he shouted into the telephone, one hand instinctively buttoning his tunic to more official formality.

Faircloth restarted:

"Last night, shortly after midnight, at the T-Inverted R——"

"Bite it off, for Heaven's sake!" broke in the Inspector. "Who, and how, and by whom?"

"Billy Windover—shot—cattle-thieves!" the Corporal chipped off.

For just the fraction of a second Inspector Barker waited. Then:

"Well? Nothing more?"

The Division knew that tone.

"Two hours before we were informed," apologised the Corporal. "Trouble on the telephone line. Followed the trail—they got the cattle as well—till lost it in fresh tracks of the round-ups."

The Inspector laughed shortly.

"Did you expect a paper-chase trail?"

The Corporal made no reply. Usually it took him a sentence or two to remember the Inspector's impatience, but for the particular interview concerned he observed the training well when he did recall it.

"Why didn't you telephone right away? Why did you give the trail up? Oh, damn it, wait!"

For a moment or two the only sound in the barracks office was the buzzing of the flits on the dirty window glass. Thereafter he was himself.

"Any strangers seen out there in the last couple of days? Any cowboys off their beats?"

"No time yet to enquire, sir."

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately. Did the tracks lead toward the Cypress Hills?"

"No, sir."

"Hm-m-m!"

"A bit north-east—far as we could follow."

The Inspector paused. "What's your plan?"

"Going to scurry round—to look for the cattle."

It came with just a suggestion of defiance, as if the speaker were a little ashamed of the sound of it but was prepared to defend it. The Inspector laughed.

"God bless you!" he mocked. "How did you think of it?"

"The very cattle themselves," Faircloth persisted. "It happens——"

The Inspector's laugh became less pleasant. "And you think——"

"Pardon, sir; but it isn't quite as silly as it sounds. I know this particular herd almost as well as their own punchers—and I think I know something of brands."

"Lad, your optimism is contagious—but this dairy-maid tracking is such a new stunt in the Force. When you come across Co-Bossie and Spot give them my compliments and ask them to drop in some afternoon——"

He sickened of his own banter.

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately," he rasped. "Remain yourself within reach of the phone for fifteen minutes. I'll have a campaign then.... Do you happen to recall that this is the third case of cattle-stealing in your district in a month? ... By the way, know anything about dogs—tracking dogs? I expect a couple of rippers from down East in a day or two. I'll get them out to you. See what you've let the Force sink to! Now hustle!"

He slammed the receiver into its place and sank back in his chair, chin resting on breast. A constable, receiving no reply to his knock, opened the

back door softly—and closed it again more softly. He knew that attitude of his chief.

CHAPTER II

MORTON STAMFORD: TENDERFOOT

Corporal Faircloth hung up the telephone receiver and strolled to the door, still bridling at the Inspector's ridicule. For several minutes he stood looking thoughtfully out on the familiar prairie scene, where not another spot of human life or habitation was visible as far as the dark line of hills to the south-east. But an incongruous telephone line, stretching a zigzag course of rough poles away into the south-eastern distance, told of isolated ranch-houses cuddled in far-away valleys.

A dark spot moved into view over a southern rise and crept along the top. Faircloth instinctively seized a pair of field-glasses from a case hanging beside the door and focused them on the distant rider, then, content, dropped them dreamily back. Away off there lay Dead Dogie Coulee, just now, he knew, full of cattle.

The telephone behind him rang, and he hastened to it, trying to compose himself for the Inspector's orders. But it was not Inspector Barker.

"Hello, Faircloth!" called a laughing voice. "How's the Cypress Hills hermitage?"

"Oh, Stamford!" Faircloth was thinking rapidly. "What's the little editor got on his mind now? Make it brief: I'm expecting the Inspector to call up."

"Why has who been murdered by whom?"

Faircloth laughed. "The brevity of it deserves more than I can tell you. Who told you—anything?"

"The Inspector."

"Then why not get it all from him?"

Stamford chuckled into the telephone at the other end.

"I got the impression that my arrival at the barracks was inopportune. The extent of the particulars I got was a particular request to betake myself elsewhere. I betook. I came to a friend."

"And the friend must fail you. You're too hopeful for the West, Stamford. I'd tell you all I dare—you know that. No, not a bit of use pleading."

"Then," said Stamford, "permit me to tell you to your face that when next I see you I'll——"

Faircloth cut him short with a laugh. "No threats to the Police, little man. I'll tell you what I'll do. On Thursday I'm coming to town for the Dunmore Junction cattle shipping. By the way, as a tenderfoot you should see it. Drive along out and hear the latest. Bye-bye! I'm busy."

* * * * *

Dunmore Junction, bald, bleak and barren, four miles from Medicine Hat, consisted of nothing more than a railway station, a freight shed, and a commodious freight yard, marking the connecting point of the Crow's Nest branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway with the main line. It could not well be more and remain the principal shipping station for the vast herds that roamed the prairies for eighty miles from Medicine Hat. The open spaces about the Junction were necessary for the herding of the steers awaiting their call to the shipping stockades. Even the station staff lived in Medicine Hat, the shifts changing with the arrival and passage of the trains to town.

Thither Morton Stamford, editor of the *Journal*, directed the only trustworthy horse in town and a good-enough buggy. As a new experience he

could not afford to miss the cattle shipping, though the following day was publication day.

Morton Stamford was a tenderfoot. What was more deplorable from his point of view, he looked it. He was small, fair-haired, mild and inoffensive of manner, and from stiff hat to cloth-topped boots was stamped as a fresh arrival from "the cent-belt," as Western Canada termed the petty East where the five-cent piece was not the minimum of exchange.

Two months ago he had dropped from the train at the town of the funny name, attracted as much by the name as by the advertisement in *The Toronto Globe*. When he had succeeded in steeling himself to the general atmosphere of disdain and suspicion, as well as to the rival occupancy of his room at the hotel, he discovered sufficient enthusiasm left to inspect the newspaper he had come to look over. And, having decided that the introduction of modified Eastern methods would be profitable, he had come to terms with the disgusted English proprietor whose stubborn adherence to the best traditions of *The Times* and *The Telegraph* "back home" had, at the end of his resources, convinced him that Huddersfield or Heaven was his home, not the riotous, undignified, unappreciative Canadian West.

Already Stamford had seen more of the real life of the West than many an old-timer citizen of Medicine Hat. Such portions of a spring round-up as were within range of a buckboard, a bucking contest, and limited visits to four ranches had almost made him an authority on Stetsons, chaps, and cowboy slang. He simply doted on cowboys, without discrimination. He loved the Mounted Police, too, who had quickly discovered in him a soul above steers and bronchos; and at his fingertips was a motley assortment of stories of doubtful and certain unauthenticity that painted the future in rosy colours of excited hope just round the corner.

He was small of stature, but imagination and a capacity for thrills are not corporally circumscribed.

When he arrived, Dunmore Junction was no longer lonely. Within two miles of the station platform was more life than Medicine Hat had seen since the buffalo drifted drearily to other hunting-grounds before the civilisation of the rancher and the barbarism of gory hunters. Out there in the rolling folds

of the prairie two thousand head were looking for the last time on their limitless pastures, kept under control by a cloud of cowboys, in herds as distinct as possible according to ownership. Scarcely a steer was visible, but at intervals a wildly riding cowboy dashed from a coulee in pursuit of protest against the extended restraint.

Back of the station, where his livery horse was tied with the care and insecurity of a tenderfoot, a dozen bronchos dozed, a few tied to the rail, most merely with reins thrown to the ground. About Stamford the platform was alive with lounging cowboys in every style of cowboy dress; and among them the station-master and his staff, a couple of brakemen from the shunting-engine crew, and three or four ranchers—scarcely distinguishable from their own punchers to-day—were more alertly eyeing the preparations for the coming task.

For two days it would continue. During that time several score of cowboys would sleep and eat on the prairie, fed from their own mess-wagons, with here and there a bed-wagon, though in the semi-arid belt about Medicine Hat there was little danger of rain from June to September.

It was a Red Deer River shipment. The thin line of ranchers along the Red Deer, sixty miles to the north of Medicine Hat, had combined, but most of the herd belonged to "Cockney" Aikens, of the H-Lazy Z ranch.

Stamford recognised Aikens immediately. Only a blind man would fail at least to see him.

Cockney Aikens, his nickname derived from an aggressive English origin he did his best to flaunt, stood well over six feet without his riding boots, his big frame wrapped in a wealth of muscle no amount of careless indolence could conceal. Handsome, graceful in spite of his lazy movements, he seemed to have gone to brawn. Laughs came easily to his lips, and the noise of them made other sounds pause to listen. "Cockney" was to him a compliment; if anyone implied otherwise he was careful—and wise—to conceal it.

"Hello, you little tenderfoot!" he called, as Stamford wound humbly and unseen through the indifferent wall of Stetson hats, flannel shirts, and leather

or hairy chaps that blocked the end of the platform. "Where's that girl I advertised for?"

Stamford grinned.

"You're an optimist, Cockney. Just as I get some innocent female rounded up to clean your boots, grill a coyote steak, and wield a branding iron between times, she finds out the semi-lunar location of that unearthly ranch of yours. I warned you that the *Journal* might find the missing link, a mother-in-law, or the street address of a Cypress Hills wolf, but a 'general' for the Red Deer—impossible!"

"About all I see for it," growled Cockney, "is to kidnap one—unless you open your eyes to the only possible use for a man of your dimensions and come out to wash my dishes yourself. I'll pay you as much as you can hope to make from that mangy sheet of yours—a more honourable living than robbing a struggling rancher of two shillings for a hopeless ad."

Stamford solemnly produced a large leather purse and extracted a coin from the cash department.

"Here, you overgrown sponge! I figure that ad cost me a quarter in setting, make-up, run, and paper—a shilling, if you can understand no other values. Here's the other quarter. But bear in mind this—if you take it I'll show you up. I'll camp on your trail, rout out your past crimes, and publish them to the last drop of blood. I feel sure you've committed burglary, murder, or arson somewhere in your dark career; and, besides, you're an arrant bully."

Though Stamford knew as much—or as little—of Cockney Aikens' past as the rest of Medicine Hat, and the big rancher's merry and spendthrift ways belied suspicion of irritation at the loss of "two shillings," the blatant exaggeration of the editor failed somehow to carry off the banter lightly. Cockney's face went grim, and a strange silence fell along the platform.

Then Cockney himself smothered it by a physical retort. Reaching over, he seized Stamford's shoulders and lifted him by the coat at arm's length until their faces were on a level.

"If I had this much added to my stature," blustered the editor, in affected fury, vainly striking out his short arms at the face opposite, "I'd punch you on the nose."

"If you were this size," grinned Aikens, "I mightn't take liberties. Just the same," he added, with a ring of boyish disappointment in his voice, "it would be one h—l of a fight. You've got the white matter, I guess, but I'm just spoiling for a rough-and-tumble. I haven't had what you might call exercise since—" he flushed through his tan, "—oh, for a long time."

It so happened that everyone, including Cockney, was thinking of the "exercise" he had once, largely at the expense of the police, town and Mounted; and the memory of it to the one most concerned was not sweet.

A long line of cattle cars rolled quietly down the track before the corrals, a brakesman on the top keeping up a steady signalling to the engine. When the first two cars were opposite the gangways from the two loading stockades, his hand shot out and the train came to a violent halt. Almost instantly the gates at the bottom of the gangways opened and two lines of steers from the crowded, white-fenced pens rushed up the slope to the open doors of the cars.

The lounging cowboys sprang to life. Throwing themselves in excited abandon on their bronchos behind the station, they tore across the tracks and disappeared in the folds of the prairie, shouting, cracking their quirts, laughing taunts at each other, to reappear a few minutes later, little less noisy, behind a small herd of galloping cattle headed for the emptying outer stockades.

It was a scene of blazing life and colour, clamorous, swift, kaleidoscopic. Stamford's eyes blazed. The East seemed such a dull spot in his past. He thought with a cynical smile of how unfitted he was, by nature and acquirement, for a life so deliciously thrilling.

Cockney struck his hands together explosively.

"There's good old beef for good old England, my boy!"

"If you don't mind, Cockney," Stamford grimaced, "would you give me

warning when you have those thunder-claps in mind? You jar me out of focus, mentally and optically.... I wish we had some of that 'good old beef' down at my hotel. I often wonder where the West gets the beef it eats."

"Get a herd of your own, man. I didn't know as much about ranching when I started as you do. There's a million miles of grazing land out about the Red Deer yet."

Stamford made a wry smile. He drew out the large purse and counted three dollar bills and sixty cents in silver.

"Would that start me?" he asked. "Guess I'd have to steal the herd."

"Lots have done that before you," said Cockney, staring over the prairie.

A loose-limbed cowboy, whose chaps seemed to be about to slip over his hips, had drifted over from the stockades as they talked.

"Yes," he exclaimed, slapping Cockney on the back, "good old beef for England, and good old gold for you!"

The jeer in the tone might have passed, Stamford felt sure, but the slap on the back was another matter. He understood Englishmen rather well, Aikens in particular, and he knew that even the King would require a winning smile to gild such familiarity.

Aikens stiffened.

"Once or twice, Dakota," he warned quietly. "I've *looked* what I thought of this particular form of playfulness; now I've *told* you. The natural progression is the laying on of hands—and that'll come next." He turned his back.

Dakota Fraley, foreman of the H-Lazy Z and part owner, tried to laugh it away, but he did not move.

Stamford was apparently absorbed in the procession of steers up the gangways.

"Aren't they a bit thin, Cockney? A month or two more on the ranges

would have rounded them out a bit, eh?"

"There are thousands more out there getting the extra month or two," returned Cockney, with an expansive gesture.

Dakota laughed.

"Somebody musta told him," he said to Stamford. "He don't see the herds twice a year."

"Why should I?" demanded Aikens lightly. "You know all about them. Why do you think I gave you a share in the H-Lazy Z?"

Stamford was unnecessarily embarrassed at the scene. He knew about both men what was generally known. Cockney Aikens was a good-natured, irresponsible fellow, completely ignorant of ranching and as little concerned to learn, quick of temper as of smile, with an unfortunate passion for gambling and a reckless thirst that was sullyng his reputation. Dakota Fraley was a cowboy, by instincts and training, with the untypical addition of a reputation as a "bad actor." Though there was nothing more definitely disreputable known about him than unconcealed disregard for law and order, a few instances of cynical brutality made even ranchers sometimes forget what a profitable enterprise he had made of the H-Lazy Z.

The association of the two men was inexplicable, except for the fact that Aikens, arriving four years earlier from none knew where, with no qualifications for a rancher but the money to start a herd, was just the sort of tenderfoot to swallow Dakota holus-bolus as part of the operation—and then to sit back with the conviction that he had done his share.

A few, including the Mounted Police, knew something of Dakota's past, but in a country where a man's present is all that matters, the story that might have been told died from lack of interest. In a general way it was common knowledge that Dakota had drifted over from the States, a born cow-puncher, broncho-buster, and prairie-man; and at his heels had come a motley assortment of kindred spirits whom Dakota had rounded up as his outfit at the H-Lazy Z. No one could say that the results in cold cash had not justified him.

Dakota stood flipping his quirt against his chaps, a slight frown on his forehead but a forced smirk on his lips.

"It *is* early," he explained to Stamford, "but the prices is good now—good enough to pay to ship. They'll come down, shore thing—and it saves in outfit, thinning out the herds."

"If that gang of toughs we keep about the H-Lazy Z aren't enough to handle twice our herds," observed Cockney, "then I know nothing about ranching."

"You've shore said it right that time, boss," jeered Dakota. "You don't."

"We've the biggest outfit on the Red Deer."

Dakota faced him squarely with angry eyes.

"Say, who's running that end of the H-Lazy Z?"

Cockney's head turned slowly, and Dakota decided to modify tone and language.

"Ain't I getting result? That's all that counts, ain't it?"

All Stamford's experience warned him that they would be at each other's throats in a moment, but his Western life had been too limited to allow for the greater licence where emotions crowd so close to the surface.

He was relieved when both men turned toward the dusty black trail down the grade to Medicine Hat, from which came the soft pad of a cantering horse.

A stodgy little broncho was loping easily along, a woman seated astride its broad back. At such a distance Stamford's only impression was of a perfect equestrienne, mingled with some surprise that a woman should appear in such a scene. Then he became aware of her perfect physique, an overflowing vitality, and an intense pleasure in the very act of riding. It attracted him strangely, for modesty of stature had all his life imposed an undue modesty of manner in his relationship with the other sex. The uncouth shouts of the

cowboys, the rumbling trample of the cattle up the gangways and in the sand-strewn cars, the threatened explosion of the past minute, sank into the background of his mind as he watched.

The longer the silence in his little group, the more the approaching woman looked to him like a studio arrangement that must utterly fail, in the incongruity of its essential parts, to melt into a natural picture. It was impossible to fit her into that background of untilled hills, dead grass, barren waste, though there could never be awkwardness where she was concerned.

Cockney Aikens raised his head with a jerk and stared, frowning in a puzzled way.

Dakota merely glanced at the supple rider and transferred his eyes to Cockney's lace.

"Here's your Yankee, Mr. Aikens," he grinned, and lounged across the tracks to the loading pens, laughing as he went.

The look on Cockney's face warned Stamford to silence, but he trotted to the end of the platform and offered his hand to assist the woman to alight. With a quick flick of her body she stood beside him, rewarding him with a gentle smile as she rearranged her skirts.

"Thank you. Matana will stand by herself."

Her eyes had scarcely paused on Stamford before passing on to the big rancher. Aikens had not moved. With lowered head he was staring at her. She stooped in some confusion and brushed her skirt to smoother lines about her limbs. Then her head went up, and with a nervous laugh she moved swiftly along the platform.

"Mary, what are you doing here?"

"I got tired waiting out there, Jim," she pouted. "It's so lonesome."

Her voice was appealing, yet charged with a nervous independence. Cockney's reply was to stare down on her for a few moments, and turn his

back without another word and follow Dakota to the loading cars.

Never had Stamford longed so intensely for the physique to squeeze an apology from a bully's throat, but the greater desire to hide from the hurt wife what he was thinking made him turn to her with a smile.

"These must be trying days to the shippers—ah—Mrs. Aikens, isn't it? I suppose you've had breakfast? I have, I believe, a bit of chewing gum in my pocket."

"I stopped in town for breakfast," she replied dully, her eyes on the big man climbing lazily to the roof of one of the cars before the gangways. "When I need more I'll go out to our mess-wagon. It'll be out there somewhere with the cattle."

"They've just commenced loading," Stamford went on eagerly. "This is my first experience. You see, I'm the sample tenderfoot in this district. I believe," he added, with a whimsical smile, "I've been that ever since I came."

Her eyes were on him now, and Stamford saw a gleaming smile, behind which lay an ever-gnawing worry.

"You seem to enjoy the distinction so well as to be jealous already of your successor," she said.

"It has its advantages, especially to an editor. It gives me access to the sources of news——"

"Thrusts them at you, in fact," she smiled.

"I trust my news sense culls out the wheat."

"I read the *Journal*," she told him slyly.

"That's the first encouragement I've had since my arrival. Might I give such commendation a fitting place on the front page?"

"Since your arrival," she returned lightly, "the *Journal* has surely added a

new zest to local existence."

He extracted an enormous notebook from a capacious pocket.

"I must make a note of that," he said. "My friends will probably be seeking an epitaph for me shortly. You see, this week I start to collect two months' bills. If I survive that I've announced my intention of learning to ride—rather *starting* to learn. If an indulgent Providence still leaves me on earth, there remains the fare at the Provincial Hotel to seal my fate. Any one of the three, I'm told, is enough to make a man wonder what his friends may select for his tombstone."

Her laugh tinkled spontaneously, so that Cockney rolled over on his elbow to look at her, and a couple of cowboys peeped shyly round the end of the cars and ducked to cover when they realised they were seen.

"A course in ranch-life is what you need, Mr. Stamford. It's only a case of nerves. At the H-Lazy Z, for instance, we have air that can't be beaten, food that will certainly sustain—even salads now and then—and there are a million square miles of soft grass to fall on. Let the collecting out to someone who totes a gun."

"The suggestion is so good," he replied solemnly, "that I take it as an invitation. When the worst threatens, I'll remember the H-Lazy Z—and its—ah—charming mistress."

"Right-o!" she laughed.

"That's your husband speaking," he said. "I suppose living with even an Englishman is contagious."

Her face suddenly went wistful.

"Yes," she agreed absent-mindedly.

Stamford thought he had never before heard so much in a single innocent word.

CHAPTER III

CORPORAL FAIRCLOTH ARRIVES

As the loading fell to a routine it quickened its pace. Every seven or eight minutes the two loaded cars were replaced by empty ones whose floors had already been strewn with sand. When the outer yards emptied their live freight into the loading pens, the cowboys whose duty it was galloped off into the low hills for more. Sometimes Dakota Fraley rode with them, but for the most part he busied himself hastening the loading operations.

Brand-Inspector West, small, wiry-haired, nervous, with worry in his eyes and a semi-apologetic manner he tried in vain to conceal, had much to struggle against in the performance of his duty. Wherever he got he was in the way, principally Dakota's. From the edge of the gangways near the car doors Dakota brushed him unceremoniously; on the stockade fence near the gangways he was a nuisance to the prodders. Here and there he darted, peering through the bars, reaching over the railing of the gangways, snatching hasty glances at the jumbled herds in the outer pens, as inefficient as he was conscientious.

Cockney Aikens lounged on the roof of the loading cars, where he overlooked everything, moving lazily from car to car as they filled and were shunted back. He saw the bewildered efforts of the brand-inspector, and his eyes followed Dakota from place to place, altering their focus sometimes to the pens and gangways below him. As the largest shipper, his foreman, Dakota Fraley, had charge of the operations, and all but a couple of the cowboys about the yards were from the H-Lazy Z outfit.

Mrs. Aikens and Stamford crossed the tracks and stationed themselves near the gangways.

Many of the cattle were of Texan breed, their long white horns swaying

awkwardly up the gangways to catch now and then in car door or fence, momentarily holding up the line. The faster the loading moved, the more disturbing these breaks in the swing of the work. A tremendous steer, its horns projecting over the gangway railing, lumbered up the slope and paused at the car door, doubting the width of the opening. At a vicious prod from Dakota it dashed forward, jammed the point of one horn in the side of the car, withdrew it, and in a panic drove the other horn in the other side.

The line behind, a solid mass, jammed tighter and tighter. Two cowboys leaped to Dakota's assistance, but the steer only closed its eyes to their blows and stood braced.

Cockney, looking down at first with some amusement, saw what was happening back in the gangway and heaved himself upright. Dropping to the side of the gangway, he tossed Dakota and another cowboy to the ground and reached a hand across to either horn. Without apparent effort he forced the steer's head sideways so that its horns ran diagonally with the opening, and, swinging a leg over the railing, kicked the brute forward into the car.

Catching Stamford's admiring gaze he paused only long enough to thrust an unlit cigarette between his lips, before sidling down the outside of the railing to the stockade. There the brand-inspector had stubbornly installed himself, refusing to make way for the prodders and protesting at the speed of the loading. Cockney, holding to the railing with one hand, reached across the backs of the cattle and lifted the little man clear over the gangway, depositing him laughingly on the ground.

"Such a little fellow," he bantered, "yet so much in the way!"

He winked at Stamford and his wife.

West exploded in a typical volley of Western oaths. Cockney waved a finger at him.

"Oh, fie, West! And before ladies! Mary, that's not part of his duties. It's only an accomplishment that has gained him more notoriety than his official capacity. He wants to give the impression of guarding the Great West from cattle-thieving and rustling." He pointed to West's flaming face. "That's not

anger. West never gets mad. It's shame at losing control before ladies."

West's hat came off with a sweeping bow to Mrs. Aikens.

"We don't expect ladies at these little affairs," he apologised. "At the same time"—turning to Cockney—"I must insist on being permitted to do my duty—else I'll order the loading to stop."

Dakota came blustering under the gangway.

"West's got his job to do, Mr. Aikens. Let him alone."

Cockney lolled against the railing, looking with twisted lips down into Dakota's sullen eyes.

"Shall I lift him up where he can see everything, Dakota, and protect him from your bullying?"

Something about it made Dakota's eyes drop.

"Don't mind him, West," soothed the foreman. "You come over here and stand on the fence. As long as you don't get in the way about the gangways you're all right."

Stamford failed to see how any one on the fence, except at the gangways, could see more of the cattle than their backs.

Cockney Aikens watched Dakota thoughtfully as the latter pulled himself to the other gangway. Then he climbed to his old perch on the roof and lay on his elbow without lighting his cigarette. And Mary Aikens watched her husband.

"Poor West!" sympathised Stamford. "He leads a dog's life. I can feel for small men."

He saw she was not listening. "I was saying——"

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening, Mr. Stamford," she said apologetically. "What were you saying?"

"I don't believe I remember. I never say much worth while."

"It wasn't—that," she explained uncomfortably.

Stamford yielded to her embarrassment. "West and your husband should change jobs."

A gust of laughter broke from her lips. It startled him, but he went on:

"I don't think Dakota Fraley would stop Cockney Aikens——"

"Do you think Dakota was doing it purposely?"

Stamford stared. "I didn't think of that. Perhaps—— But why should he ——"

"Of course," she laughed, "why should he?"

"Your husband would make an admirable brand-inspector, and West's size would be no handicap to a rancher."

"Jim isn't a rancher; he wasn't born with the first qualification.... I don't believe that's to his discredit, do you?"

She was challenging him with her eyes, facing him squarely.

"Cockney Aikens possesses the greatest qualification of all," he replied, "—the capacity for picking the right man to boss the job—and the right woman to make such a job on the Red Deer endurable."

"That is very eastern of you, Mr. Stamford," she smiled. "I have known the social life that sort of thing springs from." Her face went dreamy. "The right man, you say—yes—perhaps he has picked—the right man. I suppose—that is a qualification."

Stamford felt constrained once more to change the subject.

From the corner of his eye he saw Cockney suddenly raise himself and look away to the hills. Stamford turned in the same direction.

A Mounted Policeman was seated motionless on his horse on the crest of a rise, looking down on the station yard. For only a moment Cockney looked, then slid from the roof to the gangway railing, a frown on his handsome face. At the same instant Dakota dropped from the fence surrounding the stockade and whispered to a companion, and the two sauntered away round the corner of the cattle pens.

A moment later Cockney sauntered carelessly after them and peered away into the Saskatoonberry and bulberry bushes that filled a coulee extending from close to the tracks. In long strides he retraced his steps, crossed the tracks to his horse behind the station, and loped off over the prairie toward the herd-filled coulees.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHOTS FROM THE BUSHES

Presently the policeman gathered up his reins and came on, casting his eyes about him. While still some distance away, Stamford recognised Corporal Faircloth, his favourite in the local Force.

Their friendship was closer than the ordinary, especially in the West. A couple of months earlier, within a week of Stamford's arrival, the tenderfoot had yielded to the tug of the clear prairie evening and launched himself thoughtlessly on the great stretches of soft moonlight that looked so brilliant from the town, but altered every guide where landmarks were few. So effectively did he tear himself from the rude haunts of men that when he thought of bed he had not the least idea in which direction to seek it. It was an early lesson in the supreme helplessness of being lost on the prairie.

A dim light in the eastern sky was tinging the moonlight when a Mounted Policeman came on him seated hopelessly beside the Trail. Corporal

Faircloth was riding in through the night from Medicine Lodge. From that meeting had sprung a friendship that helped to fill a want that now and then oppressed the editor in the unconventional and thoughtless friendships of the prairie. What a bearing the new companionship would have on his future never entered his head.

Now the Corporal rode slowly along the side of the stockades, staring into the four filled yards, and jogged across the track to leave his horse with the others. Returning on foot, he stopped a moment to greet the two spectators before mounting the gangways.

For a few minutes he stood on the fence, moving from gangway to gangway, making way for the cowboys in their work, but always keeping the operations under his eye. The brand-inspector studied him with covert envy, as the Corporal climbed along the outside of a gangway and placed himself close to one of the car doors. At intervals he strained forward to examine a passing steer, and for an obviously unsatisfied two minutes he lay at length on the roof, head extended over the gangway.

All the time Mary Aikens' eyes followed him as they had her husband a few minutes before.

Suddenly he dropped to the ground and hurried to the stockade fence. For what seemed hours to Stamford's rioting imagination he peered through the heavy rails, restrained excitement in every move. A couple of cowboys moved away, conversing in whispers.

With equally sudden purpose the Policeman climbed the fence, at the same time shouting to West, who, having found a post from which he had not been ousted for five minutes, obeyed reluctantly.

At that moment two rifle shots snapped from the shrub-filled coulee.

Corporal Faircloth straightened up on the fence, and dropped limply outside the pens.

Instantly every cowboy sank to cover, reaching for his gun. Only little Brand-Inspector West scorned danger. He leaped across to the fallen

Policeman and raised his head.

The thing had happened so suddenly that Stamford was too bewildered to move, until the woman at his side dashed beneath the gangways to West's assistance. Stamford turned and ran across the tracks to the station telephone.

As he reached the platform a third shot cut the silence that had fallen about the stockades. Stamford could see the cowboys lying close to the pens glance anxiously about for trace of the third mysterious bullet, and then questioningly to each other. A pair of leather-chapped fellows squirmed round the corner, revolvers poised, and, crouching low, rushed the shrubbery from which the shots had come.

By the time Stamford was back at the tragic group Corporal Faircloth's eyes were opening—such hopeless eyes. He smiled up into the woman's face and seemed suddenly to remember what had happened.

"Tell the Inspector—stop——"

A gush of blood stilled his tongue for ever.

Stamford, staring incredulously into the face of his dead friend, grated his teeth, tears dropping down his cheeks.

"By God!" he hissed. "By God!" he repeated, gripping his fists. It was as if he were taking an oath of vengeance.

Mary Aikens turned her wet eyes up to his with a shudder and burst into violent sobbing.

A dozen cowboys, galloping up with the next herd for the stockades, dashed into the coulee, Dakota Fraley most eager of all. Stamford bent to the body of his murdered friend, and they carried him mournfully over the tracks to the station platform.

As they laid him down on the rough planks, his poor blind eyes turned to the sky he had worked under in every season with the glorious conscientiousness of the Mounted Police, a silent group of cowboys, hats in

hand, crept across the tracks, bearing another body.

Back in the coulee they had come on him, one of themselves, Kid Loveridge, of the H-Lazy Z outfit, shot through the neck. Only one rifle had they found—for they carried rifles only on special work on the prairie—and it lay beside Kid's limp hand, an empty cartridge near.

Round the corner of the stockades Dakota Fraley dashed, pulling up as the second procession laid its burden beside the dead body of the Corporal. He leaned over and looked into the bloodless face of his comrade, seemingly dazed. Then he bit his lip and shifted his head, struggling to face down the grief and horror of it with the grimness fostered in the life he knew best.

"Who did it?" he demanded fiercely. "Who murdered the Kid?"

His revolver was clenched in his hand, pointing skyward. They only looked at him sadly and sympathetically.

"The Kid!" he whimpered, his lip trembling.

Brand-Inspector West spoke:

"Back in that coulee two rifle shots and one pistol shot. We've found only one empty rifle cartridge, a Winchester."

That was the problem that faced the Police when they arrived—Sergeant Prior and Constable Woolsey—riding like mad up the steep trail from Medicine Hat. Not five minutes behind them came Inspector Barker on a light engine, having commandeered it in the station yards as a quicker means of transportation, and as an ambulance for the Corporal, whose death Stamford had not telephoned.

For hours the Policemen ranged the hills, searching, searching. If they found any clue they said nothing of it, but the Inspector's face was ominously grave.

They told their stories, but in the crowding tragedy of it much was omitted, much of no consequence included. Dakota Fraley swore before them

that he himself would find the murderer of Kid Loveridge, if the Police failed.

"The Kid and I," he burst out, "went along together there just before the shooting to where we'd left our horses, and there wasn't a blessed sign of anyone. The Kid struck back for our own bunch, and I climbed the rise to join the drivers. Nobody out there seemed to hear the shots, what with the shouting and the rush of the cattle.... And—and there's the Kid!" His face twisted, and he struggled to hide it with a curse.

Inspector Barker listened without a word.

"Why was Loveridge carrying a rifle?"

"I didn't know he was. I don't believe it's his."

"That's easily proved," said the Inspector. Dakota said nothing more.

Cockney Aikens had ridden in with the Police from their search. He reported that Kid Loveridge had never reached the H-Lazy Z outfit, of course; but his replies were sullen and brief, and Inspector Barker did not press him. At the end Cockney addressed his wife.

"This is less than ever a place for a woman. Go in to town now. I'll be spending the night at the Provincial."

She flinched before the tone of command.

"I'd rather stay here, Jim. I'm not tired. I can get enough to eat at the mess-wagon till you're ready to come with me."

"Best go to town, Mrs. Aikens," Dakota broke in. "We haven't much to spare out there. The boys'll be hungry."

She frowned slightly on him, surprised as much as annoyed. Cockney, too, was watching the foreman.

"Yes, Mary," he said. "I'll be in during the afternoon."

"You shore might as well go too, boss," began Dakota. "There ain't nothing you'd be——"

"Mind your own damn business, Dakota!" Cockney exploded furiously.

Stamford, riding back the down trail to Medicine Hat, was so wrapped in the mystery of the double murder that he forgot next day was publication day. That night his sleep was broken in the cramped little bedroom in the Provincial. When the last form was on the press and everything ready for the newsboys and the mailing, he hired again the unimpeachable horse and good enough buggy and drove out to Dunmore Junction.

The last cars were facing the gangways. A cloud of cowboys was clustered about the stockades, wearily watching the thinning lines move up the gangways, their desultory conversation constantly reverting to the tragedies of the previous day. A thousand times they had reviewed and discussed every phase of it, but the excitement still clung.

Dakota Fraley, raw of temper and untidier than ever, was making notes. With a sigh of relief he snapped the notebook shut and looked out over the prairie. From the low hills was streaming down a line of rocking wagons, their drivers lashing the horses and shouting defiance at each other.

The ranchers from the Red Deer were grouped at one gangway comparing notes—all except Cockney Aikens, who was lolling on a station bench, smoking hard, speaking to no one. He seemed to have aged during the night; in his eyes was a gaunt, wild look, and his clothes were seedy. Stamford read the record of one man's night in town.

The wagons rattled up. Dakota singled one out, stopped it with a peremptory wave, and engaged the driver in low conversation. Stamford moved carelessly nearer. The driver was expostulating, pleading—Dakota obdurate.

"You'll take the north trail right here, see?" he jerked, pointing to where a dim break in the dead grass announced the direct trail to the Red Deer, avoiding the town.

"An' ain't I to have no time in town?" whined the driver. "It ain't my fault that——" His voice sank away.

"You've had two nights of it already. Now git that wagon away as fast as you know how."

The last picture in Stamford's mind of the Red Deer shipping was a stream of swaying wagons rattling down the deep trail to town to the cheers and whip-cracking of their drivers. And off to the north one lone wagon rolled silently and slowly northward over the dead grass toward the lonely stretches of the Red Deer. And Stamford wondered.

CHAPTER V

DAKOTA RUNS AMOK

Cattle shipping, as any other event that collected cowboys, was a time of some anxiety in Medicine Hat. Stores closed early, citizens with any claim to being old-timers—and that was the leading ambition locally—retired unobtrusively to their homes, and even the bars, which stood to profit materially from the visit of lively young bloods whose veins had been swelling for months without outlet—or inlet—contemplated the occasion with misgiving amounting almost to trepidation.

The daily life of the West in those days, especially the part of it that dealt with law enforcement, was sufficient training in itself to arouse something like indifference to ordinary perils. Still, everything considered, it was well not to be associated with the maintenance of peace when broad-brimmed sombreros and sheepskin, angora, or leather chaps careered down Main or Toronto Streets on bronchos that seemed as appreciative of the excitement as their riders themselves.

At such time it was no matter of regret among the Mounted Police that the policing of incorporated towns in the Canadian West was in an equivocal position to which they bowed. According to the strict interpretation of the law, the jurisdiction of the Mounted Police was without geographical limits within the prairie provinces; but no town policeman would admit that such a reading was not blind prejudice. Thus it came to pass, to avoid endless squabbling and overlapping, that the red-coats confined their attention to the great stretches where man was seldom seen breaking the law—until such time as the town police, in shamefaced recognition of their physical limitations, called in their better known brethren.

When the cowboys ran amok in town, he was a tenderfoot red-coat who envied the town policeman his monopoly.

There is little inherently bad about the cowboy. Normally he is fairer, more gallant and honest than the ruck of Westerners who have gone West with their eyes blinded by dollars. Often a shocking cold-bloodedness marks his revenge or anger, but it is usually frank and fair, according to his lights, a development of the hard life he lives.

Out there on the prairie no house is locked. There, where the nearest neighbour may be hours of hard riding distant, no decent woman need be afraid.

But lope the same gallant, honest cowboys into town in a group of a fine evening, and it is best to be where they aren't. To them town is the visible epitome of all they condemn: luxury, inexperience, flaccidity, nervousness; the source of that impending peril, the farmer. Town has its uses, the admissible ones being the amusement and accommodation of visiting ranchers and their outfits.

And one of the readiest amusements, and usually the cheapest, is impressing the townsman.

Dakota Fraley and his gang were peculiarly trained to enjoy this form of amusement. Over in Montana, where they came from, the law was less confining—a mere matter of solitary sheriffs, probably recruited from among themselves after the excitement of punching palled. This side of the border it

was more relentless, depending upon straight-shooting, fearless, hardriding, uniformed officials who scorned the assistance of posses and were only the human representatives of an overwhelming force that could not be stayed by a thousand rifles or reputations. To have a chance to break loose in such a tight-laced country was like rolling out a pent-up oath when the parson's back is turned.

Dakota and his mates hated Canada, as a burglar hates an electric alarm, because a flesh-and-blood gunman hadn't a chance. They hated the townsman especially because of his insulting confidence in the protection of the law.

Most of all they hated the Mounted Police.

When the last steer had lumbered up the gangway and been locked in the last car, Dakota and his companions lingered on the trail to town. They knew their unpopularity with the other outfits and resented it. The Mounted Police knew, in the course of their intimate investigations into the past of everyone who ever came West, that this feeling was no novelty to Dakota's comrades. They were almost as unpopular in their own country. Indeed, under adequate pressure Inspector Barker might have told an interesting story of the reason for Dakota's change of climate.

On South Railway Street the H-Lazy Z outfit pulled up. Here were the most bars, and since these were crowded they split into small groups and divided their patronage. The Royal, the Commercial, the European, the Cosmopolitan were treated impartially, for they all served equally potent liquid. Disregardful of toes and elbows and prior rights, they dived into the crowds and for fifteen minutes kept the perspiring dope-slingers busy on recklessly juggled concoctions.

From Inspector Barker's window across the tracks four Mounted Policemen sighed; they read the story of the night ahead, without being within sight of the labels on the bottles.

After that a breathing space of ominous quiet, for the cowboys were gorgeously hungry after two days of mess-wagon fare.

Every hotel in town was prepared, though they had nothing to fear but

hunger. Not one of the cowboys was likely to impose in the dining-room. They might, within the last two minutes, have been shooting up the town, filling themselves on rot-gut, cursing each other and everything else with fraternal abandon or fighting with the ruthlessness of fiends. In the dining-room they became more formal than the freshest "remittance-man" from "back home." They might hanker to seize their soup plates and gulp the contents into impatient throats, but they genteelly spooned it up, tilting it daintily to the last drop. They might tackle poached eggs with a knife, but they contemplated their comparative failure with gravity and patience. They never smiled or spoke above a whisper; and before they appeared at the table each and every one had stood in line in the hotel lavatory for a turn at the common brush and comb—unchained, because there was no danger of theft.

As befitted his rank, Dakota selected the Provincial, taking with him his crony, Alkali Sam. They would meet the others in the market-place after "dinner"—for the Provincial alone, run by a venturesome and popular Englishman, insisted on that untimely designation for its night meal.

Having introduced to their plated interiors all the liquid refreshment the remainder of the evening's entertainment could handle with steady aim, they recalled the assignation. Thither they repaired, solemnly studying legs and hands to verify their good judgment, nevertheless exhilarated by anticipation.

In the market-place Bean Slade, Muck Norsley, General Jones, the Dude, and a few lesser lights of the H-Lazy Z outfit, together with kindred spirits from other ranches, were impatiently cursing the wasted time, with the bars still open and their thirst unquenched. When the foreman arrived they cursed him and his companion with unaffected impartiality, tightened the cinches, rubbed the noses of their mounts, and climbed to the saddles.

When they dashed through the narrow exit to Toronto Street the fun was on.

Dakota struck straight for the Provincial opposite—a brilliant idea that staggered them all.

Now, the front door of the Provincial was attainable only by climbing fourteen steep steps and crossing a deep verandah. The height enabled

loungers to expectorate in comfort over the railing to the sidewalk without inconveniencing themselves, and to some extent discouraged the visits of the too heavily loaded, who naturally gravitated to the more accessible bar door, situated lower down the street and on the street level.

Those fourteen steps had acquired a reputation that subdued the wildest spirits—like a Mounted Policeman's uniform. But one of Dakota's favourite amusements back in Montana—a stereotyped one in a cow country—was to ride through the saloon doors. To-night he was in the precise humour for shocking convention. Accordingly eight confirmed loungers were much scandalised by the nose of Dakota's horse thrusting itself in their midst.

Judas—Dakota's own name for his mount, because, as he said, you never know when he's going to sell you—lowered his head in response to the swift lash of Dakota's quirt, fixed his eyes on the centre step of the flight and ate up the climb in two leaps, drawing up with a slide as nose and neck protruded through the front door. Thereupon Dakota gently urged him into the rotunda, dodging the chandelier, and pulled up before the dining-room door, where he leaned forward, Stetson in hand, to see what the diners were making of it.

Somewhat subdued by the simplicity of the proceeding and the loneliness of the adventure, he lay back on Judas' rump to negotiate the descent, and a bit shamefacedly rejoined his companions in the street.

Perhaps it was to cover his embarrassment that he opened the night's performance without loss of time.

Whirling Judas on his hind legs, he dashed spurs into him and roared down Toronto Street, shooting into the air as he went, with eight or ten shrieking, shooting companions behind him.

At the corner of South Railway Street the gas-lamp caught his eye. A quick shot scattered the globe, but Medicine Hat's gas, that gushed from an unlimited sea of natural supply six hundred feet down in the earth, continued to blink at him from an undamaged mantle.

"Thunder!" he snorted. "I must be drunk."

The next shot re-established his self-confidence.

Someone beside him banged a bullet through the transom of a store entrance, another brought down fragments of a telephone insulator, and two or three, catching sight of an open window, imprinted their valentines on the ceiling beyond.

Every door was closed and bolted, not for fear of looting—no cowboy would stoop to that—but in instinctive exclusion of lawlessness. So that the few caught on the street had no way of escape. Dakota recognised it first. Two or three well-directed shots into the pavement about their feet invariably drove pedestrians back against the wall, hands raised, a mere act of polite acceptance of the fact that the cowboys owned the town.

Two women scurried in a panic for a locked door, screamed, and turned blanched faces to the terror. Dakota raised his arm, shouted, and on the instant every mouth closed, every finger was held. With doffed Stetsons, guns pointing to the sky, a band of dare-devil cow-punchers trotted meekly past the terrified women, bowing as they went, and twenty yards beyond broke loose with redoubled vigour.

At the corner of Main Street every eye flicked across the tracks to the barracks, but things seemed lifeless there.

Up a deserted Main Street they blazed their way. A couple of small store windows "holed" before them, one, struck at an angle, falling to pieces. More gas lights went dark.

Morton Stamford, busy in his scrubby little office on the weekly accounts of publication day, heard the shooting and threw up his window to watch the cowboys thunder past. When Dakota whirled in his saddle and sent a bullet on either side of his head, Stamford cudgelled his panicky brain for a reasonable and dignified excuse for retirement from the limelight. Failing to find one, he stuck there, with his head through the window. After the clamour had passed on into Main Street he carefully traced the bullets through the partition to the outer office and tried to hoke them as souvenirs from the brick wall with a paper knife. Then he tiptoed to the window and, standing well back, pulled it down and locked it, though by that time the shooting had

dimmed away.

Thrilled with the incident, Stamford hastily planned a letter to an old newspaper friend down East who could make use of vivid little bits like that, with sundry touches of imagination that would be certain to rouse an Eastern outcry. He could draw pictures like that any time he wanted, and his friends back East had long since decided that he was either a fool or a hero.

Suddenly he remembered that he had not dined. It was then he became aware of a revival of the clamour in another direction. And as it did not seem to be coming to him, he went out to it. On Toronto Street he stood for a minute to locate the disturbance, but, hunger getting the better of his curiosity, he began to trot toward the Provincial Hotel.

Round the corner above him careened the cowboys into Toronto Street, now lifeless save for the little figure of Morton Stamford hurrying to dinner.

Dakota saw him. It was nothing short of insult, this indifferent little tenderfoot waggling his legs down the street before them. Stamford was only half way to safety when Dakota whirled up behind him on the sidewalk and, expecting him to duck to the shelter of a doorway, wheeled off to one side only in time to escape riding him down. Judas' sides brushed Stamford's shoulder, so near a thing was it for the editor.

In a flash Dakota was around, and three shots in quick succession close to Stamford's feet were sufficient to warn any but the rankest tenderfoot what was expected of him. A fourth removed his stiff hat. The next struck the edge of his boot sole. Something told him he was dangerously unconventional. He looked up with a smile into the faces of the crowding cowboys.

"You don't seem to like me, Dakota."

"Like you, you little sawed-off! Never paid so much 'tention to a tenderfoot in my born days afore. I fair love you. Same time, I'd like to see you back again that wall and h'ist your hands. These is our streets to-night."

Stamford continued to grin about him.

"I was just on my way to dinner, Dakota," he said, and stooped to pick up his hat.

"You won't need any—ever!" yelled Dakota furiously, reaching for his second gun.

But certain slow processes in the brain of the solitary town policeman had evolved the decision that the town's peace was being breached at last. From the shadow of an adjacent doorway he stepped and seized Judas' bridle.

"Stop it, Dakota! You get right away home. There's a good-sized bill against you already. There'll be another not so easy to pay if you don't vamoose."

But Dakota's anger was riding the crest of his liberal potations; and anyway this was only the town policeman. Clubbing his gun, he leaned over Judas' neck and struck. As he did so, he was bumped into on the off side and in the effort to retain his seat the gun dropped to the sidewalk.

"Cut that out, Dakota, you tarnation ijut!" growled Bean Slade. "This ain't no skull-crackin' holiday. Neither it ain't Montany. Not by a damn sight!" he added, with sudden excitement, pointing down the street with his quirt.

Round the corner from South Railway Street four Mounted Police were riding nonchalantly.

Dakota looked from the red town-uniforms of the Police to the little figure hurrying up the Provincial steps. But the sudden burst of life behind him decided him for discretion. Up the street, faster than they had ridden in their orgy, a group of satisfied cowboys tore.

Medicine Hat reopened its windows. The loungers reappeared on the Provincial verandah. Evening strollers returned to the streets. Inspector Barker locked his office door and went home to a tardy supper.

Three days later a khaki-coated Policeman loped up to the cook-house

door of the H-Lazy Z, stooped to look inside, and spoke:

"Dakota, I want you."

Six cowpunchers gasped. Dakota opened his mouth and closed it without speaking, but his face reddened.

"Come here!"

Dakota stumbled to his feet and came to the doorway. Constable Hughes handed him a blue paper and waited for the reading. Dakota's anger flamed. With an oath he tore the paper in two—but as the two parts separated, his hands stayed.

"Now you're coming with me, Dakota Fraley!"

The Policeman dismounted without haste and stepped up to the part-owner of the best paying ranch in the Medicine Hat district, the boss of the toughest outfit of cowpunchers in Western Canada.

"Well, this is one h—l of a country!" growled Dakota, putting on his Stetson and starting for the stables.

"It *might* be," said Hughes.

CHAPTER VI

STAMFORD MAKES A DECISION

Morton Stamford sat in his office staring at a blank sheet of copy paper. Already he was an hour behind his schedule for the day, and the compositors upstairs had sent down twice for copy. According to schedule this was his

morning for preparing the week's editorials, but, though the town bell would announce noon in less than half an hour, he had not yet written a word.

What he should like to say he dare not. A certain diffidence, impelled by his Western experiences, held his pen from an attack on the Mounted Police. Back East as a newspaperman he had worked in so closely with the local police that he knew their every move in the development of their cases. Yet in the ten days since the murder of his friend, Corporal Faircloth, the Mounted Police seemed to have done nothing. Stamford knew of no clue, no sleuthing, and only vague suspicions. As a dignified newspaperman there was deep within him an instinct that he should, therefore, accept it as evidence of official inertia.

As a newspaperman, too, he had struggled to arrive at definite deductions as to the murderer, only to be confronted with a blank wall that drove him to the beginning again to reconstruct his case. It was the dead body of Kid Loveridge that upset all his calculations. The Kid's reputation was more along the line of proving him a murderer than the murdered, and that there was any connection between the Corporal and one of the wildest cowboys in Western Canada was impossible.

Hitting in and out of his conjectures were the forms of Cockney Aikens and Dakota Fraley, two men apparently as antagonistic in inclinations as they were intimate in business interests. Cockney's careless, good-natured ways appealed to him in a way that denied belief in inherent badness. Yet he had gathered the impression during the Police investigations on the spot that the big Englishman was not outside their suspicions. He resented that. Cockney was a friend of his. If the Police were working on that line he was prepared to stake——

His ruminations were interrupted by the opening of the door to the outer office, and the clumsy tramp of a heavy man. For a moment he waited for the familiar tap on his own door. All Medicine Hat knew where to find him. Not hearing the expected summons, he went out.

A great hulk of a stranger was standing in the middle of the office, feet braced, peering about him through large horn spectacles. His shoulders were stooped, his hands limp and awkward, his whole attitude and appearance

more than hinting at anæmia and flabbiness. On his long black hair was perched a ludicrously small stiff hat; and he wore a high white collar and loose black bow tie, a suit built in a factory, and a pair of "health" boots that could not possibly possess any other attraction.

He seemed entirely oblivious of Stamford's presence, continuing to stare about at the untidy arrangement of tables and chairs, and over the partition that separated the office from the "job" room. He was interested; also he was accustomed to concentrating.

Stamford wanted most to laugh. The fellow filled the office with such an air of innocent curiosity that he felt no resentment at his own small share in the scene.

Someone laughed from the doorway, and Stamford started. It was such a merry, chuckling sort of laugh, so much in line with just the feeling Stamford himself had, that, though the laugh was a woman's, he vaguely thought of some uncanny echo that repeated what was in his mind.

When he turned to the doorway he was more doubtful than ever of the reality of the scene. A girl stood there—a beautiful girl—Stamford realised that first of all. Under her soft felt hat, with a sprig of flowers slanting nattily up toward the back, a fluffy bit of dark brown hair protruded. Stamford saw that next. He had a curious feeling that it would be nice to touch—and he flushed at the entrance of such unaccustomed thoughts.

She was looking at him, quizzically, still laughing. One little step forward she took.

"Amos," she said, and in the tone was the indulgence of a mother, though the man was years her senior, "Amos, don't you think you two had better meet? This is my brother Professor Amos Bulkeley, of the Smithsonian Institute," she said, turning to Stamford.

Her brother swept his big frame about with the cheeriest of smiles and extended his hand.

"You're the local editor, I suppose," he said, in a gentle voice. "We've

come to you for help—naturally. Appealing to a newspaper for help is a habit we all have, from politicians up to ordinary burglars."

"So long as you're not collecting," grinned Stamford, "my resources are at your command. My week's accounts show that last week my charity expenses were seven dollars and twenty-five cents. To date that's about my net income per week."

"It's only information we're collecting," explained the girl. "We——"

"Excuse me, dear." Her brother stopped her sternly. "You haven't yet met Mr.—Mr.——"

"Morton Stamford," said the editor.

"Mr. Stamford, my dear. Mr. Stamford, this is my sister Isabel, as yet possessing the same ultimate name as myself. But there's still hope."

"I'm certain of it," murmured Stamford over her hand.

"Ahem!" said the Professor. "That's not starting badly."

"If you imply by that that we're to see more of each other——" began Stamford gallantly—and went crimson with wonder at the strange things his tongue was saying.

"Ahem again!" said the Professor slyly. "Isabel, I have always thought, has such a strange effect——"

"I'm sure Mr. Stamford has other uses for his time, Amos, and so have we." Isabel Bulkeley was blushing a little herself.

"I forgot," apologised the Professor. "This is strictly business. I'm here—we're here in the interests of the Smithsonian Institute. You may not suspect it, but you have history embedded in you—in the form of fossils that should have disappeared when your much-removed grandpa was scuttling through the tree-tops by his tail. I'm in hopes that the geanticlinal discoveries of my predecessors among the argillaceous cliffs of the Red Deer River will support my contention that somewhere the course of the river to the north of

you may yield up the secrets of the Triassic, or at least the Jurassic stage of the Mesozoic period. Perhaps the Palæozoic. Who knows?"

"I confess *I* don't," said Stamford. "In fact, except that you seem to be using the language my mother taught me, I wouldn't know what you're talking about, were it not that I happen to be aware of the palæontological discoveries on the Red Deer. But that was three hundred miles west of here."

"I'm anxious to get beyond their tracks," said the Professor. "It was the New York fellows worked there—our deadly rivals. I contend that the Red Deer River did not in those days boast of circumscribed summer resorts. Why, a megatherium could lunch at Red Deer town and dine in Medicine Hat—at least the one *I* want to find could."

"And how can I help you?" asked Stamford.

"We don't know a thing—how we get there, where we can stay, what we can do."

"At last," sighed Stamford, "there's a tenderer tenderfoot than myself. For two long months I've been the baby of the Western family. Now I'm ousted from the cradle."

The Professor examined his own huge body doubtfully.

"How big's this cradle?" he asked.

"It'll hold you and your sister," replied Stamford gallantly. "But the man you want to see is Inspector Barker. In the West it's different: you don't consult the newspaper, but the Mounted Police."

He tapped a bell, and the "devil" stumbled down from the composing-room overhead.

"Give these to Arthurs," Stamford ordered, grabbing a handful of clippings from the pigeon-hole. "They'll keep him busy. I'll be out for a while. Watch the office till Smith comes back."

"I'm taking you down to the barracks myself," he explained to his visitors.

"The Inspector might suspect you of ulterior motives. I confess," he added whimsically, "that you're different enough to justify it."

Inspector Barker and the editor of the *Journal* were on the best of terms. In Stamford's little body was all the romance of men physically unfitted to play a part in the pictures of their imagination; he had a scalp that tingled easily. And the Inspector had experiences to tell that would tingle any scalp not fossilised—as well as little reluctance about clothing his experiences with what might have happened. It wasn't often he was free to let himself loose to such an appreciative audience whose ideas could expand several sizes in response to a good yarn.

But it was plain enough that Professor Bulkeley was more susceptible, less inclined to question the reasonableness of the wildest yarn. The Inspector received him and his sister with generous hand, and a smile that took them to his heart. And their summer plans only added to his eagerness. This was something new in an extended experience popularly considered to have covered every possible phase of Western life.

"All the way from Washington, D.C., eh? Special visit to our benighted town, eh? Flattered is too mild a word. Bringing your sister adds the last drop to our overfull bucket of gratitude."

"Isabel," asked the Professor gravely, "did he put it as nicely as Mr. Stamford, d'ye think?"

The Inspector gurgled into his moustache, but Stamford was annoyed.

"You'll stay at the Double Bar-O," said the Inspector, getting down to business. "I think that'll give you a good centre to work from. Westward is only the H-Lazy Z. I don't think you'd care to stop there. Cockney Aikens is a queer fish. You mightn't understand him."

Stamford, in thought, came valiantly to Cockney's support. He was certain the Police had ideas about the big rancher that they did not care to disclose.

"The Double-Bar-O!" repeated the Professor. "What is it—a hotel?"

Stamford and the Inspector laughed.

"A ranch," explained the latter. "My dear man, your nearest hotel, when you get to the Red Deer, is over there on South Railway Street."

"But will they—will they take us in?"

"Professor Bulkeley," said the Inspector proudly, "this is Western Canada. You can lift the latch of any ranch in the country, any day, any time, and there's a plate and a bed for you as long as you wish to remain."

"But—ah—the pay? How much—about how much——"

"The only thing I forgot," interrupted the Inspector, "is to warn you that your welcome is limited to the period during which you don't mention pay."

"But we're strangers——"

"That's the only excuse for your suggestion. There are no strangers in the West in that sense of the word."

"So hospitable—so generous—so utterly natural!" beamed the Professor to his sister. "I suppose there's a livery here—with a nice buggy and a gentle horse that I can rent for two or three months."

Inspector Barker stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

"There are liveries—yes—but they won't let you have a horse for that long." He looked up suddenly. "Let me supply you. I've a couple of horses out there eating their heads off. It's cheaper for us to hire the few times we need them. But for goodness' sake, leave the buggy out. This is not a country for driving—not if you can ride. But perhaps your sister——"

"Isabel," declared the Professor proudly, "is a centaress." He added with a deprecatory grin: "I've never been on a horse in my life."

"Amos is going to learn some day," said Isabel hopefully. "Aren't you, Amos? Perhaps this is his chance—out on the boundless prairie."

"Miss Bulkeley," Stamford warned, "I wouldn't speak of the prairie as boundless. They'll think you're a poetess—and try to unload on you a parcel of worthless real estate. We're just hungry for people like that out here. But," he added dryly, "I don't believe they'll succeed."

"Is it a compliment, Mr. Stamford?" she asked gaily.

"No," he replied solemnly, "it's the truth."

"How ingenuous! How simple and sweet and natural!" gushed the Professor. And the little editor bemoaned his lack of inches.

"Ah, man, man!" teased the Inspector, when brother and sister were gone, the cumbersome Professor passing before the window a foot behind his quick-stepping sister. "In the West it's always Spring. A country that hasn't women enough to go round——"

"What in blazes are you driving at——"

"I didn't think it was in you, Stamford. I'm delighted to see something of the gallant again; I thought the West had lost it all these many years—or never had it. The poor Corporal had traces of it—— Ah!" as Stamford frowned, "I thought you had something heavier than a pretty girl on your mind when you called. Now, let's have it."

Stamford brought his fist down on the desk.

"Who murdered Corporal Faircloth?"

Inspector Barker readjusted the ink-well.

"If you don't mind, my boy, keep your thumping for your own desk. I have this one reserved."

Stamford, stubborn as small men can be, threw himself into a chair, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"In ten days—what have you done? That's what I want to know. What are you planning to do? I'm going to sit here till you tell me."

The Inspector frowned, then smiled grimly.

"We close at six. Those who stay later—spend the night in there." He indicated the door leading to the cells.

Stamford's scowl drifted into a shamefaced shaking of the head.

"You don't seem to realise that your third in command was foully murdered, almost under your very nose! You don't——"

"Listen, Stamford! Did you ever hear of a murdered Mounted Policeman unavenged? Did you ever know the Mounted Police to drop the chase—even for shooting an antelope out of season?"

"But you've done nothing—nothing."

"We don't report to the *Journal*—it's not in the regulations."

"And there's Billy Windover," Stamford stormed on. "You haven't discovered his murderer."

"Wrap them in the same parcel——" The Inspector stopped abruptly.

"But I thought you suspected Cockney Aikens."

The Inspector turned on him fiercely. "Who said we suspected him—anyone? Stamford, Faircloth was your friend; he was not only my friend for five years but my third in command for two. Don't you think you'd better consult an oculist? We *always* suspect—everyone."

"Then why didn't you round up the whole gang that day?"

"Including yourself and Mrs. Aikens, Inspector West, four ranchers, sixty cowboys——"

"But I——"

"Yes, I know. Same with the others. It isn't always the obvious that explains. Suppose we'd arrested Cockney—or anyone at that time, where

would have been our proof? We didn't even find the rifles—except Kid Loveridge's. Clues don't grow on bulberry bushes in a country where everyone can shoot—and so many do."

Stamford was thinking rapidly. The repetition of Cockney's name seemed to confirm his suspicions of the direction of the Police search.

"The thing has got a bit too much for my nerves—or something," he declared abruptly. "I've got to get away from it for a time—take a holiday. In reality it was to tell you that I came down."

"It isn't in the Police regulations, you know."

"Perhaps not, but I wanted you to know in case—in case anything happened."

"Nothing will happen—if you mind your own business."

But Stamford did not seem to hear; he was examining himself in a broken-framed mirror above the desk.

"I need bucking up. Meals—change of air—new methods and manners—something doesn't agree with me. I can't sleep."

"Never mind explaining," grunted the Inspector. "I'm not interested in your health. Here's West now. I've an appointment with him."

"By the way, West," he said, as the brand-inspector entered, "the local scribe is enquiring why we didn't arrest the whole countryside for Faircloth's murder that day."

West smiled in some confusion.

The Inspector laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, West, you're as critical as he. But if you—or Stamford here—had given me that day the details you've remembered since, other things might have happened."

"But I knew—I saw everything!" stammered Stamford.

"And told so little," snapped the Inspector. "So many after-thoughts are too late!"

He waved Stamford out. As the editor passed through the door he turned.

"Honest now, Inspector, whom do you suspect?"

But the Inspector was already talking to the brand-inspector.

The door closed—and opened again to admit Stamford's head.

"By the way, Inspector, I didn't tell you where I was going to take my holiday."

"You don't need to. The H-Lazy Z's as good as anywhere. Tell the Professor—if you see him; the Double Bar-O's only ten miles away—that I'm of the opinion that the schistosity of the stratification in the flexure of the Cretaceous period exposed thereabouts will simplify his investigations—or words to that effect. Give my love to his sister."

When the door closed again the Inspector ruminated. Then he scribbled a message to the police back at Stamford's Ontario home and called a constable to despatch it.

"West," he said, wheeling suddenly on the brand-inspector, "you don't happen in your wanderings to have come across two large dogs new to the district—part Russian wolf, part greyhound, I believe? A week ago they were under lock and key in the barracks corral. One night they disappeared. Nobody seems to have seen or even heard them go—and they were wild as wolves, with a howl that would shame a husky on a Labrador island on a moonlight night."

"Hm-m-m!" grunted the brand-inspector. "Large tracking dogs in the Police corral—deductions obvious."

"I don't care a hang for deductions. It's the dogs I want obvious. I was depending on them to run down these measly cattle-thieves who've been fooling my men all year. I thought maybe a good hound or two——"

"So did the cattle-thieves apparently," laughed West.

"Therefrom comes one interesting deduction; the cattle-thieves are local. But the stealing is too persistent and small to be otherwise."

"And now, I suppose, you'll get another pair to track the first?"

"No-o," replied the Inspector cheerfully. "It only makes another mystery to solve. At one time this looked like being a dull summer."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE H-LAZY Z

Cockney Aikens was striding up and down the little gravel walk before the ranch-house—the walk that Mary herself had built from the loose rock of the river-bed—his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Mary, raising her head sadly from her work to peer at him through the window, read the symptoms. So did the cluster of grinning cowboys from the darkened depths of the cookhouse.

Presently Cockney stopped in his stride to stare off over the valley to the opposite cliff, his eyes returning slowly to the trail and away up it toward town, sixty miles away.

Muck Norsley, from far back in the cook-house, looked through the window, watch in hand.

"Yer winning, Gin'ral, o.k. Jest about seventeen minutes now, I reckon, and he'll be saddling—unless he has to black his boots and crease his pants."

Cockney turned suddenly, kicked two innocent stones into the grass, and pushed open the ranch-house door.

"Mary, I'm off to town."

He spoke roughly. She lifted the sock she was darning and set it on the table.

"You'll take me this time, won't you, Jim?"

"Haven't you enough here to keep you busy?" He would not meet her eyes. "A fellow don't want a woman tagging after him every time he goes to town."

"He doesn't have her," she replied with quiet dignity.

She might have told him that one of the troubles was that she had *too much* to do about the H-Lazy Z. Most of her married life had been a drudgery, girls refusing to drown themselves in the isolation of the Red Deer—sixty miles from town, without a living soul between, and the nearest ranch ten miles to the east. Westward was nothing but wilds for further than anyone had travelled.

A tear squeezed into her eyes. He saw her struggling to hold it back, and hastily retreated outside.

The H-Lazy Z ranch may not have been quite equal to its reputation in a district where not a dozen citizens had ever visited it, but it could boast of luxuries—especially its ranch-house—that few other ranches considered worth the trouble and expense. This ranch-house was a two-story structure of numerous and ample rooms, erected by one with money to spare and English ideas of expenditure.

When Cockney Aikens selected his wife in a mid-Western American town on one of the many unreasonable and indefinite trips he made in those days to distant parts, he insisted on leaving her at her own home until he had built for her a residence his uncertain conscience told him was fit for a woman.

In those days Mary Aikens wanted her Jim more than *any* house but Cockney was obdurate, with a stubbornness that hurt her lovesick heart early in their married life. He had won her rapidly, with his big, joyous, reckless

ways, and his pictures of the life in the Canadian West. With four years to look back on since she left the Eastern seminary, her little body crammed with romance, his pictures were all the more alluring from the monotonous similarity and repetition of the letters of her late schoolmates, each of whom, according to her own story, had captured the one and only sample of real American manhood.

When a girl's friends write month after month of home magnificence that radiates largely round the conventional "carriage and pair" that is the dream of schoolgirls, a whole ranch of horses and cattle looks like the earmarks of a fairy prince, especially when they belong to such a stunning big chap as Jim Aikens.

Mary Aikens often looked back on those days now with a sad smile. Jim was still the stunning big chap—at times. At other times—— But that was the effect of Western haze. In the two years of their married life she had never become really acquainted with her husband. At the very moment—it happened again and again—when the sympathy she craved was lifting the latch, Jim Aikens kicked it from the door with brutal foot and rode madly off on the southern trail on one of his periodical sprees in town.

The ranch-house stood half way down a long slope that stretched northward to the Red Deer River. A half-mile away, across a valley that might have been a garden in a wilderness, rose a sheer line of jagged cliffs, before which ran the tumbling river. Up and down the stream, on both sides of it, sometimes crowding the current, sometimes set back of a deep valley filled with weirdly protuberant mounds of rock from about which the soft clays had been washed by the rains and currents of ages, the cliffs were repeated. Only at long intervals did the banks slope to the river as they did before the H-Lazy Z ranch buildings, and that only on the southern shore. Elsewhere the Red Deer rushed through hundreds of miles of a hundred-and-fifty-foot canyon.

Two hundred yards from the house—Dakota Fraley had insisted on the distance—the cook-house, bunk-house, stables and corrals began, and spread out over the eastern end of the valley in conventional disarray, the bottom corral touching the rough beach that there lined the river. Dakota had no stomach for skirts about the place, especially the kind he imagined his wild

master would bring. In that he failed to understand Cockney.

Before the ranch-house door Dakota met his partner retreating from Mary's tears. Behind the foreman two or three cowboys lounged in the open doorway. Three others rolled off toward the stables.

Cockney stood still, watching them with lowering eyes.

"Why the samhill, Dakota, do we need such a bunch of roughnecks about the place?" he exploded. "Every time I see them they make me think of a gang of Whitechapel foreigners fresh from Russia, or Hungary, or Poland. If they hadn't guns on their hips, there'd be knives in their bootlegs or stilettos up their sleeves."

Dakota laughed in a nasty way.

"Best bunch of cowpunchers in Alberta—in America, for that matter. Look at the ranch they've made for you."

Cockney made a wry face. "Gad! I could do without some of the dollars for cheerier countenances about me. They look as if they'd murdered their mothers and were looking for the rest of the family."

"What's it matter to you," Dakota growled, "so long's they fix you up for your gambling and boozing? You better cut butting in on personnel. That's *my* third of the partnership."

Cockney was in a vile humour—that always came with his craving for town; and his wife's wet eyes had not improved matters.

"Don't forget, Dakota," he said, with deadly calmness, "it's only a third. I provided all the capital."

"And don't *you* forget, *Mister* Aikens, that I purvided all the experience—and I'm still purviding it, far's anyone can notice—and all the work and the worry. You better go and get drunk. We don't need you. We got *real* work to do."

Cockney restrained himself.

"What are you on now?" he enquired.

Dakota's eyes fell. He turned about and looked back toward the cook-house.

"Oh, nothing special; just the usual rush. This time it's a lot of riding, looking up a bunch of mavericks that uv been kicking up the devil. Missed 'em in the round-up and they've got chirpy."

"You're sure they're ours?"

Dakota swung on him angrily.

"What the h—l you mean? Think I'm rustling? *Shore* they're ours. They've gone rampaging down Irvine way with a little bunch of steers that broke from the nighthawks a couple of days ago."

"Be away long?"

"Four or five days, I guess. You needn't worry your head. You couldn't help none."

Cockney made no reply, though he winced a little at the sneer.

"Off to town, I see," jeered Dakota. "Best place for you—when you feel that way. Taking the missus?"

Cockney remained silent, thinking.

"Or are you leaving her to us?"

Without moving his feet, Cockney's great fist shot out and caught the side of Dakota's head. As his back struck the prairie the cowboy reached for his gun, but Cockney was on him with a bound, wrenching one gun from his hand and another from a loose pocket in his chaps. With one hand he lifted Dakota to his feet and released him.

"I don't like the way you speak of my wife," he thundered.

Dakota, helpless and a little cowed without his guns, glared his fury.

"It's as good as you *treat* her," he snarled.

Cockney started.

"She's my wife," he said, with a new dignity.

"I don't know what you was brung up to, but in this country we'd think that something to *show*, not just to talk about."

"Don't let me hear you talking about her," warned Cockney, "or anyone else," he added, raising his voice and looking over Dakota's shoulder to the cook-house.

He tossed the guns contemptuously at Dakota's feet and wheeled about. The cowboy muttered oaths at his retreating back, and rubbed the cords of his neck where the strain of the blow had come.

Mary Aikens had seen nothing of the incident—her eyes were too wet. With a dead weight at her heart she sank her head in her arms on the table and let the tears flow.

Cockney came on her that way and softly retreated, drawing the door gently behind him. After a few noisy crunches among the gravel and a preliminary kick to the outside step, he took a long breath and entered. She was darning then, her head held low. He passed quickly through to the bedroom door, but there he stopped, and, without turning, stood with his hand on the knob. Then he disappeared. Ten minutes later he reappeared in town attire.

In Cockney Aikens' ways were so many strange conventions that his friends had ceased to marvel at them. One of them was the formality of his dress for his visits to Medicine Hat. His boots were soft, light-soled, and natty, with drab cloth tops, like nothing ever seen on the prairie before; his socks silken, with white clocks. A delicate grey suit enclosed his huge frame in graceful lines that betrayed their Bond Street origin. His collar was a straight white upstanding affair with delicately rounded corners, and his

cravat Irish poplin or barathea—always one of these silks, the former with a coloured diagonal stripe, the latter adorned with clusters of flowers. Above it all rested a light grey hat. From his breast pocket peeped the tips of chamois gloves, and on one little finger was a curious ring of triple cameos.

Mary Aikens always gasped when she saw him thus. It was thus she had learned to love him, thus he had turned the heads of half the girls of the northern United States towns from Seattle to Duluth. For Cockney Aikens wore his clothes as one accustomed to them. One suit he always kept in town at his tailor's, pressed and cleaned, changing at each visit.

His wife drew a sharp breath, forgetting that she was staring at him with uplifted hand. The evil temper had left his face with his leather chaps and neckerchief. He regarded her with an embarrassed twist to his face.

"Better get into your grey," he said, looking anywhere but into her eyes. "I'll be ready for you in fifteen minutes."

"Oh, Jim!"

That was all. She dropped her darning on the table and fled ecstatically to the bedroom. And big Cockney Aikens picked up the ball of darning wool and kissed it furtively.

By the time he was back from the stables with a lively team hitched to a buggy, she was almost dressed, and a suitcase stood packed outside the bedroom door. He drew a second suitcase from beneath the bed and began to fill it with his ranch clothes. She watched him, surprised.

"Why, Jim, what are you taking those for?"

He muttered something about going to do some riding perhaps, and snapped the catches, hurrying out with the suitcase to the buggy.

Mary bustled to the kitchen and began to lay various tins on the table. A side of bacon she wrapped up and suspended from a hook in the ceiling. When she was finished she stood back and struck off a list on her fingers:

"Bacon, flour, cheese, oatmeal, matches—there, I forgot the matches again."

He laughed.

"Lord, Mary, you're still expecting visitors to this corner of the moon!"

She tilted her head. "You never know. We couldn't leave the house with nothing to eat in it. Some day—perhaps—— We *should* have visitors——" She ended the sentence by a noisy clustering of the tins, and ran to her suitcase.

He took it from her hand and carried it out. One of the horses was trying to get back into the buggy, but he quieted it with masterful hand. With one foot on the step she paused.

"Why—that's Pink Eye! He's never been harnessed before, has he?"

"I've been breaking him to it. Good time to try him out on a long trip like this. He'll have the spirit taken out of him in that sixty miles—seventy by the Double Bar-O. We're going across there first. Maybe Cherry Gerard would like to come too; you may be lonesome."

"I don't want Cherry, Jim," she pouted.

He lifted her in and took his seat beside her before he replied:

"It's possible I'll be leaving you for a couple of days in there."

She was looking straight ahead without a word of what was in her mind. But as the horses galloped madly up the sloping trail to the east her spirits rose, and she laughed exultantly.

"Seventy miles won't tire Pink Eye," she gurgled. "He's steel."

Dakota, standing before the door of the cook-house, watched them go, scorning to reply to Mary Aikens' waving hand. It was Bean Slade, emerging hastily from the interior of the shack, who returned it, as Pink Eye and his mate tore along the indistinct eastern trail over the edge of the prairie above.

"Hoorah!" shouted Dakota, when the moving speck had vanished over the ridge.

"Hoorah!" responded a half-dozen voices; and the Dude and Alkali seized each other for a musicless dance.

"Dassent leave her t'yore tender mercies, Dakota, ole sport," chaffed Alkali. "Yo're a reg'lar lady-killer, that's what yo are."

"Oh, I dunno," grunted the Dude jealously, buttoning the loose front of his brilliant vest. "There's others."

"Go 'long with you, Dude," jeered General. "She never looks at you. Jest about two days o' Dakota's slippery manners, and the missus ud be shore climbing his neck."

Bean Slade unwound his lanky legs from a chair and spat through the doorway.

"Yer a tarnation liar, Gin'ral. Not a doggone neck ud the missus climb that she hadn't oughter. An' you're a dang lot o' sap-heads to talk it."

"You oughter know, Bean," grinned General. "Y'ain't licking her pots fer nothing, I bet."

Bean was on his feet so quickly that no one else had moved by the time a chair whirled aloft in his hands. General slid to the cover of the table in desperate haste.

Dakota flung himself between them.

"Drop it, you fools! Nobody's saying nothing again the missus, Bean. They're just joshing you. You needn't get so touchy anyway; she ain't *your* wife."

Bean, whose anger rose and fell with disturbing unexpectedness, dropped the chair.

"No sech luck!" he growled. "If she was I wudn't risk her where you slimy

coyotes was."

Alkali broke in:

"And now what's the agendar, Dakota? Takin' on that Irvine job this week. 'T should be a good time with the boss away."

Dakota screwed his eyes up thoughtfully. "That's what I had in mind."

"No rifles this time," protested Bean Slade. "We've toted 'em once too often—I don't know but *twice* too often. Br-r-r! I won't ever forget——"

"Shut your clap, Bean! You've had your man in your day, heaps of 'em."

"They allus had their chance," growled Bean. "No rifles, I say, or I don't go."

Three or four insulting guffaws greeted the threat.

"The Reverend Beanibus Slade, him of Dead Gulch memory and Two-Shot Dick fame, will now lead us in singing the twenty-third Psalm!" scoffed General Jones. "Come along with us, Reverend sir—and bring yore burial service."

"I've said it," repeated Bean stubbornly.

Dakota tried to oil the surface. "We don't need rifles this time—it's an easy job.... But we'll shore miss the Kid. He shore was the handy kid with the blinkers on a dark night, and he'd hold a close second to yours truly with a gun. Poor Kid! I'd give my left ear to get even with the guy that got him. I've a bit o' lead resarved for him."

CHAPTER VIII

A LAMB AMONG THE LIONS

"There y'are, mister. That's your place."

Stamford unlimbered his stiffened legs and raised himself in the buggy to look out over the valley of the H-Lazy Z.

"It's my place all right," he moaned. "I don't care what ranch it is. I didn't think Canada was so wide as that sixty miles of prairie. Sixty miles! Humph! I've a complete set of disarticulated bones that's ready to go into any witness box and swear it's at least umpteen million miles, and then some."

The youthful driver grinned.

"Oh, you'd get used to that. I 'member when *I* was raw——"

"Look here, young man, for about eighteen hours you've been rubbing my rawness into me. Lord knows you didn't need to! This rattly, lumpy, jumpy bone-shaker you call a carriage would make any body raw that's not made of cast-iron. How the dickens Cockney Aikens, to say nothing of his wife and the ranch outfit, can contemplate that sixty miles with sufficient equanimity to stick the job is beyond my limited experience."

"Golly, mister, Dakota Fraley—Two-Gun Dakota—bosses the outfit. He's fit for anything."

"Huh! Dakota seems to have a rep."

"Dakota Fraley," confided the driver, "is a gunman, a dead shot with either hand. He's lightning on the draw and was never known to miss his man. He's the toughest of the tough, a broncho-buster that takes all the prizes at the contests—and they say he's got so many men he lost track years ago. But, say, he's a dead-game sport. Ju hear about the police-court case—for shooting up the town that time?"

Stamford knew every word of it, but the lad's story was worth hearing, so

he only looked interested.

"He just ponied up seventy-five simoleons without a wink. I think old Jasper was hoping he wouldn't have it, so he could send him down for a couple of months. Gee, I wouldn't send Dakota Fraley down, not by a long sight—least, not unless I was dying or something and wouldn't be there when he got out. I wouldn't fool with Dakota Fraley, no sir-ee!"

Stamford heard it with fitting solemnity.

"I suppose," he murmured, "that's how the books put it. I mustn't blame him."

"What d'you mean, mister?"

"Oh, excuse me, lad. Don't mind me when I get wandering. I'm often taken that way. The doctor says I'm not really dangerous."

"Don't you go to wandering about *here* or you'll get plumb lost."

Stamford cast a furtive eye back on the sixty miles and shuddered. Almost at daylight—and that meant about two-thirty a.m.—they had pulled out of Medicine Hat, for he was determined to run no risk of a night in the open. One he had had already, and was content. That sixty miles of prairie hung behind him like a pall, too oppressive to be relieved by its varied monotony. Here a line of unaccountable sand-buttles, there a landscape of rolling sweeps like the billows of a petrified sea, and sometimes a stretch of dullness that melted into the horizon uncountable miles away; and over all but the sand-buttles dead whispering grass, trembling in the blazing winds of midsummer, and a lifelessness that was uncanny.

His nerves were jangling still from the memory of it and, delighted though he was at the end of his journey, sundry and impressive qualms that resembled fear made him question his ability to cope with the problem he had set himself.

He raised himself on his arms before the house and tentatively extended one dead foot, drew in his breath painfully, and held himself erect by the

buggy as both feet touched the ground.

"There are the stables, I guess," he pointed out. "I confess I don't know the proper thing to do with you. Will they feed you there or here in the ranch-house?"

The driver gathered up the reins.

"They ain't going to have a chance to keep me neither places. I'm not taking chances where Two-Gun Dakota is—me with no gun or nothing. These broncs are good for another ten miles. I got a friend over at the Double Bar-O. That's good enough for me."

He tumbled Stamford's suitcase out, chirruped to the horses, and rattled away eastward up the slope.

Stamford was suddenly oppressed with the loneliness of things. About the ranch-house was not a sign of life, and the ranch buildings two hundred yards away seemed to be equally deserted. He glanced hurriedly about and launched himself on the noisy gravel walk to the door. He was thrilled with the vastness of things, the tremendous silence, the frowning cliffs across the river, the pettiness of mere man; the gravel crunched pleasantly under him as he walked.

Receiving no reply to his persistent knocking, he lifted the latch. The evidences of recent life within pleased him mightily, especially the signs of a woman's presence. Mary Aikens' darning lay on the table where she had dropped it. A pile of folded newspapers and magazines covered the top of a smaller table against the wall, almost crowding off a smoker's tray and pipestand. The pictures on the walls, the shiny stove, the cushions piled with attractive abandon on couch and chairs, and, above all, a piano—Stamford felt his spirits rise.

Here were luxury and art as he had not before seen them on the prairie. Here was more than temporary makeshift. Here, he read, was a woman determined to make life out there, sixty miles from the nearest post office, railway station, and store, independent of its isolation and inconveniences.

He spied the open door to the kitchen and passed through, gathering from the array of tin boxes that his host and hostess were more than temporarily absent. It made him uncomfortable. His mind refused to grasp the full significance of the situation in which he found himself.

He was wondering vaguely what to do, when the outer door burst violently open, and he started like a thief caught in the act. Dakota Fraley was standing in the doorway, peering about with an evil frown. Through the kitchen doorway he caught sight of Stamford and strode quickly across the sitting-room.

"What you doing here?"

Stamford's attempt at propitiation was a wan smile; his heart was pattering uncomfortably.

"Just as you entered, Dakota, I was wondering the same thing. Mr. and Mrs. Aikens are not at home, I take it."

"And won't be for a week, maybe," barked Dakota, standing with legs wide, his thumbs caught in his belt.

"I gathered that from the lay-out."

"Tell 'em you was coming?"

"No. I knew the rule of the prairie."

"What rule?"

"That a visitor is always welcome. Have they been pulling my leg in that, too?"

Dakota thought over that a moment. His dislike for the little editor since the shooting-up scene, as well as for any visitor to the ranch, inclined him to kick Stamford off the place. But there was Cockney to reckon with.

"There's nobody here to welcome you—you can see that," he grunted.

"I was noting it," said Stamford quietly.

"Look here, you two-by-four, none o' your insults. This is a mighty big prairie to be alone on of a night ten miles from the next stopping place. There's nicer things for a tenderfoot, I warn you."

"But one of them isn't forcing myself on your society, Dakota Fraley. Yet, at the moment you're my host by proxy; my lips are sealed."

Dakota calmed. He was uncertain of the efficacy of anything but a gun in dealing with insults, but to draw on such a little tenderfoot was not to be thought of.

"Driver coming back?" he asked.

"By the way he galloped away I came to the conclusion he hoped never to have to," smiled Stamford.

"We'll lend you a horse."

"Thanks, but I can walk better without one."

"I see you walking ten miles at this hour o' the night, I do?" jeered Dakota.

"I wouldn't think of taking you from your own comfortable ranch for such a trifling spectacle. I won't mind if you take it for granted.... But perhaps a horse would be company. Lead me to it."

He pushed past Dakota and started toward the ranch buildings, the foreman following, obviously ill at ease. As they neared the cook-house door a sly smile crossed the latter's face. Several cowboys came out.

"I've found it, boys!" yelled Dakota, with a wide grin. "The only and original tenderfoot—guaranteed to eat peas with a fork, crease his pants every month, say 'fudge' when he means 'damn,' and take a saddle-horn for the back of a rocking chair. Only he doesn't like us. He's decided to move on. We're bold bad men. Alkali, trot out Joe-Joe."

Dakota's grin repeated itself in several faces. Stamford, aware that silence

was safest, said nothing until Dakota was through.

"It's a shame to inflict myself to the extent of a horse on your already overtaxed hospitality," he said. "I promise to pay livery rates."

"Best put it on yer will, ole hoss, an' right now," drawled Bean Slade through the whiffs of a cigarette.

Stamford looked up with a glint of understanding.

"My executors will naturally pay my debts first—if my estate is equal to it."

"Yu seem to like Heaven best, kid," muttered Bean. "It's close up to here—the way yu're going."

"One might be forgiven for preferring the other place," replied Stamford. "At least there's only one devil there."

The cowboys grinned appreciatively.

"Best call it off, Dakota," suggested Bean.

Dakota frowned.

"If you geezers know of any quicker way of getting off the H-Lazy Z than by Joe-Joe, trot the idea out and let's look at it, and precipitous-like."

Joe-Joe, a mule-faced, conscience-stricken creature, with a scraggly tail that never stopped flicking, came humbly up at the rear of Alkali, bridle and saddle having been adjusted in the stables to an accompaniment of clatter that confirmed Stamford's suspicions. Still he had no thought of funk. He reached out for the rein.

His hand was pushed roughly aside, and Bean Slade vaulted into the saddle, cigarette between his lips. With a touching appeal in his wandering eyes Joe-Joe looked about on the unsympathetic audience, then, with a jerk that was startling even to see, he lowered his head, arched his back, and leaped straight up with stiffened legs, all part of one movement.

When he landed, every bone in Bean's lanky body rattled; and before they had time to rearrange themselves Joe-Joe was in the midst of a new gyration that loosened Bean's sombrero and cigarette.

The cowboys looked on, laughing, darting sly glances at Stamford to see how he was taking his escape. Dakota was divided between anger at Bean's interference, and satisfaction at the trepidation on the little editor's face. Joe-Joe continued to leap and twist and kick, Bean shouting encouragement and slapping the steaming thigh behind him; but when the horse straightened out for a run, his rider freed his feet and slid over his rump.

"Our show outlaw," he explained to Stamford, stooping to recover hat and cigarette. "Yu can see why yu'd need to say yer say in yer will."

Dakota accepted his defeat with a laugh. He had had his fun, and the sympathies of the outfit were against him.

"Any other ladylike nags about the place you'd like to break for us, my little man?" he giped, clapping Stamford on the back. "The H-Lazy Z's at your disposal."

"Thanks, Dakota, then I'll stay a while."

Bean Slade shoved out a long, limp hand.

"Bully fer you! Yu've got the guts!"

"If you're going to kick about till the boss comes back," said Dakota, "you'd better shake hands with the bunch. Give your hoof to Alkali Sam. Alkali wasn't christened that—if he was ever christened at all. Somebody musta been reading a wild-West story and thought Sam looked like the leading villain. It's commonly hinted he christened himself. He's a would-be devil, a gen-u-ine bad actor—in his own mind. Alkali'd rather be called that than get his man on the draw. It saves a lot o' shooting—and it's less dangerous, a rep like that.

"And this one—where's your flapper, Muck?—he's Muck Norsley. Nothing's too dirty for muck—hence, Muck.

"The Dude there has been known to take a bath, comb his hair with axle grease, and change his shirt, all in the same year. Dude, you ain't doing us justice. Your neckerchief—well, it's a bit mussed, and a tailor might improve them chaps. Look nifty for the gent.

"General Jones derives his cognomen, so to speak—not from the army, bless you, no, but because he's generally drunk, generally loafing, generally a cuss. No one thinks his name's Jones, least of all the Police. And that's why General's so popular.

"Bean Slade, here, forced his name on us. He has to stand up seven times to make a shadow. When the wind's ripping things to kingdom-come we send Bean out to do the punching; he just turns sideways. Truth is, Bean's the lady-killer o' the bunch, that is, when Dude's not in glamorous garb. Oh, Bean's the sly one. There's only one lady in ten miles here, and Bean's her lady's-maid. Meaning nothing vulgar," he added hastily at sight of Bean's glowering brows. "Even in town Bean looks at every female as if she's val'able china and li'ble to be broke."

Stamford, conscious of his incapacity to reply in kind, solemnly shook the offered hands; which tickled them. The Dude first rubbed his palm on the side of his chaps, General Jones pumped his arm until his head shook, and Muck Norsley murmured something he'd heard somewhere about being glad to meet him. Bean Slade muttered a sheepish "Ta-ta!" and preferred his package of cigarettes.

The frowsy-headed cook thrust his face through the back doorway and announced that "chuck" was on, and, in the fading light of a late summer night—where the sun sinks about ten o'clock in mid-summer—Stamford seated himself before his first meal with a family of cowboys, a bit uncertain of the good taste of dining with an unwilling host, but determined now to carry the adventure to the end.

Throughout the meal, which seemed to Stamford's hungry but as yet fastidious taste to consist largely of pork and beans, with a later stratum of pie, there was a disposition among the others to show off, developing quickly, as Stamford's interest grew, to an effort at fun at his expense—not meanly, but with a twisted idea of sustaining their reputations before a

tenderfoot. Stamford felt something of it but, not knowing how to receive it, concentrated on the meal. In that he unconsciously did well; so that when the pie was well washed down with strong coffee he remained the butt of their fun, but with less malice than before.

Muck Norsley's appetite seemed insatiable. When the others had drawn back and were smoking the package of cigarettes that was a special recognition of visitors, he continued to munch at the last piece of pie—his fourth, Stamford was certain—swallowing noisily from his coffee cup, the spoon held in the practised crook of his first finger.

"Muck always was delicate," said Dakota, by way of apology. "Don't you know, Muck Norsley, that it ain't good manners to eat when everyone's through?"

"Everyone ain't through," replied Muck. "I ain't. It mightn't be good manners, but it's good pie. Anyway, this is supper, not sassiety. If that isn't so, tell yer pal and fellow-villain to take his feet outen my coffee."

Alkali pushed his feet further on the table, brushing aside the dishes, and relit his cigarette.

"You big lubber, you!" yelled Muck. "Can't yer see this is comp'ny? You know yer dassent do it when we're alone, you—you insult ter decency!"

"Muck," warned Alkali gravely, tossing the match over his shoulder, "yo know how easy I'm roused. I've et bigger men'n yo fer breakfast."

"Alkali Sam," returned Muck, with equal gravity, "I ast yer tuh remove them blots on the innercent habits o' the H-Lazy Z seminary fer perlite young ladies. I don't often ask twice."

Alkali ostentatiously loosened his Colt.

"Here, Dakota, take this toy while I'm good-tempered. We ain't got time fer no funeral."

Stamford caught the wink that accompanied Alkali's toss of the revolver

before his face, but it did not prepare him for the explosion that filled the room the instant it touched Dakota's hand. The bullet whistled so close that he ducked.

When he straightened, Dakota was looking into the smoking muzzle of the Colt with an air of intense surprise.

"Funny things, guns!" murmured the foreman.

"Darn funny!" growled Stamford, taking fresh hold of himself.

The smile he saw flitting over the faces of the cowboys had warned him that he was the victim of a bit of gun-play dangerous in the hands of less expert gunmen than Alkali and Dakota.

Muck Norsley swept his hand over the table, scooping up a sample of the flies that had all through the meal been robbing Stamford of some of his appetite, fished two from his coffee, and carried them to the door, where he gravely released them.

"I never did like the flavour of them flies," he muttered. "Now over in Dakota they come——"

During his absence at the door Alkali had liberally replenished the supply of flies in his cup, and Muck, noticing the disturbance in the liquid as he was about to swallow it, promptly despatched it into Alkali's face.

Before he could defend himself, Alkali was on his shoulders, punching wildly. Muck heaved himself to his feet, caught Alkali about the waist in a bearlike hug and, burying his face in his tormentor's stomach, seemed to be eating him alive.

Alkali beat himself free, howling all the time, and rubbed his stomach as if in terrible pain.

"Gi' me the gun, Dakota, gi' me the gun! Quick! I'll fill the ring-boned, wind-galled, spavined son-of-a-gun so full o' holes——"

"Alkali always was fluent," applauded Dakota.

The two men were fighting round and round the room, striking awkwardly, cursing, bunting with their heads. The others retreated to the two doorways and the corners, making no move to separate them. Stamford circled the table with bulging eyes; he had never seen anything so furious and brutal before.

Alkali fell over a chair, and Muck, seizing another, whirled it aloft. But Alkali squirmed beneath the table, grabbed Muck by the feet, and brought him down with a crash. Seated astride him, he leaned over his victim, punching with both fists. Muck struggled vainly for a moment, then seemed to give up in sheer weariness. Alkali gave a blood-curdling yell and jabbed his fingers at the helpless man's eyes.

In the dimming light Stamford seemed to see the horrible gouging as in a dream.

"Stop him! Stop him!" he screamed.

Alkali whooped his triumph and reached to the table for a knife. High above his victim he drew it back, gloating over the blow that would clench his victory.

"Not by a darn sight!" yelled Stamford, hurdling a fallen chair and kicking with all his might at the uplifted wrist.

Alkali uttered a howl of real pain and clambered to his feet. To Stamford's bewilderment Muck followed him, grinning, but sidling between the irate Alkali and his new foe. The injured man cursed volubly, holding his wrist with the other hand, then he plunged toward his gun, which lay on the table. But Bean Slade's long leg flashed out, and the gun rattled away to a corner.

"Yu got what was comin' tuh yu, you goat. Swallow yer medicine. Thought yu was puttin' it over on the li'l fellow, eh? Looks 's if he's got the last laugh."

"He's broke my wrist!" howled Alkali, hopping about.

"Get out!" jeered Bean. "Yer shure a soft bad-man. A li'l scrunt like him put yu out o' business! Haw! Haw!"

Stamford was squirming beneath a burden of chagrin at the revelation that all the time they had been poking fun at the tenderfoot.

"Funny thing, feet!" he murmured, contemplating his small shoes.

"Darn funny!" growled Dakota.

Stamford slept at the ranch-house and took his meals in the cook-house. It suited him perfectly—in spite of flies and mosquitoes. His search for health was accepted without question among cowboys who imagined that poor health was the curse of every tenderfoot, the dose being multiplied in one of such limited proportions. General Jones expressed the conviction that a month of roughing it would make him so eager for "home and mother" that bad health would look attractive by comparison; and Bean slyly suggested that what Stamford needed to buck him up was a few more rough-and-tumbles like the lickin' he gave Alkali.

Dakota looked into his guileless eyes and ridiculed himself for having tried to get rid of him.

Early next morning, before Stamford had made up for the sleeplessness of the first part of the night in a lone house on the prairie, surrounded by a million shrieking coyotes, a conference took place in the cook-house. The result of it was reported in part to him by the information that he and Bean Slade and the cook would have the ranch to themselves for the next few days. Stamford asked a few questions, but his ignorance of ranching deprived the replies of most of their significance. For four days, therefore, he and Bean developed the strange friendship that had commenced with Dakota's personal attack in the shooting-up of Medicine Hat, and had been strengthened by the scenes of his first evening on the ranch.

At the end of that time Dakota returned with three strange cowboys in the best of spirits. The three strangers, Stamford learned, were other members of the outfit whose work was in more intimate touch with the herds.

"Ten bucks for you, Bean!" Dakota announced jubilantly.

Stamford looked his enquiry.

"He's raisin' my wages fer lookin' after you," Bean explained; and everyone laughed.

CHAPTER IX

COCKNEY'S MYSTERIOUS RIDE

Long after midnight of the short summer night, Cockney Aikens and his wife drove up to the Provincial Hotel, the team in a lather but Pink Eye with lots of the devil left. Mary climbed down and pounded up the night clerk, and Cockney, given the stable key, took the team back himself.

As he emerged from the lane leading to the stables, a Mounted Policeman, riding in late from patrol, pulled up before him and stooped to see his face.

"What's on at this hour, Cockney?"

The big rancher straightened furiously.

"Say! Some day I want to get somewhere where a bunch of interfering red-coats aren't dogging my steps."

The Policeman laughed. "I'm afraid you'll have trouble doing that in this country."

"Then I'll go back home, where a man's his own boss."

"It didn't seem to suit you so well when you were there."

"What do you mean?" Cockney's tone was almost a bellow.

"Sh-h!" soothed the Policeman. "Everyone's in bed but ourselves. I suppose if you'd liked England so well you'd have stayed there. No one in Canada sent for you, did they?"

Cockney wheeled about and stalked up the Provincial steps, the Policeman watching him until the door closed behind him.

Cockney Aikens hated the Mounted Police. In all his life nothing had so roused the depths of hatred usually dormant in his big body. If one came within sight he swore beneath his breath—or aloud, according to the company. He thought and spoke the worst of them, and his unqualified dislike was unwilling to accord them any credit, would grant no conceivable purpose they fulfilled. On the trail he passed them without so much as nodding, and the very few patrols that wandered at long intervals to the vicinity of the H-Lazy Z avoided the sullen hospitality of its owner.

The cause of this settled hatred was as simple and unreasonable as that which lay at the root of most of Cockney's emotions.

Early in his career in the Medicine Hat district, when he was "going the pace" more recklessly than since his marriage, one of his uncontrolled orgies of drinking and gambling had brought him hard against the red-coats, and he had learned what a ruthless wall they are for wrong-doers to butt against.

Medicine Hat was not a wild town, as cow-towns go. Drinking that threw a man on the street in a condition dangerous to himself or others was discouraged with a firm hand, but gambling, so long as it kept under cover, was winked at by the town policeman as the least objectionable of the many vices common to a section that lived largely on its nerve.

Whether there was more in it than that for the policeman was open to question. Poker, and other card games of less skill and more manipulation, were available to anyone who knew the ropes. A daring stranger to town had reported to a local friend, who happened to be an usher in the Methodist Church, that the town policeman himself had directed him to a game in progress—but this was challenged when it came up before the town council.

One resort, the basement under a barber shop on Toronto Street, was Cockney's favourite den; and, with the gambling instincts of the Englishman, and copious additions developed within himself, his evenings in the fetid atmosphere of smoke and whisky were times of fever to more than himself.

One night, unlucky, urged to stake more than he had ready money to meet, he emerged from the den in a vile temper, convinced that the cards had been stacked but unable to prove it before a crowd of blood-suckers frankly hostile to him. At the moment the town policeman happened to be on his rounds in that quarter, and in sheer wantonness, Cockney banged his helmet into the roadway; and when the policeman seemed to show resentment, he was tossed after his helmet. But a Western policeman, town or Mounted, faces such contingencies with the donning of his uniform, and Mason returned to the attack with drawn baton. Mason, baton and all, proved scarcely exercise for big Cockney Aikens.

Unfortunately two Mounted Policemen, attracted by the crowd that had trickled up from nowhere, arrived on the scene.

It was a brave struggle while it lasted, and four bodies ached from it for several days, but it ended with Cockney securely locked in the cells. *In the cells!* The big fellow came to himself and cried like a child.

But his shame was only commencing. Next morning the scene of his disgrace was transferred to the police court, where Cockney, with bowed head, scarcely heard the sentence of fifty dollars or thirty days. He realised it when he discovered that his account at the bank was drained to the last ten dollars to pay the fine, owing to heavy recent drafts thereon in settlement of his winter accounts and the purchase of new stock for the ranch.

And there remained unpaid his gambling losses of the previous night.

That was most terrible of all. When that afternoon he slunk from town with forty dollars of gambling debts recognised only in IOU's, his shame was complete.

In his mind the Mounted Police were entirely to blame. Before they interfered he was having only an exhilarating frolic with Mason. It was that

strange hold of one of the red-coats—it almost broke his neck, and twisted his arm so that it still ached—that did the thing.

And so, with the capacity for stubborn hatred that required much rousing but defied conciliation, he never forgave them. They had besmirched his honour—for four months he was ashamed to show himself in the den under the barber shop—and nothing could remove the stain. He would grind his teeth and swear that if a Mounted Policeman were dying at his feet for a glass of water he would not stoop to give it to him.

When Cockney entered their bedroom in the hotel he was too angry to speak. Mary was waiting for him, thoughtfully rocking in an old rocker that was supposed to make cosy a room that had outlasted its decorations and furnishings years ago. He glanced at her swiftly, but whatever she had in mind, his sullen mood seemed to alter it.

The clerk knocked and enquired if anything was wanted.

"Yes," cried Cockney, "a big whisky—straight."

His wife studied him anxiously as she went about preparing to retire. The hideous life that would be hers for the next few days was commencing earlier than usual. Yet she was thankful to be there to look after him.

He seized the glass when it was handed through the crack of the door, stared at it a second, and placed it on the washstand untouched.

"I'll be away for a few days," he told Mary casually, as he washed. "You'd better sleep in; it's been a stiff day for you."

"You've had seventy miles of Pink Eye to hold," she reminded him. "You need the rest more than I do."

He laughed bitterly. "Rest? There's no rest for me now for—maybe for months. I'll be back about—about Saturday, I think."

She knew the folly of asking questions, but she noticed that the whisky was not touched.

She seemed to have been asleep only a few minutes when she felt him lean over and gently kiss her. She did not open her eyes until he was fully dressed in his ranch clothes.

"Don't worry," he muttered, seeing she was awake; and went out on tiptoe. Though it was broad daylight, no one was yet stirring about the hotel.

When she awakened later and realised how thoughtlessly in her weariness she had let him go without trying to wring from him his destination, she dressed hurriedly and went to the stables. Pink Eye was gone—Pink Eye, like his master, untirable. It made her thoughtful, and with thought came a sigh that deepened the lines about her eyes.

On Saturday he returned. He rode quietly into the stable yard, handed his horse to the ostler, and sought his room. He was clear-eyed, but heavy with fatigue. Without undressing he dropped to the bed and was asleep before Mary could draw the curtains.

Out in the stable Pink Eye was as weary as his master.

Mary Aikens went into the streets, and in the post office heard the latest gossip—a new case of cattle-thieving off toward Irvine. For hours she walked up and down the streets with a terrible ache at her heart.

That night her husband sent her to a show in the "opera house," while he broke loose up in the Toronto Street den and lined the pockets of the usual sharpers on the look-out for reckless fools. Through a wretched performance she sat without grasping even its general idea, miserable, lonely, trembling with indecision. On her return to the hotel she borrowed a railway time-table from the hotel clerk and took it to her room. For a long time she sat rocking, staring into space, her face pale, her little fists clenched in the fight she was making, and at last carried the time-table down unopened.

She hungered to get away from it all, to sink her streaming eyes in a mother's lap, to feel about her arms that sympathised without questioning. But her pride, and a curious feeling about Jim, kept her to the duty she had undertaken when she stood beside Jim Aikens at the altar.

CHAPTER X

STAMFORD'S SURPRISES COMMENCE

Cockney and Mary Aikens returned home to find Morton Stamford established at the ranch. He had enlisted Bean Slade's special interest in an effort to maintain himself in a saddle long enough to sink asleep at night, sore but happy, with the thrill of having ridden a horse. For his use Bean had selected a broncho burdened with the name of Hobbles, "because she acts that way," Bean explained. Not a cowboy on the ranch would bind himself to Hobbles' limited capacities—more correctly, to Hobbles' mild manner of getting about. When Stamford had learned that the horn was not a handle, he discovered, as he thought, unsuspected resources in Hobbles. He confided it to Bean.

"Humph!" replied the cowboy. "Yu can't tell me nothin' about Hobbles' speed. She can cover the ground, but look at the way she does it. No self-respectin' cow-puncher wants to get about in a rocking-chair—an' that's about how much life *she* has."

So Stamford was content to reserve Hobbles' unconventionalities for himself, convinced that under his developing horsemanship Hobbles and he might yet be able to face a ten-mile ride without quailing.

His reception by his host and hostess was bewildering in its fluctuations. At first Mary welcomed him with enthusiasm that was almost pathetic. Cockney closed his lips and went about the chores in the house necessary after a protracted absence.

"I guess the Provincial meals got too much for me," Stamford explained. "My doctor prescribed rest, exercise, no worry. It's the cheapest treatment I ever took. I remembered your invitation, Mrs. Aikens."

Cockney examined his wife with raised brows.

"Or rather," Stamford hastened to correct, "the invitation I twisted your words into that day at Dunmore Junction. Already I feel rewarded, not only in a new vigour that has made me almost reckless——"

"Don't let your recklessness run away with you," advised Cockney quietly, pausing in his efforts to blow the kitchen fire into a flame.

"Already," continued Stamford, "I can ride—*ride*. At least, to-day I stuck to Hobbles for ten minutes, and almost chose my spot to fall on. Only I didn't see the cactus. If you don't mind, I'll eat off the piano to-night."

"I can assure you, Mr. Stamford," said Mrs. Aikens, "that the H-Lazy Z will be your debtor as long as you can stay. Jim will say the same."

But Jim did not say the same—at least not then. Though Bean Slade and the cook had arrived from the cook-house, Cockney bore the brunt of the kitchen fire. He remained bent over it, blowing and watching, until the flame burned bright.

"There isn't a ranch in the country closed to strangers at any time," he said, slowly rising from his knees and bending to brush them off.

A sensible embarrassment filled the room. Stamford felt the chill of it, but the look he surprised on Mary Aikens' face prompted him to ignore it.

"Of course there's danger of a tenderfoot out-Westing the West when he gets started," he said lightly.

"Don't worry," said Cockney, more genially. "We'll hold you to the conventions."

Stamford was indignant inwardly. Though he had made himself Cockney's guest to prove his faith in his host justified, he felt a twinge of shame at accepting such lukewarm hospitality.

"You know, Mary, I thought I noticed a difference in the last issue of the *Journal*." Cockney's spirits were unaccountably rising. "It seemed newsier,

better written."

"I suppose," said Stamford, "like an old employer of mine, you consider editors necessary evils to justify the existence of the advertising man. Smith will get along all right with the *Journal*. I figured that an anæmic paper for a few weeks is better than a dead editor for a long time—at least from my point of view. In my efforts to uplift Western journalism I seem to have pitted a puny constitution against a vigorous tradition that all stomachs look alike to the Provincial. This little body was beginning to buck."

Mary Aikens had brought from town another visitor, a small fox-terrier that Cockney had picked up somewhere, he did not remember where. He only knew that when he woke one morning he was forty-seven dollars out and a fox-terrier in. Mary was delighted. It surprised her that she had not thought of it before. Cockney was less enthusiastic. He was oppressed with sundry misgivings of the manner in which he had come by the dog, and out there on the Red Deer was no place for a miserable little creature no decent coyote would make two bites of.

Imp had accepted the ranch from the moment of his arrival as his own special possession, and its occupants as created for his exclusive amusement. He was as keenly interested in the rousing of the kitchen fire as was Cockney, considered Bean Slade a rather boring plaything, favoured Stamford with a tentative sniff, but for his mistress had a deep though undemonstrative affection.

Dakota Fraley lounged over from the bunk-house and stood in the front doorway, tapping on the frame to attract attention.

"Here's something you'll be interested in, Dakota," called Mrs. Aikens. "I managed to get a couple of Montana papers for you. Why, look at Imp!"

Imp, christened more in hope than descriptively, was crawling to Dakota's feet, head outstretched, tail invisible.

Dakota smiled. "They all do it. Never seen the dog yet didn't get on his belly to me. Here! Up you get! Better go back to your missus; she's jealous."

The dog raised himself obediently, but with cringing body, and slunk back to Mrs. Aikens, where he seated himself sideways in the shadow of her skirts, watching Dakota.

"Just came to tell you, Mr. Aikens, that I'd best get Pink Eye out of harness instanter or he'll get himself out, and mess up the ranch in doing it."

Stamford remembered then that, in the fever of his new ranch life, he had forgotten to shave that day. He excused himself and retired to his room, which adjoined the sitting-room on the ground floor. Cockney went with Dakota to the front door.

"Thanks, Dakota!" he was saying. "Pink Eye's going to make a driver all right. I may use him a lot. He's got——"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the closing of the door, but more of their conversation came to Stamford through the open window.

"Get those cattle, Dakota?"

Dakota shouted to Pink Eye before replying:

"Found a dozen or so."

"Far away?"

"Down toward the railway—east."

The cowboy busied himself pulling Pink Eye to an even keel.

"Funny thing happened," he said. "Spooky rider got through the night-hawks the first night and pretty near stampeded the bunch. General got a shot at him—a big fellow, the boys say, riding a devil of a broncho—but we couldn't find any trace of him when it got light.... We found some tracks though," he added slowly.

There was an appreciable period of silence before Dakota went on: "I got my eye peeled for him. He'll be bucking better shooting eyes than General's next time."

The whip cracked and the buggy rattled off to the stables. Stamford, peeping through the window, his cheeks in a lather, saw Cockney look after the retreating team a moment, then strike away to the stables.

Shaved and freshly clad in a white tennis shirt, Stamford emerged from his room and found Mary Aikens superintending the preparations for the night meal. Bean Slade was peeling potatoes, a big grin on his blushing face, and a large blue apron before him that Mary had insisted on tying under his chin. The cook from the ranch cook-house was mixing something on the table, while the mistress was diving into cupboards and shelves with the stores she had brought from town.

She hastened to meet Stamford in the sitting-room, a strange constraint in her manner. While she nervously set about laying the table, he occupied himself with Imp. He wondered what she had to say to him that required so much courage.

"I'm afraid you'll find time hang heavily on your hands here."

She was leaning across to straighten a corner of the tablecloth, and he could not see her face.

"I'm not afraid of that," he replied, giving Imp a poke.

"We've—we've never had visitors before." A flush stole softly into her cheeks. "You've selected the last ranch to suit your purpose—though it's healthy enough, I suppose. The Double Bar-O now—there are young people there. And the Circle-Arrow further east."

Apparently he was busy poking Imp's fat sides, but beneath his brows he glanced at her again and again as she spoke. For some sudden reason she did not wish him to stay. That suspicion determined his course.

"In five days," he declared, "there have been no premonitory twinges of lonesomeness. And if, with only three of us on the ranch for three days——"

"Only three? What do you mean?"

"Bean Slade, cookie, and I—that was all."

"Weren't—— Where were Dakota and the others?"

"Down south somewhere—Irvine way, I think they said, in search of strays."

"O-oh!"

She stopped on her way to the kitchen and turned into her bedroom.

Stamford became suddenly aware of Bean Slade's lanky, blue-aproned figure lolling in the kitchen doorway.

"Yer shure lucky," said Bean, "gettin' the missus to cook yer meals, 'stead o' cookie. Mebbe we'll miss yu—fer the meals. Not to say cookie here ain't a real shuff when he likes, but he don't like nowhar 'ceptin' here at the ranch-house. Look at that, now!" He turned to watch the cook relentlessly pursue a stray fly that had managed to squirm through the screen door at the back, where a great number of its fellows, attracted by the odour and heat, were jealously prying about for entrance. "One measly li'l insec' gi's him the pip here; out at the cook-house he can sarve flies twenty-seven different ways without overlappin'. But lookee here, Mr. Stamford"—he leaned into the room and spoke in a whisper—"don't yu go fer to tell all yu heard us croakin' out there. The boss mightn't like it."

Stamford felt a glow of elation that Bean, in his innocence, had furnished him with a clue, but before he could follow it up, Mary Aikens came thoughtfully back and went about her work. Bean slunk back into the kitchen and nosed about for his own special fly.

Mary was in the act of reaching to a cupboard, when her hand stopped and she turned to the window. An exciting sense of nervousness and unrest about the ranch made Stamford's heart leap. He moved restlessly in his chair.

"Listen!"

The dull thud of hoofs and the rattle of wheels drew them both to the door.

A buckboard was coming drunkenly down the eastern trail, its horses, under the direction of an inexpert—or drunken—driver, uncertain of what was expected of them. The smallest deviation from the beaten track meant that one horse was mounting the ridge and the other the prairie at the side, the wheels following them in jerks from the deep ruts in the black loam worn by the unanimous track of every previous vehicle and horse.

CHAPTER XI

THE FOSSIL-HUNTERS

Stamford raised his eyes from the wobbling wheels to the seat of the buckboard. Instantly he felt, rather than saw, that it was the Professor and his sister. Beside him Mary Aikens was puzzled, with a nervous mingling of surprise and amusement. With the instinct of her sex her hand went to her dark hair, and a quick eye fell to the spotless apron and moved on to her neatly clad feet.

When the buckboard was near enough to make out the Professor's extended hands on the lines, his fierce concentration on the horses' ears, his braced feet, and the threatening bounce of his body as the wheel mounted the ridge, the spectators in the ranch-house could not control their laughter. For the sake of politeness Mary temporarily withdrew.

With several stentorian and anxious "whoas" the buckboard came to a stop at the end of the gravel walk, and Isabel Bulkeley, with a sigh of relief, bounded out.

"Amos," she announced, "hereafter *I* drive."

The Professor, an amusing figure of mingled satisfaction and relief, protested.

"Now *I* think I did that rather well. Take the exact end of the walk and the centre of the buggy—I'm not more than a yard or two out. It's that left horse that dislikes me. I feel as if I must expend myself on that line—and the other horse responds too. When I get time I'm going to invent a separate line for each horse—if only for the use of amateurs. As it is now, if one horse is of a contrary disposition——"

He had leaped over the wheel and was diving a hand into a box in the back of the buckboard, rummaging among bits of rock.

"Isabel! Isabel Bulkeley! Where's that Allosaurus vertebra? Oh—yes, here it is. Goodness, how it frightened me!" He raised his head and beamed on them through his large spectacles. "Do you know, I don't believe I've lost a thing—except confidence in my driving."

An enormous handkerchief emerged from his coat pocket and mopped his forehead. The hand that held the lines gripped them so firmly that the horses were backing on him.

"Whoa!" he shouted, pulling harder. "Mr.—Mr. Stamford, will you give to this equine problem the touch I seem to lack? If you don't, I'm going to drop these flimsy bits of leather and take the brutes in my arms.

"Some day," he went on, when Stamford had taken the reins, "I hope posterity will unearth the bones of that brute on the left—and grind them to dust. Yes, I do. Sometimes I can be really blood-thirsty. But," he grinned, "I wouldn't be surprised if they found mine at the same time, with Gee-Gee—what funny names you give your horses!—with Gee-Gee sitting on my chest enjoying his last laugh."

Mary Aikens, her eyes brimming with tears, had rushed to meet Isabel with a hungry welcome that was pathetic, seizing her hand in both her own; and Isabel, after a moment of surprise she could not conceal, flushed a little and responded with moisture in her eyes. But the few moments of the Professor's dilemmas had served to conceal the little scene that recorded more of the story of Mary Aikens' lonely life than she would willingly have exposed.

They were standing now, hand in hand, laughing on the two men. To Mary it was enough that, for the first time, another woman was to cross the threshold of the H-Lazy Z. Isabel was still, Stamford thought, the fond sister who took as much amusement as anyone from her brother's artlessness.

She turned to her hostess. "This is not merely a flying visit, Mrs. Aikens. Amos—my brother—was dissatisfied with his searching down the river. We hoped you wouldn't mind letting us camp on your ranch here while he pokes about the banks."

Beside the buckboard Professor Bulkeley was making the same request of Cockney, who had come hurriedly up from the stables.

"The Double Bar-O—that is, I believe, the technical name—seems to have been unpopular among dying dinosaurs and their forbears. Whether one should infer from that that they avoided the locality as unhealthy, or found it so healthy they couldn't die there, does not appear in the evidence. All I found there we know as much about already as about last year's weather or the origin of mumps. The further I prodded west, the more promising the outlook. This bit of bone, for instance, is, I believe, of the Upper Jurassic period. The Double Bar-O region is by comparison disreputably modern—not earlier than the Miocene. This bone appears to be blood-cousin to a megalosaurus we received once from England. It has all the——"

"I'm not quite following you, Professor." Cockney was struggling to keep his face straight.

"No, no, of course not. I'm—I'm apt to forget there are *people* live in the nineteenth century. I suppose they have their purpose in the scheme of life—for our progeny of the five-hundredth century to worry about, perhaps."

As he was speaking he was pulling from the buckboard the canvas and poles of a tent.

"What's that?" asked Cockney, with a frown.

"Our tent. If we could pitch it somewhere along the bank of the river here _____"

"You can pitch it into the river—and that's all."

"But we——"

Cockney kicked the canvas off the trail, drew a cigarette and match from his pockets, lit them in a leisurely way—and dropped both into the canvas. A second match he struck and calmly held to a loose corner. The cloth, dry and brittle in Alberta air, smouldered a moment, then burst into flame.

Stamford solemnly leaned over the blaze to fan it with his hand. Mary stood laughing. Isabel was divided between alarm and wonder. Only the Professor seemed undisturbed. He stood watching the growing blaze with interest.

"As a raw backwoodsman I would suggest starting the blaze on the side toward the wind."

Stamford followed the suggestion with success.

A heavy smoke rose and swirled about them, pungent and stifling. The Professor whiffed it once or twice and turned his back on it.

"Fancy, my dear, thinking of living in a tent that smells like that. I can't imagine any other form of fumigation being sufficient."

"Now," ordered Cockney, "take your suitcases into the house."

The Professor looked at him admiringly. "I wish I could express myself like that. Sometimes I find the language of the lecture-room not exactly suited to buying oatmeal or getting a tooth filled. He means, Isabel, that we must be his guests, in spite of ourselves. On him be the blame."

Cockney burst into a laugh that startled the horses.

"I don't see why you shouldn't find old bones about here, Professor. We seem to have pretty nearly everything else anyone wants. We've opened a sanatorium." He nodded at Stamford. "Might as well add a seminary. From to-day the H-Lazy Z ranks as a public institution."

There was nothing offensive in the tone, but about the laugh was a suggestion of recklessness.

"Of course," stammered the Professor, "I'd be delighted if—if——" He cleared his throat. "General—I mean, Inspector Barker warned me not to suggest it, but I feel I owe it to myself and to the professional nature of my visit to express the hope that—that if there's any consideration——"

"If you suggest such a thing again," interrupted Cockney, angrily looking the Professor up and down, "I'll carry you down and drop you in the river."

The Professor, retreating before the blaze of indignation, tripped over the board edging of the gravel walk and fell.

"I meant no offence," he stammered, where he lay. "It's only my Eastern ignorance, you know."

Cockney reached down and jerked him to his feet.

"Gad!" he exclaimed. "What a waste of muscle! You fellows with brains teeming with junk scorn the good things the Almighty has given you. Here's Stamford dying to have one little fibre of the sinew you ignore—and you thinking only of a lot of old bones that can't affect the price of cattle. Well, heigh-ho! Give me a month of you and I'll show you new things in life to glow over. You've the stature. Maybe you'll learn out here to use it."

The Professor turned to bow over Mary Aikens's hand, and she flushed with embarrassment and pleasure at the courtesy.

"Your husband has offered to share with me some of the fine things of life on the prairie," he said. "It is a prophecy of the scope he has, that I see before me the woman who shares that life with him."

Stamford recalled with a malicious twinkle a moment of intense chagrin in Inspector Barker's office.

"How ingenuous!" he murmured sweetly. "How simple and sweet and natural!"

The Professor's face went red. Isabel's eyes were dancing.

"I owe that to the Professor," Stamford explained to Cockney and Mary.

"One of the things I don't share is my wife," Cockney observed abruptly, and drove away with the buckboard.

Dinner—the night meal was dinner where Cockney gave the orders—was such a time of pleasant chatter and merry banter as the H-Lazy Z had never dreamed of, though there was a recurring element of constraint that puzzled Stamford. Cockney was a mass of varying moods, now laughing uproariously, now moody and watchful; and all the time Mary Aikens was rent by the conflicting emotions of delight, and of sensitiveness to her husband's humours. Afterwards Bean was dismissed, and the two women undertook the kitchen work. Cockney and Stamford smoked, the former the inevitable cigarette, the latter his short curved pipe. The Professor did not smoke; he seemed to have missed most of the habits of man. While the two others talked in the detached but perfectly satisfied periods of smokers, he drifted to the piano and turned over the music.

And presently, so softly and smoothly that no one seemed to know when he commenced, his fingers were moving over the keys to a quiet refrain he had picked up from the pile of music on the piano. When Stamford looked up, suddenly conscious of the melody of it, it was not the Professor he saw, but Mary Aikens standing in the doorway to the kitchen with the dish-towel in her hand, tears in her eyes. So close to the surface had the unexpected arrival of guests brought her emotions that she did not know she was showing them. Stamford heard Cockney draw a sharp breath, and the next instant his host stumbled up and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

A gentle knock interrupted the Professor before he noticed the consternation his wandering fingers caused. The latch lifted and Dakota stepped inside, fumbling his hat, his hair oiled flat from a centre parting, and a pair of fluffy angora chaps held up by a belt several holes tighter than was his wont. He stood there, embarrassed, looking from one to another.

When the music ceased Cockney came from the bedroom. He laughed noisily when he saw Dakota.

"Come in, come in, Dakota. This is civilisation as the old H-Lazy Z never looked for it, eh? Guess you and I will have to take to our glad clothes to keep in line."

There were no introductions—that would have added to the embarrassment of the uncomfortable cowboy.

"Dakota!" repeated the Professor interrogatively. "Does it so happen that you come from my own country, the land of the free, where floats—but, ahem! this is not Decoration Day. I can see from the light in your eye that you understand. May I have the honour of shaking your hand?"

Dakota intruded no objections, though he grinned foolishly.

"Your parents little thought," rambled on the Professor, "that the name they gave you in the cradle would be your password the world over. With no offence to my host and hostess, and this eminently agreeable gentleman on my left, I feel that I can take you to my heart—or wherever people take their friends. I must see more of you, my countryman."

Though the flamboyancy of it was flagrant, and delivered with a twinkle, Dakota felt an inclination to expectorate, but bethought himself and coughed behind his hand.

"By the way, Mr.—ah—Dakota, now that I have you two residents together, I must take advantage of it. We have long known that the banks of the Red Deer River are replete with interest for the paleontologist. The region around the Double Bar-O was disappointing. Perhaps your acquaintance with the rocks about here will prepare me for what I will find."

"Looking for old bones, Dakota," explained Cockney, with a grin.

Dakota turned his eyes suspiciously from one to the other several times.

"Seen a few bits o' stone that might 'a' been bones once," he growled—"not such a lot o' them."

"You no doubt are as familiar as anyone with the banks hereabouts?"

suggested the Professor.

"I shore oughta be. Seen every blessed foot on both sides for a matter of fifty miles or so a million times."

"Ah! And you've seen the fossils? Where, may I enquire?"

Dakota felt for a cigarette, found he had neglected to put them in his new clothes, and put a match between his lips instead.

"Seen a few to the east——"

"But I've covered the ground myself rather well in that direction. It's the west I'm most interested in. It was several hundred miles to the west, this side of the town of Red Deer, where my hated rivals of the American Museum of Natural History made their discoveries——"

"Not a da—I mean a durn thing to the west, mister," Dakota broke in firmly. "All I ever seen in that direction was within three miles, or at least four. Lots o' them down here just where the cliff starts, enough to keep you going a dozen summers."

"Do you mean you'd advise me not to go further west?"

"You'd be wasting time, that's all."

"Where are the fords—or the ferries—or however one crosses the river?"

Dakota glanced furtively up into the Professor's guileless face and looked across at Cockney before replying.

"Course there ain't no ferries. Never saw a blessed bone on the other side anyway."

"The only ford about here," volunteered Cockney, "is a mile or so to the east."

"West it's all canyon," added Dakota.

"By the way," asked Cockney, "do you ride any better than you drive?"

Professor Bulkeley shrugged his great shoulders.

"I regret to admit that it's not one of my few accomplishments."

"Not ride?" Dakota broke into a relieved laugh. "Then you don't need to worry about anything further away than four miles—you'll never get there. You can't drive over these prairies, you know. They ain't as smooth as they look. Wait till you've tried it."

"I *have* tried it," groaned the Professor feelingly.

"Dakota," said Isabel shyly, "*I* ride—only a little, I suppose, compared with your Western girls."

"I knew you did, miss," said Dakota gallantly. "I could tell from the cut o' you. But I bet"—he looked the Professor up and down with professional eye—"I bet I could have him riding in a week—only I ain't got time," he added hastily. "I know the shape when I see it. Now, the tenderfoot here"—Stamford squirmed—"he'll never make a rider. Ain't got the right-shaped legs, nor the body-swing. The minute I seed you——"

He became conscious of his unusual loquacity and stopped.

"If you'll teach me Western ways of riding. Dakota," smiled Isabel.

The cowboy grinned and rubbed his hand across his lips in sheer delight.

"Shore, miss." He looked up at the clock. "Is it too late now?"

"They're going to be with us for months, Dakota," laughed Mary Aikens. "We mustn't unfold all our pleasures the first day."

Dakota rose to go, started to stretch, bethought himself, and addressed Cockney.

"About them staples, Mr. Aikens. We can't do much more to the new corrals till we have 'em."

"I forgot them in town, Dakota. We'll have to send one of the boys in for them."

When Dakota was gone Cockney addressed the Professor.

"I wouldn't advise you to try to ford the river in that buckboard."

"I wouldn't advise me to try it without the buckboard," laughed the Professor. "A bath-tub of water gives me a panic. And I'd never feel satisfied if I didn't cover all the ground."

"If it wouldn't be too late then," said Cockney, "I'd let you find out by trying. It's safe enough if you know the trail, and the river isn't high. Better learn to ride."

The Professor glanced guiltily at his sister.

"Amos," she reminded him sternly, "you said you'd learn."

"Isabel," he replied, "I'm finking."

"Let me give you the recipe," said Stamford. "You take Hobbles—it must be Hobbles; she's used to it by now—you take Hobbles to where the ground's soft. You get one able-bodied cowboy to hold her head and another—you might need two—to lift you into the saddle. Close your eyes, breathe the quickest prayer you know ... and brush the dead grass off your clothes where you landed. The cowboys'll catch Hobbles. One little secret I haven't yet told anyone: sneak your feet from the stirrups while you're praying. It's far easier to fall then."

But the Professor shook his head stubbornly.

"It wouldn't be fair to the Institute to risk losing those old bones out there on the rocks by risking these bones. That, you see, is the comparative values of the products of the Mesozoic and the Quaternary periods. It may be a distortion, but it's my job."

"Then," declared Stamford firmly, "you're not going to save your bones and risk your sister, until we've tried the ford without her. I'm going with you

myself."

"How ingenuous! How sim——"

Stamford raised a warning finger.

"Not that, Professor, not that! To date we're even. If you reopen the feud, I swear I'll have the last word, if I have to leave it set in type."

The Professor's eyes twinkled about the room.

"If my dead body is picked up among the cliffs, here's the murderer. I can't always be sure of having Isabel along to protect me."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Stamford," said Isabel, "he's grown rather dependent on me."

"Then he can't learn independence earlier," persisted Stamford.

"And he's going to need it some day," laughed Cockney. "There are other men, Miss Bulkeley."

"The necessity for concentration in a task like mine——" began the Professor.

"Doesn't excuse selfishness," Stamford filled in. "To-morrow I'll be your assistant. We'll risk our valueless lives together on that ford. The little man has spoken."

"Such a quaintly practical way of expressing his devotion to your sex, my dear!" said the Professor to his sister.

CHAPTER XII

STAMFORD GOES FOSSIL-HUNTING

They did not go fossil-hunting on the morrow. Instead, the Professor preferred to spend much of the day with his countrymen at the cook-house, while Isabel hunted Dakota up and took her first lesson in an art of which she had little to learn. Stamford, feeling unaccountably out of things, sulked under the pretext of reading.

He was oppressed with a sense of the futility of his mission, where so many side-issues were so much more vital than the purpose of his visit. Just what that purpose was he had to revive by sundry uninteresting reminders. Of mysteries about the H-Lazy Z there were enough to encourage the hope that some day the big thing he was searching for would stumble into the light—and he must be there to see it. Cockney's innocence was not so assertive now as it once was; perhaps in his foolish idea of proving the Police wrong he would only convict himself.

The Professor was frankly extending his information about ranch-life, and the humorous twists to his queries and replies immediately made him a favourite with the cowboys. They tried to express their approval by teaching him to ride, hunting out Stamford at last to put him through his paces as a sample of one week's lessons. The Professor shook his head.

"The difference between us is in the results of failure. A man of his size scarcely ruffles the grass where he lights. The seismometers at my own Institute would record my unseating as my only epitaph worthy of note."

Dakota and Isabel whirled down the slope, Dakota liberally applying his whip without gaining ground. Right on top of the group about Hobbles and Stamford they drew up, so close that Hobbles herself reared a little. Stamford promptly slid off on his back.

"Hobbles," he chided, "we were showing off. I'm disappointed.... I'm also surprised. I'd clean forgotten a horse rears, though I've seen it in pictures. Dakota, should I wrap myself round the pommel when she does that?"

But Dakota was too busy with troubles of his own. When the two riders

pulled up, Isabel was off first. With an angry flush she snatched Dakota's quirt from his unresisting hand.

"If you use your whip once more, Dakota, I'll never ride with you again. I don't want to call you a brute, but I got quite as much speed out of my horse without punishing him."

Dakota was staring down into her indignant eyes, too surprised to speak.

Stamford cocked an eye at him. "When you hang and quarter him, Miss Bulkeley, I'd like you to save those chaps. I think they'd become me."

Isabel's anger had already fled before Dakota's helplessness. She laughed apologetically.

"It's all right, Dakota. I suppose I'm not used to Western ways. But I won't get used to that."

Dakota took off his Stetson. "Not used to them! By Samson, miss, there's nothing in the West can beat you! If you could come along with us on the ranges we'd show you life. We're going to be busy out there for the next couple of months."

"Couldn't I come?" asked Isabel innocently.

Dakota looked at the other cowboys, and they all laughed, without explaining.

"Can I come along in my buckboard?" queried the Professor.

Dakota elaborately explained the work of the ranges—*too* elaborately, it seemed to Stamford—and the Professor and his sister listened with evident interest, the former asking foolish and wise questions that brought equally varied replies.

"I'm coming out here to the cook-house often," gushed the Professor, as the call came to lunch.

"Shore!" chorused a half-dozen voices.

"And bring your sister," said Dakota.

"We're your debtors for the summer," bowed the Professor, backing away.

"I do love the native," he enthused to Stamford, on the way to the ranch-house.

"The funny part of it is," laughed Stamford, "that Dakota and the H-Lazy Z outfit are the only cowboys about who *aren't* natives. They're your own countrymen."

"Mr. Stamford," chided Isabel, looking slyly at her brother, "you have a drab soul. Why can't you let Amos enthuse? It's what he grows fat on."

"Is it a prescription you're giving me?" asked Stamford.

The next morning, feeling a little foolish in his new rôle of gallant—as the Professor called it—Stamford stretched his five-feet-odd on the seat of the buckboard beside the towering six-feet-three of his tormentor. Down the river trail, and thence along the edge of the rough beach rock below the corrals, the skeleton buggy bounced eastward to the only ford west of the Double Bar-O. The one consolation to the injured pride of the smaller man was that his companion insisted on letting him drive. Stamford had always considered his accomplishments with the reins as born of necessity rather than of experience, but the Professor frankly refused to expose himself to his own driving.

"I'd even let Isabel do the driving," he confided, "if it weren't that I'd rather die a man's death than live a male baby with a female chaperon."

The ford was used only at long intervals as access to pastures across the river. It was plain enough at its southern entrance to the river flood, but to those who did not know it the course thereafter was a matter of conjecture. Stamford drove into the water with more trepidation than he allowed himself to show, anxiously searching the torrent ahead. Mid-stream the water bubbled through the slats of the buckboard, and the team, terrified by the prospect, pulled up. Stamford urged them on, but Gee-Gee leaped against his mate, forcing him into deep water. The buckboard would have overturned were it

not built for almost any situation into which a horse might force it. Stamford stood up to get a shorter hold of the lines, but the Professor swept him back to the seat with one strong arm and took control. Immediately the team seemed to find bottom and courage together.

As they climbed the gently sloping grade on the north side, the Professor lifted his hands and stared at the reins.

"Goodness! How did I get them? Did you—did you give them to me? I hope I didn't use force. Honest, Mr. Stamford, I never did such a thing in my life before. Was I very frightened? Don't tell the women, please. I'm horribly and disgustingly proud." He squared his shoulders. "Say! with practice I believe I could get on to the hang of the thing. Let's get the practice right now when my spirits are high. We'll do that crossing again. It looks shallower up this way."

Before Stamford could voice his protest the team was around and re-entering the water. With much waving of arms and shouting they completed the double passage of the river in safety by a better route.

"There!" The Professor handed the reins back and mopped his forehead with the big handkerchief. "I'm more puffed up than when they Ph.D.'ed me. Will you be good enough to steer for that bulge in the cliff? I like the looks of the flexure there."

All day Stamford yawned and slept and tried to read, and opened his eyes to the blazing sky and heated rocks. The Professor, his round spectacles pressed close to the ground, poked off among the rocks. At lunch-time he reported his delight at the prospects and could scarcely stop to eat, though he managed his share easily enough when he started. In the evening they drove back over the ford, Stamford hot and irritated, the Professor gushing with anticipation.

"You know," he said, "I wonder *more* neurasthenics don't give this climate a chance at them."

"Good heavens! You don't think I'm a neurasthenic?"

"No offence, I hope. I knew you were here for your health, and I couldn't see—— You'll forgive me, my dear fellow, but I've dabbled a little in medicine too."

Stamford had not prepared for enquiry into his symptoms.

"I'm just generally run down—overworked, I suppose, trying to stiffen the legs of a dying newspaper."

"You were lucky to have such old friends as the Aikens to see you through."

"But they're *not* old friends—very new, in fact. I happened to meet Mrs. Aikens one day at a railway station; she invited me out."

"Ah, Mr. Stamford! Those railway stations!" The Professor's big finger was wagging in his face. "Must I remind you that Mrs. Aikens is married? Oh, you bachelors!"

Stamford jumped. "Great Scott, man! What in thunder has that to do with it?"

The Professor coughed apologetically.

"I thought—well, anyone can see that Mr. Aikens is none too—too eager, shall we say, for visitors. I'm sure it can't be for fear of his wife. She seems much more—more thoughtful of him than he of her—if one may be permitted to discuss his host and hostess. I'm sure I'd rather pay—or live in a tent, and be independent. Dakota, too—though he's a countryman of mine, doesn't seem overjoyed at our presence. May I ask if you received the same impression?"

Stamford chuckled. "*You* were lucky. I had to face Dakota alone. I'm sure my hair went a shade lighter from the first impressions *I* received."

"Ah—I thought so."

The big fellow settled back in deep thought. Stamford tried to reassure him.

"There's no need to mind Dakota. He's only a third partner and doesn't really count when it comes to a show-down."

"But I'm vastly interested in Dakota," murmured the Professor. "He seems to have something on his mind—some worry."

"They *all* do," Stamford blurted out.

"Ah!"

Stamford glanced from the corner of his eye at the Professor. He wanted to confide in someone. Dare he tell his suspicions to the simple friend beside him, who seemed to be stumbling on things. He decided against it; it would be no relief to himself and only add to the Professor's worry.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CONSPIRACY

After dinner the Professor announced his intention of strolling across to his friends at the cook-house, but learned from Cockney that only Bean Slade was about the place, the rest having gone out on the ranges for a few days. Bean was finishing some needed repairs about the ranch buildings, and was going to town in a couple of days for the staples.

"Dakota has made a place for your team in the stables," Cockney said casually. "He's afraid to let strange horses loose in the corrals at night: they might hurt themselves."

"That's thoughtful of Dakota," replied the Professor. "I don't know what Inspector Barker would say—he lent them to me, you know, as the safest in

Medicine Hat—because it must be stifling some nights in the stables. If I relieved Dakota of all personal responsibility I suppose he'd let them run loose in the corrals? Gee-Gee seems to have a temperament that requires airing."

"The stables are not stifling," said Cockney shortly. "Besides, Dakota looks after that part of the ranch; I don't interfere."

Stamford took it outside and thought it over.

"I'd almost forgotten my daily ride," he said, entering the sitting-room a few minutes later. "I have a premonition that should Hobbles lose track of me for a day she'll forget my weaknesses. Will you come and see I get fair-play, Miss Bulkeley?"

"Hobbles is in the stable, too," said Cockney, "also Miss Bulkeley's horse. The key's hanging inside my bedroom door. Help yourself."

Bean Slade suggested that he, as teacher, accompany the two, but Stamford waved him away with mock rudeness.

"You make me blush, Bean. I'm taking Miss Bulkeley for an evening ride—showing her the sights. One of them may be when Hobbles decides to trot, but I must chance that. I usually last only three trots. Hobbles has the habit now of stopping at the third to let me remount."

He bumped away, the perfect seat of his companion giving his inexperience the laugh.

"I don't see how you do it, Miss Bulkeley, but if I could ride like that I'd be a Mounted Policeman—if they'd take me in. Too bad to waste it in Washington. If everyone in your city rides like you——"

"Don't talk about civilisation, Mr. Stamford," she rebuked. "It sounds so funny out here."

"Can I really be funny so easily? Speaking about civilisation, did you ever see anything to beat this locking up of our horses? What's Dakota afraid of

anyway? I'm a funny critter, Miss Bulkeley. I never had an ambition to ride Hobbles out of hours before. Now I'm wild to tear about this lonesome prairie at the most unconventional hours. If you'll turn your back you won't be accessory to a crime. I'd ride away and turn my back to you, only Hobbles wouldn't leave your horse now, and I couldn't make her. I'm making a drawing of this stable key. Yours not to reason why."

He turned himself from her as much as he could and outlined the key in his notebook.

"I was watching the sunset all the time," she told him when he had finished, "and wondering."

"Don't wonder," he warned, with a sigh. "I've started to, and I'm getting more tangled every day. Life was never like this before."

That night he made arrangements with Bean to go to town with him two days later, and retired to bed with a virtuous satisfaction at having beaten his favourite enemy, though when he thought of Cockney he had twinges of conscience.

The second day of fossil-hunting with the Professor was even less interesting and more wearying than the first. There was a limit to the hours Stamford could sleep, and the scorching heat among the rocks made eyes and face sting. After lunch he ended an uncomfortable hour of dozing by hunting up the Professor.

He found him curled in the shadow of a rock, sound asleep, hammer and chisel by his side. Stamford struck the rock a ringing blow with the hammer. With a bound the Professor was on his feet.

"Oh—you, Stamford! This heat—I guess I must have succumbed to it—that and the drone of the mosquitoes. Did you ever feel such a blistering heat, or see such armies of mosquitoes? I believe they've been here all these years probing into these old bones under the impression that they're succulent. They've discovered their mistake since I came," he added ruefully. "Six weeks ago one must have had to hack a way through them in this Edmonton formation. In one short week I've learned that the guiding star to some

antediluvian monster is the modern mosquito."

He seized his tools and began to hack a crevice.

"There's a rib here, a big fellow. I'm having a great time tickling it—but the big brute never quivers a hair—if he ever had any. Down there is a tooth. Would you mind taking a look and reporting on the quality of dentistry prevailing in B.C. a million?" He sat back on his heels. "I envy the advantages of those to whom my bones will be fossils. Present palæontological graveyards have not to date yielded up a single gold filling. If you wouldn't mind chalking off any outlines of bones on that patch of rock down there, you could feel that your day was not wasted."

Stamford yawned, made a few desultory marks, and sat down. The Professor continued his hacking without bothering him further.

That night there was music at the H-Lazy Z; the banks of the Red Deer canyon echoed for the first time to sounds prophetic of the day when ranches will give place to farms, farms to towns. Professor Bulkeley played, until he felt every eye fixed breathlessly on him; then he rose in confusion and insisted on Mary Aikens taking his place. To her accompaniment a chorus formed, but in a few minutes it had dwindled to a duet. Stamford and Isabel withdrew to a corner. Cockney sat smoking in gloomy silence. Even the yelping coyotes out on the prairie ceased their shuddering clamour to listen—a space of silence Imp did his resentful best to fill.

Stamford, seated by the screen in his room before climbing between the sheets, heard the voices of brother and sister over his head. After a minute he started to a guilty consciousness that he was straining to hear what they said. Noisily he jerked the window down.

It seemed to him that he had just dropped to sleep when Bean hammered at the screen to waken him for the trip to town.

On the long drive Stamford found the cowboy little more inclined to talk than was the youthful driver who had brought him out. It was a keen disappointment to the self-appointed detective, for he had counted on Bean's affection for him providing the clues that were evading him. The lanky

cowboy was willing enough to talk on subjects of no possible interest to Stamford, but of the ranch he had nothing to say.

However, when, the second day afterwards, he and Bean floated on the ferry across the South Saskatchewan and climbed the cut bank toward the northern trail, Stamford felt that his trip was not wasted. For one thing he carried in his pocket a duplicate of the stable key. Also he had had a short conversation with Inspector Barker that clung to the fringes of his consciousness.

"For an invalid, Stamford," mocked the Inspector, "you strike me as no friend of the undertaker's. If I didn't know your holiday was a real loss in dollars and cents, I'd say it was undiluted laziness. I can't imagine anyone, after three months in this dollar-chasing country, sacrificing cash for chronic fatigue. Or is the fair Isabel there?"

"How did you know?" asked Stamford amiably.

"That's the little birdie that tells secrets to us married men. If she hadn't come to the mountain, then the mountain—— How's the Professor getting along with his new friends, the Red Deer dinosaurs? What's more to the point, by the way, have you come across a pair of big dogs that don't seem at home?"

"There's Imp," suggested Stamford.

"Who's Imp?"

"Imp is several degrees short of big—though he certainly doesn't seem at home—unless Dakota's about. Legally he belongs to Mrs. Aikens. As a matter of fact Dakota has him eating out of his hand. The little chap attached himself to our rowdy friend at first glance. Love at first sight. Took to him like a mouse to cheese."

The Inspector was more than amused. He asked so many questions that Stamford realised how easy it was to make the little terrier entertaining. Some of the brightest things he determined to repeat to Isabel Bulkeley.

On the return Bean was more talkative, without saying anything of value for Stamford's purposes.

As they rolled, in the late afternoon, over the gently waving prairie toward the Red Deer, Stamford's weary eyes caught a movement on the top of a rise to the west. It came once, and went, furtively, Stamford was convinced. Without seeming to watch he kept his eyes fixed on the ridge, and after a few minutes was rewarded by the tip of a Stetson, as if someone were lying down, peering over at them. Bean was sleepily flicking the broncos.

When two more Stetsons appeared beside the first, he made his mind up. Calling Bean's wandering senses back to earth, he waved his arms. Instantly the Stetsons disappeared. A moment later Dakota loped over the ridge and down the slope. He drew up several yards away and beckoned Bean to him. From the furtive glances in his direction Stamford knew he was the subject of their early conversation, Dakota questioning, Bean explaining. Then they turned their backs on him. The owners of the other Stetsons did not show themselves.

As Bean clambered back over the wheel Dakota shouted a last word:

"Get cookie to hustle a snack for you. But hurry. We'll wait. You can do it in a couple of hours."

Bean flicked the whip and they started for home on the canter.

"They aren't giving you much rest," sympathised Stamford.

"Naw," replied Bean shortly.

"The work about a ranch is certainly a surprise to me. What does Dakota want you for?"

"It's a hell of a life!" grumbled Bean. Thereafter he kept his lips closed.

An hour later Stamford was eating in the ranch-house, trying to answer with intelligent flippancy the questions poured at him. The promise of the stable key burning a hole in his pocket was filling his mind. To outwit Dakota

was his sole ambition at the moment. If he could get Hobbles from the locked stables——

Pleading fatigue, he retired early. For some time he heard the conversation in the sitting-room, subdued for his sake, and then the stair door closed behind the Bulkeleys. The sudden Western night had fallen.

CHAPTER XIV

RIDERS OF THE NIGHT

Stamford, softly lifting the screen from his window, with the thrills of a conspirator, climbed through and looked about. Once before he had stood in the midst of the darkened prairie, with no thought then than that he was temporarily but not dangerously lost. What lay before him now he thought he had seen under every aspect from his bedroom window. But there was a difference—a very disturbing difference.

Now, in the eeriest part of the vast prairies he was stepping into an eery and illegitimate adventure. Deliberately he was involving himself in a situation that could bring no satisfaction but that of counter-plotting, and, were he discovered, would expose him to even worse suspicion than he deserved. Most of the exhilaration fled with the touch of the cold night air on his face; the rest of it went before the vividness of his imagination. He marvelled that a mere key should have uplifted him so much, that a prospective ride at such an hour should have gratified one to whom riding was at best nothing more than an unpleasant education.

Had his knees not trembled he would probably have climbed back through the window with a grin of shame at his foolhardiness, but with terror tingling his scalp—— He closed his teeth and struck out stubbornly round the corner of the house, avoiding the noisy gravel walk. Up the slope diagonally he

crept, pointing above the stables. A sense of the necessity of concealment, and a dim thought of future needs, impressed him so strongly that he scouted about for a long time back and forth in search of the deepest of the scarcely visible rolls he knew to mark the prairie everywhere.

Dropping down the slope then from above the stables, he applied the key to the padlock. His heart was beating fast, his fingers trembling. The night was crammed with terrors, and anxiety about the fit of the key made him wonder what kink in his brain clothed an adventure like this in attraction.

The key fitted. He realised then that there was no honourable escape but to go on. Fate was a funny thing. He looked back once toward his window in the ranch-house, took a long breath, and stepped into the utter blackness of the stable. The horses sniffed, and for a moment he tried to convince himself that he had accomplished all he wished.

He knew Hobbles' stall, and, speaking gently, advanced in the darkness. By the light of a sulphur match which he struck under the cover of his coat he found saddle and bridle and clumsily fastened them in place. Once off the wooden floors, the horse's feet met only hard, soundless clay, and when he emerged into the night, leading Hobbles, he was satisfied that he could not have wakened the cookie, who alone, he thought, remained in the ranch buildings. Pushing back the loop of the padlock without locking it, he led off to the south-east, avoiding bunk-house and ranch-house.

In the saddle he was more satisfied. No longer was he alarmed, but the exhilaration of exercising a new art alone in the night determined him on one burst of speed. Stopping suddenly at the end of a few hundred yards, he turned his ear back with tingling veins. Back there somewhere in the darkness he imagined the beat of a horse's hoofs—and then sudden silence. Twice more he repeated it with the same result.

Convinced now that he was really frightened into foolish fancies, he rode on.

Out before him a strange lightness in the sky attracted his attention. Five minutes later he could see dimly the lines of dead grass on the crest of a ridge. Riding slowly up a slope, he looked over.

Four hundred yards away, in a deep coulee, a fire was burning. The bottom in which it was kindled was carefully chosen for concealment, and Stamford thrilled with excitement. Between him and the flames a bunch of cattle was kept in hand by a temporary corral, two silhouetted cowboys seated on the top rail. About the fire more cowboys were struggling with a steer that lay on its side, and the smell of burning hair carried to Stamford's nose the work of the branding irons.

He wondered what mystic night rites he was invading.

Seeking a nearer approach than was possible from that direction, he rode back down the slope and skirted about to the opposite side. That side, the south, suited him better, too, for the reason that, if he were detected, he would not seem to have come from the ranch.

Leaving Hobbles with dropped rein in another coulee, he climbed to the ridge. There he could see everything. Though he knew next to nothing of branding, and nothing whatever of its dishonest forms, the hour of the deed, the silence of the operations, and the choice of location, convinced him that it was intended only for the eyes of those immediately concerned.

He had just settled down to watch the thing through, when from only a few yards away rose the startling howl of a coyote. The sound galvanised more startling life into the group of cowboys. Those at the fire dropped their branding irons and rushed for their horses, and the two at the corrals were in their saddles as the howl ceased.

Stamford tumbled down the slope and raced for Hobbles. As he clambered into the saddle he realised with a gasp how hopeless flight was. Even with such a short start he had confidence that Hobbles could hold her own in the dark—but *he* couldn't at such a speed. Fifty yards convinced him of it—fifty yards of giving Hobbles her head and concentrating on the horn in front.

He was considering what would happen when they caught him, when a horse raced out of the darkness behind him and shot past—so close that a skirt blew against his legs and he could hear a woman's voice whispering to her mount.

So Mary Aikens, too, was out that night! He forgot his fears and raced on.

But escape was hopeless. From the ridge came the thunder of the pursuing cowboys—and then, close behind him, another horse. It was gaining rapidly, the quirt lashing again and again—Stamford could hear its gushing breath at his hip.... And then he felt himself pushed from the saddle with a force that threw him clear of Hobbles' flying heels. Over and over on the soft earth he rolled, uninjured but too mystified and angry to appreciate it. He was rising to his feet to face his captor, when he realised that the rider who had unhorsed him had not even paused in his pace. Twice he heard the quirt fall, and he remembered that as he left the saddle that quirt had lashed over Hobbles' flank. Without a rider Hobbles would make the ranch.

A short hundred yards back pounded the feet of the pursuing horses. Stamford crept swiftly out of their path and lay still.

When they were past he rose and started on the run for the ranch. Vaguely he felt that in the speed of his return lay safety. Reaching the trail, he ran until his heart threatened to collapse; but he would not stop to rest.

It was still dark when he topped the rise overlooking the ranch buildings and crept carefully down toward the house. Though there seemed little danger of discovery, he kept to the depressions, zig-zagging downward. He was thankful to his instinct for concealment when he suddenly became aware of someone standing before the ranch-house looking up the trail—a woman. He could make out no more than the outline, but it must, of course, be Mary Aikens. He knew that she could have no desire to be discovered by him, and he moved more slowly, waiting for her to go.

His foot struck an unexpected mound and landed him on his face. As he lay in the grass he saw her move swiftly away round the corner of the house. Both the front door and the window of the Aikens' bedroom were in plain sight, but she did not enter either. He ran on openly then.

On the other side of the house no one was in sight. He hastened to the back, but the peg left by the cookie on the outside of the screen door when he departed after his evening's work proved that no one had entered there since.

Stamford leaned against the wall, completely mystified. He looked around, poking in the grass, yet without hope. The woman had vanished.

He remembered Hobbles and, gulping down a desire to cuddle into the bedclothes, hurried to the stable. The mysteries increased—*the stable was locked*. From the bunk-house came the noisy snoring of the cook. With his duplicate key he let himself into the stable and found Hobbles—*unsaddled*—as if she had never been out, though her sides were still slightly warm.

Stamford crept out. It was uncanny.

The soft padding of a horse down the slope to the east, far from the trail, brought him to a sense of his exposure. Diving between two buildings, he waited. The rider turned off toward the corrals, evidently moving with caution, and a few minutes later Cockney Aikens came round the corner of one of the buildings that concealed Stamford, stopped a moment to listen to the snoring of the cook, and passed on to the house.

His steps were still audible when another horse came along the same course, but it did not turn off to the corrals. Stamford slunk further into his hiding-place as Dakota Fraley rode past and drew up before the bunk-house.

To Stamford's amazement Bean Slade came out.

"Who in h—I's been riding about here to-night?" Dakota demanded.

"Nobody—not that I've heard," returned Bean in a whisper.

"You been sleeping so tight, I guess, it ud take a kick on the ear to wake you."

"I heard *you* far enough," returned Bean sharply.

"Bring the lantern."

Dakota dismounted. Bean was a long time with the lantern, striking several matches in vain.

"No ile," he growled, with a curse.

"Never mind. I have matches."

Dakota tried the padlock, unlocked it, and entered the stable. Stamford heard a match scratch and saw a momentary flare through the cracks where the mud had dropped out.

"That shore beats me," muttered Dakota, as they came out. "They're all there. Let's take a look at the corrals."

They went off around the stable, and Stamford, creeping out, slunk up to the depressions in the slope that had become in one night such good friends to him, and returned to the house. He discovered that he had left his screen out, and a few hardy mosquitoes that defied the chilly night were buzzing within. Imp's snuffling grunt came from beneath the door and he opened it noisily and let the little terrier in. As he did so he thought he heard a gentle creak of Cockney's door. He smiled into the darkness and crept into bed, the dog curled up at his feet.

CHAPTER XV

ONE MYSTERY LESS

It was after nine the next morning when Stamford's eyes opened on a world that seemed out of focus. He examined his watch incredulously; the dink of breakfast dishes and the rumble of lowered voices convinced him that it was wrong, and he dressed without hurry.

As he opened the door, the Professor, Isabel and Mrs. Aikens were rising from the table. The sitting-room clock told him that his watch was right after all.

"These prairie nights seem too much for all of us," said Isabel, in answer to his puzzled look.

"Except our host," corrected her brother. "He's been gone an hour."

"It *does* affect strangers that way," said Mary Aikens, without looking up from the table she was rearranging for Stamford's breakfast.

"It wasn't that with me," explained Stamford. "I didn't sleep well."

"The drive was too much for you," suggested Mrs. Aikens.

"Perhaps Mr. Stamford had too successful a day in town," laughed Isabel, watching him.

"Yes, it was successful," he replied, looking straight at her.

"Perhaps they're serving stronger stuff than they did a couple of weeks ago," hazarded the Professor. "By a chronometer that never deceives, you've been in bed for the circle of the clock. My limit is eight hours. Simple mathematical progression in comparative physical proportions would grant to Imp here the whole twenty-four hours, and a mosquito would overlap on the

week after next and still be the creditor of time. But, lord knows, they never sleep. In the meantime some gently dead but brutally fossilised Trachodon is kept waiting beyond his preconceptions of Doomsday for the resurrective hand of the Smithsonian Institute."

Stamford yawned frankly.

"Really, Professor, I'm not quite up to that so early in the morning."

"Some day," said Isabel, "Amos will have had his say. And the world will be so still then."

"And so will science, and brilliant conversation——"

"Even our hostess is laughing at you," said Stamford.

"Me?" Mary Aikens was colouring. "I—I like this new life about the ranch. I wish I could keep you all—always."

Isabel leaned over and patted her hand, and a tear was behind the smile. Stamford, uncomfortable at the display of emotion, changed the subject.

"And so you've been exposing your sister to that ford while I was away?"

"My dear fellow," replied the Professor, "when did you come to the conclusion that Isabel was here for someone else's amusement than mine? Of course, Mrs. Aikens, if she can be of real service to you here——"

The door had opened.

"Don't worry about Mary," Cockney broke in harshly. "Since Stamford and the *Journal* let us down in the matter of help, we're getting accustomed to doing our work ourselves. At any rate we haven't fallen to depending on our guests. Mary, where's the large pair of wire-cutters?"

His wife loaded herself with dirty dishes and started for the kitchen. The Professor leaped to her assistance.

"I wouldn't disturb myself so much if I were you," said Cockney in an

even tone, so full of meaning that the Professor turned aside through the stair door without a word.

"We'll have to go now." Isabel started to follow her brother. "The ford's perfectly safe, Mr. Stamford," she threw over her shoulder. "Anyway I can swim."

"What can't you do? But you'd drown trying to save that blundering brother of yours."

"But he's a perfectly nice brother, don't you think?"

"No," he snapped. "I don't. I wanted you to come for a ride."

"Thank you," she called back from the stair door. "My next engagement's with Dakota, I believe."

When the buckboard had disappeared round the lower end of the corrals on the way to the ford, Stamford, more than a little uncertain of the wisdom of it, made for the stables in search of some light on the previous night's scene. But no one was about, and he saddled Hobbles and rode for an hour.

As he turned back, a solitary mess-wagon came into sight far along the eastern trail. Stamford's thoughts flew back to the cattle shipping at Dunmore Junction, when the same mess-wagon, at Dakota's command, drifted away into the lonesome northern prairie, leaving a half-dozen of its companions rattling off down the trail for a night in Medicine Hat.

Stamford found himself wondering now, as he had then. He swung Hobbles off to the south, and when the wagon had turned down the slope to the ranch stables, he rode slowly back to the crest of the slope. The wagon had just pulled up before the bunk-house.

The driver was lifting several rifles from the wagon to carry them inside, the other cowboys, who had returned while he was riding, looking on. Stamford's eyes gleamed with a sudden revelation.

That lonesome mess-wagon of the H-Lazy Z on the day of the double

tragedy had concealed the rifles the Police could not find. Its puzzling departure—Dakota's objection to feeding Mary Aikens at the ranch mess-wagon—it was all clear now.

Down the slope he could see Dakota, Bean and several strange members of the outfit watching him. Whereupon he promptly fell off, scrambled into the saddle again, and rode in clinging to the horn.

"You're shore conside'ble of a horseman," chaffed Dakota. "If I was you I'd patent that style and sell it to a circus. Barnum's got clowns not half so funny."

"We're always funniest when we don't suspect it," returned Stamford. "I hope nobody will tell you the truth about yourself, Dakota; it would spoil things for the spectators."

Dakota forced the frown from his face with a smile. For some reason he preferred to be friendly.

"You and me should mate up. We could put on a show for the ranch folks some night. But you seem to be having fun without it. We can hear you out here. Say, that Bulkeley gal shore can sing some, eh?"

Stamford resented words and tone.

"It happens that she never sings."

"Then it's the only thing she don't do. You don't mean to tell me it's the missus?"

"Mrs. Aikens has done all the singing you've heard."

"Holy Smoke!" Dakota turned to his companions. "Think of that. It's more'n a year since she's opened that piano. 'Member when she came first, boys? Wasn't them fine concerts she gave us? Then she stopped. Say, d'ye think, Mr. Stamford, they'd mind if I drop around some night and just sit quiet-like where I can hear and see? Us punchers don't get much chance with music, 'cept what we make ourselves."

"I'm not the one to ask, Dakota. But I don't imagine——"

"By Samson! I'll take the chance. I don't think I look so awful raw in them angoras, eh? They cost me a handful of bucks in the days when I was a gayer spark than I have time to be these days. It's about time I got something back for my money."

And so that night, after the singing commenced, Dakota sidled humbly to the open door and stood outside the screen waiting to be invited in. Mary Aikens called to him.

"It sounds purty fine out there," he apologised. "It's a heap sight nicer close."

He carried a chair to the corner of the room, clutching his Stetson nervously. When Stamford thought of him again he discovered him deep in conversation with Isabel Bulkeley, a wide grin on his face. Stamford liked it so little that he looked no more until Dakota rose to leave.

The next day, after his morning ride on Hobbles, Stamford had a lunch put up for him and set out for the river to test the fishing. A few goldeyes fell to his rod in the first half-hour, and after that he grew sleepy and leaned against a rock. Across the river the cliff towered raggedly above him, its strata a confusing repetition of lines that merged into monotonous chaos. Great clefts, gorges and inclines cut the face of it into a less inaccessible wall than it looked at a distance. He became interested. He dropped his pole and sauntered up the bank.

Reward came suddenly. Through a fissure in the cliff, that seemed to open into a wider cleft further back, he caught a glimpse of a familiar grey dress. He was thankful then for the idea that had struck him on his visit to town—that he might find use for his pocket field-glasses.

Isabel Bulkeley was seated on a ledge, her back against a straight wall, her hands folded idly in her lap. Evidently she was dreaming, though slight movements of her feet showed she was not asleep. The tools lay beside her, and, though Stamford watched for almost an hour, she did not use them. Of the Professor he saw nothing. He returned thoughtfully to his fishing, cast his

line, and almost immediately hooked a big pickerel. Thereafter he forgot for a time the very existence of the Bulkeleys.

On his way to the ranch-house Imp darted from the cook-house and fell in at his heels.

"At any rate," he said to his hostess, "I've earned my feed to-day. Four gold-eyes, one real pickerel—and Imp."

"For the fish, thanks!" laughed Mary Aikens. "But for Imp I fear we can lay the credit to Dakota's absence more than to your attractions. We're alone again on the ranch, and even Imp, the traitor, finds the ranch house preferable to a deserted cook-house. No," she scolded down at Imp, "I'm not prepared to receive you into my heart on such short notice." She turned suddenly to her husband. "Where have Dakota and the others gone this time?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me. My ignorance of ranching is notorious. Ah—by the way, it's good we have friends with us. I'm going away myself for a few days. I want to see how the Circle-Arrow dogies are standing the gaff. They've been on the ranges for two months now. Next summer I'm thinking of improving the strain from the east.... You'll be all right with such brave companions as the Professor—and Stamford."

A forced smile was scarcely wrinkling his face. Mary Aikens made no reply, but whistled to Imp and went out to frolic on the little patch of dry grass she had once fondly hoped to be able to call a lawn.

Dinner over, Cockney rode away to the east. They stood in the doorway and watched Pink Eye race up the slope and sink out of sight over the ridge.

"A wonderful man on a wonderful horse!" Isabel Bulkeley voiced the thoughts of them all.

"And yet you've seen me on Hobbles!" chided Stamford.

"That's why." The Professor ducked beyond reach.

"Pink Eye is as vicious on occasion as he is powerful," said Mary.

"Cockney doesn't ride him much, but when he does I know there's a hard trip ahead."

That evening a strange silence brooded over the valley; even the coyotes failed to greet the falling darkness. The Professor played a little, but his fingers were lifeless, and, after a few bars, he closed the piano and pulled his chair before the door to stare into the night. The women were busy with needlework; Stamford smoked and thought.

Cockney's repeated absences, always coinciding with those of Dakota and the others, puzzled him. His instincts refused still to link the big rancher with the subterranean work in which Stamford suspected the cowboys were engaged, but—— Stamford closed his lips tight; he was there to prove Cockney's innocence in the teeth of suspicion.

When he went to his room. Imp shivered in at his heels and curled up on the foot of the bed. Once during the night Stamford was awakened by the dog's muffled bark, and against the window he could see the ears pointing stiffly out into the night. Far away a big pack of coyotes yelped, and, half-asleep, Stamford followed their rapid passage along the crest of the cliff across the river. Yelps and barks and howls burst out in a score of places over the prairie. Stamford reached down to rub Imp's ears and sank to sleep.

It was three days before Cockney returned. They were at the dinner table when they saw him ride up to the stables, unsaddle, rub Pink Eye down with straw, and lead him away to the lower corral.

"Any of the boys back yet?" he asked, as he joined them.

When they told him only the cookie was about the place:

"Better keep quiet about where I've been. Dakota's sensitive on the dogie question. Every year we fight about it. He considers dogies the blight of the West—that they lack more in stamina and size than they make up in quality of beef. My idea is to improve the quality, not only the bulk."

Stamford was watching him narrowly. That he was weary and hungry was evident, and about his talk was an abstraction that belied the seriousness of

his subject.

"You have a few more ideas about ranching than you care to show," he said.

Cockney served himself a third helping of pork and beans and said nothing.

"Large men always wear masks," observed Isabel.

"And small men are as transparent as water, I suppose," complained Stamford indignantly.

Cockney was playing with his knife. "Perhaps Stamford knows he couldn't deceive if he tried. My personal experience of small men is they're seldom up to what they wish to appear. For instance, Stamford is physically broken. Would anyone suspect it? He seems to enjoy the aimless life out here, yet in town he works twelve hours a day with gusto. There's nothing to do about the Red Deer but loaf, yet he's never indolent. I don't try to understand them."

He had resumed his eating, but Stamford was uncomfortably conscious of more than banter in his words. Isabel spoke quickly:

"Anyone can see that Mr. Stamford's job is to sleep—and doze—and sleep again."

"In order not to give offence——"

"You wouldn't willingly give offence," she broke in, with a laugh so indulgent that to accept her words seriously would have been impertinence.

"I wish you'd teach Mary how to say that," said Cockney.

"Perhaps," suggested the Professor merrily, "she knows you better than Isabel does Mr. Stamford."

"Too often guessing is mistaken for knowing," said Cockney, looking at his wife.

Dakota and Bean returned early the next morning, the others following in the afternoon. The Professor greeted them with unaffected pleasure as he returned from his day's work; and after dinner he made his way to the cook-house. Imp was already installed at the foreman's feet. Cockney lit a cigarette and wandered off toward the corrals, and Mary called for Matana and went for a wild ride, leaving Stamford and Isabel to keep the ranch-house. But Dakota drifted across from the cook-house, whereupon Stamford was quite certain that henceforth they were bitter enemies.

Indeed, Dakota developed such an annoying habit of spending the evenings at the ranch-house that Stamford's hatred of him assumed enormous proportions. The cowboy took to daily shaving, and even Stamford was forced to admit hitherto unsuspected traces of an elemental comeliness. When Isabel also seemed conscious of it, he cursed beneath his breath with a small man's jealousy.

Dakota responded to the poorly veiled dislike in the safety of the cook-house, whither Stamford repaired at every opportunity for the purposes of his quest.

"You don't seem to like me, Dakota," smiled Stamford. He knew the memories it recalled.

"I always did hate dwarfs," snorted Dakota.

"You see," said Stamford, with mock humility, "there was so much good left after you were created that it wouldn't have been fair to put it up in big bundles. I must have been turned out just after you were patched together."

Dakota was not soothed by the loud guffaw from his companions.

"Some day," he warned, "I'll get you where we can talk it over real friendly-like. Let me invite you over to Montana, where the shooting's good."

"Thanks! I'm safer here."

"You're dead right there, youngster," agreed Dakota vehemently.

August was hastening to its end. Stamford, in a panic, began to realise how little he had accomplished. He was oppressed with the depth of his inexperience, and at moments considered seriously the wisdom of handing over to the Police all the information he had collected and getting back to his paper. Though, the longer he remained, the more he was impressed with the mysterious undercurrent at the H-Lazy Z, he had arrived no nearer the solution of the murder of Corporal Faircloth. His tentative ventures to direct the conversation to informative channels, whether with the cowboys or with Cockney, were blocked by sullen silences or suspicious glances; and it spurred him on in his most discouraged moments, though it told him nothing of value. He knew he was in the right place, but he was growing less confident that he was the right man.

One day, having wandered far up the bank of the river with fishing tackle in hand but a keener intentness on the opposite cliffs where he knew Isabel Bulkeley was working with her brother, he saw, far to the south-west, a galloping Policeman. He mentioned it at the dinner table. Cockney bit off an oath in time and expended his fury on his meat. Professor Bulkeley did not seem to hear, expressing a regret that he had been denied an opportunity of meeting "these fearless and sparkling guardians of the law."

Cockney gave an audible sneer.

"You don't admire them, Mr. Aikens?"

"I hate them," Cockney exploded. "If I saw them driven into a corral and shot out of hand——"

"Jim, dear," Mary broke in gently.

His anger directed itself against her. "Yes, you've been swallowing the dope, like everyone else. You women! You can't resist the glamour of them. But, for Heaven's sake, keep it from me in my own house! I won't have it!"

He was almost shouting at the last, the very unreasonableness of his outburst increasing his anger. Mary sat cowering a little before it, and

Professor Bulkeley rose abruptly and disappeared upstairs. Cockney's eyes followed him in a sudden silence, then he, too, got up and stumbled out.

Mary Aikens, returning in the early darkness that night from a mad gallop on the prairie, brought with her a bundle of papers handed her by a rider from the Double Bar-O. From copies of the *Journal* Stamford learned that the cattle-thieving was becoming bolder. Evidently Smith was doing good work on the paper, and the advertising was holding its own.

He went across to the cook-house, the Professor strolling in later. The Dude was induced to bring out his guitar, and accompany himself to one of the sentimental ditties of the Montana saloons, the Professor proving himself possessed of a remarkable ear for songs new to Stamford and not in the tenor of Smithsonian Institute circles. There were several mouth-organs among the outfit, and Bean Slade's high tenor was a not unpleasing addition to the part-singing. The Professor was so exuberantly delighted with the entertainment that he went to the door and whistled across to the ranch-house for his sister.

She came immediately, laughing her way into the group with the subtle touch of companionship that always breathed from her. Stamford immediately retired into his shell, resenting her frank friendliness with these rough fellows, resenting their half-shy acceptance of it, resenting more intensely Dakota's assumption that he represented the things she liked about them. Isabel looked at him under her brows two or three times, with a sly smile about her lips that did not add to his good humour. And presently, when she and Dakota were talking and laughing together, while the others went on with the desultory entertainment, Stamford rose to leave.

"Oh, Mr. Stamford," she called. "Don't leave the tenderfeet unprotected. We're going in a minute. I was almost forgetting Mrs. Aikens."

She smiled on Dakota and the others, and Dakota bowed low, hand on heart. In his enthusiasm he shook hands with the Bulkeleys, omitting Stamford. Bean's shy but inevitable "Ta-ta" was quite as full of gratitude, and Imp barked a farewell that, by his snuggling wriggles against Dakota's legs, was meant to say: "I appreciate the friendship of the ranch-house, but it mustn't presume to interfere with my *real* love."

"What fine fellows those chaps could be!" muttered the Professor, on the way to the ranch-house.

"They're that now," replied Stamford,— "except Dakota."

CHAPTER XVI

AN ADVENTURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

Stamford climbed into bed with a feeling of discomfort. He always knew beforehand when he would not sleep. Even as a youngster the aftermath of indigestible luxuries, nightmare, was heralded before he closed his eyes by a feeling of oppression. To-night he longed for Imp's watchful ears at the foot of his bed. Outside, the world was dominated by the hideous yelping of the coyotes. To Stamford they were a symbol of Red Deer mysteries: though hundreds of them by day lurked within the horizon, they were seldom visible; at night, when only their eyes could see, they filled the darkness with raucous clamour.

For a long time he struggled in vain to sleep, and at last put on his dressing-gown and seated himself before the window. The mosquitoes had retreated before the cool nights, though the sun still brought them to life in clouds by day. He removed the screen and leaned from the window. Beyond the shadow of the house the prairie was yellow now with a brilliant moonlight.

A distant sound of disjointed conversation drew his eyes to the bunk-house. A light still burned there.

Urged by sudden recklessness, he hastily donned part of his clothing and climbed outside.

He found the prairie in another of its moods. To-night the moon blazed a spirit that ridiculed the proportions of darkness and day. It seemed inconceivable that the slightest movement could pass unnoticed in such brilliance, but this that he looked on was a new world of silent majesty. There were the old landmarks, but they were altered in size and distance and relative location. So plainly did the cliff across the river stand out that it seemed within a stone's throw, yet any attempt to decipher the familiar strata, the recesses and projections, was defeated by a bewilderingly new mass of shadows and high-lights. The ranch buildings were crowding closer, and the lazy movements of the horses in the corrals came sharp as pistol shots.

Stamford stood for minutes, gripped in the clutch of the prairie by moonlight. His mind refused to turn from the scene; he was restless, unsatisfied, undecided. The light was still there in the bunk-house, and at intervals he could hear the sound of voices.

Bringing himself back to realities by sheer force of will, he moved round to the front of the house, clinging to the shadows. Where they ended he paused a moment to fix in his memory the concealing depressions that stretched further up the slope toward the stables, and then struck swiftly through the moonlight.

He was conscious of an ill-defined desire to conceal his movements from the ranch-house as well as from the bunk-house for which he was making, and he sank to the first cover with a sigh of relief. After a careful inspection in both directions through the long grass he began to crawl forward.

Nearer and nearer he approached the bunk-house, though on a higher level, without having once exposed himself—he was confident of that. The voices grew audible, certain excited words coming to him, then phrases. A wordy quarrel was in progress, from which Bean Slade's high-pitched voice projected itself frequently.

Stamford moved nearer, crept over several rolls to a hollow before the bunk-house, and lay down to listen.

"Yah!" he heard General sneer. "*You'd 'a' let him go, you would, and got a bellyful o' lead fer yore trouble, you would.*"

"There was other ways o' gettin' out of it," protested Bean shrilly, "besides doin' fer him. It was damn brutal murder, I call it."

"Just 'cos *you* cain't sleep, Bean," jawed Alkali, "don't mean yo need to growl the rest of us awake everlastingly."

Dakota broke in imperatively:

"If you fellows don't shut your heads there's going to be trouble. Here you been on that ole song, Bean, for the last hour. What's the good? It can't be helped now. Somebody had to shoot—not to say it was meant to plug him for keeps. Now shut up both of you. We got enough excitement ahead for a month or so without worrying about a measly bullet or two."

Stamford hugged the ground, scarcely breathing. Once more Dakota had blocked him. Another minute and he would have heard something of moment, he was certain, though what it was he did not stop to consider until, in obedience to Dakota's orders, the quarrel ceased. He was not sure then that it was a case of any personal interest to him. Someone had once shot someone. All he knew was that Bean resented it, and that General was its strongest defender, whether as the shooter or not was uncertain.

He knew of only three deaths by shooting since he arrived: Corporal Faircloth, Kid Loveridge, and Billy Windover. Corporal Faircloth's death was not involved, since there could have been no danger of a bullet had he been spared. Kid Loveridge? It was almost as difficult to imagine that it concerned him, since he was one of the outfit and its most popular member. Of Billy Windover's death he knew too little, and was too little interested to follow the connection.

The light went out; silence reigned in the bunk-house. But Stamford lay there, forgetting where he was, riveting the conversation to his memory for future reference.

A sharp, muffled bark from the bunk-house roused him. He raised his head cautiously and peered through the grass. That was the precise warning the dog had given twice from the foot of his bed. What had disturbed it this time?

The door of the bunk-house opened and Dakota came stealthily but swiftly out, clad only in his shirt. In his hand was a rifle.

His first glance was toward the ranch-house, but all the time he was moving rapidly to the corner of the bunk-house, the rifle half-poised. Imp was there ahead of him, ears cocked, looking off down the valley toward the corrals. Stamford sank into the grass.

A burst of flame startled him, and then the crack of the rifle. It, too, was pointing down the slope toward the corrals. Stamford forgot caution and raised himself to look. But he could see nothing save the melting moonlight that never fulfilled its promise of exposing details.

Dakota returned to the bunk-house even more quickly than he had come. A few excited whispers followed, and then silence once more. Stamford began to work his way back to the ranch-house, suddenly aware of how shivery he was.

He had but started, his eyes searching the line of retreat, when he saw Cockney, fully dressed, appear from the shadows of the house, pass into the moonlight-bathed side where his bedroom window was, and climb through. Stamford hurried on. But before he reached the point where he must cross the open, Cockney reappeared and slunk into the shadows. An instant later Mary Aikens, in a dressing-gown, clambered through the bedroom window and crept timidly along the moonlit wall. At the corner she cautiously peered round after her husband.

Stamford could see Cockney outlined against the moonlit prairie beyond. He was standing with his face turned to the ranch buildings, as motionless as the other shadows. After a moment or two, with sudden decision he wheeled about and began to retrace his steps in long strides.

Mary Aikens turned and ran for the window, but she was too late, unless

Stamford stood upright and spoke:

"Did you hear it, too, Cockney—the shot?"

Cockney stopped in his tracks, hand on hip. And his wife disappeared over the window-sill. Stamford stepped across the moonlight to the shadow of the house.

"Stamford"—Cockney's voice was full of menace, though it was quiet and low—"you'd better not butt in."

"I'm sure——" Stamford recognised the futility of talk. "I heard the shot and——"

"I've warned you," said Cockney, and entered the house by the front door.

Stamford stumbled thoughtfully on to his bedroom window. He was throwing one leg over the sill when Isabel Bulkeley spoke suddenly from over his head.

"I was wrong, Mr. Stamford."

He was as much startled by her presence there as by anything else that had happened that night, and he did not reply until he was safe in his room.

"You—you frightened me, Miss Bulkeley," he gasped, leaning out to see her.

Her low laugh made him himself again.

"How *could* you be wrong?"

"You certainly do more than sleep—and doze—and sleep again. Here you're strolling out when everyone else is asleep."

"It's very lonely," he hinted.

He felt that she was laughing in the silence that followed.

"There are more reasonable hours for a moonlight promenade than ten minutes to one in the morning—even in *such* moonlight."

"Any hour of the moonlight will suit me," he said,— "if I'm not alone."

What wakened you?"

"When two men stand outside one's window quarrelling, a light sleeper is apt to waken."

"Didn't you hear the rifle-shot?"

"Sh-sh!" she whispered. "I think I hear Amos. If he wakens he'll not sleep for the rest of the night. And he must have his eight hours. Good-night, Mr. Stamford!"

The little man cursed the petty weaknesses of the big brother.

"Miss Bulkeley! Miss Bulkeley!"

But her window lowered, and he could hear her move away.

With throbbing heart, unaccountably happy, he threw off his clothes and crawled between the sheets. The clandestine good-night echoed sweetly in his ears. He could die like that—— But that was getting maudlin. He pulled up an extra covering and settled to sleep.

As in a dream he seemed to hear, far to the west, the thud of a horse's hoofs.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOWL OF STRANGE DOGS

Sleep trifled with him—beckoned him on, only to elude him maddeningly. He spoke sternly to himself in language favoured by the cowboys. The fact was that he was frightened, and he knew it. A sense of impending events held

his body tense and his ears strained. Reasoning with himself that it was only the result of the night's rapid sequence of mysterious incidents did not calm him.

For minutes he strained away to the west after those strange hoof beats, only to relax, disgusted at himself for yielding to the imaginings of his tingling nerves.

From the direction of the bunk-house he imagined he could hear at intervals Imp's muffled bark—and then the gripping silences of the most silent places in the world.

After a long time the coyotes gave tongue again in their long, shuddering yaps. Strange how reassuring they were that night—that hideous yelping that always before made him shiver! Stamford sank into a sense of momentary security. He slept.

He wakened to find himself seated upright in bed, trembling, straining with eyes and ears. Something terrible was happening outside. Yet there was not a sound. In a flash he knew. His sensitised ears were still echoing with the comforting yelps of the coyotes, but at the moment it was as silent as if not another force but himself existed in all the world. He knew that he had wakened at the moment when a great hand seemed to have gripped a thousand wild throats to silence. A hundred times before he had heard the same uncanny burst of silence. But now——

On his elbow he rested, scarcely breathing.

Outside—in the house—even down in the corrals where several restless bronchos always hitherto in these startling moments of peace had spoken audibly of life, was a breathlessness as strained as his own. The world was waiting—waiting.

Suddenly into the hush burst a solitary howl, a shattering roar that seemed to mass all the wild things of the prairie behind one tremendous throat.

Stamford's blood ran tingling to his scalp. Every muscle was tense against the inclination to shut the awful thing from his ears. And as the howl pulsed

through the listening night, a second joined it. Taking a deep breath, Stamford bounded from the bed.

He knew that cry. It was the night-baying of huge dogs gone wild on the trail, of such dogs as he had never seen. Shivering before the window, he listened. They were running swiftly across the prairie above the house, drawing nearer and nearer, their clamour shutting everything else from Stamford's mind. What were they doing there? Where were they making for?

A commotion in the bunk-house brought his eyes in that direction. A pair of figures, trailing saddles, flashed out and ran to the corrals. And even in their haste their movements were furtive. As they galloped madly up the slope toward the oncoming dogs, Stamford heard Dakota Fraley curse under his breath. The hoofs of the horses struck the prairie at first with only the hiss of dead grass, and then the thud-thud of distant galloping.

The dogs were coming fast from the upper side of the house. Stamford braced his trembling legs, climbed through the window, and ran to the back of the house where he could see the slope upward to the prairie. Yard by yard he could follow their advance. Almost as vividly he pictured the rushing of Dakota and his companion to meet them. Half the world then for Hobbles beneath him!

Across the broken howls cut Dakota's bellow, and silence fell like a blow. A few seconds later came two sharp yelps of pain, and then nothing more.

Stamford still stood in the cold night air, one hand pressed against the wall of the house. It was that hand warned him of movement within the house. With a vivid memory of Cockney's warning only an hour before, he darted back for his window.

As he turned the corner a flicker of movement passed between him and the lighted prairie beyond; but it was too quick to place. Dragging his fingers along the wall as he ran, his hand struck something that gave before him. Without stopping, he glanced upward.

A rope ladder was hanging from Professor Bulkeley's window.

A crunch on the gravel walk before the house sent Stamford on, scarcely pausing to think. Throwing himself over the window-sill, he straightened up within his room and waited in panting excitement.

Fear crowded him in—threatened to stifle him. Someone was out there before the house—his ears told him that. But a more thrilling sense warned him that someone was in his room—that if he but reached out his hand he would touch a living body.

"Sh-sh!" The low hiss from beside him dissipated every element of personal fear. "It's Bulkeley!"

Stamford gasped. Most prominent in the medley of feelings gripping him was a desire to laugh hysterically. It was so like the big innocent fellow to present himself like that, as if they were meeting in a game of hide-and-seek—nothing more.

"I'm f-frightened," came the stammering whisper again, as the Professor's huge hand fell on Stamford's arm.

The steps before the house moved lightly round to the window.

"Are you awake, Mr. Stamford?"

Close to the house, just beyond range of the window, Mary Aikens was standing, terrified, pleading for companionship and comfort. The Professor's grip tightened so convulsively that Stamford almost cried out.

She must have heard the movement.

"What is it, Mr. Stamford, oh, what is it?"

Stamford wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her like a big brother.

"It's only dogs, Mrs. Aikens—somebody's dogs on a coyote or antelope trail."

He was trying to reassure her with his tone even more than with his words.

"But it was so terrible—so threatening!"

"It's the way of dogs at night. They're apt to revert to type at an hour like this." The Professor's grip relaxed. "To tell the truth, I'm far more thrilled than I sound. It reminds me of sheep-hunting dogs back East."

A low sob broke from her. At the same instant the Professor hissed a warning.

"But there are no dogs on the Red Deer," she sobbed, "none like that."

"The night magnifies them. But where's your husband?"

"He went out—long ago——"

A gruff voice from the corner of the house stopped her with a gasp.

"Mary, when you've finished your midnight conversation with a man through his bedroom window, we'll go to bed."

"Oh, Jim! I was frightened. I couldn't stay in there alone." A double terror was in her voice now.

Stamford ground his teeth in his impotence. Cockney's big bulk loomed before the window.

"Go to bed," he ordered. "I've something to say to this fellow—right now."

She moved quickly before the moonlit square of the window and threw her arms about the big man. Cockney made no resistance.

"Don't, Jim, please. Come to bed. Can't you see that I——"

The Professor's lips were close to Stamford's ear.

"For God's sake get him away; he'll murder us."

Stamford stepped to the window.

"Cockney," he said, "whatever you think of me is no reason for forgetting yourself. I'll be here in the morning."

The big rancher turned his head to look down on the small figure of his pleading wife, took her arm without a word, and started away. Stamford stood listening as they crossed the sitting-room and closed their bedroom door behind them.

"Now," he demanded, turning on the Professor, "perhaps you'll explain at least *one* of the night's mysteries. A little light might help."

He was fumbling about the dresser for the matches.

"No, no, please!" pleaded the Professor. "There might be others around. I'll go back to my room in the dark."

"First of all you'll explain why you're here."

In the darkness his five-feet-four was not dwarfed by the extra foot or so of the Professor, and the smaller man was in his own room and had himself under better control.

"I'm afraid you'll—you'll laugh at me, Mr. Stamford. I have my—ah—little fancies. We all have. I suppose I'm more sensitive to ridicule."

"There's a good deal more of you to be sensitive," Stamford sneered.

"Perhaps that's it. Would it be—ah—too much to beg of you not to insist? You don't suspect me of intentions on your purse, I suppose. As a matter of fact"—he giggled in a silly way—"I was on my way to the furthest corner under your bed when you came in."

"Considering the fact that I found you in my room in the dark when you are supposed to be in bed," persisted Stamford, "you'll agree that not insisting is little likely to dismiss the affair."

The Professor cleared his throat gently.

"I throw myself on your mercy, Mr. Stamford. I don't believe you'll betray

me. When a lad of eight my home was burnt down. My little dog, Tony, and a pet kitten went with it. It was terrible to me. The fear of fire has clung to me ever since. At home I always sleep downstairs. When I travel I carry a rope ladder. If you look you will see it dangling now from my window."

"Yes," said Stamford drily, "I did notice it."

"I know it's disgustingly foolish, but—ah—I was practising on it. I've done it once or twice before since we came. And then those awful dogs—or were they wolves?—completely unnerved me. I must have lost my head. You see, I've always with me such valuable papers on my work, the destruction of which would be a loss to the whole nation——"

"It doesn't happen to be *my* nation," Stamford broke in coldly.

"Mr. Stamford, can I trust you?"

"That depends."

"I was going to crave that you'd take the responsibility of looking after my notes—in this room." He laughed apologetically, "In case of fire they could be saved here."

Stamford had a sudden idea.

"And your sister—does she share your fears and—and practise on the rope ladder?"

"Never, never! Fear is a matter of mind, and to Isabel is not that peculiar delicacy of mind that——"

A slight scraping sound against the side of the house stopped him. There was a dull thud on the ground, and Isabel Bulkeley came swiftly before the window.

"Mr. Stamford, I can't find my brother." She was almost as agitated as Mary Aikens had been a few minutes before. "He's not in his room——"

"Here I am, Isabel."

The Professor stepped quickly to the window and touched her on the arm. She laughed, with a tinge of hysteria none would have connected with her. Then the chaperone came uppermost.

"Amos Bulkeley, you come right to bed! Don't you know you never could stand the night air? You'll catch your death of cold. Is it any wonder, Mr. Stamford, that I lose patience with him sometimes? No, not a word, Amos! You march!"

And Amos marched as he was told, his long, awkward legs struggling through the window with ludicrous contortions. Stamford, watching with a smile in which was amusement and contempt, saw him carefully place his feet in the ladder rungs, test the ropes, and begin to climb ponderously upward.

He could not resist the opportunity. Isabel was holding the ladder for her brother to ascend.

"Miss Bulkeley, I'm so glad you came to me for help. This is the second time I've seen you to-night. It's been a lovely night. If ever I can——"

"Thank you," she whispered back. "I'll remember."

"Isabel, Isabel!" The Professor was leaning through his window. "Come right along now. I'll hold the ladder. Don't be a bit afraid, dear. Nothing can happen. Just close your eyes and climb."

Stamford snarled up at the cooing voice.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CATCH OF MORE THAN FISH

Long before the guests appeared at the breakfast table next morning Cockney was away on Pink Eye; so that there was nothing to fear from him. A singular and confusing reticence was on them. Several times the Professor cleared his throat as if he would speak of the things they were avoiding, but he thought better of it each time and continued his meal in silence.

Imp was there, slinking close to Mary's skirts wherever she went, cowering, every bit of his chirpy impudence gone. His mistress reached down and rubbed his ears.

"He leaped through my window this morning and ran under the bed. He would scarcely come out. If you'll tell me how I can keep you, little fellow, I'm willing to try. It's home in a storm, isn't it? Dakota doesn't wear, does he?"

Imp wagged a lifeless tail and relapsed into obscurity.

A heavy knock startled them, and Dakota walked in.

"Mr. Aikens here?"

"He went away early, Dakota—perhaps across to the Double Bar-O. I know he was intending to see Mr. Gerard soon on business."

Dakota's eyes were roving about the room. Imp tried to slink to the other side of the concealing skirts, and Dakota's face lit up. He reached over and prodded the terrier with a forefinger.

"Scared o' the wolves, little shaver, eh? I don't wonder. We don't hear 'em often up here."

"Were they wolves?" asked Stamford, eager to believe mere dogs had not so shattered his nerves.

"Come down from the north, I guess," explained Dakota.

"But how could they cross the river?" queried the Professor. "They must have a better ford than I use."

"Hm-m! Perhaps they drifted up from the Cypress Hills, or across from the west. Maybe they smelt the little shaver here. If they ever got after him they'd shore peel the bark off him. I'll be warning the boys to keep a look-out on the calves. I wouldn't like to meet the beggars on the prairie without a horse, no, not even with an arsenal on me. They're dangerous devils."

"Isabel!" The Professor was looking anxiously at his sister. "I guess we'd better hasten our task. This isn't safe for you. Wolves! Gr-r-r! It sounds uncivilised."

Dakota shook his head gravely and left. Imp tagged humbly at his heels.

"Of course," the Professor grinned, "if there are only the two we heard last night, I might be able to satisfy them myself. A couple of hundred pounds ought to hold them for one meal. At any rate, I'd make a point of lying so heavy on their innards that you'd have a chance to escape, Isabel."

He looked out through the window to the ranch buildings. Dakota had picked up Imp and was hurrying along with the little terrier tucked under his arm.

"I think, Isabel, we'll try this side of the river to-day. That Monodionous skull can wait another day. It's managed to stick it long enough to forgive another twenty-four hours, don't you think? I'll get the horses."

He lumbered off along the path to the stables, calling as he passed the cook-house for a good Samaritan to lend him a hand in deciding which end of the harness went first on Gee-Gee. Bean Slade beat the Dude and General to it, while the Professor watched proceedings as if it were a new experience.

"Some day," he declared, "I'm going to invent a harness that can be grafted on a horse for a few generations until it's handed down as part of his natural equipment, like teeth and eyes. I've a warm spot for tenderfeet—even tenderfeet of ten centuries hence. If I lived that long I'd never forget my troubles with Gee-Gee.... Hello, Dakota! Teaching Imp to ride?"

Dakota was in the saddle, with Imp still under his arm.

"Naw! I'm taking him for his morning constitooshunal. He's changed his doctor, and this one prescribes lots of exercise. What Imp needs is muscle; he's got gall enough for a Great Dane."

The cowboys grinned, and Dakota chirruped to his horse and moved away.

"Why don't you train him to hunt wolves?" suggested the Professor.

Dakota threw him a quick glance over his shoulder.

"By Samson, Prof., you've a head! Alkali 'n' me'll perceed to take your advice—Alkali 'n' me 'n' the dread avenger o' the Red Deer, Imp. Wolfies, we're on your trail."

"If you'd wait a few minutes," said the Professor, all excitement, "I'd like to join you. To be able to tell my colleagues at the Institute that I, the old-bone man, had hunted wolves—that would be pride, indeed."

Dakota merely waved a refusal and trotted away.

But the Professor picked up his sister at the ranch-house and bumped away to the south-west over the prairie in the direction Dakota had taken, Isabel hanging to the low arm of the seat with both hands.

Far out they descried Dakota and Alkali riding in circles. Imp was running about with his nose to the ground. The Professor shouted and stood up in the buckboard to wave his arms. But long before he was close enough to speak, Imp yelped and struck off to the north-west as fast as his little legs would carry him, Dakota and Alkali spurring behind.

The Professor waved in vain for them to wait, then turned the horses' heads to the north-east and his day's work.

Meanwhile Stamford, left to his own resources for the day, collected his fishing tackle and made for the river. He was not a fisherman, but such fishing as the Red Deer afforded gave him excuse for getting away where he could tell himself without restraint what a fool he had been to undertake his

hopeless task.

In the shadow of a low cliff he baited his hook and tossed it into the water. A gold-eye took it at once, and for a time he played with it absent-mindedly, finally drawing it out, removing it from the hook, and tossing it back. Several more he treated in the same way, and at last cast in his hook without troubling to bait it. The sun crept higher and beat unmercifully on the bare rock, and he rolled a stone on the end of the pole and stretched himself in the shade.

"Don't seem ter be enj'yin' the fishin'," gibed a high-pitched voice from the rocks above, "or else yer too blame cosy."

Stamford raised his head lazily and surveyed Bean Slade's unkempt figure perched on a ledge over his head.

"Any fish that takes that hook's a born fool," he sighed. "I don't want 'em any more than they want me. Come on down, Bean. It's far more fun to lie about and talk."

Bean climbed down and picked up the rod.

"Yu don't know no more about fishin', boss, then yu do about—about lots o' things yu'd like to know. Gi' me that bait. See that smooth spot out there? That's deep water. Watch yer Uncle Ned."

He whirled the rod back and forward, and the hook shot out to the centre of the deeper water. Almost immediately the line tugged, jerked, loosened, and went taut again. Stamford leaped to his feet and grabbed the pole.

"Hang to it, Bean! There, we'll get it! Whoop! Gee, ain't he a fighter?"

Bean yielded up the rod with twinkling eyes.

"Fer a tenderfoot who don't fish, yu can work up what looks mighty like a taste fer it."

He hung precariously over the water and scooped unsuccessfully at a shining back that showed for a moment.

"Let 'er run, dang yu! Let 'er run. Yu got to get 'er to shallow water."

After a struggle, in which Stamford objected to assistance, but was unable to complete the catch himself, Bean stepped into shallow water and clutched the sturgeon. Stamford looked down on it with blazing eyes.

"Mister Stamford," grinned Bean, "if yu wasn't born a fisherman, yer shure goin' ter die one."

"Bean," said Stamford, "I'll crave your kind assistance to the extent of baiting that hook again. Then—no more. I'll bring the next fellow in myself or die in the attempt."

Stamford went back to the hole. Nothing happened. He waited several minutes, yawned, frowned, and leaned back against the rock.

"That one," he declared, pointing to the still wriggling fish, "had this whole darn river to itself. My line says so." He yawned again. "Bean," suddenly, "you're my friend, aren't you?"

The cowboy studied him curiously. "I reckon I ain't got no spite again yu—none of us chaps at the cook-house have."

"Not including Dakota, of course."

Bean ruminated over that. "Mebbe yer right."

"I don't believe, Bean Slade, that you're happy with that gang."

Bean got up and started away.

"Ta-ta!" he called. "This ain't my pumpin' day."

Stamford cursed his impetuosity.

"All right," he laughed. "You've a brain of your own—and I've seen no evidences of a loose tongue in you. I was going to tell you something—perhaps—that was all."

Bean kicked over some loose stones and wandered back. Plainly he did not want to go.

And just then a fish took the bait. Stamford jumped forward, missed his footing, and tumbled helplessly into the rushing current.

At the same instant a scream broke down the river from the cliffs higher up.

Bean bounded to an overhanging rock, braced his feet in a crevice and leaned far over. Stamford came up almost beneath his hand, gasping, already half drowned, surrendering to the icy torrent that started in distant glaciers. He could not swim a stroke. Bean's bony fingers closed over his hair, stayed his progress, and the other hand moved down to his arm.

"Here, yu noodle!" he shouted. "Yu got to help yerself, or I'll let yu go. This ain't no time to faint. Grab my shoulders. Now work yer way up my body. Yu'll find bones thar to catch hold of. Now—all together!"

Stamford lay panting on the rock. Bean, perspiration bursting from every pore, leaned weakly on his elbow beside him.

"Whew!" he puffed.

That was all, but his limbs were shaking, and the perspiration trickled down his neck and dampened his loose neckerchief. A great gush of affection passed between the two men, though neither spoke. Stamford extended his hand and laid it on Bean's, and the cowboy looked away and drew a coloured bandana with his free hand and rubbed it round his neck.

Presently he sat up and stared up the river.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Yu shure don't take a bath of'en, do yu?"

"Not that way—never again!" replied Stamford fervently.

"Thought not."

"Why?"

"Cos there's such a funny noise when yu strike the water."

Stamford flushed. "Did I scream?"

"If 'twas you," grinned Bean, "yu shure can throw yer voice high and far."

Stamford followed his eyes up the river cliff, and flushed again, this time for a different reason.

"Pshaw, Bean! You were excited."

"Then there was two of us, I reckon."

"I'm sure I must have screamed," said Stamford. "I was never so scared in my life." But his heart sang with the knowledge that Isabel Bulkeley, somewhere in the cliffs above, had feared for him.

"All right, have it yer own way. Only if I was you I wouldn't believe myself." He drew several long breaths and looked shyly at the man he had rescued. "God, if I hadn't been here!"

"Bean, I——" The surge of Stamford's gratitude was choking him.

"Billy Windover saved me once like—like that," said Bean, his eyes fixed on the foaming water.

"Billy Windover? Wasn't that the cowboy who was shot down near the Cypress Hills a couple of months ago?"

Bean nodded. "Billy an' me was chums—the best chums in the world, I guess, pretty near. Me and him was raised together—down in Indiany. Our farms was close together, an' Billy an' me played Injun an' pirate an' stage robber together when we was knee high to a grasshopper.... We grew up together.... We loved the same gal.... He licked me and won. We fought it out on the banks of a deep stream that cut through both farms—in the woods—an' the licked one was to drown himself.... He pulled me out...."

He lifted himself higher and drew one hand angrily across his eyes.

"The gal she turned out bad ... and Billy went a bit wild.... I went with Billy. We broke out in Montany. Billy was a reckless cuss, an' he got in bad with the sheriffs and flitted over here. I came as soon's I got the chance.... And—and now he's—he's pulled out an' left me—alone."

"He was murdered, I understand," said Stamford.

Bean's face darkened, and his sunken eyes glared.

"Damned sight wuss 'n that! Shot down without a chance in the dark. Dirty cuss who did it's goin' to settle with me."

"If you ever find who it was."

"Why——" Bean's eyes peered out furtively beneath his shaggy brows, and he said no more.

Stamford led off on another tack; he had learned all that interested him there.

"There's Kid Loveridge, too. Someone shot him, and he was one of this very outfit."

"Huh!" growled Bean. "The Kid got what was comin' to him."

Stamford held himself under careful control.

"Then there's Corporal Faircloth."

Bean's lips closed, his face was inscrutable.

Presently he spoke.

"Yu thought a lot o' the Corporal?"

"He was my first and best friend in the West."

"An' yer mighty consarned to find out who shot him?"

Stamford did not reply immediately. He had a thought of throwing himself frankly on Bean's affection. It was certain that Bean could tell him what he wished to know—much more certain than that he would. But the three fruitless weeks of search on the H-Lazy Z called for desperate measures. He was debating it when Bean spoke again in an ominous tone.

"Cos what yer doin' 's a mighty dangerous game."

"Dangerous? Do you know what I'm trying to do?"

"I'm just givin' yu a warnin', boss, that's all. It's like to end at the business end of a gun."

Stamford made a decision.

"The H-Lazy Z is crammed with mysteries. If you——"

"An' the less yu understand them the better fer yer skin. An' it shore ain't no business o' yours."

"It is my business that my best friend was murdered."

"Best leave that to the Police."

"But they're doing nothing."

"I guess ya don't know the Police," said Bean, rolling a cigarette.

Stamford sat thinking. "Bean," he said suddenly, "I'm going to tell you something. The night we returned from Medicine Hat I got Hobbles out—never mind how—and rode back to where we'd seen Dakota."

He waited in vain for a burst of surprise. Bean merely nodded.

"They were branding or something. They almost caught me."

"Yer dead right there," agreed Bean.

In a flash Stamford understood. "But it couldn't have been *you* pushed me

from Hobbles."

"Huh!" grunted Bean, taking a long draw at his cigarette.

"You were back at the bunk-house. I saw you there an hour or so later, when Dakota came in."

"Uh-huh! An' yu purty near gave the show away—if Dakota's ears was as good as mine.... Also Hobbles couldn't 'a' been out at the branding neither, 'cos *she* was there in the stable then, too, eh?"

He chuckled, and coughed with the smoke.

"But I heard you tell Dakota no one had gone out—also I saw you start off right after your supper to join Dakota; you promised him to as we were driving in."

"Dear me! Did yu think yu wasn't intended to see an' hear all that? Ha! Ha!"

"But I don't understand."

"Shure yu don't! If yu did yu'd be back in town now.... An' I'm not goin' to tell yu, neither."

He got up, stretched, expectorated into the river, and sauntered away.

"Ta-ta!" he called back. "Take care o' yerself."

CHAPTER XIX

TWO PAIRS

Stamford folded his fishing-rod, threw his lunch strap over his shoulder, and started back for the house, forgetting the big sturgeon lying in the sun. His clothes were almost dry already with the warm rocks and sun. He had his first useful clue, and it reassured him. His guiding thought now was that Bean Slade knew the murderer he was after—and if Bean Slade, then the rest of the H-Lazy Z outfit. But how much or how little was Cockney Aikens involved?

He was surprised to find the Bulkeleys already returned to the ranch-house, though dinner was a couple of hours away. It delighted him—and also blotted from his mind the success of his afternoon's work. What he recalled was the scream Bean claimed to have heard. He wanted to verify or disprove that. With a refreshed pride in himself he determined that he *would*. He proposed a walk; the brilliance of the out-of-doors provided perpetual excuse in the West. Isabel's immediate reply was an anxious look at her brother and Mary.

"I'm not asking your brother," he said boldly.

"Amos and I have to work on his notes," she objected. "That's why we came in early."

"Tut, tut!" protested her brother recklessly. "I've changed my mind. The inspiration is lacking. It's not my day for work. I don't care a hang if the entire carcass of a crested *Saurolophus* is lost to the world by an afternoon's indolence. I'm—going—to be indolent! There! Whoopee! Hear the cry of independence."

He lifted a foot and kicked the top of the doorway with surprising ease.

"It sounds to me like revolution," said his sister with mock severity, yet with more than a little anxiety.

He picked her up and deposited her outside the door.

"Trot along now, or Mr. Stamford may never ask you again."

"Amos!"

He made a face at her from the doorway and turned his back.

That her annoyance was not assumed Stamford discovered to his embarrassment before they had gone six paces. Once she turned about, to see the laughing faces of the Professor and Mary Aikens regarding them from the doorway. For some minutes their progress was wordless. Stamford was puzzled by her reluctance to leave the ranch-house, for he was convinced that she wanted to come. He knew the wisdom of leaving her to break the silence, of assuming humility, whether he felt it or not.

But he was not prepared for what she did say.

"We shouldn't, Mr. Stamford, we shouldn't."

He heard only the implied partnership, and threw his shoulders back recklessly as he tramped on.

"I don't care what we shouldn't do. If it's naughty it's nice. That's how reckless I am."

Her smile was wan; some anxiety too deep to respond to his banter was there.

"I don't like you serious," she said, "but—but you *must* be now." There was such innocent candour in it that he knew he wanted only to help her. Always when he was feeling most strongly the thrill of her presence, she disarmed him by throwing herself on his mercy.

"I'm going to be serious with you some time, Miss Bulkeley," he said soberly.

She ignored the warning.

"It's about Amos."

"If Amos isn't big enough to leave alone, he never will be. Anyway, Mrs. Aikens will look after him till we've had our walk. Now I've got you to myself, I'm going to keep you till dinner-time."

She was laughing a little, but shaking her head, as if to reprove him for trying to turn her away from her troubles.

"We mustn't be selfish," she said slowly. "Amos is big ... but he's not big enough, I fear, to resist the—the most powerful thing in life."

The alarm with which he searched her face for a moment changed quickly to annoyance.

"It isn't possible to misunderstand you, Miss Bulkeley, but——"

She laid one hand on his arm, turning to him her troubled eyes. He stood still for fear she would remove it.

"Haven't you seen—haven't you suspected?"

"Miss Bulkeley, I can answer for our hostess. If you can say the same for your brother——"

"I can, I can," she murmured brokenly. "But love, you know——"

"I know that, love or no love, there never was a finer little woman than Mary Aikens. Has your brother betrayed to you that he is less of a gentleman?"

"I could trust Amos anywhere," she replied simply.

"Then why not here?"

Her hands were clasping and unclasping as they walked.

"This is so different. I know what love can do—how it can change things." She was stumbling over it, flushing as she spoke, but continuing brave!

"I hope you do," he breathed.

But the tears brimming in her eyes made him feel the brute for intruding his petty affairs just then.

"Would your brother stay if he knew he was exposing himself to a temptation he could not resist?" he demanded.

She considered the reply for a long time before she made it.

"We can't leave, Mr. Stamford. We have our work to do—it's not mere personal pleasure or satisfaction that forces Amos to continue until he's completed his investigations. It's his duty to stay to the end—he can't help himself."

He frowned. "Please don't make me believe you think digging up old bones a duty that ignores—what you fear. I hope you're not that kind of a girl—I won't believe it."

She turned her face squarely to his, and for several seconds they stood looking into each other's eyes. Her head was thrown back a little proudly and reprovingly, and every barrier of reserve was down. Once more the utter confidence in his manliness forced him to control himself.

"I knew it," he said humbly. "Only I don't understand.... There's this to say for your brother, that the husband of the woman you fear your brother is learning to love doesn't seem to be trying to hold her love. I don't understand Cockney Aikens. I believe he's white, but—but here we treat women differently."

"That's what started it, I think," she said sadly. "Amos pitied her—as you and I did.... And there are other things.... I can't tell you all—everything that worries me."

"Then it's your duty——" He was about to tell her that she should take her brother away, but he was not unselfish enough for that.

"I can't," she replied, as if he had finished the sentence. "He wouldn't come—he couldn't."

They had turned back and were approaching the ranch-house.

"May I—talk things over a little like this with you when I'm worried, Mr.

Stamford?"

Even as his heart leaped, he recognised the subtle way she had armed herself against him by the petition. Never was he to permit himself to take advantage of her confidence. When he would say to her the thing which he now knew he would some day say, he must make his own opening.

"I understand," he murmured. "You may say anything you like. If I can help you—that will be enough for me—now."

Mary Aikens and Professor Bulkeley, left to themselves, with cookie in the kitchen fussing over the dinner, looked out to the sunlit silences where the other two had gone, and responded to their appeal. They saw the two lovers sauntering down toward the river, and they chose the trail up the slope. Slowly they climbed the grade, saying nothing. From the cook-house door Imp thrust his nose, sniffed with half-shut eyes into the drooping sun, and decided that one of his half-formed barks befitted the occasion. Then, satisfied that he had done all that could be expected of him, he trotted back and lay on one of Dakota's feet.

The foreman was sneering through the doorway.

"The big boob! He's shore on the wrong trail there, and some sweet day the boss'll lay hands on him and—piff!" He made a movement of tossing something away.

"An' the biggest boob on earth wouldn't have no chance to earn it," growled Bean. "Not with the missus." When Dakota laughed in his nasty way, Bean fired angrily: "An' that little editor'll piff you"—he imitated Dakota's gesture of a moment before—"if you go gettin' funny with the other gal. Anyone can see where your eyes is."

He laughed and strolled outside to avoid the explosion.

Up the trail, over the crest of the slope, the two passed out of sight. She plucked a handful of grass from the centre ridge of the trail between them and

began thoughtfully to tear it to pieces. He moved at her side, his great hands gripped behind him, his eyes on the rut at his feet.

"Don't you think they're getting fond of each other?" he said after a long time.

A smile of loving sympathy made her face so beautiful that he looked sharply away and pointed to the vivid colourings of the sunset. She followed his pointing finger absent-mindedly.

"It would be one of the few flawless matches," she said, in a low voice.

"They are all flawless—at first," he returned. "Only some last a shorter time. That's part of life's misery, the legacy of original sin—perhaps the worst.... Some pause to weigh to the merest trifles—and lose their chance. Some ... some don't pause enough. The secret of happy marriage, I'm convinced, Mrs. Aikens, is a complete knowledge of the essentials of each other's lives before the ceremony."

One handful of grass had been pulled to pieces, and she seized another nervously.

"Few of us pause for that," she murmured.

"The agony of it!" His hands were clasping and unclasping behind his back, almost as were his sister's on the other trail. "And ordinarily there is no way out. Divorce doesn't settle it. The most righteous divorce laws cannot supplant conscience—and conscience speaks only in the one Book of all the world.... But this isn't becoming to such a night," he broke in, with sudden eagerness. "Look at that sunset. Only in the West do you find that unbroken spectacle, such clearness of air, such a wonderful sweep of colour. What is it about the Western air that makes a man——"

He paused abruptly, breathing heavily. She looked at him in quick fear.

"—that makes a man feel ten years younger," he went on, with an absurd change of tone. "I think I could grow frisky out here."

Across her face passed a grateful smile of relief and understanding that she did not know she made so plain.

"It's the essence of the West. It makes or mars a man. It does the same, only more swiftly, with the consumptives they send to us from the East. Some it cures—some it kills.... Some it kills when it seems most certainly to be curing them.... That's the West; it does that with everyone—one never knows."

He broke in on her dreamy reflections in a lighter vein:

"Just the same it's the young man's country, don't you think?"

"It's a great blessing—or a great curse.... What was Jim before he came here?"

It startled him; he had no reply ready.

"I fear Jim and I do not fulfil your estimate of the foundation for a happy married life. I never knew his past—I don't now. I never knew his people—he never speaks of them. I took Jim—for himself—a handsome, manly, honest, good-natured——"

The man at her side coughed, and she turned to him with a wan smile.

"I know," she said wearily. "You think I shouldn't talk of my husband to others ... but in all our married life I've never before had anyone to talk *anything* with.... Jim and I—Jim and I——"

"What I'm thinking, Mrs. Aikens," he interrupted gravely, "is that I'm the last one to whom you should speak of him."

She kept her eyes ahead of them on the dim line of the sand buttes, and they walked on in silence.

Suddenly a cry burst from her lips.

"I must speak, I must. My very heart is eating away with the strain of silence. I'll go crazy with the worry of it. It's about him—Jim. He's different

—these days. At first—— Don't think there's any chance of Jim and me not —not sticking to each other. I've fought that out with myself already. He's changed, but I know what he *can* be—what he was once ... what he won't let himself be now. Why? I don't know. Something—something is crowding between us—crowding harder and harder every day, I see him so little now, and——"

The big man squared his shoulders and lifted his head.

"Mary Aikens, I'd do anything—pretty nearly anything to help you. You know that. But I can't help you in this. Please, please, don't ask me—don't say another word about him—not to *me*. It doesn't seem heartless, does it? It's as far from that as—as black from white. You've a heavier burden to carry than anyone I know ... and I don't know yet how it can be relieved. But it *will* be, it *will* be. I've that much faith in Providence. I shouldn't have said—that about marriage. Had you known—did you know all about him, you would at least bear one less trouble than you do, I'm sure of that. If I were you I wouldn't bother about that—not now. You're his wife. You should know whether he loved you once or not. And"—he ran his hand across his forehead—"as an onlooker with eyes, I can tell you that he loves you more than he ever did. Is that enough.... I believe—at this moment—he loves you better—better than you do him."

She gasped, and her hands tightened convulsively over the grass she carried.

"I still love him," she said deliberately.... "I think I do. What my love lacks is thrust there by—by the wall he is slowly building between us. I think he loved me, yes, but—it probably sounds foolish—I don't feel that he wants me to love him—not too much. He—sometimes seems to toss me aside—you've seen it. And Jim's not naturally brutal."

The Professor spoke with careless deliberation:

"His past is much easier to unravel than his present. You're most anxious about the latter. I can see it—I see it every day. You've undertaken a lonesome task—it's the way a wife has to, but it's as apt to mislead as enlighten. I don't believe that—that the wall is unscalable—or at least the

mortar's thin....

"And now," he started again lightly, "let's enjoy that sunset. I have only a few more of them ahead, unless the winter holds off longer than usual. I'm not so bound up in my poking about not to be sorry when I think of having to give all this up."

They had been retracing their steps for some time, at his wordless guiding, and were close to the ridge before the drop to the valley.

"Never," he told her, "no, never, speak to me again of your husband. It won't lighten your burden and it only increases mine. Jim Aikens may be maligned by circumstances beyond his control, and we from the fringes are so apt to misunderstand. When I can help you I'll give the signal. Till then—but there he is now—down in front of the house—waiting for us."

Cockney was standing on the gravel walk, every line grim and accusing. His great legs were apart, his arms were folded across his chest, and he was staring at them under his eyebrows in that thoughtful, disapproving way of his. They could read the angry tossing of his mind far away. Mary Aikens laughed nervously. The Professor bit his lip. But before they came within speaking distance, Cockney wheeled away and disappeared into the house. When they reached the sitting-room they could hear his heavy striding in the bedroom beyond. His wife trembled, started for the kitchen, then changed her mind and passed into the bedroom to him.

It was a grateful relief to an oppressive dinner when Dakota presented himself at the door. A fire was burning in the sitting-room stove, for the evenings were sometimes frosty now, and the cowboy sank modestly into a chair in the corner beside it. Isabel, in an effort to break the embarrassing silence, seated herself near him.

"I hope you're finding all you came for," said Dakota pleasantly.

"Thank you, Dakota. My brother considers the summer well spent indeed. He still has hopes of a more complete skeleton, but we can't remain much

longer, can we?"

Dakota scoffed.

"There ain't likely to be snow before November. Sometimes we have a storm in September—mostly, I guess—but it goes as quick as it comes. We're often out riding with the herds into November. It ain't just the weather you'd want to be handling rock in, but you should oughta see October here. It's got creation beat a mile. Don't you go till October. Besides," he added naïvely, "we got some hard work for the next few weeks, and we can't be home much."

"What indefatigable people you cowboys are!" exclaimed the Professor. "Sometimes there seems nothing to do, and then it's night and day for weeks."

"You're right there, Professor," Dakota agreed in a loud voice. "To make a ranch pay like the H-Lazy Z is real hard work—though Mr. Aikens there don't seem to think so. And there ain't many pays like the H-Lazy Z, I tell you."

"What's that you said, Dakota?" asked Cockney, coming out of his silence. "Going away for a few weeks?"

"Yes, and taking the outfit. The fall clean-up. We'll make the round o' the ranges and fix things up a bit. The Indians say we're in for a breezer of a winter. There's that Big Bone Slough we got to fence on the north side—where we lost all them cattle two winters ago. I was saying to the visitors they needn't go for another month anyway—till we're through all that. It's shore been a different place this summer. The Dude was saying that he never got such joy from slicking up and changing his shirt every week."

He grinned with them. It was a long speech to make in public, and he was proud of it. The Professor bowed with a low sweep.

"I'm bowing for Mr. Stamford, too," he chuckled. "I can do it bigger than he can. We appreciate, Mr. Fraley, the many courtesies we have received from our fellow-countrymen. But, no, that couldn't include the little editor; he's only a local product. He doesn't know what it is to thrill to the stripes of

Old Glory. We'll always remember you. We hope you'll have equal cause to remember us."

"That's all right, Professor," Dakota replied, with an expansive sweep of his hand. "We're shore pleased punchers."

And having delivered himself with credit to himself and his friends, he backed out, bowing, his angora chaps ruffling in the wind as he opened the door.

His companions greeted him at the bunk-house with eager grins.

"Did she give yer a scented hanky to wear nex' yore heart, ole hoss?" enquired General confidentially.

"Or a kiss on the forehead an' promise to be a sister to yo?" put in Alkali sympathetically.

"Oh, you fellers ain't familiar with the symptoms," said Muck. "Dakota's planned ter 'lope, an' he ain't got his checks cashed."

"G—! I wish I had," muttered Dakota, with sudden fervour. "I'll shore be devilish glad when we get this bunch offen our hands and the equiv in our jeans. I got a spooky feeling about the whole biz. It's a big bunch to get down across the railway and over fifty miles more to the border. And it'll be a deuced sight bigger when the next lot's run in.... But we got to do it. That S-Bar-I outfit'll give us a run for our money. But that's all to the hunky. Got your shooting irons o.k., boys?"

He shifted his eyes slowly to Bean Slade's thin body outstretched on a bunk, his hands beneath his head.

"Bean's funking," he sneered.

Bean lifted an angry head. "Bean Slade's got himself in this thing with both feet, you son-of-a-gun, an' he'll stick.... Just the same, the old H-Lazy-Z outfit's goin' to bust up this winter. This li'l boy's strikin' back fer civilisation—whatever that means."

Imp, resting against Dakota's foot, raised his sharp ears and grunted. In a couple of bounds Dakota had the door open. Professor Bulkeley stood outside, blinking and smiling through his spectacles.

"I'm so glad you haven't retired, friends," he chattered. "I couldn't let you go without a record of the pleasant associations with my estimable and cheery countrymen of the H-Lazy Z. Will you do me the honour of inscribing your names in this little book? My sister and I will look at it for many a year in remembrance of you when we're far away."

He stumbled over the step, a notebook in one hand, fountain pen in the other. Dakota laughed harshly.

"Here, trot up, you low-born Yanks, and scrawl your nom-de's for the everlasting records of the li'l country God made without desecrating it with Mounted Police. Let's make it our second papers o' repatriation. Hurrah for Old Glory—and Professor Bulkeley and his charming and beautiful sister!"

The Professor pompously cleared his throat.

"On behalf of myself and my sister, on behalf of the country we love and respect, I thank you. Ever enthroned in our hearts will be——"

"Ya-as," yawned Alkali, "so they say. Le's take the rest for granted. Sounds like Decoration Day—an' sort o' makes me lonesome. An' I don't cry pretty."

"Don't mind Alkali," apologised Bean Slade. "He allus did get maudlin easy. There's my scribble—Albert Shaw, better—or worse—known as Bean Slade ... so my mother won't rekernise me when I get mine in the way I'm shure to get it. Fust time I've wrote it fer eight years.... Last fer the rest o' my nacherl days, so help me!"

He tossed the book across the table. The Professor picked it up with a beaming smile and bowed himself out.

"Ta-ta!" Bean called after him.

"The sneaking old geezer!" growled Dakota, when the heavy steps had faded into the darkness. "If it ud been anyone else there'd 'a' been shooting, I tell you—that Stamford peanut, for instance. I don't like the look of his ratty eyes. He's just the kind o' unlikely chap ud be working for the Police—if he had a foot more on him. Now turn in, boys. To-morrow's the last round-up for the big vamoose to God's country—and then gold enough to drown ourselves. Bean, hang on for another year or two, and I'll be damnified if I don't flit with you. It's a bit too creepy for me off here at the edge of nowhere."

CHAPTER XX

THE SECRET VALLEY

Morton Stamford may not have been a sick man when he arrived at the H-Lazy Z ranch; he was at least a stronger man at the end of his month's stay. His riding he continued only as practice, always with the thought that he might require it. But he walked more, diving out of sight daily into the chaos of the river banks, there to piece together his clues and plan new attacks on the problem he was working into shape for presentation to the Mounted Police.

Also he now and then caught sight of Isabel Bulkeley on the other cliff, and that in itself was reward enough.

As the days passed he felt a new thrill in his veins, a virility that clamoured for physical exertion, and his walks extended further and further along the river, a lunch strapped over his shoulders.

Eastward the south bank often fell to an uninteresting flatness, lined still by the grass-covered trails of the buffalo herds of comparatively recent years. Westward it was different. There the prairie level dropped to the river in one great leap, confining the current sometimes between high cliffs, sometimes

with steep rocky wall on one side and an almost inaccessible valley on the other to the foot of the opposite cliff. It was a canyon of varying tightness, but always a canyon, the water dashing down here and there with frothy roar, everywhere with a force and depth that defied fording. The glamour of its fury appealed more and more as he tramped further up-stream.

Hundreds of miles still to the west, in the foothills of the Rockies, the main branch was a glacier torrent that rolled onward through uninhabited wilds until it cut the Calgary-Edmonton line of homesteaders at the village of Red Deer. Thereafter it dived once more into the unknown, never once touching the haunts of men until it reached the H-Lazy Z.

Stamford used to sit overlooking the torrent, picturing that long trail in the wilderness, where thousands of years ago great animals had been covered by the earth's convulsions. His uncontrolled imagination knit fantastic stories about them, and the fettered life of the little man longed to break into the heart of it and listen to its tale before soulless man tamed it.

One day he found himself far above any point he had reached before. He had clung to the top of the cliff, stopping only here and there to peer over the precipice to the water's edge, and his progress had been faster than he realised. Amid scenes new and vastly interesting he munched his lunch. Below him the face of the cliff was rent by huge fissures and lined with ledges, and the river valley spread and narrowed in infinite variety. Across the river the hitherto unbroken height showed signs of relenting, and great dips almost approached the nature of valleys.

Uncertain how far he had come, he was about to turn back, when a sudden noise sent him crouching to the upper rocks. It was the barking of huge dogs. At the first note he recognised them. He wondered if they had seen him, and he peered carefully out. The dogs were on the other side of the river, higher up.

He began to creep toward them, the condition of the cliffs favouring him. Gradually he sank lower and lower toward the river. He did not dare look out. With an instinctive anxiety he did not stop to analyse, he felt that other eyes were there; also he dreaded some unthrilling explanation for the thing that was thrilling him.

When at last the clamour told him that he had come far enough, he raised his head to an opening in the rocks and looked.

Across from him, partially hidden by a line of slender crags at the river edge, was a beautiful valley, a low-lying patch of verdant meadow as different from the dead wastes above as a garden from a wilderness. Almost half a mile long by four hundred yards deep, it was backed by a straight wall of cliff, broken only by two ledges. Several tiny waterfalls tumbled from the face of the cliff, splashing to the upper ledge, where they joined and widened for the plunge to the meadow below.

In that deserted country the Red Deer had scooped out for its own amusement a veritable oasis, and enclosed it with unscalable walls.

That was Stamford's fleeting idea. But several flaws chased the romantic thought away. The valley was neither reserved for the amusement of the river, nor was it inaccessible.

A herd of cattle was browsing in the succulent grass. To the east the cliff sloped away behind the obtruding crags. There undoubtedly was the entrance. And with his field-glasses Stamford picked out on the lower ledge a rude shack that, to the bare eye, merged in the general greyness of the background.

Nothing else of life could he find, though the valley was only a few hundred yards from him. Then where were the dogs? And where were dogs must be humans.

Suddenly the barking broke out afresh, and two great dogs burst from behind a concealing rock, their noses pointing upward to the slope at the eastern end of the valley. Stamford swept his glasses all about, but for a time saw nothing to focus the clamour.

Then, climbing along the higher levels beyond the reach of the dogs, came into view the big form of Cockney Aikens.

In and out among the rocks Cockney moved, now visible, now hidden from view, examining every rock, every foothold; climbing downward, the dogs seeming to tear themselves to pieces to get at him. He lifted himself to

the top of a rock and stood looking across the valley at the cattle, ignoring the canine protest. Then, as if startled, he leaped out of sight and did not reappear. The barks rumbled away to grunts and growls, and presently the dogs returned to the lower level.

Stamford was still watching with fascination their slinking muscular movements, when one of them raised his head to the top of the cliff and growled, and in a moment both were filling the valley with their disturbing din.

The field-glasses were turned on the top of the cliff. A man's head came slowly in sight and peered over. Then a long rope dropped away, and, hand over hand, the man descended rapidly to the upper ledge—sixty feet of descent without a pause.

So absorbed was the watcher in the remarkable grace and muscle of the descent, that he did not at first recognise this second visitor to the valley. When he did he rubbed his eyes, directed his glasses again, and gasped.

Professor Bulkeley!

The big man walked fearlessly along the narrow ledge, a hundred feet above the valley, disappeared from Stamford's sight, and after a time came into view again on the lower ledge. The dogs bounded up rude steps cut in the rock before the shack, welcoming him with waving tails and whimpering barks. He stooped to rub their ears, then at a word they quieted and fell in at his heels as he dropped to the valley. A second command sent them to their stomachs, while the Professor advanced slowly toward the cattle. The nearer ones raised their heads from the long grass and examined him suspiciously, but he stood still, and they returned to their feeding. Slowly the Professor moved round the herd, eyeing them from every angle. After a time he came down to the water's edge and looked up and down the river, intently examining the opposite cliff.

Stamford lay motionless, only his eyes showing.

Whistling to the dogs, the Professor went off to the eastern side of the valley and began to pick his way upward, peering about him as Cockney had

done. On the very rock where Cockney had stood he paused a long time, looking across the valley and all about at his back. Below, the dogs watched him with clumsily wagging tails. When next he came into sight it was on the ledge beside the shack. This he skirted back and forward but did not enter. Then, with a farewell pat to the dogs, he disappeared the way he had come and came out on the upper ledge.

Hand over hand he went up the rope almost as rapidly as he had descended a half-hour before, and a few seconds later two lolling dogs and a herd of feeding cattle were the only life in the valley.

Stamford lay where he was for a long time. He had no hope of seeing more that day, but he did not wish to be seen. The dogs lay on the lower edge, their heads outstretched on their paws. Below them contented steers sank their noses into such grass as they had never before eaten, and drank from sparkling streams that were nectar to their alkali-parched throats. A heavy-footed farmer might have issued from the unsightly shack and whistled lazily to the dogs to fetch the cows for milking.

Stamford smiled at the fancy.

Thoughtfully he retraced his steps under cover of the jagged cliff for almost a mile, where he emerged on the prairie and made swiftly for home.

He was late for dinner, but they were holding it for him. Cockney had not returned.

"Deep down in my innards," protested the Professor, with mock displeasure, "I've an irresistible impulse to be nasty. I'd like to think it righteous indignation—but it may be only hunger. At any rate, here goes: Anyone who can delay a meal in this boarding-house should have his rates raised. He insults the fare—as well as the f-a-i-r." He bowed to their hostess.

"I nearly lost myself," apologised Stamford. "Deep down in my innards is only hunger; and I'm not going to make it an excuse for mushy compliments. I'll leave contrition until I've satisfied my hunger."

"Indigestion is the most likely result," laughed the Professor.

"Were you really lost?" asked Isabel anxiously. "You know how dangerous——"

"Isabel Bulkeley"—the Professor was shaking a stern finger at her—"I refuse to share your anxiety with Mr. Stamford."

"Having made such a failure of mothering you," she retorted, flushing, "I'm inclined to transfer my anxiety."

"I wasn't really lost," Stamford assured her, "for I stuck to the river-bank. But I've been further than I ever was before—many miles to the west."

He regarded the Professor significantly as he said it.

"I, too, went far afield," returned the Professor mysteriously. "And I found promising signs. But before I say more I want to be certain; it's disappointing to hope too much. It's very interesting up there, isn't it?"

"It is—very," Stamford replied into his soup-spoon.

All evening the Professor was plainly trying to get a word alone with him, but Stamford had no wish to be questioned, and he gave no opportunity.

CHAPTER XXI

THE RAFT IN THE CANYON

Next morning Stamford started off the instant breakfast was over, but he did not go further than the cook-house. He found it deserted, the outfit having departed the day before on what promised to be a three or four days' expedition. Stamford poked about the cook-house and bunk-house with a vague idea of coming on clues left carelessly exposed. In the midst of it the

Professor walked in on him.

"Oh, I thought you were gone for the day," said the Professor, "and I hoped our friends of the funny names might be back."

"I'm going now," Stamford returned shortly, and walked away, though the Professor called to him.

From among the rocks on the river-bank he saw the buckboard pass around the corrals and make for the ford. He followed.

Somewhere that herd of cattle in the little valley had crossed the river, and he was determined to discover where. He had rather definite ideas about them that led him to expect no information from the ford.

In that he quickly proved himself right. He had seen, even from where he lay on the opposite cliff, that most of the cattle had been in the valley a long time; that was evident from their plumpness and undisturbed feeding. The more recent arrivals were betrayed by their rougher coats and leaner bodies, and by a wilder fling of the head when the Professor approached them. There had been no rain on the Red Deer in two months; their tracks, were there any, would show plainly enough in the mud approaches to the ford.

But there was nothing there save the hoof-marks of the Professor's team and a few dim old hollows that must have been there from the spring.

He considered the possibility of a ford further east, but one near enough to be of use to the valley he would have heard of.

Carefully examining the shore as he went, he turned back to the west. Now and then he stopped to scrutinise the face of the opposite cliff for marks of a slope on that side.

Not far from the end of the lowest corral he raised himself on a rounded rock to look about him. Across the river was unbroken wall. On this side was a stretch of tumbled erosions that cut off his view from the ground. As he let himself down again his foot slipped and he fell, feet first, between two rocks. He was surprised to hear the crunch of leather, and, looking where his feet

had gone, he saw a saddle carefully hidden, and beneath it a bridle. More surprising, it was not a stock saddle but an English pattern of the softest, lightest kind, ridiculously small and compact—so small that a man's coat would almost hide it.

He thrust it back and went hastily on. His eyes flitted instinctively to the ranch-house, and just then the cook came from the kitchen and emptied a pot. Stamford ducked, though a score of heads would pass unnoticed in that jumble of rock at such a distance.

Keeping to the river-bed, he moved up-stream and presently the cliffs beside him rose to the level of their mates on the other side. But there was always room for him to advance. At places the walls narrowed, the current rushing between with indescribable fury, and widening below in eddying sullenness that was almost as terrifying. That it did not always chafe its barriers in vain was shown by the tumbled confusion everywhere.

In a few places deep crevices ran down from the prairie, and these Stamford examined carefully. But there was no sign of a ford. Equally alive was he to movement on the opposite cliff. By lunch-time his clothes were showing marks of his tireless clambering.

Below him—during the last half-hour he had been rising on the face of the cliff—a comfortable ledge invited, and he climbed down and unslung his lunch. As he ate he realised how easy had been his descent. Out before him extended a level floor of rock up-stream; behind, a steep incline ran upward, disappearing around a bulge in the rocky face. Stamford knew cattle would not follow such a steep ledge at such a height. Below, the water ran smooth, but tiny whirlpools covered its surface; the current beneath was swift and treacherous.

He ate absent-mindedly, puzzled by the clear ledge ahead, while elsewhere was such a chaos of fallen boulders. With the last mouthful he retraced his steps, searching for some branching path to the prairie above. He found it in a draw that left at right angles the one he had followed down—an easy, grass-floored ascent. Tangling and twisting, he reached the prairie.

In its depths were unmistakable evidences of cattle.

He returned to the lower level and followed it to its end. Gently it fell to the level of the river; abruptly it ended in a wide platform of rock that extended in under the cliff for fifty feet or more. On all sides but the way he had come was towering rock only a bird could pass.

Nonplussed, irritated by the dashing of his hopes, he poked about. The bare rock all round could conceal nothing, and ten yards ahead was the certain end. Yet at his feet were the marks of cattle. He moved nearer the end of the platform and leaned against a pinnacle that projected from the water. As he turned helplessly to the opposite side of the river, the solution lay before his eyes, the one thing he had never suspected.

A heavy raft lay tight against the pinnacle on which he leaned, protected from the rush of water above by another jutting rock.

He approached it with incredulity. Quiet as the stream looked superficially just there, he knew no motive power applicable at such a place would breast that current. And clearly it was too deep and swift to pole. In vain he examined the overhanging cliffs for wire.

At the very end of the ledge he caught sight of an end of cable wound round a rock. Through his field-glasses he traced its exit across the river. But still the method of passage was obscure, for the cable stretched beneath the torrent, as did the wire that connected it with the raft. Studying then the angle of the raft to the current, he realised that the same principle prevailed here as propelled the ferry across the South Saskatchewan at Medicine Hat.

It was surprisingly simple, yet he had nowhere else seen it in practice. A wire extended from either end of the raft to the cross-river cable, the shortening of the front one of which, together with the extension of the rear one, forced the current itself, urging against the angled side of the raft, to be the propelling power.

A burden lifted from Stamford's mind. Here was the crossing of the herds to the hidden valley.... Here, too, was the means by which the dogs—somehow unknown to Dakota and his comrades—were brought from the valley and turned loose on the prairie on that memorable night.

He caught himself whistling, until he realised that no part of his discovery assisted him to the solution of his own problem.

A feeling of discomfort had been increasing for some time, and he decided that he was under observation. Clambering nonchalantly to his feet, he retired to the cover of the pinnacle that concealed the raft from below, and seated himself behind it. After a time his curiosity overcame him. Turning on his knees he slowly advanced his head to look across the river.

As his eyes came over the edge of the bank he saw an end of wire protruding from a small pile of rock close to the water's edge. It extended out into the river and disappeared. He knew by its position that it was intended to be concealed even from those who commonly used the raft. The action of the current had worked the end from its covering of stones. He drew back without touching it.

At the end of an hour he decided to brave the eyes he knew were still on the watch.

Again he was late for dinner, but from a distance he saw the Professor and his sister drive rapidly up to the ranch-house. They, too, were late.

"Really," the Professor chided, trying to induce a frown to gather on his placid forehead, "your continued indignity in the matter of eats is a subject for solemn consideration."

"I am at a disadvantage," returned Stamford. "I have no team to hustle me and my discoveries home at night. With Gee-Gee and his fellow a good driver could, I am sure, cover from five miles up the other side of the river, and cross the ford, in the time it would take me to walk it on this side. With an exceptional driver I'd lose miserably."

"Some day," proposed the Professor genially, "we'll try it. I'm growing quite conceited over my mastery of the incorrigible Gee-Gee. I won't always be so busy as I am now."

"If that day delays, you'll never be able to get to town the mountain of button material collecting at the back door."

"Always," returned the Professor gravely, "I'm looking for something bigger. That discovery I hinted at last night—— You wait, you cold-blooded editor. We palæontologists may be denied some thrills, but at least when we make mistakes there's no libel action. If I could be assured that in the wonderful national museum for which I have the honour to collect there would stand through the ages a monument to the memory of one, Amos Bulkeley—— It doesn't mould readily to Latin, does it?"

Stamford sighed wearily.

The Professor stooped to look beneath the blind.

"Your husband!" he announced across the table.

Presently Cockney jerked Pink Eye to his haunches before the door.

"Anything left to eat?" he called. "I'm starving."

"When Mr. Stamford has his fourth helping there won't be," replied the Professor. "He's a past master at keeping others talking while he eats."

"Stamford, take Pink Eye to the corral," ordered Cockney. "The bottom corral, you know. He's too tired to be breezy."

"Here! Let me tackle him." The Professor was advancing in a circle on Pink Eye, as if with a vague idea of securing a strangle hold before the broncho could put up a defence. "If I could end the summer with the thought that I'd handled a real devil of a broncho, my pride would sustain me for a whole winter. Even Gee-Gee seems to have lost all ambition."

"Don't you bother," Cockney growled. "I'll take him myself."

Stamford came forward valiantly.

"Don't be afraid of him," cautioned Cockney, removing the saddle. "If he cuts up, let him go; he won't go far. Here's the key to the gate. I think you'll find it swing easily enough. We'll have real hinges and a new gate before another season. Be sure and lock up."

The Professor watched Stamford gingerly lead the jaded horse away.

"I haven't the heart to let him go alone," he decided, and set off running. "If we don't come back," he shouted over his shoulder, "you'll find me gathering up what's left of Mr. Stamford."

Stamford, turning at sound of the Professor's heavy feet, saw Cockney standing before the ranch-house, watching them in that speculative way of his.

Pink Eye was honoured with a corral all to himself, an unusually strong one of six-foot fences, with a network of wire stapled about it. The gate, a clumsy affair of cotton-wood logs, hinged to the post by heavy loops of iron, was fastened at its other side by a chain passing through a huge staple in the gate and padlocked around the fence post. This post was sunk in the ground close to the main post of the fence, apparently added to fill an over-wide breach left by a makeshift gate.

The Professor took the key and pulled the gate open for Pink Eye to scamper through.

"Humph!" he growled. "The key seems a bit superfluous, with that contraption to move before Pink Eye could get out."

He closed the padlock and started back for the ranch-house.

"You're sure you locked it?"

Stamford, remembering Cockney's last words, turned back. To his surprise the loop had not caught, though the Professor had turned the key in the lock. The latter, apologetic, returned and corrected the mistake.

"They'd have thought we were too frightened to do the job right," he remarked, with a sheepish grin. "Just the same, it's a tiresome rite to go through for one lone broncho that wouldn't go far if he got away."

"Oh," Cockney exclaimed, several minutes after they were back in the sitting-room, "the key!"

The Professor fumbled through his pocket and produced it.

"Pink Eye must look on his corral," he observed, "as the equine equivalent of a jail. Is he in the habit of spending his evenings at the corner saloon, or _____"

"It's a habit I have of wishing to reserve my own things for myself," said Cockney shortly.

"There are worse foibles," was the Professor's sweet reply. He gave the embarrassed laugh that usually preceded a confession. "One of mine is ever so much less respectable. I'm simply scared to a panic at thought of fire—fire anywhere—here at the ranch-house—wherever I spend the night. I know how foolish it is, but my instincts are stronger than my intelligence. I must have been a wolf a few lives back. At home I always sleep downstairs on that account."

"Unless both Stamford and ourselves give up our downstairs rooms I don't see how we can satisfy you at the H-Lazy Z," said Cockney.

"Of course I'd have to be near him," put in Isabel hastily. "So it's quite impossible. Please don't think of indulging his foolishness any more."

"At any rate," said Stamford stubbornly, thinking of the limitations imposed on his uncertain night investigations by an upper room, "I'm not going to give up my room until my host orders it."

"Your host," said Cockney emphatically "is going to do no such thing."

CHAPTER XXII

PINK EYE AND THE ENGLISH SADDLE

Stamford tossed about when he should have been sleeping, worried by a thousand questions, a thousand disturbing suspicions. And through them all ran the thread of his love for Isabel Bulkeley. He could hear her moving about her room, and long after they should have been asleep, the voices of brother and sister came to him in gentle murmur. Added to this was the evidence of a similar wakefulness in the Aikens' bedroom.

Imp came to his door and whined, and Stamford let him in, glad of his companionship. Thereafter, with the watchful little terrier curled on his feet, he found it easier to drift away.

He was awakened by Imp. In the outline of the window Stamford saw the dog's ears erect, and a slight sniffing sound told of some disturbing scent. Stamford hurried to the window.

The night was sharp and clear. He shivered, partly with excitement, partly with chill. Something moved in the moonlight down the slope toward the corrals, but it was gone so quickly that he was uncertain of his eyes. The moon was low and dull, with a thin mist before it that prophesied the coming of winter. He watched until his teeth were chattering, then, with a pat to Imp's warm body, he returned gratefully to the warm sheets and settled to sleep.

He was wakened again by Imp leaping to the floor to sniff beneath the door. Out in the sitting-room someone was moving, but there was nothing furtive about it.

Then Stamford became conscious of a strange rumble like distant thunder. But it was no noise of the elements.

Mary and Cockney were whispering outside his door in excited tones. Someone rapped.

"Don't be alarmed, Stamford." Cockney pushed open the door, speaking in a low voice. "It's cattle on the run—a stampede.... But it's a small bunch. They'll get them under control. The boys are riding now ... like mad! ... Listen! ... Ah! They have them bunched! ... They'll stop by getting in each other's way! Not badly frightened, I guess.... I wonder where they broke from."

A moment longer he stood listening to the waning sound.

"If you'd throw something on and come out to the sitting-room I'd be grateful. I'm going out. Mary's frightened.... I hope—I hope we're not making our guests too uncomfortable."

"I'll be there in three minutes," Stamford promised, groping for his clothes. "We'd better tell the Bulkeleys; they'll wonder what it is."

"Never mind the Bulkeleys," returned Cockney sharply.

Stamford could hear him pounding off to the stables. In what seemed seconds he was galloping back below the house, making for the west.

Opposite Stamford's window the horse dropped suddenly back on its haunches. Stamford peered out. Somewhere to the west came the swift gallop of approaching horses.

But Cockney's eyes were fixed on the side of the house. Stamford saw them rise to the Professor's window and drop again, while the broncho pawed impatiently. With a bend of the hand Cockney turned the horse to the house, where it drew up for a brief moment, then, under digging spur, dashed to meet the oncoming riders.

Stamford leaned out and saw the rope ladder dangling from the Professor's window.

Before Cockney had gone a dozen paces the ladder began to move rapidly upward. In the dim light Stamford imagined a small hand reached out and drew it over the sill.

Thirty yards away Stamford and the approaching horses met.

"Who's had Pink Eye out?" demanded Dakota's angry voice.

There was a perceptible pause.

"I don't like your tone, Dakota," said Cockney icily. "When you want information, there's only one way to get it."

"I found him out there on the prairie," Dakota blustered.

Cockney rode round the horse Dakota was leading.

"I didn't know he was out. But first you'd better answer my questions. Where did the cattle stampede from, and how did they happen to be away off there?"

"What difference does that make? But if you want to know"—Dakota was plainly sparring for time—"it was a bit of the Lost Dog Coulee bunch. They ran a long way before we got 'em stopped. Just a small bunch. What's more serious is Pink Eye out there."

"Who's saddle's this?" Cockney was leaning over Pink Eye's back.

Dakota laughed in a nasty way. "Thought maybe you'd know. It's an English saddle. Ever see it before?"

"By gad! That's curious! It's a racing saddle of the lightest kind."

"I found the cinch unbuckled," said Dakota. "We were a bit too quick for the fellow that had him. But we couldn't find him." He cursed..

Cockney rode up to Stamford's window.

"You there, Stamford? Did you lock Pink Eye in the corral last night?"

"Certain of it. Both the Professor and I tried the padlock afterwards."

Dakota spoke impatiently:

"Anyone out of the house now?"

"One moment, Dakota," snapped Cockney. "I'll do the questioning. I can answer that one myself. Everyone is in.... I think I'd like to take a look at that corral," he said suspiciously. "Come along, Stamford; you can tell us if things are as you left them. Tell Mary it's all right, will you?"

Stamford spoke to Mary Aikens on his way out. She was sitting in the

dark sitting-room, and he imagined she was sobbing. He ran after Cockney and Dakota, and arrived at the corral in time to hear Dakota exclaim:

"Holy cripes!"

Stamford ran forward.

The gate was wide open, but the padlock was still locked. The ponderous mass of logs must have been lifted until the chain would pass over the top of the post to which it was fastened.

"Holy cripes!" Dakota exploded again, when he had examined padlock and post.

He stooped and put his muscle to the heavy gate, but he could scarcely lift its weight from the loops that acted as hinges.

Cockney smiled in a superior way and pushed him away. With a great heave he managed to raise the gate from the ground, but he dared not remove a hand to throw the chain over the post. With a muffled oath he let it drop, and the upper loop snapped, letting the gate sag on the lower hinge.

"That's two men's work," Dakota exclaimed.

"Three—at least," corrected Cockney thoughtfully, "two to lift the gate, the third to remove the chain."

Dakota looked fearfully about in the dim moonlight.

"Then—then there's a gang about!" he whispered.

"Come back to the house," said Cockney. "It's worth looking into."

Beneath Professor Bulkeley's window he stopped and called his name. Mary Aikens came timidly from the house, a lonely little figure bathed in the moonlight.

"What is it, Jim?"

He turned on her roughly.

"Go inside. This at least is no concern of yours."

She obeyed without a murmur, her feet dragging forlornly over the frosty grass.

"Professor! Professor!" Cockney's voice grew louder and more peremptory with each call.

Isabel Bulkeley's head appeared in her window.

"Did you want my brother, Mr. Aikens?"

"I'm not calling him at this hour of the night for vocal exercise," replied Cockney.

"He's such a sound sleeper——"

"Then you'd better waken him."

"Is anything the matter? I'll go and call him."

They heard her bedroom door open, then a knock on her brother's, and the turning of the knob.

"Amos! Amos! Don't be frightened. It's only Isabel."

The bed creaked with sudden violence.

"Uh! What—what's the matter?" sputtered the terrified voice of the Professor. "Is it fire?"

His great feet pounded to the floor and across the room to his bureau.

"Here—here! Isabel! Take these—and these—and these. I'll—oh, where's that—that——"

"Amos! Amos, dear!" She was laughing a little now. "It's not—fire."

Listen! It's—not—fire."

"Not—fire? Not—— Then what's the reason——"

"Mr. Aikens wants to speak to you—out the window. Put your slippers on first—and this gown."

"Eh—Mr. Aikens? Why—why, what's the matter?"

The window opened wider and a night-capped head was thrust out, only to be withdrawn immediately.

"Isabel—Isabel!" he whispered, in a tone that carried as far as if he had shouted it. "Where's the ladder? I'm sure I left it out as usual. It's—gone."

She spoke from dose beside him at the window, laughing:

"I drew it in, you silly! I didn't want the whole world to see how foolish you are." She put her head from the window and called laughingly down: "We always have trouble with him like this, wakening him out of his usual hours. He'll be sane in a moment."

The Professor's head appeared again, this time minus the night-cap.

"Say, is this a serenade? On behalf of myself and my sister, and the great Republic we represent—— Oh, that you, Mr. Stamford? Where's your banjo? Isabel's window is the one over yours. Fancy you making a mistake like that!"

Even Dakota was laughing. Stamford failed to see the joke.

"It's all right, Professor," Cockney assured him. "We only wanted to make certain no one was alarmed. There was a slight disturbance in a herd of cattle. You can go back to bed."

"Thank you, Mr. Aikens. I won't leave that ladder out again. I wouldn't put it past those New York museum people to have spies on my track. They haven't in their whole collection such a——"

He sneezed, repeated it, doubled in volume and noise. The men beneath the window laughed openly.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Aikens, will you come round to my door. I never could stand the night air. Could I, Isabel?"

CHAPTER XXIII

PREPARATIONS TO FLIT

The next morning Stamford was again disappointed: the cowpunchers had not returned. He walked on from the cook-house to Pink Eye's corral, to see by daylight what had seemed so incredible in the light of the moon. On the way back he saw the Bulkeleys driving to the north-west; they were not crossing the river that day.

Carrying a lunch, he set off for the river skirting far out on the prairie that he might reach the canyon unseen far above where the Professor was working. Arrived at last in the cover of the upper cliffs, he hurried on.

The hidden valley interested him. There he knew, lay the solution of some of the ranch mysteries. The stampede of the night before was significant, for the H-Lazy Z herds never ranged there. The cattle, he decided, were on their way to the raft and the hidden valley.

As he approached the valley he could hear the dogs barking continuously but without excitement. He discovered that the valley was lively with cowboys, the members he knew best of the H-Lazy Z outfit. They were moving about the fringes of the herd, carefully avoiding a bunch that kept to itself in a far corner of the valley. From its ragged and wild appearance Stamford took it to be the addition of the night before. The others the cowboys drove on foot to the eastern end of the valley, where a temporary

barricade crossed from cliff to cliff, forming a corral at the base of the only exit. Then three of them disappeared, coming into view again on their horses from behind concealing crags. At a word from Dakota the two dogs that had been all the time slinking close to his heels bounded up to the ledge beside the shack and lay down, their eyes still fixed on Dakota. The mounted cowboys gradually worked the new bunch toward the corral.

Evidently the cattle were being collected at the exit for immediate removal.

About the shack Bean Slade was acting as temporary cook. The others, when all the cattle were in the corral, grouped together, rolling cigarettes. Dakota seated himself on a rock and whistled to the dogs, which came madly bounding down the steps.

There was no suggestion of furtiveness. Stamford began to think he had come on one of the ordinary feeding grounds of the ranch herds.

To get a better view behind the crags, he crept farther up the stream and lower on the cliff—crept into the muzzle of a revolver. Behind the muzzle was Cockney Aikens' determined eye.

"So it's you, Stamford?" he sneered. "That investigative mind of yours is bound to get you into trouble sooner or later. I wonder it wasn't sooner. It strikes me you're acting strangely about the H-Lazy Z for a guest."

Stamford flushed, partly because he knew the charge to be true, though not in the way Cockney imagined. Almost as much for Cockney's sake as for his own had he undertaken to clear up the mystery of Corporal Faircloth's death; *more* for Cockney's sake had he chosen the H-Lazy Z for his investigations. He bristled with indignation.

"If you're not as guilty as you make yourself appear——"

"A guest with a sense of decency would at least have consulted his host."

"And if you're guilty," Stamford continued, "I don't care a damn whether you resent it or not."

Cockney examined him with puzzled but admiring eyes.

"I wonder if you'd be so foolhardy if Dakota was at this end of the gun. I'm not going to shoot. I'm still your host."

"No, you're not, Cockney Aikens. From this moment I'm no longer your guest." He unstrapped the lunch and tossed it at Cockney's feet. "I suppose you'll let me get my suit-case?"

Cockney thoughtfully returned the gun to his belt.

"If you'll take the advice of one who knows at last all you don't understand, you'll keep so strictly out of this that you'll forget all you've heard and seen. You don't carry a gun—you wouldn't be dangerous if you did. Yet there's going to be shooting before this is cleared up ... and when there's shooting among men who handle guns like we do, there's apt to be blood.... This is the second time I've found it necessary to warn you. Next time will be too late."

He crept away to a lower level and left Stamford wondering what it was all about.

Across in the valley Dakota had gathered his companions about him, except Bean, who was still working about the shack. Evidently they were engrossed in a discussion of the utmost importance, for several were gesticulating, and Dakota was listening judiciously. Now and then their eyes went furtively to the shack where Bean was. Through the open door Stamford could dimly see Bean watching them stealthily through the window. After a time Dakota broke from the group and climbed the steps to the shack.

In a few minutes he and Bean reappeared on the ledge, Dakota arguing violently, Bean sullen. Dakota started angrily down the steps, but Bean stood a moment on the ledge, looking thoughtfully across the river at the very spot where Stamford was lying. Then he, too, dropped to the valley.

Dakota was striding down toward the river. As he crossed one of the little streams that bubbled from the falls in the cliff he stopped abruptly and bent over the ground. An excited gesticulation brought his companions on the run,

and together they stooped over Dakota's discovery. The Professor had crossed the streams there, Stamford remembered, and the ground would be soft. Hastily scattering, the cowboys searched the valley.

It was long before Alkali, poking about close to the river, came on a second track, and they clustered about it, gesticulating, excited, voluble. Stamford leaned far from his hiding-place in his excitement, and Muck Norsley, wheeling suddenly, examined the cliff all about him. But the distance was too great, the muddle of broken rock too confusing; and Stamford scarcely breathed during the scrutiny. When it was over he sank to cover, and perspiration broke out over him.

Dakota and his friends continued their search up the eastern slope from the valley, pausing now and then as if over further disturbing evidence. They climbed upward to the great rock on which Cockney and the Professor had stood, mounting from below by means of a rope. For a time they worked about its base, then it rolled back and the upward path was clear.

As the horses toiled up the steep ascent, Stamford noticed that a rifle hung from every saddle. When they had passed, the rock rolled back again, shutting in the valley, and only the cattle in the corral and the dogs remained.

Stamford commenced his rough trail back down the river, always keeping to cover. Only two definite ideas were in his mind: to escape notice, and to reach the Bulkeleys to borrow their team for the journey to the Double Bar-O. His work at the H-Lazy Z was ended—and it was a failure. Almost he could find it in him to regret that he had lost his temper with Cockney.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT IN THE RANCH-HOUSE

Mary Aikens, alone at the ranch-house, went about her morning work with fumbling hands and tired brain. The shadow of impending crisis was over her though she recognised only the thickening of a cloud of doubt, suspicion, and fear that had been closing in on her for more than a year. To her it was conviction enough of Jim's share in the mysteries she was struggling single handed to unravel, that he refused to take her into his confidence.

The last act of her morning duties was always a visit to the Bulkeley's rooms. Isabel had refused to leave to her any of the care of their rooms, but Mary Aikens, as hostess, never omitted that morning visit to see that nothing was lacking for their comfort—perhaps, too, to dream a little over the wonderful thing that had happened that summer to the H-Lazy Z, the lonely ranch where never before in her time had another woman set foot. In Isabel's kindly eyes and sympathetic silences she read what one woman can tell another without the perils of speech. The Professor? There she always stopped short. The only indulgence she permitted her thoughts was that the Professor needed most a strong and understanding wife, indulgent—a little—but very firm at times. He was a spoiled child she longed to mother.

Softly she closed the stair door behind her and dropped on the seat before the piano. In the kitchen the cook was doing his morning cleaning with his usual noiselessness, only the patter of his slippared feet and the subdued rattle of dishes betraying his presence. In all the great north country were only the dim sounds from the kitchen, and her absent-minded fingers on the keyboard.

The great north country—the lonely ranch she had had so long to herself, where for months at a time she was cut off from every other human being save the cowboys, and a husband who was wilfully forcing her from his inner life—the silent stretches had that year taken on a different note. Even those forbidding cliffs, with their long, uneven lines, had become the hunting ground of scientists—very human scientists—a cemetery of bygone ages with an absorbing story to tell. Professor Bulkeley, big, childlike in his simplicity, frank in his likes and fears, with an instinctive strain of gallantry so pleasing to one accustomed to the stifled gentleness of the West and the proprietary affection of her English husband—would he ever come again? Would there be enough in that isolated land to lure him back another year?

She hummed as she played, her eyes staring vacantly at the wall before

her.

When he uttered her name softly from the open door she did not hear him. But when he repeated it, stepping into the room, her face reddened hotly. She tried to drop her eyes from his but they refused her will; something strange about his appearance held there in spite of her. He was without his spectacles. Never before had she seen him thus. It was as if he had disrobed before her, so naked did he appear, for the depths of simplicity and dependence had gone with the horn rims. Even his shoulders seemed to have straightened.

He must have noticed the flush on her face. His lips moved as if he were speaking to himself. Then, fumblingly, he put on the spectacles.

"That's funny," he said lightly, but his face was pale. "I didn't know you had that bit of Chopin among your music. So many of the old masters suffer from the emotionless piano. Taming the ivory keys is an art so many dabble at that almost none of them know when they have mastered them—or care. In all of us our hearts are nearer our throats than our fingers. Please hum it again for me, will you?"

He was speaking rapidly, nervously, and she had time to force herself to a rational reply.

"To-night—maybe. I—I didn't know what I was playing; I didn't know I was humming at all. In reality I was only dreaming."

The recollection of her dreams revived the flush in her face, and she rose abruptly from the piano to hide her confusion. He took one quick step forward, but stopped himself with a sudden breath.

"Is your husband in? I'd like to see him."

"He hasn't returned yet."

He frowned with sudden impatience.

"I hoped—I thought he would surely be back this morning. I couldn't wait. I wanted to see him right away."

She came nearer to him and peered up into his face.

"Why do you want to see him? Tell me—please." Her little hands were gripped over her bosom. "Oh, don't tell me you, too, are mixed up in all these things. I hoped there was someone—someone I might talk to if things went worse. You stopped me once——"

"I'm afraid I can be of no use to you, Mrs. Aikens," he replied formally.

She shuddered and put her hands before her face, and he turned away quickly.

"I don't think you need worry," he told her in a low, lifeless voice. "Your husband is his own worst enemy. I believe God intended him to be a model in more than body ... but something went wrong—only temporarily, I believe. The jealous gods—the old very human Greek gods may have been less a myth than an allegory—touched his mind when it was most sensitive."

She moved over to the side-table and began to readjust the pile of papers. She was strangely moved by his defence of her husband.

"May I thank you, Professor Bulkeley, for Jim's sake?"

"I—I'd like you to," he stammered eagerly. "It's an instinct to do one's best for Jim Aikens—especially for *me*."

She realised then how near the danger line they had been, and how firmly he had steered them to safety. It seemed to give her the chance to place their relationship on the old innocent level, when compliments were no deeper than their wording.

"And what of Jim's wife—is she worthy of such a paragon, or——"

"Jim's wife," he repeated vaguely.

"Perhaps she's the evil influence you call a god."

He turned on her with dilated eyes.

"You knew—you—knew? My God! She knew!"

Her knees were trembling with a sudden overwhelming fear, but she stumbled over to the table beside him and stared into his reluctant eyes.

With a burst the outer door opened and Cockney entered. At sight of the two standing there so close, the man's eyes falling before hers, his great shoulders shook and his chin went out.

"Ah!" It was a breath rather than a word. "So this is what you do when I'm away? This is what guest number two does to requite our hospitality? Is this the way of palæontologists, or of Americans, or"—his voice went hard as steel—"of a sneaking cur who represents nothing but the vicious things that make beasts of men?"

A flame sprang to the Professor's eyes, but the horror in Mary's quelled it, and he only shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not answer," Cockney hissed. "You have at least the common sense to make no denial. There have been terrible things happen in lonely places out here, but nothing so bad as this, you dirty cad."

He faced his wife, his chest heaving and falling.

"Go to your room. I don't want witnesses."

But Mary Aikens had reached the limit of her subservience. She stood before him unfalteringly and glared back into his furious eyes.

"Very well!" He laughed recklessly. "Perhaps it's better so. Perhaps it'll do you good to see me twist the rotten life from him—with these fingers—these fingers."

He held before him his great hands, the fingers crooked like claws. His eyes seemed to protrude, and his teeth were bare like a beast's.

"She'll hear the screams from that big soft throat of yours, you hound, and your dying gasps. And I'll laugh—I'll laugh!"

He crouched, the crooked fingers thrust before him.

Professor Bulkeley had not moved since Cockney entered. Slowly now he removed his spectacles and laid them on the table.

"You'd better leave the room, Mrs. Aikens," he ordered quietly.

"She's not going for you if she wouldn't for me!" Cockney thundered. "If she does, I swear to God I'll kill her without mercy when I'm through with you."

There were to be no blows in the struggle, the Professor knew. He was to be choked to death with those claw-like fingers; the whistling of his tightening throat was to be the triumph of his mad foe. So be it; neither would he strike until he must.

As Cockney leaped the Professor neither struck nor retired. His body twisted far side ways and his right arm wound round Cockney's waist. And the big rancher, who had never yet met his equal, was lifted clear of the floor and flung back almost to the wall.

Mary Aikens gasped. She had thought of but one outcome to the uneven struggle. But the Professor was standing there as if nothing had happened, while Cockney, stumbling over a chair, saved himself from falling only by thrusting a long arm against the wall.

"Will you let me explain, Mr. Aikens? It would be better for both of us—for you as well as for me."

But Cockney was past reason. A flash of diabolical anticipation lit his face, making it only the more terrible.

"Ah! So you have muscle under those flabby clothes! So much the better. When I've killed you there'll be no remorse. It's man to man, muscle to muscle. We'll see who's the stronger."

He advanced with the deliberation of unflinchable purpose—slowly—slowly.

Mary Aikens stifled a scream to a moan.

The Professor met him half-way. One wrist in either hand he seized before Cockney could dodge. Cockney's right, clasped in the Professor's left, went up. The other the Professor wrenched downward, and the pain of it made Cockney's face twist. Thus, face to face they stood for seconds, muscle pressing against muscle, Cockney straining to tear his wrists from the bands of steel that gripped them. Their heads fell over each other's shoulders. For one moment of dizziness Mary Aikens thought her husband's bared teeth would sink into his opponent's back.

Slowly Cockney's left hand bent behind his back. He began to struggle with his whole body, wrenching, fighting. He read the Professor's purpose. It was body to body now. The Professor's left hand was having its way with Cockney's right. Cockney saw defeat, horrible defeat, staring him in the face. He let his left yield and concentrated on his right. And inch by inch the Professor's left fell back before it. Another inch and his grip would be broken.

Mary Aikens gasped.

The Professor heard it. His teeth bared like Cockney's, the lips drawn thin and bloodless. He, too, became the beast fighting for his life. His shoulders heaved a little, as if new vigour had entered them—and his left began to win back what it had lost. Up and up it moved, and straight above their shoulders the arms halted.

To Mary Aikens they seemed to stand thus for hours, neither yielding an inch. It was endurance as well as strength now, and surely there the hardened rancher would win. But almost imperceptibly over Cockney's back the arms began to move. Cockney stiffened his body against it, and with failure his back bent. With the fury of insanity he writhed, but the hold on him now was more relentless than ever.

With a groan that was as much shriek he sank suddenly to his knees, blank incredulity distorting his crimson face.

Instantly the Professor's hands fell from him. Perspiration dripped from both swollen faces. Cockney leaped back, dropped his head, and charged

with a bellow. Foam was dripping from his mouth.

The Professor met the lowered head with his knee, stooped over Cockney's back and encircled his waist, and tossed him in a somersault over his head. The high riding heels crashed into the ceiling as they went over, bringing down a shower of plaster and dust, but the falling man landed on his feet against the stove. It fell with a clatter, and the pipes went with it.

The Professor's teeth were still bared. He saw nothing now but the enemy before him, the death that waited for either one of them. With a heave he sent the table slithering into the wall. Crouching, circling, glaring, he moved on Cockney. It was to the death now.

Mary Aikens could stand it no longer.

"Don't, don't!" she cried. "Oh, Professor! Don't kill him, for my sake!"

Professor Bulkeley shivered, stopped where he crouched, and with a long, quivering breath straightened and moved backward.

On Cockney the effect was different. A moment ago his resources seemed to be exhausted—baffled by this man he had ridiculed. But the appeal of his wife—to the Professor—for *him*—drove the blood to his eyes.

"I'll kill you!" he frothed. "I'll kill you!"

He mouthed it like a madman, his great head rolling loosely, his fingers closing and opening.

"And you, too, you Jezebel!"

Through panting lips the Professor spoke:

"It wouldn't be the first time you'd done a deed like that to a woman, would it—*Jim Cathers*?"

Cockney staggered back, his hand fumbling at his lips.

"Jim—Cathers!" he faltered. "You know—that!"

Mary Aikens' eyes dilated. She came swiftly to the Professor.

"Jim Cathers? What do you mean?"

The Professor shifted his eyes to hers—and Cockney sprang forward. The Professor threw up his arms but missed, and Cockney's right hand wound round his neck and hooked beneath his shoulder. The shock and strain almost dislocated the Professor's neck, and his eyes closed, his legs shook. He braced against the wave of dizziness, but he was powerless against such a hold of such a powerful maniac. There was nothing now but submission or a broken neck. Either meant death. Burning waves of agony and dull insensibility chased each other through his head.

Cockney shouted derisively.

"Now—now!"

The Professor's arms fell limply away, his knees bent. A burst of agony parted his swollen lips.

Mary Aikens saw only certain death to one of them—and the other a murderer—if she did not act quickly. She seized a Chinese vase from the piano beside her and, closing her eyes, brought it down with all her might on her husband's head. Dimly she heard staggering feet, the thud of a body, and then she fell unconscious.

CHAPTER XXV

COCKNEY'S STORY

Her first impression was of a warm, tender hand holding a cold cloth to her temples. She reached up and seized it; but it was jerked from her grasp.

She opened her eyes and looked into Professor Bulkeley's face bending over her. Instantly he rose to his feet.

"You'll be all right now," he said coldly, and left her.

It was so cruel. She wanted to cry out against him. But across the room she could see him and the cook bending over the prostrate form of her husband. A vague sense of the emotions that must be controlling the Professor closed her lips. The cook retreated to the kitchen, and they heard him close the back door and pass rapidly away toward the ranch buildings.

The Professor lifted Cockney against the wall. He was partly conscious now, a large bandage covering the upper part of his head. He looked over at his wife, puzzled. Memory returned to him in a wave, and he struggled to stand up. But the Professor's strong hand pressed him back.

"Wait, Jim Cathers! There are things you should know."

He drew from an inside pocket a newspaper clipping carefully folded in a piece of stiff paper, and held it out to Cockney.

"You'll know by that that I'm not the man to insult any man's wife. Perhaps you'll realise how I've held myself these many weeks."

He thrust the clipping into Cockney's nerveless hand.

"I believe I can trust it to you now—as well as the next move. You're a free man. It's an open race between us now.... But you've the inside track—and I'll leave you there till the decision's made. I think I know Cockney Aikens, if I didn't Jim Cathers."

Without looking at Mary he went out, though she hungered for his eyes. Cockney staggered to his feet and sank into a chair, staring at the clipping. Once or twice as he read, the back of his hand pressed against his forehead, and at the end he closed his eyes. Mary Aikens stood leaning on the piano, scarcely breathing.

Presently he looked at her.

"Sit down, Mary." His voice was like the old courting days. "I have a—a story to tell you."

She sank to the piano seat, her arms outstretched over the keyboard.

"It's a story that suffers from being withheld from you so long. You should have known it—*Mary Merrill*—before you—you consented to come here—no, you should never have heard it, for it should never have been necessary to tell you.... I thought the only one who knew it was myself—it was my story—the story of a broken, degraded life. It is better—and worse than I thought....

"You are not my wife."

She was conscious of a numbing chaos or emotions that clouded her brain—but there was joy there with the bewilderment; joy—and shame.

He drew a broken breath.

"You are not my wife—unless—unless ... I was born in England—in Surrey—you need know nothing more definite than that. My name is Jim Cathers—you heard it. My people had money—too much of it for my good. There are many in England like that.... I was spoilt—spoilt as a baby, as a boy, as a youth.... It was in my youth it began to twist my life. My money—everyone knew of it. That was part of my parents' creed. The girls about knew that Jim Cathers was the catch of the country-side—they thought of nothing but my money.... Money—and position—count so much more in love over there—because all men are not equal. Love is more impersonal, I suppose....

"There was one—Dorothy Swaine. She was a—a publican's daughter. I have only this excuse—a miserable one—that the publican over there is rated differently from where you were raised. I met her on one of my orgies. She was pretty; I was a fool. She wanted my money and name. I—I wanted ... Mary Merrill. I loved her as much as my shallow nature in those days knew how.... I married her."

He swallowed hard, and crushed the bit of paper in his nervous hand, but

smoothed it out again carefully on his knees.

"We scarcely lived together. Father and mother were disgusted—insulted—disgraced. In our family had been an actress or two of no great reputation, it is true, morally or artistically, and one of my uncles had married a maid. But always something was done to gloss it over—money and position are called on so often to do that—and the upper lips of the Cathers remained stiff....

"Father brought me back from France—where we had gone on our brief honeymoon—when the money was spent.... Dorothy ... she was handed a sum of money.... She took it hanging round my neck with the wails of a broken heart. I didn't suspect—about the money, and I swore I'd return when I could keep her.... You see, I had been trained to no profession. I'd been to a Public School, an expensive and exclusive one ... and they—that kind—do nothing to correct a foolish lad's sense of proportion. I was one of a vast body over there whose only profession is to uphold the family traditions and to spend. That meant the Army—or the Church....

"The longer I was kept from her, the more madly I thought I loved her.... Yes—the more I *loved* her. I want to be square: I did love her. One night I could stand it no longer. I stole away from the house.... I remember how I thrilled at the sight of the lights of her father's inn. I pictured her joy at sight of me. I swore to myself never to leave her again. There would be some way of making a home for the rest of our lives. You see, I didn't know then she had taken the money. I crept up to the inn through the darkness, partly to surprise her, partly that inquisitive eyes might not carry back the story to my father. Nine out of ten of the neighbourhood would have leaped at the opportunity of winning father's favour...

"I found her almost as I had pictured her—leaning on the gate ... almost ... almost ... She was not alone...."

Mary Aikens was listening with drumming ears. "You are not my wife—you are not my wife!" It kept ringing down everything else, so that she heard him only as against a strong wind that steals words and phrases.

"There was a man with her.... I heard what they were saying.... I followed

them...."

His voice trailed off to a whisper; his unseeing eyes stared far through the paper spread on his knee.

"When he was gone I—I took her by the throat—I was a big, strong fellow even then—and I squeezed—squeezed—squeezed. I could feel her breath bubbling through my fingers ... and then it ceased.... I flung her on the ground and ran. I told father. He crammed all the money he had in my pocket and started me off for Liverpool.... I turned up here in Canada as Jim Aikens....

"There isn't much more. Father kept me supplied with money through a firm of Winnipeg lawyers. There has been no stinting—the name of Cathers must never be sullied again—so long as I stayed away.

"For years I thought I had killed her—my wife. Not a word in all that time have I heard directly from home. I dared not write for fear my letters would be traced, and neither father nor mother have written me—ever told me Dorothy did not die. Until a year after I married you I thought I was free to marry."

Her hands fell from her face, a gasp of relief broke from her. He understood.

"Oh, Mary! I never was brute enough to marry you, knowing—my wife to be alive. You are innocent—as I am—of that.... More than a year ago I saw her picture in a New York paper. She was on the stage—she'd come to America—perhaps to look for me.... For some reason she had clung to her own name—perhaps she expected me to recognise her, for she was well known then. I knew her cruel smile, her smirking innocence, her shameless invitation. And I—I was a bigamist.... You were not my wife.... After that I went to the dogs. It was bad enough to have murdered her, even for the cause I had; it was worse to realise what I had done to you.... I married you too hastily, Mary. I wanted to stifle that gurgling breath that was always ringing in my ears, to feel that I was bound at last—everlastingly—to a woman I could safely cherish.... I didn't love you for yourself in those days, Mary, as I

have learned to since. And by the time I knew you were not my wife I loved you too much to let you love me until—until somehow I was purged, I didn't figure how. If separation must come to us, I didn't want you to suffer as I would. *I wouldn't let you love me.*"

He bowed his head in his hands, and his great shoulders shook.

"That is why I've—I've played the brute, Mary. God knows it hurt me more than it did you. But—but it was coming easier lately. A man can't lower himself to that, even for virtue's sake, without sinking a step. Of late I've sunk several. One was jealousy. You weren't mine, but I wouldn't let anyone else have you. I hated that man—and now I know why. I've hated everyone, even the men who look at you in town. I think I've been going mad for love of you, Mary.... And now—now——"

He was reading the clipping again.

"What have you there?" she asked, and her voice was dead, hopeless.

"Dorothy Swaine is dead. And I am free—free!"

He rose to his feet. A radiant light was in his eyes, and his arms stretched out to her.

"Mary, do you understand? I am free. We can look the world in the face ____"

But in Mary Merrill's face was no answering light.

"Jim! Jim!" she wailed. "Why—oh, why didn't you trust me? Why didn't you tell me a year ago?"

He pulled up, swaying, and his hands fell slowly to his side.

"Why—Mary!"

It was the moan of despair, of freshly-lit fires for ever extinguished.

Mary Merrill rose from the piano seat, her hands tight against her cheeks,

and tottered to her room. For a full minute he stared unbelievably at the locked door, then he lifted his Stetson slowly from the floor and stumbled out.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CHASE AMONG THE CLIFFS

The heart-stricken man staggered down the gravel path before the house and struck blindly across the prairie toward the river. Pink Eye, standing with drooping rein, tilted his ears and neighed to him, but he was deaf and blind to everything save his bleeding heart. Something in the rugged lines of the river cliffs drew him on. *There* was clamour to match the chaos in his mind, *there* was solitude and loneliness where to fight out the problem that stretched out and on through the rest of his days. Pink Eye neighed again, and tried to follow sideways, but a foot caught a dragging rein and pulled him up.

Cockney plunged through the long grass to the height west of the ranch valley and dropped limply into the first ragged peaks, where he lay on his back, staring with unseeing eyes into the cloudless sky. His head was paining him, and the bandage had slipped, but he thought it all a part of his mental suffering. Dimly his mind went back to the beginning—to his fight with Professor Bulkeley. But defeat did not trouble him now; the struggle was nothing more to him than a series of pictures of Mary's emotions. A groan—a gasp—a cry—the swinging of that small arm that settled the issue. That was what blinded his eyes with tears and shook his body with sobs. There lay the verdict he had sought so rashly to alter with his story. Love—he knew it now—was not a thing of many lives. One could not kill it and hope ever again to breathe life into its nostrils. Love—real love—came but once. It lived but once. Like a leaf that withers before an icy wind, love died for ever at the hand of cruelty.

For the past year—ever since he knew he had no right to marry Mary—he had suffered trebly, the ignominy of a bigamist, the horror of the injury he had done her, and the tearing agony of his grim fight to destroy her love before it learned the truth. And he only knew how well he had succeeded in that when he would have given his life to change it. Ever since he had laid foul hands on a woman's throat he had been an insult to her sex.

Big Cockney Aikens covered his face and shuddered. If a lifetime of repentance—— But there was to be no chance for repentance—there could be none without Mary. He must go on and on, living his life alone—no Mary, no pardon of God or himself without Mary to keep him straight. The years ahead were a long road of blank despair leading—where? Without Mary, without friends, without hope, without ambition or plans or pride—the end could only be that to which he had been tending this past year of reckless memory.

He rolled over on his face in his anguish. Below him the cliff dropped away for more than a hundred feet to a jumble of rock. A few yards of eroded eminences, and then the rushing torrent of the river. There lay peace—forgetfulness—an end of the struggle. He lay peering down into it with misty eyes—wondering.

But Cockney Aikens' self-condemnation was too deep for that. His sin was too great for such a simple ending. His destiny—his punishment—was to live until God cried quits and gave him happy release. Only addled cowards thought thus to escape the penalty of their misdeeds.

He clambered hastily to his feet and moved to where a wide ledge lay beneath him, cutting him off from the sheer drop to the river bottom. He was too weak just then to fight temptation, and he fled from it.

Then he saw Isabel Bulkeley. She was seated on the ledge, screened, except from above, by the fallen rubble. Hammer and chisel and whisk lay at her feet. Her hand supported her chin, and her eyes were fixed on the river below. She, too, was sad. Cockney, sensitive to the suffering of mankind, felt it in every line of her figure.

Presently he saw her start and raise her head as if listening. The next

instant she had seized her chisel and was hammering at the rock at her feet.

Around the face of the cliff only a few yards away came Dakota Fraley, Winchester strapped over his shoulder.

* * * * *

Stamford wound his way slowly from before the hidden valley, along the rocky lip of the Red Deer canyon. His arms and legs ached, and his mind was wearier still, but he crept carefully along like a conspirator. He knew that somewhere farther down the river he would find the Bulkeleys; he was thankful that that day they had chosen the south side for their explorations.

With the thought came another: his days with Isabel Bulkeley were over—he might never see her again. Slow as was his progress in the roughness of the way and the care of his advance, he was in no hurry. So long as he was away by nightfall he would be satisfied—the longer it was delayed, the better. He settled himself in the comfortable hollow of a rock.

A man burst from the prairies above, far ahead of him, leaped to the cover of the upper rocks, and in one swift glance swept the cliff below. With scarcely an instant's pause he dropped into a crevice, and Stamford could see him working a perilous but rapid descent with back and hands and knees. Reaching a ledge, he began to leap downward from rock to rock like a goat, swinging himself by his arms, unhesitating, sure-footed.

Stamford blinked as the huge figure of Professor Bulkeley threw itself down the last height and landed on the water's edge.

There he paused only long enough to cast one quick glance upward at the height behind him, another on either side into the torrent, then he leaped far out into the water. Stamford gasped. It was nothing short of suicide. Human flesh or human muscle could not master the rush of that foaming current.

There the sullen eddies told of a fierce pull beneath—and out beyond was the bubbling foam of rocks crowding the surface.

The Professor disappeared. But the big head came up farther down, shook

itself like a spaniel, and started for the other shore. Stamford swept the lashing water with his glasses, but there was nothing now to be seen save the roaring torrent.

He climbed warily upward. Something out there on the prairie—something of dire peril—had driven the Professor to such a risk.

Peering over the edge, he saw a circle of mounted cowboys closing in on the place where the Professor had disappeared. They were in no hurry. Dakota and his companions knew that cliff—they knew the hopelessness of escape from their pursuing vengeance. Dakota laughed wildly and waved his rifle; Alkali drew his hand expressively across his mouth, and General took a last look at his rifle. Fifty yards from the cliff edge they dismounted and came on, crouching, creeping in on their prey. When no shot greeted them, they moved faster, tightening the arch of the circle.

"It's a shame to take the money, boys," jeered Dakota. "The old fossil thought he could make it here. He don't know these rocks. Anyway there won't be no funeral service; the grave's just yawning for him down there."

He was on the edge now, looking down to the river. They spread out in sudden surprise and alarm, searching among the upper rocks with drawn revolvers; several of them carried their rifles as well. The foreman started down, leaving his rifle at the top. Right and left was unscalable wall; below, it seemed almost as impassable. They were puzzled—furious.

A mocking laugh drifted to them above the rattle of the waters. Across the river, three hundred yards below them, the Professor was standing, waving his hand. Bean Slade threw forward his rifle and fired, and a chip of rock broke into the air several yards above the mocking foe. The Professor waved again and disappeared.

Dakota, his face livid, climbed up to the prairie.

"Get back to the ranch. Take my horse with you. I'll attend to this little affair myself. One of us isn't going to sleep in no bed this night.... Besides, I got a little personal matter to settle, and this seems a mighty good chance. You fellers wouldn't be interested."

He jerked his Winchester back over his shoulder and started down-stream.

The others rode away, laughing significantly. Stamford slunk from his hiding-place on Dakota's trail. He had no idea what was in Dakota's mind, but in that mood he was dangerous, and it was someone's business to keep an eye on him.

Presently, far down the river on the other shore, something moved among the rocks. Dakota was invisible in a bend in the cliff, and Stamford fixed his glasses on the spot and watched. The Professor was there, straining at something, jerking forward as if for a fresh hold, and pulling back slowly again. To Stamford's amazement the raft came foot by foot into view from this side of the river and moved out toward the straining figure. And on it was Gee-Gee. The jerking of the craft made the horse rear once or twice, and his legs were braced in terror. Stamford noticed then that the raft was turned for the opposite passage, the higher end toward the shore it was leaving.

Against the pressure of that current, with Gee-Gee aboard, Professor Bulkeley was pulling the raft by sheer force of muscle and the weight of his body.

By the time Dakota came into view again Gee-Gee and the Professor had passed into the rocks on the other side. In time the cowboy arrived at the mooring platform. He saw the raft across the river and sat down under cover to think. In a minute he lifted a huge stone and approached the end of the cable. A few heavy blows severed it, and the wire, with a spitting of fume, sank into the stream. The raft, freed, floated down the current, bumped against hidden rocks, splintered, split apart, one section swinging to destruction lower down.

Dakota lifted his head and laughed into the opposite cliffs.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BATTLE ON THE CLIFFS

Stamford came to the raft-landing on the river's edge, tired and perturbed, and seated himself to rest. He was very weary and hungry. Dakota had gone on faster and faster. Suddenly Stamford remembered that somewhere ahead, down that cliff, Isabel Bulkeley would be waiting for her brother. He picked himself up in a fever of anxiety and plunged recklessly on.

He was still far away when he saw them—Isabel and Dakota. The cowboy was sitting boldly on a rock close to her, one foot swinging. His Stetson was pushed to the back of his head, and now and then he threw back his head to laugh. Isabel did not laugh. Stamford saw her withdraw suddenly and turn, and Dakota reached swiftly for her, seizing her arm. She struggled but did not scream. Dakota laughed and drew her to him.

At that moment Cockney Aikens hurled himself from above and landed on all-fours close to Dakota. The cowboy recoiled, leaped farther back, and his hand went to his belt. Cockney raised himself, lunged, and Dakota flashed his gun and fired. Cockney halted for but the fraction of a second, then his great fist landed on Dakota's face, and the cowboy tumbled back among the rocks.

Cockney seemed to go limp then; he sank to his side. But he turned to Isabel and pointed, and she dropped behind a rock. The wounded man rolled himself slowly to cover. Dakota was nowhere to be seen. Cockney threw his left arm over the rock to ease his position, and a spot of smoke broke from the place where Dakota was hiding, and the arm slid off and Cockney fell back in a contorted position. Another burst of smoke, and Isabel ducked. Dakota was keeping them both to cover.

Stamford dashed upward to the prairie to make better speed. He could see Cockney better now. His left arm lay limp. One side of shirt and trousers was soaked with blood. His one sound hand reached up and pushed a bandage from his eyes. On the exposed rock, ten yards away, lay his revolver. In his leap from the rocks it had fallen from his belt. He was unarmed, of which Dakota was evidently ignorant. Cockney's hand was fumbling at his belt.

Isabel, too, had her eyes on the revolver.

Stamford dropped to cover in the upper rocks behind Isabel to consider the situation. Then he advanced stealthily to the edge of the open, drew a long breath, and dashed out on the ledge where the revolver lay. He scooped it up and tossed it to Cockney. As he turned Dakota fired. A hot needle pierced his left shoulder. A second bullet missed him altogether, though it fanned his hair.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, as he sank beside Isabel. "Gosh!"

It was so boyishly inadequate that Isabel smiled through the fear that had come into her eyes.

"Bah!" he jeered. "I thought those cowpunchers were dead shots."

He kept his left shoulder away from her and settled down with his back to the rock. He did not ask for an explanation. It only mattered that Dakota was on one side and the other three of them on the other. Cockney, by the sound of things, was making it hot for Dakota, now that he had his gun. A curse from the cowboy registered a nip. Stamford grinned foolishly.

"I bet on Cockney," he said.

"But he's wounded, terribly wounded."

He raised himself to look over. Cockney was lying on his stomach far out from cover. His left arm was horribly unnatural, but his right held the gun pointed at the rock behind which Dakota lay.

A flash of movement brought an immediate report from Cockney's revolver, and Dakota's gun rattled out on the open ledge. A second shot sent it far out of reach.

Cockney's plan was evident: Dakota was not to be allowed to take aim. The cowboy was a two-gun man, Cockney knew. A Stetson showed above the rock, but Cockney ignored it; bits of rock jerked up in the air but failed to draw fire. Suddenly Dakota exposed his second gun and fired, Cockney

returning it instantly. Both seemed to have missed. The chance shot was repeated from the other side of the rock, and Cockney failed to reply.

For a minute or two the battle waned. Dakota tried a third shot. Both guns spoke together. Stamford, his eyes held by the recklessness of the wounded rancher lying there in the open, saw one of his feet jerk. At the same moment Dakota's second gun jangled among the rocks, though it did not come into view. They waited for its reappearance, but evidently the shot had damaged it.

"He has a rifle, Cockney," Stamford shouted.

Cockney nodded without turning his head.

After a long time the rifle snapped, but it did not show. Twice it was repeated. Dakota was summoning his friends.

An answering volley burst out down the river, followed by the shouts of the cowboys. Dakota jeered.

"And now, Cockney Aikens, comes the end o' the chapter. I knew you been tracking us all summer. You've drawn your little share of the rustling manys a year without knowing it—but there'll not be a damn cent for you of the big bunch we're taking out to-night. Then we'll scoop all that's left—including dear little Mary and the girl there."

Stamford took a chance. He looked out to the east. The cowboys were coming on the run, darting from cover to cover. At the end of the ledge they separated, some slinking over the edge to work up behind.

"I knew you killed Kid Loveridge at Dunmore Junction that day," Dakota went on, "just 'cause he shot a slinking Policeman who'd 'a' got us shore if he hadn't. I've always held one bullet for you ever since. If you'd told the Police you'd 'a' got it sooner. You didn't know I fired the other bullet that got the Corporal. I only wish I'd been nearer to help the Kid. You was too quick on the draw for him."

Cockney was stiffly trying to drag himself to cover, his eyes darting about

for a place to make a last stand.

"Stamford," he called, "can you get her to one of those fissures—the one my right foot's pointing at? I can protect you from here, I think."

Stamford examined the crevice.

"It's too far," he said. "We're not badly off here."

Cockney's revolver spat, and Muck Norsley flopped from the edge of the cliff and lay half in the open. Two others bolted across and sank out of sight. Cockney fired again but missed. Two of their enemies were now at their backs.

Stamford moved round Isabel and watched behind. A rifle barrel came slowly into sight and dropped until it almost covered them—then the peak of a Stetson. He raised himself to protect the girl at his side.

"Isabel," he whispered, "it looks as if it's about time to say something—to tell you that—I love you. If you can say anything that'll make me go with a smile—quick!"

His eye was on the rifle. He hated the thought of being shot in the back. But the rifle lifted unexpectedly to the sky, and Bean Slade reared his bony shoulders into view.

"It's only a woman, boys!" he shouted, with a scornful laugh. "A woman!"

"Bean," growled Stamford, "it may seem ungrateful, but why didn't you wait a second?"

"Shoot, you blasted idiot!" shrieked Dakota. "They're all in it. Get the boss and that editor-fellow anyway."

Stamford grinned sheepishly at Bean's lanky figure leaning over the rock, and turned to Isabel.

"I guess it's up to me to postpone the tale. I'm a bit too thin-skinned for this kind of a game."

"You don't *need* to postpone it—Morton," Isabel whispered.

"Yes, shoot, and do it quick!" muttered Stamford. "Before I waken. Do you know," he said, with a whimsical smile, "I've a feeling we're going to pull through."

Ten yards from Bean Slade rose the ruddy countenance of General Jones. Deliberately he raised his rifle.

Like a flash Bean fired, and with the report General crumpled out of sight.

"That's for Billy Windover," cried Bean, expectorating.

With the shot Cockney turned his head weakly. Dakota heard General's single cry and stood out in the open to fire. Without a groan Bean slid from the rock.

"And that's for General," hissed Dakota, dropping to cover.

Bean lifted his head and looked into Stamford's eyes. A slow smile passed across his lean features.

"Ta-ta!" he murmured, and dropped back lifeless.

Stamford's eyes were blinded with tears. For the first time an overpowering fury rose within him. He reached to his pocket and drew a small automatic.

"Damn!" he exploded. "I forgot all about it." He fumbled the little weapon in unaccustomed hand. "But what does the beastly thing do? I never fired one in my life."

She grabbed it from him and fired, and a figure that had been trying to creep across behind them darted back. Cockney turned his head and smiled wanly at them. His gun was lying beside him now; he seemed too weak to help.

"I'll just toddle over and get Bean's rifle," Stamford announced. "I seem to be useful only as an ammunition wagon in this fracas. Never fired a gun in

my life, but I'll close my eyes and—darn the consequences! It may scare them almost as much as me. If I could only hit that rock in front of Dakota _____"

He had risen to his feet, but she seized his arm.

"I'm going with you," she said.

He blinked into her eyes.

"That means?"

"It's dangerous; you're not going without me."

A shot broke from behind them and struck the rock above their heads.

"I think," smiled Stamford, "the second instalment of that serial is about due. I love you, Isabel."

For answer she reached up and pulled his lips to hers. At the kiss he paled.

"Life without this," he sighed, "could never equal death with it."

"But why not life *with* it?" she smiled.

"That," he said, "is worth any risk."

He looked at her, but she was watching the rocks behind with raised revolver.

Alkali Sam shouted:

"D'ye want the gal, Dakota?"

"You're shore right I do, old hoss!"

"Cudn't yo hang the li'l editor-chap t' yer watch chain? He don't seem wuth powder."

Stamford glared.

"Keep one bullet," he ordered Isabel. Then he smiled. "They don't seem to like me."

Alkali was shouting a ribald song as he climbed upward for a better shot.

"I think," said Stamford, "things are going to happen."

What happened was a new sound from across the river—the pound of a running herd. Silence fell suddenly over the tragedy on the ledge; every eye was turned to the opposite cliffs.

Swiftly along the edge of the cliff galloped a bunch of steers, their tails held high. And driving them on was Professor Bulkeley, mounted on Gee-Gee, two huge dogs bounding before him.

Stamford peered over the rock at Cockney—he could not help it. But Cockney was almost past surprise. Dakota and his comrades were shouting to each other excitedly. Isabel was laughing at Stamford from the corner of her eye. She nodded to his unspoken query.

But between them and the help in sight an impassable canyon ran.

The Professor, with the roar of the cattle and the river in his ears, had heard nothing. He would pass them by without a suspicion that within rifle range his sister and friends were in direst peril. Stamford and Isabel shouted, but no noise they could make would carry against the clamour closing the Professor in. Isabel fired into the air until the automatic was empty. It was useless.

Stamford darted to Bean's lifeless body. Leaning the rifle on the rock he took as careful aim as he knew how at the running cattle, but missed. He repeated the failure. Then, reckless of exposure, he carried the rifle to Cockney. Lifting the heavy man to his side, he thrust the rifle before him and held it against the rock. Cockney's face twisted in pain, but he placed his eye to the stock, held his breath, and pulled the trigger.

A steer leaped, stumbled, and those behind trod over it. A second time a steer fell. Cockney sank back. He could stand it no longer.

As the first steer went down, the Professor pulled up sharply. He had not heard the shot, but he recognised the results. The next shot he heard. And then a third snapped from the rock where Dakota lay, and Gee-Gee sank to his side.

Dakota sent a piercing whistle over the river, and the two great dogs came slinking to the edge of the cliff and lay looking over.

Dakota jeered aloud.

"Them was two fine pups the Inspector got for us, Alkali. I'll borrow dogs like them any time they come to the West. I need 'em in my biz."

"Hurrah for Dakota Fraley an' his glad eye!" shouted Alkali. "Dakota, boy, you're a devil with dogs an' skirts."

A rifle-shot broke from across the river. Dakota Fraley raised himself with a spasmodic jerk, a look of shocked incredulity on his swarthy face, and fell full length out on the ledge. His limbs scarcely twitched as he lay. Cockney smiled weakly.

Alkali and Dude could be heard seeking cover from the newer peril. Again and again the rifle-shots came from the unseen marksman. Bits of rock flew about the two cowboys. Stamford rose in his excitement and waved his hat. He could see bullet after bullet flash a white sideways mark on the face of the cliff, and the chips rise lower down where the bullet had bent its course. At the fifth shot Alkali cried out. Richochet shooting was an art even he, notorious gunman as he was, had never learned.

The firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The Dude remained. Suddenly above them a stern command rasped down. Two Mounted Policemen leaned over the edge of the cliff, their rifles covering Dude.

The cowboy stepped out, his arms up. The battle on the ledge above the Red Deer was ended.

Stamford and Isabel ran to Cockney. He was lying at full length, his left arm crumpled under him. The bandage on his head had slipped. He looked up in Stamford's face and smiled.

"My guest—to the last—anyway, Stamford. I'm going to—beat you—away—from the H-Lazy Z."

Isabel whispered to one of the Mounted Police, who dashed up to his horse and rode away.

"No—don't touch me. Let me lie—awhile. Where's the Professor?"

An exclamation from Sergeant Prior drew their eyes to the opposite shore. The Professor had jumped into the river—he could not wait to go round by the ford. They watched, Stamford satisfied that what the powerful fellow had done once he could repeat, Isabel alarmed, Sergeant Prior frankly sceptical.

They did their best for Cockney where he lay, but there was so little to be done. When they attempted to lift him, he swooned, and they left him at last and waited—waited.

The dripping Professor bounded up the rocks, scrambling from foothold to foothold.

"You're safe, dear?" he panted, when Isabel ran to him.

For one terrible moment Stamford stared at them. She read his fear and touched his arm.

"Morton, Morton! He is only a brother. I've been helping him in this case—I do sometimes."

"Heavens, Prior!" cried the Professor. "I feared you'd be too late. I stampeded the cattle. I had to. They were taking them away to-night." Then he saw Cockney. "My God, Aikens! What have they done to you?" He sank beside the wounded man.

"This is—my bad day," murmured Cockney, with a twisted smile. "First you thrashed me—now I'm—on the way, Professor."

"Not Professor, Cockney—Amos Barnes, of the Mounted Police."

Cockney smiled. "I suspected.... I helped you—what I could. But I hated—the Police so. *Your* English saddle.... Pink Eye yours now without—breaking into the corral—at nights."

Mary Aikens ran along the ledge and sank by his side. She was out on Matana when the Policeman found her.

"Jim! Jim!"

He pressed her feebly back with his right hand.

"No sentiment—Mary.... I—haven't time. You're—in good hands. This is the best way—out." His breath was coming in gasps. "Now—now, Mary Merrill—just one kiss—to help me on my way ... in memory of ... what might have been. If—Amos—doesn't mind."

She touched his lips tenderly with her own, and the tears rained on his face. He opened his eyes, and the sweet smile of big, kindly, light-hearted Cockney Aikens relieved the end.

Amos Barnes gently raised the weeping woman to her feet.

"He died as you would have him die, Mary," he whispered. "In his death you loved him as never in his life. And that's how Jim would have it. You're going home now—to your mother. We'll look after the ranch. I'll come to you when you send for me.... Poor Jim! The whole country loved him—but he'll rest best out here on the cliffs of the H-Lazy Z, where he found himself."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LONE TRAIL

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project

Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using

this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™

trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of

a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including

outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate.

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in

compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility:
www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.

Table of Contents

THE LONE TRAIL

CHAPTER I THE MURDER AT THE T-INVERTED R

CHAPTER II MORTON STAMFORD: TENDERFOOT

CHAPTER III CORPORAL FAIRCLOTH ARRIVES

CHAPTER IV THE SHOTS FROM THE BUSHES

CHAPTER V DAKOTA RUNS AMOK

CHAPTER VI STAMFORD MAKES A DECISION

CHAPTER VII AT THE H-LAZY Z

CHAPTER VIII A LAMB AMONG THE LIONS

CHAPTER IX COCKNEY'S MYSTERIOUS RIDE

CHAPTER X STAMFORD'S SURPRISES COMMENCE

CHAPTER XI THE FOSSIL-HUNTERS

CHAPTER XII STAMFORD GOES FOSSIL-HUNTING

CHAPTER XIII THE CONSPIRACY

CHAPTER XIV RIDERS OF THE NIGHT

CHAPTER XV ONE MYSTERY LESS

CHAPTER XVI AN ADVENTURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

CHAPTER XVII THE HOWL OF STRANGE DOGS

CHAPTER XVIII A CATCH OF MORE THAN FISH

CHAPTER XIX TWO PAIRS

CHAPTER XX THE SECRET VALLEY

CHAPTER XXI THE RAFT IN THE CANYON

CHAPTER XXII PINK EYE AND THE ENGLISH SADDLE

CHAPTER XXIII PREPARATIONS TO FLIT

CHAPTER XXIV THE FIGHT IN THE RANCH-HOUSE

CHAPTER XXV COCKNEY'S STORY

CHAPTER XXVI THE CHASE AMONG THE CLIFFS

CHAPTER XXVII THE BATTLE ON THE CLIFFS

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE