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Bucky O'Connor

by William MacLeod Raine

July, 1999 [Etext #1809]

Project Gutenberg Etext Bucky O'Connor, by William MacLeod Raine
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Bucky O'Connor
A Tale of the Unfenced Border

by William MacLeod Raine

To My Brother

EDGAR C. RAINE

MY DEAR WANDERER:

I write your name on this page that you may know we hold you not less in our thoughts because you have heard and answered again the call of the frozen North, have for the time disappeared, swallowed in some of its untrodden wilds. As in those old days of 59 Below On Bonanza, the long Winter night will be of interminable length. Armed with this note of introduction then, Bucky O'Connor offers himself, with the best bow of one Adventurer to another, as a companion to while away some few of those lonely hours.

March, 1910, Denver.

BUCKY O'CONNOR

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CHAPTER 1. ENTER "BEAR-TRAP" COLLINS

She had been aware of him from the moment of his spectacular entrance, though no slightest sign of interest manifested itself in her indolent, incurious eyes. Indeed, his abundant and picturesque area was so vivid that it would have been difficult not to feel his presence anywhere, let alone on a journey so monotonous as this was proving to be.

It had been at a water-tank, near Socorro, that the Limited, churning furiously through brown Arizona in pursuit of a lost half-hour, jarred to a sudden halt that shook sleep from the drowsy eyes of bored passengers. Through the window of her Pullman the young woman in Section 3 had glimpsed a bevy of angry train officials eddying around a sturdy figure in the center, whose strong, lean head rose confidently above the press. There was the momentary whirl of a scuffle, out of the tangle of which shot a brakeman as if propelled from a catapult. The circle parted, brushed aside by a pair of lean shoulders, muscular and broad. Yet a few moments and the owner of the shoulders led down the aisle to the vacant section opposite her a procession whose tail was composed of protesting trainmen.

"You had no right to flag the train, Sheriff Collins, and you'll have to get off; that's all there is to it," the conductor was explaining testily.

"Oh, that's all right," returned the offender with easy good nature, making himself at home in Section 4. "Tell the company to send in its bill. No use jawing about it."

"You'll have to get off, sir."

"That's right--at Tucson."

"No, sir. You'll have to get off here. I have no authority to let you ride."

"Didn't I hear you say the train was late? Don't you think you'd arrive earlier at the end of your run if your choo-choo got to puffing?"

"You'll have to get off, sir."

"I hate to disoblige," murmured the owner of the jingling spurs, the dusty corduroys, and the big, gray hat, putting his feet leisurely on the cushion in front of him. "But doesn't it occur to you that you are a man of one idea?"

"This is the Coast Limited. It doesn't stop for anybody--not even for the president of the road."

"You don't say! Well, I ce'tainly appreciate the honor you did me in stopping to take me on." His slight drawl was quite devoid of concern.

"But you had no right to flag the train. Can't you understand ANYTHING?" groaned the conductor.

"You explain it again to me, sonny. I'm surely thick in the haid," soothed the intruder, and listened with bland good-humor to the official's flow of protest.

"Well--well! Disrupted the whole transcontinental traffic, didn't I? And me so innocent, too. Now, this is how I figured it out. Here's me in a hurry to get to Tucson. Here comes your train a-foggin'--also and likewise hittin' the high spots for Tucson. Seemed like we ought to travel in company, and I was some dubious she'd forget to stop unless I flagged her. Wherefore, I aired my bandanna in the summer breeze."

"But you don't understand." The conductor began to explain anew as to a dull child. "It's against the law. You'll get into trouble."

"Put me in the calaboose, will they?"

"It's no joke."

"Well, it does seem to be worrying you," Mr. Collins conceded.
"Don't mind me. Free your mind proper."

The conductor, glancing about nervously, noticed that passengers were smiling broadly. His official dignity was being chopped to mince-meat. Back came his harassed gaze to the imperturbable Collins with the brown, sun-baked face and the eyes blue and untroubled as an Arizona sky. Out of a holster attached to the sagging belt that circled the corduroy trousers above his hips gleamed the butt of a revolver. But in the last analysis the weapon of the occasion was purely a moral one. The situation was one not covered in the company's rule book, and in the absence of explicit orders the trainman felt himself unequal to that unwavering gaze and careless poise. Wherefore, he retreated, muttering threats of what the company would do.

"Now, if I had only known it was against the law. My thick haid's always roping trouble for me," the plainsman confided to the Pullman conductor, with twinkling eyes.

That official unbent. "Talking about thick heads, I'm glad my porter has one. If it weren't iron-plated and copper-riveted he'd be needing a doctor now, the way you stood him on it."

"No, did I? Ce'tainly an accident. The nigger must have been in my way as I climbed into the car. Took the kink out of his hair, you say? Here, Sam!" He tossed a bill to the porter, who was rolling affronted eyes at him. "Do you reckon this is big enough to plaster your injured feelings, boy?"

The white smile flashed at him by the porter was a receipt for indemnity paid in full.

Sheriff Collins' perception of his neighbor across the aisle was more frank in its interest than the girl's had been of him. The level, fearless gaze of the outdoors West looked at her unabashed, appreciating swiftly her points as they impinged themselves upon his admiration. The long, lithe lines of the slim, supple body, the languid grace missing hauteur only because that seemed scarce worth while, the unconscious pride of self that fails to be offensive only in a young woman so well equipped with good looks as this one indubitably was the rider of the plains had appraised them all before his eyes dismissed her from his consideration and began a casual inspection of the other passengers.

Inside of half an hour he had made himself persona grata to everybody in the car except his dark-eyed neighbor across the way. That this dispenser of smiles and cigars decided to leave her out in the distribution of his attentions perhaps spoke well for his discernment. Certainly responsiveness to the geniality of casual fellow passengers did not impress Mr. Collins as likely to be an outstanding, quality in her. But with the drummer from

Chicago, the young mining engineer going to Sonora, the two shy little English children just in front of him traveling to meet their father in California, he found intuitively common ground of interest. Even Major Mackenzie, the engineer in charge of the large irrigation project being built by a company in southern Arizona, relaxed at one of the plainsman's humorous tales.

It was after Collins had half-depopulated the car by leading the more jovial spirits back in search of liquid refreshments that an urbane clergyman, now of Boston but formerly of Pekin, Illinois, professedly much interested in the sheriff's touch-and-go manner as presumably quite characteristic of the West, dropped into the vacant seat beside Major Mackenzie.

"And who might our energetic friend be?" he asked, with an ingratiating smile.

The young woman in front of them turned her head ever so slightly to listen.

"Val Collins is his name," said the major. "Sometimes called 'Bear-trap Collins.' He has always lived on the frontier. At least, I met him twelve years ago when he was riding mail between Aravaipa and Mesa. He was a boy then, certainly not over eighteen, but in a desperate fight he had killed two men who tried to hold up the mail. Cow-puncher, stage-driver, miner, trapper, sheriff, rough rider, politician--he's past master at them all."

"And why the appellation of 'Bear-trap,' may I ask?" The smack of pulpit oratory was not often missing in the edifying discourse of the Reverend Peter Melancthon Brooks.

"Well, sir, that's a story. He was trapping in the Tetons about five years ago thirty miles from the nearest ranch-house. One day, while he was setting a bear-trap, a slide of snow plunged down from the tree branches above and freed the spring, catching his hand between its jaws. With his feet and his other hand he tried to open that trap for four hours, without the slightest success. There was not one chance in a million of help from outside. In point of fact, Collins had not seen a human being for a month. There was only one thing to do, and he did it."

"And that was?"

"You probably noticed that he wears a glove over his left hand. The reason, sir, is that he has an artificial hand."

"You mean--" The Reverend Peter paused to lengthen his delicious thrill of horror.

"Yes, sir. That's just what I mean. He hacked his hand off at the wrist with his hunting-knife."

"Why, the man's a hero!" cried the clergyman, with unction.

Mackenzie flung him a disgusted look. "We don't go much on heroes out here. He's game, if that's what you mean. And able, too. Bucky O'Connor himself isn't any smarter at following a trail."

"And who is Bucky O'Connor?"

"He's the man that just ran down Fernandez. Think I'll have a smoke, sir. Care to join me?"

But the Pekin-Bostonian preferred to stay and jot down in his note-book the story of the beartrap, to be used later as a sermon illustration. This may have been the reason he did not catch the quick look that passed without the slightest flicker of the eyelids between Major Mackenzie and the young woman in Section 3. It was as if the old officer had wired her a message in some code the cipher of which was known only to them.

But the sheriff, returning at the head of his cohorts, caught it, and wondered what meaning might lie back of that swift glance. Major Mackenzie and this dark-eyed beauty posed before others as strangers, yet between them lay some freemasonry of understanding to which he had not the key.

Collins did not know that the aloofness in the eyes of Miss Wainwright--he had seen the name on her suit-case--gave way to horror when her glance fell on his gloved hand. She had a swift, shuddering vision of a grim-faced man, jaws set like a vise, hacking at his wrist with a hunting-knife. But the engaging impudence of his eye, the rollicking laughter in his voice, shut out the picture instantly.

The young man resumed his seat, and Miss Wainwright her listless inspection of the flying stretches of brown desert. Dusk was beginning to fall, and the porter presently lit the lamps. Collins bought a magazine from the newsboy and relapsed into it, but before he was well adjusted to reading the Limited pounded to a second unscheduled halt.

Instantly the magazine was thrown aside and Collins' curly head thrust out of the window. Presently the head reappeared, simultaneously with the crack of a revolver, the first of a detonating fusillade.

"Another of your impatient citizens eager to utilize the unspeakable convenience of rapid transit," suggested the clergyman, with ponderous jocosity.

"No, sir; nothing so illegal," smiled the cattleman, a whimsical light in his daredevil eyes. He leaned forward and whispered a word to the little girl in front of him, who at once led her

younger brother back to his section.

"I had hoped it would prove to be more diverting experience for a tenderfoot," condescended the gentleman of the cloth.

"It's certainly a pleasure to be able to gratify you, sir. You'll be right pleased to know that it is a train hold-up." He waved his hand toward the door, and at the word, as if waiting for his cue, a masked man appeared at the end of the passage with a revolver in each hand.

CHAPTER 2. TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

"Hands up!"

There was a ring of crisp menace in the sinister voice that was a spur to obedience. The unanimous show of hands voted "Aye" with a hasty precision that no amount of drill could have compassed.

It was a situation that might have made for laughter had there been spectators to appreciate. But of whatever amusement was to be had one of the victims seemed to hold a monopoly. Collins, his arm around the English children by way of comfort, offered a sardonic smile at the consternation his announcement and its fulfillment had created, but none of his fellow passengers were in the humor to respond.

The shock of an earthquake could not have blanched ruddy faces more surely. The Chicago drummer, fat and florid, had disappeared completely behind a buttress of the company's upholstery.

"God bless my soul!" gasped the Pekin-Bostonian, dropping his eyeglass and his accent at the same moment. The dismay in his face found a reflection all over the car. Miss Wainwright's hand clutched at her breast for an instant, and her color ebbed till her lips were ashen, but her neighbor across the aisle noticed that her eyes were steady and her figure tense.

"Scared stiff, but game," was his mental comment.

"Gents to the right and ladies to the left; line up against the walls; everybody waltz." called the man behind the guns, with grim humor.

The passengers fell into line as directed, Collins with the rest.

"You're calling this dance, son; it's your say-so, I guess," he conceded.

"Keep still, or I'll shoot you full of holes," growled the autocrat of the artillery.

"Why, sure! Ain't you the real thing in Jesse Jameses?" soothed the sheriff.

At the sound of Collins' voice, the masked man had started perceptibly, and his right hand had jumped forward an inch or two to cover the speaker more definitely. Thereafter, no matter what else engaged his attention, the gleaming eyes behind the red bandanna never wandered for a moment from the big plainsman. He was taking no risks, for he remembered the saying current in Arizona, that after Collins' hardware got into action there was nothing left to do but plant the deceased and collect the insurance. He had personal reasons to know the fundamental accuracy of the colloquialism.

The train-conductor fussed up to the masked outlaw with a ludicrous attempt at authority. "You can't rob the passengers on this train. I'm not responsible for the express-car, but the coaches--"

A bullet almost grazed his ear and shattered a window on its way to the desert.

"Drift, you red-haired son of a Mexican?" ordered the man behind the red bandanna. "Git back to that seat real prompt. This here's taxation without representation."

The conductor drifted as per suggestion.

The minutes ticked themselves away in a tense strain marked by pounding hearts. The outlaw stood at the end of the aisle, watching the sheriff alertly.

"Why doesn't the music begin?" volunteered Collins, by way of conversation, and quoted: "On with the dance. Let joy be unconfined."

A dull explosion answered his question. The bandits were blowing open the safe in the express-car with dynamite, pending which the looting of the passengers was at a standstill.

A second masked figure joined his companion at the end of the passage and held a hurried conversation with him. Fragments of their low-voiced talk came to Collins.

"Only thirty thousand in the express-car. Not a red cent on the old man himself."

"Where's the rest?" The irritation in the newcomer's voice was pronounced.

Collins slewed his head and raked him with keen eyes that missed not a detail. He was certain that he had never seen the man

before, yet he knew at once that the trim, wiry figure, so clean of build and so gallant of bearing, could belong only to Wolf Leroy, the most ruthless outlaw of the Southwest. It was written in his jaunty insolence, in the flashing eyes. He was a handsome fellow, white-toothed, black-haired, lithely tigerish, with masterful mouth and eyes of steel, so far as one might judge behind the white mask he wore. Alert, cruel, fearless from the head to the heel of him, he looked the very devil to lead an enterprise so lawless and so desperate as this. His vigilant eyes swept contemptuously up and down the car, rested for a moment on the young woman in Section 3, and came back to his partner.

"Bah! A flock of sheep--tamest bunch of spring lambs we ever struck. I'll send Scott in to go through them. If anybody gets gay, drop him." And the outlaw turned on his heel.

Another of the highwaymen took his place, a stout, squat figure in the flannel shirt, spurs, and chaps of a cow-puncher. It took no second glance to tell Collins this bandy-legged fellow had been a rider of the range.

"Come, gentlemen, get a move on you," Collins implored. "This train's due at Tucson by eight o'clock. We're more than an hour late now. I'm holding down the job of sheriff in that same town, and I'm awful anxious to get a posse out after a bunch of train-robbers. So burn the wind, and go through the car on the jump. Help yourself to anything you find. Who steals my purse takes trash. 'Tis something, nothing. 'Twas mine; 'tis his. That's right, you'll find my roll in that left-hand pocket. I hate to have you take that gun, though. I meant to run you down with that same old Colt's reliable. Oh, well, just as you say. No, those kids get a free pass. They're going out to meet papa at Los Angeles, boys. See?"

Collins' running fire of comment had at least the effect of restoring the color to some cheeks that had been washed white and of snatching from the outlaws some portion of their sense of dominating the situation. But there was a veiled vigilance in his eyes that belied his easy impudence.

"That lady across the aisle gets a pass, too, boys," continued the sheriff. "She's scared stiff now, and you won't bother her, if you're white men. Her watch and purse are on the seat. Take them, if you want them, and let it go at that."

Miss Wainwright listened to this dialogue silently. She stood before them cool and imperious and unwavering, but her face was bloodless and the pulse in her beautiful soft throat fluttered like a caged bird.

"Who's doing this job?" demanded one of the hold-ups, wheeling savagely on the impassive officer "Did I say we were going to bother the lady? Who's doing this job, Mr. Sheriff?"

"You are. I'd hate to be messing the job like you--holding up the wrong train by mistake." This was a shot in the dark, and it did not quite hit the bull's-eye. "I wouldn't trust you boys to rob a hen-roost, the amateur way you go at it. When you get through, you'll all go to drinking like blue blotters. I know your kind--hell-bent to spend what you cash in, and every mother's son of you in the pen or with his toes turned up inside of a month."

"Who'll put us there?" gruffly demanded the bowlegged one.

Collins smiled at him with confidence superb "Mebbe I will--and if I don't Bucky O'Connor will--those of you that are left alive when you go through shooting each other in the back. Oh, I see your finish to a fare-you-well."

"Cheese it, or I'll bump you off." The first outlaw drove his gun into the sheriff's ribs.

"That's all right. You don't need to punctuate that remark. I line up with the sky-pilot and chew the cud of silence. I merely wanted to frame up to you how this thing's going to turn out. Don't come back at me and say I didn't warn you, sonnie."

"You make my head ache," snarled the bandy-legged outlaw sourly, as he passed down with his sack, accumulating tribute as he passed down the aisle with his sack, accumulating tribute as he went.

The red-kerchiefed robber whooped when they came to the car conductor. "Dig up, Mr. Pullman. Go way down into your jeans. It's a right smart pleasure to divert the plunder of your bloated corporation back to the people. What! Only fifty-seven dollars. Oh, dig deeper, Mr. Pullman."

The drummer contributed to the sack eighty-four dollars, a diamond ring, and a gold watch. His hands were trembling so that they played a tattoo on the sloping ceiling above him.

"What's the matter, Fatty? Got a chill?" inquired one of the robbers, as he deftly swept the plunder into the sack.

"For--God's sake--don't shoot. I have--a wife--and five children," he stammered, with chattering teeth.

"No race suicide for Fatty. But whyfor do they let a sick man like you travel all by his lone?"

"I don't know--I--Please turn that weapon another way."

"Plumb chuck full of malaria," soliloquized the owner of the weapon, playfully running its business end over the Chicago man's anatomy. "Shakes worse'n a pair of dice. Here, Fatty. Load up

with quinine and whisky. It's sure good for chills." The man behind the bandanna gravely handed his victim back a dollar. "Write me if it cures you. Now for the sky-pilot. No white chips on this plate, parson. It's a contribution to the needy heathen. You want to be generous. How much do you say?"

The man of the cloth reluctantly said thirty dollars, a Lincoln penny, and a silver-plated watch inherited from his fathers. The watch was declined with thanks, the money accepted without.

The Pullman porter came into the car under compulsion of a revolver in the hand of a fourth outlaw, one in a black mask. His trembling finger pointed out the satchel and suit-case of Major Mackenzie, and under orders he carried out the baggage belonging to the irrigation engineer. Collin observed that the bandit in the black mask was so nervous that the revolver in his hand quivered like an aspen in the wind. He was slenderer and much shorter than the Mexican, so that the sheriff decided he was a mere boy.

It was just after he had left that three shots in rapid succession rang out in the still night air.

The red-bandannaed one and his companion, who had apparently been waiting for the signal, retreated backward to the end of the car, still keeping the passengers covered. They flung rapidly two or three bullets through the roof, and under cover of the smoke slipped out into the night. A moment later came the thud of galloping horses, more shots, and, when the patter of hoofs had died away--silence.

The sheriff was the first to break it. He thrust his brown hands deep into his pockets and laughed--laughed with the joyous, rollicking abandon of a tickled schoolboy.

"Hysterics?" ventured the mining engineer sympathetically.

Collins wiped his eyes. "Call 'em anything you like. What pleases me is that the reverend gentleman should have had this diverting experience so prompt after he was wishing for it." He turned, with concern, to the clergyman. "Satisfied, sir? Did our little entertainment please, or wasn't it up to the mark?"

But the transported native of Pekin was game. "I'm quite satisfied, if you are. I think the affair cost you a hundred dollars or so more than it did me."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff heartily. "But I don't grudge it--not a cent of it. The show was worth the price of admission."

The car conductor had a broadside ready for him. "Seems to me you shot off your mouth more than you did that big gun of yours, Mr. Sheriff."

Collins laughed, and clapped him on the back. "That's right. I'm a regular phonograph, when you wind me up." He did not think it necessary to explain that he had talked to make the outlaws talk, and that he had noted the quality of their voices so carefully that he would know them again among a thousand. Also he had observed--other things--the garb of each of the men he had seen, their weapons, their manner, and their individual peculiarities.

The clanking car took up the rhythm of the rails as the delayed train plunged forward once more into the night. Again the clack of tongues, set free from fear, buzzed eagerly. The glow of the afterclap of danger was on them, and in the warm excitement each forgot the paralyzing fear that had but now padlocked his lips. Courage came flowing back into flabby cheeks and red blood into hearts of water.

At the next station the Limited stopped, and the conductor swung from a car before the wheels had ceased rolling and went running into the telegraph office.

"Fire a message through for me, Pat. The Limited has been held up," he announced.

"Held up?" gasped the operator.

"That's right. Get this message right through to Sabin. I'm not going to wait for an answer. Tell him I'll stop at Apache for further instructions."

With which the conductor was out again waving his lantern as a signal for the train to start. Sheriff Collins and Major Mackenzie had entered the office at his heels. They too had messages to send, but it was not until the train was already plunging into the night that the station agent read the yellow slips they had left and observed that both of them went to the same person.

"Lieutenant Bucky O'Connor, Douglas, Arizona," was the address he read at the top of each. His comment serves to show the opinion generally in the sunburned territory respecting one of its citizens.

"You're wise guys, gents, both of yez. This is shure a case for the leftenant. It's send for Bucky quick when the band begins to play," he grinned.

Sitting down, he gave the call for Tucson, preparatory to transmitting the conductor's message to the division superintendent. His fingers were just striking the first tap when a silken voice startled him.

"One moment, friend. No use being in a hurry."

The agent looked up and nearly fell from his stool. He was gazing into the end of a revolver held carelessly in the hand of a masked man leaning indolently on the counter.

"Whe--where did you come from?" the operator gasped.

"Kaintucky, but I been here a right smart spell. Why? You takin' the census?" came the drawling answer.

"I didn't hear youse come in."

"I didn't hear you come in, either," the man behind the mask mocked. But even as he spoke his manner changed, and crisp menace rang in his voice. "Have you sent those messages yet?"

"Wha--what messages?"

"Those lying on your desk. I say, have you sent them?"

"Not yet."

"Hand them over here."

The operator passed them across the counter without demur.

"Now reach for the roof."

Up shot the station agent's hands. The bandit glanced over the written sheets and commented aloud:

"Huh! One from the conductor and one from Mackenzie. I expected those. But this one from Collins is ce'tainly a surprise party. I didn't know he was on the train. Lucky for him I didn't, or mebber I'd a-put his light for good and all. Friend, I reckon we'll suppress these messages. Military necessity, you understand." And with that he lightly tore up the yellow sheets and tossed them away.

"The conductor will wire when he reaches Apache," the operator suggested, not very boldly.

The outlaw rolled a cigarette deftly and borrowed a match. "He most surely will. But Apache is seventy miles from here. That gives us an extra hour and a half, and with us right now time is a heap more valuable than money. You may tell Bucky O'Connor when you see him that that extra hour and a half cinches our escape, and we weren't on the anxious seat any without it."

It may have been true, as the train robber had just said, that time was more valuable to him than money, but if so he must have held the latter of singularly little value. For he sat him down on the counter with his back against the wall and his legs

stretched full length in front of him and glanced over the Tucson Star in leisurely fashion, while Pat's arms still projected roofward.

The operator, beginning to get over his natural fright, could not withhold a reluctant admiration of this man's aplomb. There was a certain pantherish lightness about the outlaw's movements, a trim grace of figure which yet suggested rippling muscles perfectly under control, and a quiet wariness of eye more potent than words at repressing insurgent impulses. Certainly if ever there was a cool customer and one perfectly sure of himself, this was he.

"Not a thing in the Star to-day," Pat's visitor commented, as he flung it away with a yawn. "I'll let a thousand dollars of the express company's money that there will be something more interesting in it to-morrow."

"That's right," agreed the agent.

"But I won't be here to read it. My engagements take me south. I'll make a present to the great Lieutenant O'Connor of the information. We're headed south, tell him. And tell Mr. Sheriff Collins, too--happy to entertain him if he happens our way. If it would rest your hands any there's no law against putting them in your trousers pockets, my friend."

From outside there came a short sharp whistle. The man on the counter answered it, and slipped at once to the floor. The door opened, to let in another masked form, but one how different from the first! Here was no confidence almost insolent in its nonchalance. The figure was slight and boyish, the manner deprecating, the brown eyes shy and shrinking. He was so obviously a novice at outlawry that fear sat heavy upon his shoulders. When he spoke, almost in a whisper, his teeth chattered.

"All ready, sir."

"The wires are cut?" demanded his leader crisply.

"Yes, sir."

"On both sides?"

"On both sides."

His chief relieved the operator of the revolver in his desk, broke it, emptied out the shells, and flung them through the window, then tossed the weapon back to its owner.

"You'll not shoot yourself by accident now," he explained, and with that he had followed his companion into the night.

There came to the station agent the sound of galloping horses,

growing fainter, until a heavy silence seemed to fill the night. He stole to the door and locked it, pulled down the window blinds, and then reloaded his revolver with feverish haste. This done, he sat down before his keys with the weapon close at hand and frantically called for Tucson over and over again. No answer came to him, nor from the other direction when he tried that. The young bandit had told the truth. His companions had cut the wires and so isolated from the world for the time the scene of the hold-up. The agent understood now why the leader of the outlaws had honored him with so much of his valuable time. He had stayed to hold back the telegrams until he knew the wires were cut.

CHAPTER 3. THE SHERIFF INTRODUCES HIMSELF

Bear-trap Collins, presuming on the new intimacy born of an exciting experience shared in common, stepped across the aisle, flung aside Miss Wainwright's impedimenta, and calmly seated himself beside her. She was a young woman capable of a hauteur chillier than ice to undue familiarity, but she did not choose at this moment to resent his assumption of a footing that had not existed an hour ago. Picturesque and unconventional conduct excuses itself when it is garbed in picturesque and engaging manners. She had, besides, other reasons for wanting to meet him, and they had to do with a sudden suspicion that flamed like tow in her brain. She had something for which to thank him--much more than he would be likely to guess, she thought--and she was wondering, with a surge of triumph, whether the irony of fate had not made his pretended consideration for her the means of his undoing.

"I am sorry you lost so much, Miss Wainwright," he told her.

"But, after all, I did not lose so much as you. Her dark, deep-pupiled eyes, long-lashed as Diana's, swept round to meet his coolly.

"That's a true word. My reputation has gone glimmering for fair, I guess." He laughed ruefully. "I shouldn't wonder, ma'am, when election time comes round, if the boys ain't likely to elect to private life the sheriff that lay down before a bunch of miscreants."

"Why did you do it?"

His humorous glance roamed round the car. "Now, I couldn't think it proper for me to shoot up this sumptuous palace on wheels. And wouldn't some casual passenger be likely to get his lights put out when the band began to play? Would you want that Boston church to be shy a preacher, ma'am?"

Her lips parted slightly in a curve of scorn. "I suppose you had

your reasons for not interfering."

"Surely, ma'am. I hated to have them make a sieve of me."

"Were you afraid?"

"Most men are when Wolf Leroy's gang is on the war path."

"Wolf Leroy?"

"That was Wolf who came in to see they were doing the job right. He's the worst desperado on the border--a sure enough bad proposition, I reckon. They say he's part Spanish and part Indian, but all pisen. Others say he's a college man of good family. I don't know about that, for nobody knows who he really is. But the name is a byword in the country. People lower their voices when they speak of him and his night-riders."

"I see. And you were afraid of him?"

"Very much."

Her narrowed eyes looked over the strong lines of his lean face and were unconvinced. "I expect you found a better reason than that for not opposing them."

He turned to her with frank curiosity. "I'd like real well to have you put a name to it."

But he was instantly aware that her interest had been side tracked. Major Mackenzie had entered the car and was coming down the aisle. Plainer than words his eyes asked a question, and hers answered it.

The sheriff stopped him with a smiling query: "Hit hard, major?"

Mackenzie frowned. "The scoundrels took thirty thousand from the express car, I understand. Twenty thousand of it belonged to our company. I was expecting to pay off the men next Tuesday."

"Hope we'll be able to run them down for you," returned Collins cheerfully. "I suppose you lay it to Wolf Leroy's gang?"

"Of course. The work was too well done to leave any doubt of that." The major resumed his seat behind Miss Wainwright.

To that young woman the sheriff repeated his unanswered question in the form of a statement. "I'm waiting to learn that better reason, ma'am."

She was possessed of that spice of effrontery more to be desired than beauty. "Shall we say that you had no wish to injure your friends?"

"My friends?"

Her untender eyes mocked his astonishment. "Do I choose the wrong word?" she asked, with an audacity of a courage that delighted him. "Perhaps they are not your friends--these train robbers? Perhaps they are mere casual acquaintances?"

His bold eyes studied with a new interest her superb, confident youth--the rolling waves of splendid Titian hair, the lovely, subtle eyes with the depths of shadowy pools in them, the alluring lines of long and supple loveliness. Certainly here was no sweet, ingenuous youth all prone to blushes, but the complex heir of that world-old wisdom the weaker sex has shaped to serve as a weapon against the strength that must be met with the wit of Mother Eve.

"You certainly have a right vivid imagination, ma'am," he said dryly.

"You are quite sure you have never seen them before?" her velvet voice asked.

He laughed. "Well, no--I can't say I am."

"Aren't you quite sure you have seen them?"

Her eyes rested on him very steadily.

"You're smart as a whip, Miss Wainwright. I take off my hat to a young lady so clever. I guess you're right. About the identity of one of those masked gentlemen I'm pretty well satisfied."

She drew a long breath. "I thought so."

"Yes," he went on evenly, "I once earmarked him so that I'd know him again in case we met."

"I beg pardon. You--what?"

"Earmarked him. Figure of speech, ma'am. You may not have observed that the curly-headed person behind the guns was shy the forefinger of his right hand. We had a little difficulty once when he was resisting arrest, and it just happened that my gun fanned away his trigger finger." He added reminiscently:

"A good boy, too, Neil was once. We used to punch together on the Hashknife. A straight-up rider, the kind a fellow wants when Old Man Trouble comes knocking at the door. Well, I reckon he's a miscreant now, all right."

"They knew YOU--at least two of them did."

"I've been pirootin' around this country, boy and man, for fifteen years. I ain't responsible for every yellow dog that knows me," he drawled.

"And I noticed that when you told them not to rob the children and not to touch me they did as you said."

"Hypnotism," he suggested, with a smile.

"So, not being a child, I put two and two together and draw an inference."

He seemed to be struggling with his mirth. "I see you do. Well, ma'am, I've been most everything since I hit the West, but this is the first time I've been taken for a train robber."

"I didn't say that," she cried quickly.

"I think you mentioned an inference." The low laugh welled out of him and broke in his face. "I've been busy on one, too. It's a heap nearer the truth than yours, Miss Mackenzie."

Her startled eyes and the swift movement of her hand toward her heart showed him how nearly he had struck home, how certainly he had shattered her cool indifference of manner.

He leaned forward, so close that even in the roar of the train his low whisper reached her. "Shall I tell you why the hold-ups didn't find more money on your father or in the express car, Miss Mackenzie?"

She was shaken, so much so that her agitation trembled on her lips.

"Shall I tell you why your hand went to your breast when I first mentioned that the train was going to be held up, and again when your father's eyes were firing a mighty pointed question at you?"

"I don't know what you mean," she retorted, again mistress of herself.

Her gallant bearing compelled his admiration. The scornful eyes, the satirical lift of the nostrils, the erect, graceful figure, all flung a challenge at him. He called himself hard names for putting her on the rack, but the necessity to make her believe in him was strong within him.

"I noticed you went right chalky when I announced the hold-up, and I thought it was because you were scared. That was where I did you an injustice, ma'am, and you can call this an apology. You've got sand. If it hadn't been for what you carry in the chamois skin hanging on the chain round your neck you would have enjoyed every minute of the little entertainment. You're as game

as they make them."

"May I ask how you arrived at this melodramatic conclusion?" she asked, her disdainful lip curling.

"By using my eyes and my ears, ma'am. I shouldn't have noticed your likeness to Major Mackenzie, perhaps, if I hadn't observed that there was a secret understanding between you. Now, whyfor should you be passing as strangers? I could guess one reason, and only one. There have twice been attempted hold-ups of the paymaster of the Yuba reservoir. It was to avoid any more of these that Major Mackenzie took charge personally of paying the men. He has made good up till now. But there have been rumors for months that he would be held up either before leaving the train or while he was crossing the desert. He didn't want to be seen taking the boodle from the express company at Tucson. He would rather have the impression get out that this was just a casual visit. It occurred to him to bring along some unsuspected party to help him out. The robbers would never expect to find the money on a woman. That's why the major brought his daughter with him. Doesn't it make you some uneasy to be carrying fifty thousand in small bills sewed in your clothes and hung round your neck?"

She broke into musical laughter, natural and easy. "I don't happen to have fifty thousand with me."

"Oh, well, say forty thousand. I'm no wizard to guess the exact figure."

Her swift glance at him was almost timid.

"Nor forty thousand," she murmured.

"I should think, ma'am, you'd crinkle more than a silk-lined lady sailing down a church aisle on Sunday."

A picture in the magazine she was toying with seemed to interest her.

"I expect that's the signal for 'Exit Collins.' I'll say good-by till next time, Miss Mackenzie."

"Oh, is there going to be a next time?" she asked, with elaborate carelessness.

"Several of them."

"Indeed!"

He took a notebook from his pocket and wrote.

"I ain't the son of a prophet, but I'm venturing a prediction," he explained.

She had nothing to say, and she said it competently.

"Concerning an investment in futurities I'm making," he continued.

Her magazine article seemed to be beginning, well.

"It's a little guess about how this train robbery is coming out. If you don't mind, I'll leave it with you." He tore the page out, put it in an empty envelope, sealed the flap, and handed it to her.

"Open it in a month, and see whether my guess is a good one."

The dusky lashes swept round indolently. "Suppose I were to open it to-night."

"I'll risk it," smiled the blue eyes.

"On honor, am I?"

"That's it." He held out a big, brown hand.

"You're going to try to capture the robbers, are you?"

"I've been thinking that way--with the help of Lieutenant Bucky O'Connor, I mean."

"And I suppose you've promised yourself success."

"It's on the knees of chance, ma'am. We may get them. They may get us."

"But this prediction of yours?" She held up the sealed envelope.

"That's about another matter."

"But I don't understand. You said--" She gave him a chance to explain.

"It ain't meant you should. You'll understand plenty at the proper time."

He offered her his hand again. "We're slowing down for Apache. Good-by--till next time."

The suede glove came forward, and was buried in his handshake.

He understood it to be an unvoiced apology of its owner for her suspicions, and his instinct was correct. For how could her doubts hold their ground when he had showed himself a sharer in her secret and a guardian of it? And how could anything sinister

lie behind those frank, unwavering eyes or consist with that long, clean stride that was carrying him so forcefully to the vestibule?

At Apache no telegrams were found waiting for those who had been expecting them. Communication with the division superintendent at Tucson uncovered the fact that no message of the hold-up had yet reached him. It was an easy guess for Collins to find the reason.

"We're in the infant class, major," he told Mackenzie, with a sardonic laugh. "Leroy must have galloped down the line direct to the station after the hold-up. Likely enough he went into the depot just as we went out. That gives him the other hour or two he needs to make his getaway with the loot. Well, it can't be helped now. If I can only reach Bucky there's one chance in fifty he can head them off from crossing into Sonora. Soon as I can get together a posse I'll take up the trail from the point of the hold-up. But they'll have a whole night's start on me. That's a big handicap."

From Apache Collins sent three dispatches. One was to his deputy, Dillon, at Tucson. It read:

"Get together at once posse of four and outfit same for four days."

Another went to Sabin, the division superintendent:

"Order special to carry posse with horses from Tucson to Big Gap. Must leave by midnight. Have track clear."

The third was a notification to Lieutenant O'Connor, of the Arizona Rangers, of the hold-up, specifying time and place of the occurrence. The sheriff knew it was not necessary to add that the bandits were probably heading south to get into Sonora. Bucky would take that for granted and do his best to cover the likely spots of the frontier.

It was nearly eleven when the Limited drew in to Tucson. Sabin was on the platform anxiously awaiting their arrival. Collins reached him even before the conductor.

"Ordered the special, Mr. Sabin?" he asked, in a low voice.

The railroad man was chewing nervously on an unlit cigar. "Yes, sheriff. You want only an engine and one car, I suppose."

"That will be enough. I've got to go uptown now and meet Dillon. Midnight sharp, please."

"Do you know how much they got?" Sabin whispered.

"Thirty thousand, I hear, besides what they took from the

passengers. The conductor will tell you all about it. I've got to jump to be ready."

A disappointment awaited him in the telegrapher's room at the depot. He found a wire, but not from the person he expected. The ranger in charge at Douglas said that Lieutenant O'Connor was at Flag staff, but pending that officer's return he would put himself under the orders of Sheriff Collins and wait for instructions.

The sheriff whistled softly to himself and scratched his head. Bucky would not have waited for instructions. By this time that live wire would have finished telephoning all over Southern Arizona and would himself have been in the saddle. But Bucky in Flagstaff, nearly three hundred miles from the battlefield, so far as the present emergency went, might just as well be in Calcutta. Collins wired instructions to the ranger and sent a third message to the lieutenant.

"I expect I'll hear this time he's skipped over to Winslow," he told himself, with a rueful grin.

The special with the posse on board drew out at midnight sharp. It reached the scene of the holdup before daybreak. The loading board was lowered and the horses led from the car and picketed. Meanwhile two of the men lit a fire and made breakfast while the others unloaded the outfit and packed for the trail. The first faint streaks of gray dawn were beginning to fleck the sky when Collins and Dillon, with a lantern, moved along the railroad bed to the little clump of cottonwoods where the outlaws had probably lain while they waited for the express. They scanned this ground inch by inch. The coals where their camp-fire had been were still alive. Broken bits of food lay scattered about. Half-trampled into the ground the sheriff picked up a narrow gold chain and locket. This last he opened, and found it to contain a tiny photograph of a young mother and babe, both laughing happily. A close search failed to disclose anything else of interest.

They returned to their companions, ate breakfast, and saddled. It was by this time light enough to be moving. The trail was easy as a printed map, for the object of the outlaws had been haste rather than secrecy. The posse covered it swiftly and without hesitation.

"Now, I wonder why this trail don't run straight south instead of bearing to the left into the hills. Looks like they're going to cache their stolen gold up in the mountains before they risk crossing into Sonora. They figure Bucky'll be on the lookout for them," the sheriff said to his deputy.

"I believe you've guessed it, Val. Stands to reason they'll want to get rid of the loot soon as they can. Oh, hell!"

Dillon's disgust proved justifiable, for the trail had lost itself in a mountain stream, up or down which the outlaws must have filed. A month later and the creek would have been dry. But it was still spring. The mountain rains had not ceased feeding the brook, and of this the outlaws had taken advantage to wipe out their trail.

The sheriff looked anxiously at the sky. "It's fixin' to rain, Jim. Don't that beat the Dutch? If it does, that lets us out plenty."

The men they were after might have gone either upstream or down. It was impossible to know definitely which, nor was there time to follow both. Already big drops of rain were splashing down.

"We'll take a chance, and go up. They're probably up in the hills somewhere right now," said Collins, with characteristic decision.

He had guessed right. A mile farther upstream horses had clambered to the bank and struck deeper into the hills. But already rain was falling in a brisk shower. The posse had not gone another quarter of a mile before the trail was washed out. They were now in a rough and rocky country getting every minute steeper.

"It's going to be like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, Val," Dillon growled.

Collins nodded. "We ain't got one chance in a hundred, Jim, but I reckon we'll take that chance."

For three days they blundered around in the hills before they gave it up. The first night, about dusk, the pursuers were without knowing it so warm that one of the bandits lay with his rifle on a rock rim not a stone's throw above them as they wound through a little ravine. But Collins got no glimpse of the robbers. At last he reluctantly gave the word to turn back. Probably the men he wanted had already slipped down to the plains and across to Mexico. If not, they might play hide and seek with him a month in the recesses of these unknown mountains.

Next morning the sheriff struck a telephone wire, tapped it, got Sabin on the line, told him of his failure and that he was returning to Tucson. About the middle of the afternoon the dispirited posse reached its sidetracked special.

A young man lay stretched full length on the loading board, with a broad-brimmed felt hat over his eyes. He wore a gray flannel shirt and corduroy trousers thrust into half-leg laced boots. At the sound of voices he turned lazily on his side and watched the members of the posse swing wearily from their saddles. An amiable smile, not wholly free of friendly derision, lit his good-looking face.

"Oh, you sheriff," he drawled.

Collins swung round, as if he had been pricked with a knife point. He stared an instant before he let out a shout of welcome and fell upon the youth.

"Bucky, by thunder!"

The latter got up nimbly in time to be hospitably thumped and punched. He was a lithe, slender young fellow, of medium height, and he carried himself lightly with that manner of sunburned competency given only by the rough-and-tumble life of the outdoors West.

While the men reloaded the car he and the sheriff stood apart and talked in low tones. Collins told what he knew, both what he had seen and inferred, and Bucky heard him to the end.

"Yes, it ce'tainly looks like one of Wolf Leroy's jobs," he agreed. "Nobody else but Leroy would have had the nerve to follow you right up to the depot and put the kibosh on sending those wires. He's surely game from the toes up. Think of him sittin' there reading the newspaper half an hour after he held up the Limited!"

"Did he do that, Bucky?" The sheriff's tone conceded admiration.

"He did. He's the only train robber ever in the business that could have done it. Oh, the Wolf's tracks are all over this job."

"No doubt about that. I told you I recognized York Neil by him being shy that trigger finger I fanned off down at Tombstone. Well, they say he's one of the Wolf's standbys."

"Yes. I warned him two months ago that if he didn't break away he'd die sudden. Somehow I couldn't persuade him he was an awful sick man right then. You saw four of these hold-ups in all, didn't you, Val?"

"Four's right. First off Neil, then the fellow I took to be the Wolf. After he went out a bowlegged fellow came in, and last a slim little kid that was a sure enough amateur, the way his gun shook."

"Any notion how many more there were?"

"I figured out two more. A big gazabo in a red wig held up Frost, the engineer. He knew it was a wig because he saw long black hair peeping out around his neck. Then there must 'a' been another in charge of blowing up the express car, a Mexican, from the description the messenger gives of him."

Bucky nodded. "Looks like you got it figured about right, Val. The Mexican is easy to account for. The Wolf spends about half his time down in Chihuahua and trains with some high-class greasers down there. Well, we'll see what we'll see. I'll set my rangers at rounding up the border towns a bit, and if I don't start anything there I'll hike down into Mexico and see what's doing. I'll count on you to run the Arizona end of it while I'm away, Val. The Wolf's outfit is a pretty wild one, and it won't be long till something begins to howl. We'll keep an eye on the gambling halls and see who is burning up money. Oh, they'll leave plenty of smoke behind them," the ranger concluded cheerfully.

"There will be plenty of smoke if we ever do round 'em up, not to mention a heap of good lead that will be spilled," the sheriff agreed placidly. "Well, all I got to say is the sooner the quicker. The bunch borrowed a mighty good .45 of mine I need in my biz. I kinder hanker to get it back muy pronto."

"Here's hoping," Bucky nodded gayly. "I bet there will be a right lively wolf hunt. Hello! The car's loaded. All aboard for Tucson."

The special drew out from the side track and gathered speed. Soon the rhythmic chant of the rails sounded monotonously, and the plains on either side of the track swam swiftly to the rear.

CHAPTER 4. A BLUFF IS CALLED

Torpid lay Aravaipa in a coma of sunheat. Its adobe-lined streets basked in the white glare of an Arizona spring at midday. One or two Papago Indians, with their pottery wares, squatted in the shade of the buildings, but otherwise the plaza was deserted. Not even a moving dog or a lounging peon lent life to the drowsy square. Silence profound and peace eternal seemed to brood over the land.

Such was the impression borne in upon the young man riding townward on a wiry buckskin that had just topped the rise which commanded the valley below. The rider presented a striking enough appearance to take and hold the roving eye of any young woman in search of romance. He was a slender, lithe young Adonis of medium height. His hair and eyebrows left one doubtful whether to pronounce them black or brown, but the eyes called for an immediate verdict of Irish blue. Every inch of him spoke of competency--promised mastership of any situation likely to arise. But when the last word is said it was the eyes that dominated the personality. They could run the whole gamut of emotions, or they could be impervious as a stone wall. Now they were deep and innocent as a girl's, now they rollicked with the buoyant youth in them. Comrades might see them bubbling with fun, and the next moment enemies find them opaque as a leaden sky. Not the least

wonder of them was that they looked out from under long lashes, soft enough for any maiden, at a world they appraised with the shrewdness of a veteran.

The young man drew rein above the valley, sitting his horse in the easy, negligent fashion of one that lives in the saddle. A thumb was hitched carelessly in the front pocket of his chaps, which pocket served also as a holster for the .45 that protruded.

Even in the moment that he sat there a change came over Aravaipa. As a summer shower sweeps across a lake so something had ruffled the town to sudden life. From stores and saloons men dribbled, converging toward a common centre hurriedly.

"I reckon, Bucky, the band has begun to play," the rider told himself aloud. "Mebbe we better move on down in time for the music."

But no half-expected revolver shots shattered the stillness, even though interest did not abate.

"There's ce'tainly something doing at the Silver Dollar this glad mo'ning. Chinks, greasers, and several other kinds of citizens driftin' that way, not to mention white men. I expect there will be room for you, Bucky, if you hurry before the seats are all sold out."

He cantered down the plaza, swung from the saddle, threw the rein over the pony's head to the ground, and jingled across the sidewalk into the gambling house. It was filled with a motley crowd of miners, vaqueros, tourists, cattlemen, Mexicans, Chinese, and a sample of the rest of the heterogeneous population of the Southwest. Behind this assemblage the newcomer tiptoed in vain to catch a glimpse of the cause of the excitement. Wherefore, he calmly removed an almond-eyed Oriental from a chair on which he was standing, tipped the ex-Cantonese a half dollar, and appropriated the point of vantage himself.

There was a cleared space in the corner by the roulette table, and here, his chair tipped back against the wall and a glass of whisky in front of him, sat a sufficiently strange specimen of humanity. He was a man of about fifty years, large boned and gaunt. Dressed in fringed buckskin trousers and a silver-laced Mexican sombrero, he affected the long hair, the sweeping mustache, and the ferocious aspect that are the custom of the pseudo-Westerners who do business in the East with fake medical remedies. Around his waist was a belt garnished with knives by the dozen. These were long and pointed, sharpened to a razor edge. One of them was in his hand poised for a throw at the instant Bucky mounted the chair and looked over the densely packed mass of heads in front of him.

The ranger's keen glance swept to the wall and took in the

target. A slim lad of about fifteen stood against it with his arms outstretched. Above and below each hand and on either side of the swelling throat knives quivered in the frame wall. There was a flash of steel, and the seventh knife sank into the wood so close to the crisp curls that a lock hung by a hair, almost completely severed by the blade. The boy choked back a scream, his big brown eyes dilating with terror.

The bully sipped at his highball and deliberately selected another knife. To Bucky's swift inspection it was plain he had drunk too much and that a very little slip might make an end of the boy. The fascinated horror in the lad's gaze showed that he realized his danger.

"Now, f'ler cit'zens, I will continue for your 'musement by puttin' next two knives on right and lef' sides of his cheek. Observe, pleash, that these will land less than an inch from his eyes. As the champion knife thrower in the universe I claim--"

What he claimed his audience had to guess, for at this instant another person took a part in the act. Bucky had stepped lightly across the intervening space on the shoulders of the tightly packed crowd and had dropped as lightly to the ground in front of the astonished champion of the universe.

"I reckon you've about wore out that target. What's the matter with trying a brand new one drawled the ranger, his quiet, unwavering eye fixed on the bloated, mottled face of the imitation "bad man."

The bully, half seas over, leaned forward and gripped his knife. He was sober enough to catch the jeer running through the other's words without being sufficiently master of himself to appreciate the menace that underlay them.

"Wha's that? Say that again!" he burst out, purple to the collar line. He was not used to having beardless boys with long, soft eyelashes interfering with his amusements, and a blind rage flooded his heart.

"I allowed that a change of targets would vary the entertainment, if you haven't any objections, seh," the blue-eyed stranger explained mildly.

"Who is this kid?" demanded the bully, with a sweep of his arm toward the intruder.

Nobody seemed to know, wherefore the ranger himself gave the information mildly:

"Bucky O'Connor they call me."

A faint murmur of surprise soughed through the crowd, for Bucky

O'Connor of the Arizona Rangers was by way of being a public hero just now on account of his capture of Fernandez, the stage robber. But the knife thrower had but lately arrived in the country. The youth carried with him none of the earmarks of his trade, unless it might be that quiet, steady gaze that seemed to search the soul. His voice was soft and drawling, his manner almost apologetic. In the smile that came and went was something sweet and sunny, in his bearing a gay charm that did not advertise the recklessness that bubbled from his daredevil spirit. Surely here was an easy victim upon whom to vent his spleen, thought the other in his growing passion.

"You want to be my target, do you?" he demanded, tugging ferociously at his long mustache.

"If you please, seh."

The fellow swore a vile oath. "Just as you say. Line up beside the other kid."

With three strides Bucky reached the wall, and turned.

"Let 'er go," his gentle voice murmured.

He was leaning back easily against the wall, his thumb hitched carelessly in the revolver pocket of his worn leather chaps. He looked at ease, every jaunty inch of him, but a big bronzed cattleman who had just pushed his way in noticed that the frosty blue eyes never released for an instant those of the enemy.

The bully at the table passed an uncertain hand over his face to clear his blurred vision, poised the cruel blade in his hand, and sent it flashing forward with incredible swiftness. The steel buried itself two inches deep in the soft pine beside Bucky's head. So close had it shaved him that a drop of blood gathered and dropped from his ear to the floor.

"Good shot," commented the ranger quietly, and on the instant his revolver seemed to leap from its holster to his hand. Without raising or moving his arm in the least, Bucky fired.

Again a murmur eddied through the crowd. The bullet had neatly bored the bully's ear. He raised his hand in dazed fashion and brought it away covered with blood. With staring eyes he looked at his moist red fingers, then at his latest victim, who was proving such an unexpected surprise.

The big cattleman, who by this time had pushed a way with his broad shoulders to the front, observed the two men attentively with a derisive smile on his frank face. He was seeing a bluff called, and he enjoyed it.

"You'll be able to wear earrings, Mr. Champion of the Universe,

after I have ventilated the other," suggested the ranger affably.
"Come again, seh."

But his opponent had had enough, and more than enough. It was one thing to browbeat a harmless boy, quite another to measure courage with a young gamecock like this. He had all the advantage of the first move. He was an expert and could drive his first throw into the youth's heart. But at bottom he was a coward and lacked the nerve, if not the inclination, to kill. If he took up that devil-may-care challenge he must fight it out alone. Moreover, as his furtive glance went round the ring of faces, he doubted whether a rope and the nearest telegraph pole might not be his fate if he went the limit. Sourly he accepted defeat, raging in his craven spirit at the necessity.

"Hell! I don't fight with boys," he snarled,

"So?"

Bucky moved forward with the curious lightness of a man spring-footed. His gaze held the other's shifting eyes as he plucked the knife from his opponent's hand.

"Unbuckle that belt," he ordered.

All said, the eye is a prince of weapons. It is a moral force more potent than the physical, and by it men may measure strength to a certainty. So now these two clinched and battled with it till the best man won. The showman's look gave way before the stark courage of the other. His was no match for the inscrutable, unwavering eye that commanded him. His fingers began to twitch, edged slowly toward his waist. For an instant they fumbled at the buckle of the belt, which presently fell with a rattle to the floor.

"Now, roll yore trail to the wall. Face this way! Arms out! That's good! You rest there comfortable while I take these pins down and let the kid out."

He removed the knives that hemmed in the boy and supported the half-fainting figure to a chair beside the roulette table. But always he remained in such a position as to keep the big bully he was baiting in view. The boy dropped into the chair and covered his face with his hands, sobbing with deep, broken breaths. The ranger touched caressingly the crisp, fair hair that covered the head in short curls.

"Don't you worry, bub. Now, don't you. It's all over with now. That coyote won't pester you any more. Will you, Mr. False Alarm Bad Man?"

At the last words he wheeled suddenly to the showman. "You're right sorry already you got so gay, ain't you? Come! Speak yore

little piece, please."

He waited for an answer, and his gaze held fast to the bloated face that cringed before his attack.

"What's your name?"

"Jay Hardman," quavered the now thoroughly sobered bad man.

"Dead easy jay, I reckon you mean. Now, chirp, up and tell the boy how sorry you are you got fresh with your hardware."

"He's my boy. I guess I can do what I like with him," the man burst out angrily. "I wasn't hurting him any, either. That's part of our show, to--"

Bucky fondled suggestively the revolver in his hand. A metallic click came to his victim.

"Don't you shoot at me again," the man broke off to scream.

The Colt clipped the sentence and the man's other ear.

"You can put in your order now for them earrings we were mentionin', Mr. Deadeasy. You see, I had to puncture this one so folks would know they were mates."

"I'll put you in the pen for this," the fellow whined, in terror.

"Funny how you will get off the subject. We were discussin' an apology when you got to wandering in yore haid."

The mottled face showed white in patches. Beads of perspiration stood out on the forehead of Hardman. "I didn't aim to hurt him any. I'll be right glad to explain to you "

A bullet plowed a path through the long hair that fell to the showman's shoulders and snipped a lock from it.

"You don't need to explain a thing to me, seh. I'm sure resting easy in my mind. But as you were about to re-mark you're fair honin' for a chance to ask the kid's pardon. Now, ain't I a mind reader, seh?"

A trembling voice stammered huskily an apology.

"Better late than too late. Now, I've a good mind to take a vote whether I'd better unload the rest of the pills in this old reliable medicine box at you. Mebbe I ought to pump one into that coyote heart of yours."

The fellow went livid. "My God, you wouldn't kill an unarmed man, would you?"

For answer the ranger tossed the weapon on the table with a scornful laugh and strode up to the other. The would-be bad man towered six inches above him, and weighed half as much again. But O'Connor whirled him round, propelled him forward to the door, and kicked him into the street.

"I'd hate to waste a funeral on him," he said, as he sauntered back to the boy at the table.

The lad was beginning to recover, though his breath still came with a catch. His rag of a handkerchief was dabbing tears out of his eyes. O'Connor noticed how soft his hands and how delicate his features.

"This kid ain't got any more business than a rabbit going around in the show line with that big scoundrel. He's one of these gentle, rock-me-to-sleep-mother kids that ought to stay in the home nest and not go buttin' into this hard world. I'll bet a doughnut he's an orphan, though."

Bucky had been brought up in the school of experience, where every student keeps his own head or goes to the wall. All his short life he had played a lone hand, as he would have phrased it. He had campaigned in Cuba as a mere boy. He had ridden the range and held his own on the hurricane deck of a bucking broncho. From cowpunching he had graduated into the tough little body of territorial rangers at the head of which was "Hurry Up" Millikan. This had brought him a large and turbulent experience in the knack of taking care of himself under all circumstances. Naturally, a man of this type, born and bred to the code of the outdoors West, could not fail of a certain contempt for a boy that broke down and cried when the game was going against him.

But Bucky's contempt was tolerant, after all. He could not deny his sympathy to a youngster in trouble. Again he touched gently the lad's crisp curls of burnished gold.

"Brace up, bub. The worst is yet to come," he laughed awkwardly. "I reckon there's no use spillin' any more emotion over it. He ain't your dad, is he?"

The lad's big brown eyes looked up into the serene blue ones and found comfort in their strength. "No, he's my uncle--and my master."

"This is a free country, son. We don't have masters if we're good Americans, though we all have to take orders from our superior officers. You don't need to serve this fellow unless you want to. That's a cinch."

The boy's troubled eyes were filmed with reminiscent terror. "You don't know him. He is terrible when he is angry," he murmured.

"I don't think it," returned Bucky contemptuously. "He's the worst blowhard ever. Say the word and I'll run the piker out of town for you."

The boy whipped up the sleeve of the fancy Mexican jacket he wore and showed a long scar on his arm. "He did that one day when he was angry at me. He pretended to others that it was an accident, but I knew better. This morning I begged him to let me leave him. He beat me, but he was still mad; and when he took to drinking I was afraid he would work himself up to stick me again with one of his knives."

Bucky looked at the scar in the soft, rounded arm and swept the boy with a sudden puzzled glance that was not suspicion but wonder.

"How long have you been with him, kid?"

"Oh, for years. Ever since I was a little fellow. He took me after my father and mother died of yellow fever in New Orleans. His wife hates me too, but they have to have me in the show."

"Then I guess you had better quit their company. What's your name?"

"Frank Hardman. On the show bills I have all sorts of names."

"Well, Frank, how would you like to go to live on a ranch?"

"Where he wouldn't know I was?" whispered the boy eagerly.

"If you like. I know a ranch where you'd be right welcome."

"I would work. I would do anything I could. Really, I would try to pay my way, and I don't eat much," Frank cried, his eyes as appealing as a homeless puppy's.

Bucky smiled. "I expect they can stand all you eat without going to the poorhouse. It's a bargain then. I'll take you out there to-morrow."

"You're so good to me. I never had anybody be so good before." Tears stood in the big eyes and splashed over.

"Cut out the water works, kid. You want to take a brace and act like a man," advised his new friend brusquely.

"I know. I know. If you knew what I have done maybe you wouldn't ask me to go with you. I--I can't tell you anything more than that," the youngster sobbed.

"Oh, well. What's the diff? You're making a new start to-day."

Ain't that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Bucky."

"Yes, sir. Bucky, I mean."

A hand fell on the ranger's shoulder and a voice in his ear.

"Young man, I want you."

The lieutenant whirled like a streak of lightning, finger on trigger already. "I'll trouble you for yore warrant, seh," he retorted.

The man confronting him was the big cattleman who had entered the Silver Dollar in time to see O'Connor's victory over the showman. Now he stood serenely under Bucky's gun and laughed.

"Put up your .45, my friend. It's a peaceable conference I want with you."

The level eyes of the young man fastened on those of the cattleman, and, before he spoke again, were satisfied. For both of these men belonged to the old West whose word is as good as its bond, that West which will go the limit for a cause once under taken without any thought of retreat, regardless of the odds or the letter of the law. Though they had never met before, each knew at a glance the manner of man the other was.

"All right, seh. If you want me I reckon I'm here large as life," the ranger said,

"We'll adjourn to the poker room upstairs then, Mr. O'Connor"

Bucky laid a hand on the shoulder of the boy. "This kid goes with me. I'm keeping an eye on him for the present."

"My business is private, but I expect that can be arranged. We'll take the inner room and let him have the outer."

"Good enough. Break trail, seh. Come along, Frank."

Having reached the poker room upstairs, that same private room which had seen many a big game in its day between the big cattle kings and mining men of the Southwest, Bucky's host ordered refreshments and then unfolded his business.

"You don't know me, lieutenant, do you?"

"I haven't that pleasure, seh."

"I am Major Mackenzie's brother."

"Webb Mackenzie, who came from Texas last year and bought the Rocking Chair Ranch?"

"The same."

"I'm right glad to meet you, seh."

"And I can say the same."

Webb Mackenzie was so distinctively a product of the West that no other segment of the globe could have produced him. Big, raw-boned, tanned to a leathery brick-brown, he was as much of the frontier as the ten thousand cows he owned that ran the range on half as many hills and draws. He stood six feet two and tipped the beam at two hundred twelve pounds, not an ounce of which was superfluous flesh. Temperamentally, he was frank, imperious, free-hearted, what men call a prince. He wore a loose tailor-made suit of brown stuff and a broad-brimmed light-gray Stetson. For the rest, you may see a hundred like him at the yearly stock convention held in Denver, but you will never meet a man even among them with a sounder heart or better disposition.

"I've got a story to tell you, Lieutenant O'Connor," he began.

"I've been meaning to see you and tell it ever since you made good in that Fernandez matter. It wasn't your gameness. Anybody can be game. But it looked to me like you were using the brains in the top of your head, and that happens so seldom among law officers I wanted to have a talk with you. Since yesterday I've been more anxious. For why? I got a letter from my brother telling me Sheriff Collins showed him a locket he found at the place of the T. P. Limited hold-up. That locket has in it a photograph of my wife and little girl. For fifteen years I haven't seen that picture. When I saw it last 'twas round my little baby's neck. What's more, I haven't seen her in that time, either."

Mackenzie stopped, swallowed hard, and took a drink of water.

"You haven't seen your little girl in fifteen years," exclaimed Bucky.

"Haven't seen or heard of her. So far as I know she may not be alive now. This locket is the first hint I have had since she was taken away, the very first news of her that has reached me, and I don't know what to make of that. One of the robbers must have been wearing it, the way I figure it out. Where did he get it? That's what I want to know."

"Suppose you tell me the story, seh," suggested the ranger gently.

The cattleman offered O'Connor a cigar and lit one himself. For a

minute he puffed slowly at his Havana, leaning far back in his chair with eyes reminiscent and half shut. Then he shook himself back into the present and began his tale.

"I don't reckon you ever heard tell of Dave Henderson. It was back in Texas I knew him, and he's been missing sixteen years come the eleventh of next August. For fifteen years I haven't mentioned his name, because Dave did me the dirtiest wrong that one man ever did another. Back in the old days he and I used to trail together. We was awful thick, and mostly hunted in couples. We began riding the same season back on the old Kittredge Ranch, and we went in together for all the kinds of spreeing that young fellows who are footloose are likely to do. Fact is, we suited each other from the ground up. We frolicked round a-plenty, like young colts will, and there was nothing on this green earth Dave could have asked from me that I wouldn't have done for him. Nothing except one, I reckon, and Dave never asked that of me."

Mackenzie puffed at his cigar a silent moment before resuming.

"It happened we both fell in love with the same girl, little Frances Clark, of the Double T Ranch. Dave was a better looker than me and a more taking fellow, but somehow Frances favored me from the start. Dave stayed till the finish, and when he seen he had lost he stood up with me at the wedding. We had agreed, you see, that whoever won it wasn't to break up our friendship.

"Well, Frankie and I were married, and in course of time we had two children. My boy, Tom, is the older. The other was a little girl, named after her mother." The cattleman waited a moment to steady his voice, and spoke through teeth set deep in his Havana. "I haven't seen her, as I said, since she was two years and ten months old--not since the night Dave disappeared."

Bucky looked up quickly with a question on his lips, but he did not need to word it.

Mackenzie nodded. "Yes, Dave took her with him when he lit out across the line for Mexico"

But I'll have to go back to something that happened earlier. About three months before this time Dave and me were riding through a cut in the Sierra Diablo Mountains, when we came on a Mexican who had been wounded by the Apaches. I reckon we had come along just in time to scare them off before they finished him. We did our best for him, but he died in about two hours. Before dying, he made us a present of a map we found in his breast pocket. It showed the location of a very rich mine he had found, and as he had no near kin he turned it over to us to do with as we pleased.

"Just then the round-up came on, and we were too busy to pay much attention to the mine. Each of us would have trusted the other with his life, or so I thought. But we cut the paper in half,

each of us keeping one part, in order that nobody else could steal the secret from the one that held the paper. The last time I had been in El Paso I had bought my little girl a gold chain with two lockets pendent. These lockets opened by a secret spring, and in one of them I put my half of the map. It seemed as safe a place as I could devise, for the chain never left the child's neck, and nobody except her mother, Dave, and I knew that it was placed there. Dave hid his half under a rock that was known to both of us. The strange thing about the story is that my false friend, in the hurry of his flight, forgot to take his section of the map with him. I found it under the rock next day, so that his vile treachery availed him nothing from a mercenary point of view."

"Didn't take his half of the map with him. That's right funny," Bucky mused aloud.

"We never could understand why he didn't."

"Mebbe if you understood that a heap of things might be clear that are dark now."

"Mebbe. Knowing Dave Henderson as I did, or, rather, as I thought I did, such treachery as his was almost unbelievable. He was the sweetest, sunniest soul I ever knew, and no two brothers could have been as fond of each other as we seemed to be. But there was no chance of mistake. He had gone, and taken our child with him, likely in accordance with a plan of revenge long cherished by him. We never heard of him or the child again. They disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed them up. Our cook, too, left with him that evil night."

"Your cook?" It was the second comment Bucky had ventured, and it came incisively. "What manner of man was he?"

"A huge, lumbering braggart. I could never understand why Dave took the man with him."

"If he did."

"But I tell you he did. They disappeared the same night, and the trail showed they went the same road. We followed them for about an hour next day, but a heavy rain came up and blotted out the tracks."

"What was the cook's name?"

"Jeff Anderson."

"Have you a picture of him, or one of your friend?"

"Back at the ranch I had pictures of Dave, but I burned them after he left. Yes, I reckon we have one of Anderson, standing in

front of the chuck wagon."

"Send it to me, please."

"All right."

The ranger asked a few questions that made clearer the situation on the day of the kidnapping, and some more concerning Anderson, then fell again into the role of a listener while Mackenzie concluded his story.

"All these years I have kept my eyes open, confident that at last I would discover something that would help me to discover the whereabouts of my child, or, at least, give me a chance to punish the scoundrel who betrayed my confidence. Yesterday my brother's letter gave the first clue we have had. I want that lead worked. Ferret this thing out to the bottom, lieutenant. Get me something definite to go on. That's what I want you to do. Run the thing to earth, get at the facts, and find my child for me. I'll give you carte blanche up to a hundred thousand dollars. All I ask of you is to make good. Find the little girl, or else bring me face to face with that villain Henderson. Can you do it?"

O'Connor was strangely interested in this story of treachery and mystery. He rose with shining eyes and held out his hand. "I don't know, seh. but I'll try damned hard to do three things: find out what has become of the little girl, of Dave Henderson, and of the scoundrel who stole your baby because he thought the map was in the pocket."

"You mean that you don't think Dave--"

"That is exactly what I mean. Your cook, Anderson, kidnapped the child, looks like to me. I saw that locket Collins found. My guess was that the marks on the end of the chain were deep teeth marks. The man that stole your baby tried first to cut the chain with his teeth so as to steal the chain. You see, he could not find the clasp in the dark. Then the child wakened and began to cry. He clapped a hand over its mouth and carried the little girl out of the room. Then he heard somebody moving about, lost his nerve, and jumped on the horse that was waiting, saddled, at the door. He took the child along simply because he had to in order to get the chain and the secret he thought it held."

"Perhaps; but that does not prove it was not Dave."

"It's contributory evidence, seh. Your friend could have slipped the chain from her neck any day, or he could have opened the locket and taken the map. No need for him to steal in at night. Do you happen to remember whether your little girl had any particular aversion to the cook?"

The cattleman's forehead frowned in thought. "I do remember, now,

that she was afraid of him. She always ran screaming to her mother when he tried to be friendly with her. He was a sour sort of fellow."

"That helps out the case a heap, for it shows that he wanted to make friends with her and she refused. He was thus forced to take the chain when she was asleep instead of playing with her till he had discovered the spring and could simply take the map."

"But he didn't know anything about the map. He was not in our confidence."

"You and your friend talked it over evenings when he was at the ranch, and other places, too, I expect."

"Yes, our talk kind of gravitated that way whenever we got together."

"Well, this fellow overheard you. That's probable, at least."

"But you're ignoring the important fact. Dave disappeared too that night, with my little girl."

Bucky cut in sharply with a question. "Did he? How do you know he disappeared WITH her? Why not AFTER? That's the theory my mind is groping on just now."

"That's a blind trail to me. Why AFTER? And what difference does it make?"

"All the difference in the world. If he left after the cook, you have been doing him an injustice for fifteen years, seh."

Mackenzie leaned forward, excitement burning in his eyes. "Prove that, young man, and I'll thank you to the last day of my life. It's for my wife's sake more than my own I want my little girl back. She jes' pines for her every day of her life. But for my friend--if you can give me back the clean memory of Dave you'll have done a big thing for me, Mr. O'Connor."

"It's only a working theory, but this is what I'm getting at. You and Henderson had arranged to take an early start on a two days' deer hunt next mo'ning. That's what you told me, isn't it?"

"We were to start about four. Yes, sir."

"Well, let's suppose a case. Along comes Dave before daybreak, when the first hooters were beginning to call. Just as he reaches your ranch he notices a horse slipping away in the darkness. Perhaps he hears the little girl cry out. Anyhow, instead of turning in at the gate, he decides to follow. Probably he isn't sure there's anything wrong, but when he finds out how the horse he's after is burning the wind his suspicions grow stronger. He

settles down to a long chase. In the darkness, we'll say, he loses his man, but when it gets lighter he picks up the trail again. The tracks lead south, across the line into Mexico. Still he keeps plodding on. The man in front sees him behind and gets scared because he can't shake him off. Very likely he thinks it is you on his track. Anyhow, while the child is asleep he waits in ambush, and when Henderson rides up he shoots him down. Then he pushes on deeper into Chihuahua, and proceeds to lose himself there by changing his name."

"You think he murdered Dave?" The cattleman got up and began to pace up and down the floor.

"I think it possible."

Webb Mackenzie's face was pallid, but there was a new light of hope in it. "I believe you're right. God knows I hope so. That may sound a horrible thing to say of my best friend, but if it has got to be one or the other--if it is certain that my old bunkie came to his death foully in Chihuahua while trying to save my baby, or is alive to-day, a skulking coward and villain--with all my heart I hope he is dead." He spoke with a passionate intensity which showed how much he had cared for his early friend, and how much the latter's apparent treachery had cut him. "I hope you'll never have a friend go back on you, Mr. O'Connor, the one friend you would have banked on to a finish. Why, Dave Henderson saved my life from a bunch of Apaches once when it was dollars to doughnuts he would lose his own if he tried it. We were prospecting in the Galiuros together, and one mo'ning when he went down to the creek to water the hawsses he sighted three of the red devils edging up toward the cabin. There might have been fifty of them there for all he knew, and he had a clear run to the plains if he wanted to back one of the ponies and take it. Most any man would have saved his own skin, but not Dave. He hoofed it back to the cabin, under fire every foot of the way, and together we made it so hot for them that they finally gave up getting us. We were in the Texas Rangers together, and pulled each other through a lot of close places. And then at the end-- Why, it hurt me more than it did losing my own little girl."

Bucky nodded. Since he was a man and not a father, he could understand how the hurt would rankle year after year at the defalcation of his comrade.

"That's another kink we have got to unravel in this tangle. First off, there's your little girl, to find if she is still alive. Second, we must locate Dave Henderson or his grave. Third, there's something due the scoundrel who is responsible for this. Fourthly, brethren, there's that map section to find. And lastly, we've got to find just how this story you've told me got mixed with the story of the holdup of the Limited. For it ce'tainly looks as if the two hang together. I take it that the thing to do is to run down the gang that held up the Limited. Once we do

that, we ought to find the key to the mystery of your little girl's disappearance. Or, at least, there is a chance we shall. And it's chances we've got to gamble on in this thing."

"Good enough. I like the way you go at this. Already I feel a heap better than I did."

"If the cards fall our way you're going to get this thing settled once for all. I can't promise my news will be good news when I get it, but anything will be better than the uncertainty you've been in, I take it," said Bucky, rising from his chair.

"You're right there. But, wait a moment. Let's drink to your success."

"I'm not much of a sport," Bucky smiled. "Fact is, I never drink, seh."

"Of course. I remember, now. You're the good bad man of the West," Mackenzie answered amiably. "Well, I drink to you. Here's good hunting, lieutenant."

"Thank you."

"I suppose you'll get right at this thing?"

"I've got to take that kid in the next room out to my ranch first. I won't stand for that knife thrower making a slave of him."

"What's the matter with me taking the boy out to the Rocking Chair with me? My wife and I will see he's looked after till you return."

"That would be the best plan, if it won't trouble you too much. We'd better keep his whereabouts quiet till this fellow Hardman is out of the country."

"Yes, though I hardly think he'd be fool enough to show up at the Rocking Chair. If my vaqueros met up with him prowling around they might show him as warm a welcome as you did half an hour ago."

"A chapping would sure do him a heap of good," grinned Bucky, and so dismissed the Champion of the World from his mind.

CHAPTER 5. BUCKY ENTERTAINS

Bucky began at once to tap the underground wires his official position made accessible to him. These ran over Southern Arizona, Sonora, and Chihuahua. All the places to which criminals or

frontiersmen with money were wont to resort were reported upon. For the ranger's experience had taught him that since the men he wanted had money in their pockets to burn gregarious impulse would drive them from the far silent places of the desert to the roulette and faro tables where the wolf and the lamb disport themselves together.

The photograph from Webb Mackenzie of the cook Anderson reached him at Tucson the third day after his interview with that gentleman, at the same time that Collins dropped in on him to inquire what progress he was making.

O'Connor told him of the Aravaipa episode, and tossed across the table to him the photograph he had just received.

"If we could discover the gent that sat for this photo it might help us. You don't by any chance know him, do you, Val?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not in my rogues' gallery, Bucky."

The ranger again examined the faded picture. A resemblance in it to somebody he had met recently haunted vaguely his memory. As he looked the indefinite suggestion grew sharp and clear. It was a photograph of the showman who had called himself Hardman. All the trimmings were lacking, to be sure--the fierce mustache, the long hair, the buckskin trappings, none of them were here. But beyond a doubt it was the same shifty-eyed villain. Nor did it shake Bucky's confidence that Mackenzie had seen him and failed to recognize the man as his old cook. The fellow was thoroughly disguised, but the camera had happened to catch that curious furtive glance of his. But for that O'Connor would never have known the two to be the same.

Bucky was at the telephone half an hour. In the middle of the next afternoon his reward came in the form of a Western Union billet. It read:

"Eastern man says you don't want what is salable here."

The lieutenant cut out every other word and garnered the wheat of the message:

"Man you want is here."

The telegram was marked from Epitaph, and for that town the ranger and the sheriff entrained immediately.

Bucky's eye searched in vain the platform of the Epitaph depot for Malloy, of the Rangers, whose wire had brought him here. The cause of the latter's absence was soon made clear to him in a note he found waiting for him at the hotel:

"The old man has just sent me out on hurry-up orders. Don't know

when I'll get back. Suggest you take in the show at the opera house to-night to pass the time."

It was the last sentence that caught Bucky's attention. Jim Malloy had not written it except for a reason. Wherefore the lieutenant purchased two tickets for the performance far back in the house. From the local newspaper he gathered that the showman was henceforth to be a resident of Epitaph. Mr. Jay Hardman, or Signor Raffaello Cavellado, as he was known the world over by countless thousands whom he had entertained, had purchased a corral and livery stable at the corner of Main and Boothill Streets and solicited the patronage of the citizens of Hualpai County. That was the purport of the announcement which Bucky ringed with a pencil and handed to his friend.

That evening Signor Raffaello Cavellado made a great hit with his audience. He swaggered through his act magnificently, and held his spectators breathless. Bucky took care to see that a post and the sheriff's big body obscured him from view during the performance.

After it was over O'Connor and the sheriff returned to the hotel, where also Hardman was for the present staying, and sent word up to his room that one of the audience who had admired very much the artistic performance would like the pleasure of drinking a glass of wine with Signor Cavellado if the latter would favor him with his company in room seven. The Signor was graciously pleased to accept, and followed his message of acceptance in person a few minutes later.

Bucky remained quietly in the corner of the room back of the door until the showman had entered, and while the latter was meeting Collins he silently locked the door and pocketed the key.

The sheriff acknowledged Hardman's condescension brusquely and without shaking hands. "Glad to meet you, seh. But you're mistaken in one thing. I'm not your host. This gentleman behind you is."

The man turned and saw Bucky, who was standing with his back against the door, a bland smile on his face.

"Yes, seh. I'm your host to-night. Sheriff Collins, hyer, is another guest. I'm glad to have the pleasure of entertaining you, Signor Raffaello Cavellado," Bucky assured him, in his slow, gentle drawl, without reassuring him at all.

For the fellow was plainly disconcerted at recognition of his host. He turned with a show of firmness to Collins. "If you're a sheriff, I demand to have that door opened at once," he blustered.

Val put his hands in his pockets and tipped back his chair. "I

ain't sheriff of Hualpai County. My jurisdiction don't extend here," he said calmly.

"I'm an unarmed man," pleaded Cavellado.

"Come to think of it, so am I."

"I reckon I'm holding all the aces, Signor Cavellado," explained the ranger affably. "Or do you prefer in private life to be addressed as Hardman--or, say, Anderson?"

The showman moistened his lips and offered his tormentor a blanched face.

"Anderson--a good plain name. I wonder, now, why you changed it?" Bucky's innocent eyes questioned him blandly as he drew from his pocket a little box and tossed it on the table. "Open that box for me, Mr. Anderson. Who knows? It might explain a heap of things to us."

With trembling fingers the big coward fumbled at the string. With all his fluent will he longed to resist, but the compelling eyes that met his so steadily were not to be resisted. Slowly he unwrapped the paper and took the lid from the little box, inside of which was coiled up a thin gold chain with locket pendant.

"Be seated," ordered Bucky sternly, and after the man had found a chair the ranger sat down opposite him.

From its holster he drew a revolver and from a pocket his watch. He laid them on the table side by side and looked across at the white-lipped trembler whom he faced.

"We had better understand each other, Mr. Anderson. I've come here to get from you the story of that chain, so far as you know it. If you don't care to tell it I shall have to mess this floor up with your remains. Get one proposition into your cocoanut right now. You don't get out of this room alive with your secret. It's up to you to choose."

Quite without dramatics, as placidly as if he were discussing railroad rebates, the ranger delivered his ultimatum. It seemed plain that he considered the issue no responsibility of his.

Anderson stared at him in silent horror, moistening his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. Once his gaze shifted to the sheriff but found small comfort there. Collins had picked up a newspaper and was absorbed in it.

"Are you going to let him kill me?" the man asked him hoarsely.

He looked up from his newspaper in mild protest at such unreason. "Me? I ain't sittin' in this game. Seems like I mentioned that

already."

"Better not waste your time, signor, on side issues," advised the man behind the gun. "For I plumb forgot to tell you I'm allowing only three minutes to begin your story, half of which three has already slipped away to yesterday's seven thousand years. Without wantin' to hurry you, I suggest the wisdom of a prompt decision."

"Would he do it?" gasped the victim, with a last appeal to Collins.

"Would he what? Oh, shoot you up. Cayn't tell till I see. If he says he will he's liable to. He always was that haidstrong."

"But--why--why--"

"Yes, it's sure a heap against the law, but then Bucky ain't a lawyer. I don't reckon he cares sour grapes for the law--as law. It's a right interesting guess as to whether he will or won't."

"There's a heap of cases the law don't reach prompt. This is one of them," contributed the ranger cheerfully. He pocketed his watch and picked up the .45. "Any last message or anything of that sort, signor? I don't want to be unpleasant about this, you understand."

The whilom bad man's teeth chattered. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Now, that's right sensible. I hate to come into another man's house and clutter it up. Reel off your yarn."

"I don't know--what you want."

"I want the whole story of your kidnapping of the Mackenzie child, how came you to do it, what happened to Dave Henderson, and full directions where I may locate Frances Mackenzie. Begin at the beginning, and I'll fire questions at you when you don't make any point clear to me. Turn loose your yarn at me hot off the bat."

The man told his story sullenly. While he was on the round-up as cook for the riders he had heard Mackenzie and Henderson discussing together the story of their adventure with the dying Spaniard and their hopes of riches from the mine he had left them. From that night he had set himself to discover the secret of its location, had listened at windows and at keyholes, and had once intercepted a letter from one to the other. By chance he had discovered that the baby was carrying the secret in her locket, and he had set himself to get it from her.

But his chance did not come. He could not make friends with her, and at last, in despair of finding a better opportunity, he had

slipped into her room one night in the small hours to steal the chain. But it was wound round her neck in such a way that he could not slip it over her head. She had awakened while he was fumbling with the clasp and had begun to cry. Hearing her mother moving about in the next room, he had hastily carried the child with him, mounted the horse waiting in the yard, and ridden away.

In the road he became aware, some time later, that he was being pursued. This gave him a dreadful fright, for, as Bucky had surmised, he thought his pursuer was Mackenzie. All night he rode southward wildly, but still his follower kept on his trail till near morning, when he eluded him. He crossed the border, but late that afternoon got another fright. For it was plain he was still being followed. In the endless stretch of rolling hills he twice caught sight of a rider picking his way toward him. The heart of the guilty man was like water. He could not face the outraged father, nor was it possible to escape so dogged a foe by flight. An alternative suggested itself, and he accepted it with sinking courage. The child was asleep in his arms now, and he hastily dismounted, picketed his horse, and stole back a quarter of a mile, so that the neighing of his bronco might not betray his presence. Then he lay down in a dense mesquit thicket and waited for his foe. It seemed an eternity till the man appeared at the top of a rise fifty yards away. Hastily Anderson fired, and again. The man toppled from his horse, dead before he struck the ground. But when the cook reached him he was horrified to see that the man he had killed was a member of the Rurales, or Mexican border police. In his guilty terror he had shot the wrong man.

He fled at once, pursued by a thousand fears. Late the next night he reached a Chihuahua village, after having been lost for many hours. The child he still carried with him, simply because he had not the heart to leave it to die in the desert alone. A few weeks later he married an American woman he met in Sonora. They adopted the child, but it died within the year of fever.

Meanwhile, he was horrified to learn that Dave Henderson, following hard on his trail, had been found bending over the spot where the dead soldier lay, had been arrested by a body of Rurales, tried hurriedly, and convicted to life imprisonment. The evidence had been purely circumstantial. The bullet found in the dead body of the trooper was one that might have come from his rifle, the barrel of which was empty and had been recently fired. For the rest, he was a hated Americano, and, as a matter of course, guilty. His judges took pains to see that no message from him reached his friends in the States before he was buried alive in the prison. In that horrible hole an innocent man had been confined for fifteen years, unless he had died during that time.

That, in substance, was the story told by the showman, and Bucky's incisive questions were unable to shake any portion of it. As to the missing locket, the man explained that it had been

broken off by accident and lost. When he discovered that only half the secret was contained on the map section he had returned the paper to the locket and let the child continue to carry it. Some years after the death of the child, Frances, his wife had lost the locket with the map.

"And this chain and locket--when did you lose them?" demanded Bucky sharply.

"It must have been about two months ago, down at Nogales, that I sold it to a fellow. I was playing faro and losing. He gave me five dollars for it."

And to that he stuck stoutly, nor could he be shaken from it. Both O'Connor and the sheriff believed he was lying, for they were convinced that he was the bandit with the red wig who had covered the engineer while his companions robbed the train. But of this they had no proof. Nor did Bucky even mention his suspicion to Hardman, for it was his intention to turn him loose and have him watched. Thus, perhaps, he would be caught corresponding or fraternizing with some of the other outlaws. Collins left the room before the showman, and when the latter came from the hotel he followed him into the night.

Meanwhile, Bucky went out and tapped another of his underground wires. This ran directly to the Mexican consul at Tucson, to whom Bucky had once done a favor of some importance, and from him to Sonora and Chihuahua. It led to musty old official files, to records already yellowed with age, to court reports and prison registers. In the end it flashed back to Bucky great news. Dave Henderson, arrested for the murder of the Rurales policeman, was still serving time in a Mexican prison for another man's crime. There in Chihuahua for fifteen years he had been lost to the world in that underground hole, blotted out from life so effectually that few now remembered there had been such a person. It was horrible, unthinkable, but none the less true.

CHAPTER 6. BUCKY MAKES A DISCOVERY

For a week Bucky had been in the little border town of Noches, called there by threats of a race war between the whites and the Mexicans. Having put the quietus on this, he was returning to Epitaph by way of the Huachuca Mountains. There are still places in Arizona where rapid transit can be achieved more expeditiously on the back of a bronco than by means of the railroad, even when the latter is available. So now Bucky was taking a short cut across country instead of making the two train changes, with the consequent inevitable delays that would have been necessary to travel by rail.

He traveled at night and in the early morning, to avoid the heat

of the midday sun, and it was in the evening of the second and last day that the skirts of happy chance led him to an adventure that was to affect his whole future life. He knew a waterhole on the Del Oro, where cows were wont to frequent even in the summer drought, and toward this he was making in the fag-end of the sultry day. While still some hundred yards distant he observed a spiral of smoke rising from a camp-fire at the spring, and he at once made a more circumspect approach. For it might be any one of a score of border ruffians who owed him a grudge and would be glad to pay it in the silent desert that tells no tales and betrays no secrets to the inquisitive.

He flung the bridle-rein over his pony's neck and crept forward on foot, warily and noiselessly. While still some little way from the water-hole he was arrested by a sound that startled him. He could make out a raucous voice in anger and a pianissimo accompaniment of womanish sobs.

"You're mine to do with as I like. I'm your uncle. I've raised you from a kid, and, by the great mogul! you can't sneak off with the first good-for nothing scoundrel that makes eyes at you. Thought you had slipped away from me, you white-faced, sniveling little idiot, but I'll show you who is master."

The lash of a whip rose and fell twice on quivering flesh before Bucky leaped into the fireglow and wrested the riding-whip from the hands of the angry man who was plying it.

"Dare to touch a woman, would you?" cried the ranger, swinging the whip vigorously across the broad shoulders of the man. "Take that--and that--and that, you brute!"

But when Bucky had finished with the fellow and flung him a limp, writhing huddle of welts to the ground, three surprises awaited him. The first was that it was not a woman he had rescued at all, but a boy, and, as the flickering firelight played on his face, the ranger came to an unexpected recognition. The slim lad facing him was no other than Frank Hardman, whom he had left a few days before at the Rocking Chair under the care of motherly Mrs. Mackenzie. The young man's eyes went back with instant suspicion to the fellow he had just punished, and his suspicions were verified when the leaping light revealed the face of the showman Anderson.

Bucky laughed. "I ce'tainly seem to be interfering in your affairs a good deal, Mr. Anderson. You may take my word for it that you was the last person in the world I expected to meet here, unless it might be this boy. I left him safe at a ranch fifty miles from here, and I left you a staid business man of Epitaph. But it seems neither of you stayed hitched. Why for this yearning to travel?"

"He found me where I was staying. I was out riding alone on an

errand for Mrs. Mackenzie when he met me and made me go with him. He has arranged to have me meet his wife in Mexico. The show wouldn't draw well without me. You know I do legerdemain," Frank explained, in his low, sweet voice.

"So you had plans of your own, Mr. Anderson. Now, that was right ambitious of you. But I reckon I'll have to interfere with them again. Go through him, kid, and relieve him of any guns he happens to be garnished with. Might as well help yourself to his knives, too. He's so fond of letting them fly around promiscuous he might hurt himself. Good.

Now we can sit down and have a friendly talk. Where did you say you was intending to spend the next few weeks before I interrupted so unthinking and disarranged your plans? I'm talking to you, Mr. Anderson."

"I was heading for Sonora," the man whined.

What Bucky thought was: "Right strange direction to be taking for Sonora. I'll bet my pile you were going up into the hills to meet some of Wolf Leroy's gang. But why you were taking the kid along beats me, unless it was just cussedness." What he said was:

"Oh, you'll like Epitaph a heap better. I allow you ought to stay at that old town. It's a real interesting place. Finished in the adobe style and that sort of thing. The jail's real comfy, too."

"Would you like something to eat, sir?" presently asked Frank timidly.

"Would I? Why, I'm hungry enough to eat a leather mail-sack. Trot on your grub, young man, and watch my smoke."

Bucky did ample justice to the sandwiches and lemonade the lad set in front of him, but he ate with a wary eye on a possible insurrection on the part of his prisoner.

"I'm a new man," he announced briskly, when he had finished.

"That veal loaf sandwich went sure to the right spot. If you had been a young lady instead of a boy you couldn't fix things up more appetizing."

The lad's face flushed with embarrassment, apparently at the ranger's compliment, and the latter, noticed how delicate the small face was. It made an instinctive, wistful appeal for protection, and Bucky felt an odd little stirring at his tender Irish heart.

"Might think I was the kid's father to see what an interest I take in him," the young man told himself reprovingly. "It's all tommyrot, too. A boy had ought to have more grit. I expect he needed that licking all right I saved him from."

When Bucky had eaten, the camp things were repacked for travel. Epitaph was only twenty-three miles away, and the ranger preferred to ride in the cool of the night rather than sit up till daybreak with his prisoner. Besides, he could then catch the morning train from that town and save almost a day.

So hour after hour they plodded on, the prisoner in front, O'Connor in the center, and Frank Hardman bringing up the rear. It was an Arizona night of countless stars, with that peculiar soft, velvety atmosphere that belongs to no other land or time. In the distance the jagged, violet line of mountains rose in silhouette against a sky not many shades lighter, while nearer the cool moonlight flooded a land grown magical under its divine touch.

The ranger rode with a limp ease that made for rest, his body shifting now and again in the saddle, so as to change the weight and avoid stiffness.

It must have been well past midnight that he caught the long breath of a sigh behind him. The trail had broadened at that point, for they were now down in the rolling plain, so that two could ride abreast in the road. Bucky fell back and put a sympathetic hand on the shoulder of the boy.

"Plumb fagged out, kid?" he asked.

"I am tired. Is it far?"

"About four miles. Stick it out, and we'll be there in no time."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me sir. Call me Bucky."

"Yes, sir."

Bucky laughed. "You're ce'tainly the queerest kid I've run up against. I guess you didn't scramble up in this rough-and-tumble West like I did. You're too soft for this country." He let his firm brown fingers travel over the lad's curly hair and down the smooth cheek. "There it is again. Shrinking away as if I was going to hurt you. I'll bet a biscuit you never licked the stuffing out of another fellow in your life."

"No, sir," murmured the youth, and Bucky almost thought he detected a little, chuckling laugh.

"Well, you ought to be ashamed of it. When come back from old Mexico I'm going to teach you how to put up your dukes. You're going to ride the range with me, son, and learn to stick to your saddle when the bronc and you disagrees. Oh, I'll bet all you

need is training. I'll make a man out of you yet," the ranger assured his charge cheerfully. "Will you?" came the innocent reply, but Bucky for a moment had the sense of being laughed at.

"Yes, I 'will you,' sissy," he retorted, without the least exasperation. "Don't think you know it all. Right now you're riding like a wooden man. You want to take it easy in the saddle. There's about a dozen different positions you can take to rest yourself." And Bucky put him through a course of sprouts. "Don't sit there laughing at folks that knows a heap more than you ever will get in your noodle, and perhaps you won't be so done up at the end of a little jaunt like this," he concluded. And to his conclusion he presently added a postscript: "Why, I know kids your age can ride day and night for a week on the round-up without being all in. How old are you, son?"

"Eighteen."

"That's a lie," retorted the ranger, with immediate frankness. "You're not a day over fifteen, I'll bet."

"I meant to say fifteen," meekly corrected the youth.

"That's another of them. You meant to say eighteen, but you found I wouldn't swallow it. Now, Master Frank, you want to learn one thing prompt if you and I are to travel together. I can't stand a liar. You tell the truth, or I'll give you the best licking you ever had in your life."

"You're as bad a bully as he is," the boy burst out, flushing angrily.

"Oh, no, I'm not," came the ranger's prompt unmoved answer. "But just because you're such a weak little kid that I could break you in two isn't any reason why I should put up with any foolishness from you. I mean to see that you act proper, the way an honest kid ought to do. Savvy?"

"I'd like to know who made you my master?" demanded the boy hotly.

"You've ce'tainly been good and spoiled, but you needn't ride your high hawss with me. Here's the long and the short of it. To tell lies ain't square. If I ask you anything you don't want to answer tell me to go to hell, but don't lie to me. If you do I'll punish you the same as if you were my brother, so long as you trail with me. If you don't like it, cut loose and hit the pike for yourself."

"I've a good mind to go."

Bucky waved a hand easily into space. "That's all right, too, son. There's a heap of directions you can hit from here. Take any

one you like. But if I was as beat as you are, I think I'd keep on the Epitaph road." He laughed his warm, friendly laugh, before the geniality of which discord seemed to melt, and again his arm went round the other's weary shoulders with a caressing gesture that was infinitely protecting.

The boy laughed tremulously. "You're awfully good to me. I know I'm a cry-baby, sissy boy, but if you'll be patient with me I'll try to be gamer."

It certainly was strange the way Bucky's pulse quickened and his blood tingled when he touched the little fellow and heard that velvet voice's soft murmur. Yes, it surely was strange, but perhaps the young Irishman's explanation was not the correct one, after all. The cause he offered to himself for this odd joy and tender excitement was perfectly simple.

"I'm surely plumb locoed, or else gone soft in the haid," he told himself grimly.

But the reason for those queer little electric shocks that pulsed through him was probably a more elemental and primeval one than even madness.

Arrived at Epitaph, Bucky turned loose his prisoner with a caution and made his preparations to leave immediately for Chihuahua. Collins had returned to Tucson, but was in touch with the situation and ready to set out for any point where he was needed.

Bucky, having packed, was confronted with a difficulty. He looked at it, and voiced his perplexity.

"Now, what am I going to do with you, Curly Haid? I expect I had better ship you back to the Rocking Chair."

"I don't want to go back there. He'll come out again and find me after you leave."

"Where do you want to go, then? If you were a girl I could put you in the convent school here," he reflected aloud.

Again that swift, deep blush irradiated the youth's cheeks. "Why can't I go with you?" he asked shyly.

The ranger laughed. "Mebbe you think I'm going on a picnic. Why, I'm starting out to knock the chip off Old Man Trouble's shoulder. Like as not some greaser will collect Mr. Bucky's scalp down in manyana land. No, sir, this doesn't threaten to be a Y. P. S. C. E. excursion."

"If it is so dangerous as that, you will need help. I'm awful good at making up, and I can speak Spanish like a native."

"Sho! You don't want to go running your neck into a noose. It's a jail-break I'm planning, son. There may be guns a-popping before we get back to God's country--if we ever do. Add to that, trouble and then some, for there's a revolution scheduled for old Chihuahua just now, as your uncle happens to know from reliable information."

"Two can always work better than one. Try me, Bucky," pleaded the boy, the last word slipping out with a trailing upward inflection that was irresistible.

"Sure you won't faint if we get in a tight pinch, Curly?" scoffed O'Connor, even though in his mind he was debating a surrender. For he was extraordinarily taken with the lad, and his judgment justified what the boy had said.

"I shall not be afraid if you are with me."

"But I may not be with you. That's the trouble. Supposing I should be caught, what would you do?"

"Follow any orders you had given me before that time. If you had not given any, I would use my best judgment."

"I'll give them now," smiled Bucky. "If I'm lagged, make straight for Arizona and tell Webb Mackenzie or Val Collins."

"Then you will take me?" cried the boy eagerly.

"Only on condition that you obey orders explicitly. I'm running this cutting-out expedition."

"I wouldn't think of disobeying."

"And I don't want you to tell me any lies."

"No."

Bucky's big brown fist caught the little one and squeezed it. "Then it's a deal, kid. I only hope I'm doing right to take you."

"Of course you are. Haven't you promised to make a man of me?" And again Bucky caught that note of stifled laughter in the voice, though the big brown eyes met his quite seriously.

They took the train that night for El Paso, Bucky in the lower berth and his friend in the upper of section six of one of the Limited's Pullman cars. The ranger was awake and up with the day. For a couple of hours he sat in the smoking section and discussed politics with a Chicago drummer. He knew that Frank was very tired, and he let him sleep till the diner was taken on at Lordsburg. Then he excused himself to the traveling man.

"I reckon I better go and wake up my pardner. I see the chuck-wagon is toddling along behind us."

Bucky drew aside the curtains and shook the boy gently by the shoulder. Frank's eyes opened and looked at the ranger with that lack of comprehension peculiar to one roused suddenly from deep sleep.

"Time to get up, Curly. The nigger just gave the first call for the chuck-wagon."

An understanding of the situation flamed over the boy's face. He snatched the curtains from the Arizonian and gathered them tightly together. "I'll thank you not to be so familiar," he said shortly from behind the closed curtains.

"I beg your pahdon, your royal highness. I should have had myself announced and craved an audience, I reckon," was Bucky's ironic retort; and swiftly on the heels of it he added. "You make me tired, kid."

O'Connor was destined to be "made tired" a good many times in the course of the next few days. In all the little personal intimacies Frank possessed a delicate fastidiousness outside the experience of the ranger. He was a scrupulously clean man himself, and rather nice as to his personal habits, but it did not throw him into a flame of embarrassment to brush his teeth before his fellow passengers. Nor did it send him into a fit if a friend happened to drop into his room while he was finishing his dressing. Bucky agreed with himself that this excess of shyness was foolishness, and that to indulge the boy was merely to lay up future trouble for him. A dozen times he was on the point of speaking his mind on the subject, but some unusual quality of innocence in the lad tied his tongue.

"Blame it all, I'm getting to be a regular old granny. What Master Frank needs is a first-class dressing-down, and here the little cuss has got me bluffed to a fare-you-well so that I'm mum as a hooter on the nest," he admitted to himself ruefully. "Just when something comes up that needs a good round damn I catch that big brown Sunday school eye of his, and it's Bucky back to Webster's unabridged. I've got to quit trailing with him, or I'll be joining the church first thing I know. He makes me feel like I want to be good, confound the little swindle."

Notwithstanding the ranger's occasional moments of exasperation, the two got along swimmingly. Each of them found a continued pleasure in delving into the other's unexplored mental recesses. They drifted into one of those quick, spontaneous likings that are rare between man and man. Some subtle quality of affection bubbled up like a spring in the hearts of each for the other. Young Hardman could perhaps have explained what lay at the roots

of it, but O'Connor admitted that he was "buffaloed" when he attempted an analysis of his unusual feeling.

From El Paso a leisurely run on the Mexican Central Pacific took them to Chihuahua, a quaint old city something about the size of El Paso. Both Bucky and his friend were familiar with the manners of the country, so that they felt at home among the narrow adobe streets, the lounging, good-natured peons, and the imitation Moorish architecture. They found rooms at a quiet, inconspicuous hotel, and began making their plans for an immediate departure in the event that they succeeded in their object.

At a distance it had seemed an easy thing to plan the escape of David Henderson and to accomplish it by craft, but a sight of the heavy stone walls that encircled the prison and of the numerous armed guards who paced to and fro on the walls, put a more chilling aspect on their chances.

"It isn't a very gay outlook," Bucky admitted cheerfully to his companion, "but I expect we can pull it off somehow. If these Mexican officials weren't slower than molasses in January it might have been better to wait and have him released by process of law on account of Hardman's confession. But it would take them two or three years to come to a decision. They sure do hate to turn loose a gringo when they have got the hog-tie on him. Like as not they would decide against him at the last, then. Course I've got the law machinery grinding, too, but I'm not banking on it real heavy. We'll get him out first any old way, then get the government to O. K. the thing."

"How were you thinking of proceeding?"

"I expect it's time to let you in on the ground floor, son. I reckon you happen to know that down in these Spanish countries there's usually a revolution hatching. There s two parties among the aristocrats, those for the government and those ferninst. The 'ins' stand pat, but the 'outs' have always got a revolution up their sleeves. Now, there's mostly a white man mixed up in the affair. They have to have him to run it and to shoot afterward when the government wins. You see, somebody has to be shot, and it's always so much to the good if they can line up gringoes instead of natives. Nine times out of ten it's an Irish-American lad that is engineering the scheme. This time it happens to be Mickey O'Halloran, an old friend of mine. I'm going to put it up to Mick to find a way."

"But it isn't any affair of his. He won't do it, will he?"

"Oh, I thought I told you he was Irish."

"Well?"

"And spoiling for trouble, of course. Is it likely he could keep

his fist out of the hive when there's such a gem of a chance to get stung?"

It had been Frank's suggestion that they choose rooms at a hotel which open into each other and also connect with an adjoining pair. The reason for this had not at first been apparent to the ranger, but as soon as they were alone Frank explained.

"It is very likely that we shall be under surveillance after a day or two, especially if we are seen around the prison a good deal. Well, we'll slip out the back way to-night, disguised in some other rig, come boldly in by the front door, and rent the rooms next ours. Then we shall be able to go and come, either as ourselves or as our neighbors. It will give us a great deal more liberty."

"Unless we should get caught. Then we would have a great deal less. What's your notion of a rig-up to disguise us, kid?"

"We might have several, in case of emergencies. For one thing, we could easily be street showmen. You can do fancy shooting and I can do sleight-of-hand tricks or tell fortunes."

"You would be a gipsy lad?"

The youngster blushed. "A gipsy girl, and you might be my husband."

"I'm no play actor, even if you are," said Bucky. "I don't want to be your husband, thank you."

"All you would have to do is to be sullen and rough. It is easy enough."

"And you think you could pass for a girl? You're slim and soft enough, but I'll bet you would give it away inside of an hour."

The boy laughed, and shot a swift glance at O'Connor under his long lashes. "I appeared as a girl in one of the acts of the show for years. Nobody ever suspected that I wasn't."

"We might try it, but we have no clothes for the part."

"Leave that to me. I'll buy some to-day while you are looking the ground over for our first assault on the impregnable fortress."

"I don't know. It seems to me pretty risky. But you might buy the things, and we'll see how you look in them. Better not get all the things at the same store. Sort of scatter your purchases around."

They separated at the door of the hotel, Frank to choose the materials he needed, and O'Connor to look up O'Halloran and get a

permit to visit the prison from the proper authorities. When the latter returned triumphantly with his permit he found the boy busy with a needle and thread and surrounded by a litter of dress-making material.

"I'm altering this to fit me and fixing it up," he explained.

"Holy smoke! Who taught you to sew?" asked Bucky, in surprise.

"My aunt, Mrs. Hardman. I used to do all the plain sewing on my costumes. Did you see your friend and get your permit?"

"You bet I did, and didn't. Mickey was out, but I left him a note. The other thing I pulled off all right. I'm to be allowed to visit the prison and make a careful inspection of it at my leisure. There's nothing like a pull, son."

"Does the permit say you are to be allowed to steal any one of the prisoners you take a fancy to?" asked Frank, with a smile.

"No, it forgot to say that. When do you expect to have that toggery made?"

"A good deal of it is already made, as you see. I'm just making a few changes. Do you want to try on your suit?"

"Is THIS mine?" asked the ranger, picking up with smiling contempt the rather gaudy blouse that lay on a chair.

"Yes, sir, that is yours. Go and put it on and we'll see how it fits."

Bucky returned a few minutes later in his gipsy uniform, with a deprecating grin.

"I'll have to stain your face. Then you'll do very well," said Frank, patting and pulling at the clothes here and there. "It's a good fit, if I do say it that chose it. The first thing you want to do when you get out in it is to roll in the dust and get it soiled. No respectable gipsy wears new clothes. Better have a tear or two in it, too."

"You ce'tainly should have been a girl, the way you take to clothes, Curly."

"Making up was my business for a good many years, you know," returned the lad quietly. "If you'll step into the other room for about fifteen minutes I'll show you how well I can do it."

It was a long half-hour later that Bucky thumped on the door between the rooms. "Pretty nearly ready, kid? Seems to me it is taking you a thundering long time to get that outfit on."

"How long do you think it ought to take a lady to dress?"

"Ten minutes is long enough, and fifteen, say, if she is going to a dance. You've been thirty-five by my Waterbury."

"It's plain you never were married, Mr. Innocent. Why, a girl can't fix her hair in less than half an hour."

"Well, you got a wig there, ain't you? It doesn't take but about five seconds to stick that on. Hurry up, gringo! I'm clean through this old newspaper."

"Read the advertisements," came saucily through the door.

"I've read the durned things twice."

"Learn them by heart," the sweet voice advised.

"Oh, you go to Halifax!"

Nevertheless, Mr. Bucky had to wait his comrade's pleasure. But when he got a vision of the result, it was so little what he had expected that it left him staring in amazement, his jaw fallen and his eyes incredulous.

The vision swept him a low bow. "How do you like Bonita?" it demanded gaily.

Bucky's eyes circled the room, to make sure that the boy was not hidden somewhere, and came back to rest on his surprise with a look that was almost consternation. Was this vivid, dazzling creature the boy he had been patronizing, lecturing, promising to thrash any time during the past four days? The thing was unbelievable, not yet to be credited by his jarred brain. How incredibly blind he had been! What an idiot of sorts! Why, the marks of sex sat on her beyond any possibility of doubt. Every line of the slim, lissom figure, every curve of the soft, undulating body, the sweep of rounded arm, of tapering waist-line, of well-turned ankle, contributed evidence of what it were folly to ask further proof. How could he have ever seen those lovely, soft-lashed eyes and the delicate little hands without conviction coming home to him? And how could he have heard the low murmur of her voice, the catch of her sobs, without knowing that they were a denial of masculinity?

She was dressed like a Spanish dancing girl, in short kilts, red sash, and jaunty little cap placed sidewise on her head. She wore a wig of black hair, and her face was stained to a dusky, gipsy hue. Over her thumb hung castanets and in her hand was a tambourine. Roguishly she began to sway into a slow, rhythmic dance, beating time with her instruments as she moved. Gradually the speed quickened to a faster time. She swung gracefully to and fro with all the lithe agility of the race she personified. No

part could have been better conceived or executed. Even physically she displayed the large, brilliant eyes, the ringleted, coal-black hair, the tawny skin, and the flashing smile that showed small teeth of dazzling ivory, characteristic of the Romanies he had met. It was a daring part to play, but the young man watching realized that she had the free grace to carry it out successfully. She danced the fandango to a finish, swept him another low bow, and presented laughingly to him the tambourine for his donation. Then, suddenly flinging aside the instrument, she curtsied and caught at his hand.

"Will the senor have his fortune told?"

Bucky drew a handful of change from his pocket and selected a gold eagle. "I suppose I must cross your palm with gold," he said, even while his subconscious mind was running on the new complication presented to him by this discovery.

He was very clear about one thing. He must not let her know that he knew her for a girl. To him she must still be a boy, or their relation would become impossible. She had trusted in her power to keep her secret from him. On no other terms would she have come with him; of so much he was sure, even while his mind groped for a sufficient reason to account for an impulse that might have impelled her. If she found out that he knew, the knowledge would certainly drive her at once from him. For he knew that not the least charm of the extraordinary fascination she had for him lay in her sweet innocence of heart, a fresh innocence that consisted with this gay Romany abandon, and even with a mental experience of the sordid, seamy side of life as comprehensive as that of many a woman twice her age. She had been defrauded out of her childish inheritance of innocence, but, somehow, even in her foul environment the seeds of a rare personal purity had persistently sprung up and flourished. Some flowers are of such native freshness that no nauseous surroundings can kill their fragrance. And this was one of them.

Meanwhile, her voice ran on with the patter of her craft. There was the usual dark woman to be circumvented and the light one to be rewarded. Jealousies and rivalries played their part in the nonsense she glibly recited, and somewhere in the future lay, of course, great riches and happiness for him.

With a queer little tug at his heart he watched the dainty finger that ran so lightly over his open palm, watched, too, the bent head so gracefully fine of outline and the face so mobile of expression when the deep eyes lifted to his in question of the correctness of her reading. He would miss the little partner that had wound himself so tightly round his heart. He wondered if he would find compensating joy in this exquisite creature whom a few moments had taken worlds distant from him.

Suddenly tiring of her diversion, she dropped his hand. "You

don't say I do it well," she charged, aware suspiciously, at last, of his grave silence.

"You do it very well indeed. I didn't think you had it in you, kid. What's worrying me is that I can never live up to such a sure enough gipsy as you."

"All you have to do is to look sour and frown if anybody gets too familiar with me. You can do that, can't you?"

"You bet I can," he answered promptly, with unnecessary emphasis.

"And look handsome," she teased.

"Oh, that will be easy for me--since you are going to make me up. As a simple child of nature I'm no ornament to the scenery, but art's a heap improving sometimes."

She thought, but did not say, that art would go a long way before it could show anything more pleasing than this rider of the plains. It was not alone his face, with the likable blue eyes that could say so many things in a minute, but the gallant ease of his bearing. Such a springy lightness, such sinewy grace of undulating muscle, were rare even on the frontier. She had once heard Webb Mackenzie say of him that he could whip his weight in wildcats, and it was easy of belief after seeing how surely he was master of the dynamic power in him. It is the emergency that sifts men, and she had seen him rise to several with a readiness that showed the stuff in him.

That evening they slipped out unobserved in the dusk, and a few minutes later a young gipsy and his bride presented themselves at the inn to be put up. The scowling young Romany was particular, considering that he spent most nights in the open, with a sky for a roof. So the master of the inn thought when he rejected on one pretense or another the first two rooms that were shown him. He wanted two rooms, and they must connect. Had the innkeeper such apartments? The innkeeper had, but he would very much like to see the price in advance if he was going to turn over to guests of such light baggage the best accommodations in the house. This being satisfactorily arranged, the young gipsies were left to themselves in the room they had rented.

The first thing that the man did when they were alone was to roll a cigarette, which operation he finished deftly with one hand, while the other swept a match in a circular motion along his trousers leg. In very fair English the Spanish gipsy said: "You ce'tainly ought to learn to smoke, kid. Honest, it's more comfort than a wife."

"How do you know, since you are not married?" she asked archly.

"I been noticing some of my poor unfortunate friends," he

grinned.

CHAPTER 7. IN THE LAND OF REVOLUTIONS

The knock that sounded on the door was neither gentle nor apologetic. It sounded as if somebody had flung a baseball bat at it.

O'Connor smiled, remembering that soft tap of yore. "I reckon--" he was beginning, when the door opened to admit a visitor.

This proved to be a huge, red-haired Irishman, with a face that served just now merely as a setting for an irresistible smile. The owner of the flaming head looked round in surprise on the pair of Romanies and began an immediate apology to which a sudden blush served as accompaniment.

"Beg pardon. I didn't know The damned dago told me " He stopped in confusion, with a scrape and a bow to the lady.

"Sir, I demand an explanation of this most unwarrantable intrusion," spoke the ranger haughtily, in his best Spanish.

A patter of soft foreign vowels flowed from the stranger's embarrassment.

"You durned old hawss-stealing greaser, cayn't you talk English?" drawled the gipsy, with a grin.

The other's mouth fell open with astonishment He stared at the slim, dusky young Spaniard for an instant before he fell upon him and began to pound his body with jovial fists.

"You would, would you, you old pie-eating fraud! Try to fool your Uncle Mick and make him think you a greaser, would you? I'll learn yez to play horse with a fullgrown, able-bodied white man." He punctuated his points with short-arm jolts that Bucky laughingly parried.

"Before ladies, Mick! Haven't you forgot your manners, Red-haid?"

Swiftly Mr. O'Halloran came to flushed rigidity. "Madam, I must still be apologizing. The surprise of meeting me friend went to me head, I shouldn't wonder."

Bucky doubled up with apparent mirth. "Get into the other room, Curly, and get your other togs on," he ordered. "Can't you see that Mick is going to fall in love with you if he sees you a minute longer, you young rascal? Hike!"

"Don't you talk that way to a lady, Bucky," warned O'Halloran,

again blushing vividly, after she had disappeared into the next room. "And I want to let yez have it right off the bat that if you've been leading that little Mexican senorita into trouble you've got a quarrel on with Mike O'Halloran."

"Keep your shirt on, old fire-eater. Who told you I was wronging her any?"

"Are you married to her?"

"You bet I ain't. You see, Mick, that handsome lady you're going to lick the stuffing out of me about is only a plumb ornery sassy young boy, after all."

"No!" denied Mick, his eyes two excited interrogation-points.

"You can't stuff me with any such fairy-tale, me lad."

"All right. Wait and see," suggested the ranger easily. "Have a smoke while you're falling out of love."

"You young limb, I want you to tell me all about it this very minute, before I punch holes in yez."

Bucky lit his cigar, leaned back, and began to tell the story of Frank Hardman and the knife-thrower. Only one thing he omitted to tell, and that was the conviction that had come home to him a few moments ago that his little comrade was no boy, but a woman. O'Halloran was a chivalrous Irishman, a daredevil of an adventurer, with a pure love of freedom that might very likely in the end bring him to face a row of loaded carbines with his back to a wall, but Bucky had his reticencies that even loyal friendship could not break down. This girl's secret he meant to guard until such time as she chose of her own free will to tell it.

Frank returned just as he finished the tale of the knife episode, and Mick's frank open eyes accused him of idiocy for ever having supposed that this lad was a woman. Why, he was a little fellow not over fifteen--not a day past fifteen, he would swear to that. He was, to be sure, a slender, girlish young fellow, a good deal of a sissy by the look of him, but none the less a sure enough boy. Convinced of this, the big Irishman dismissed him promptly from his thoughts and devoted himself to Bucky.

"And what are yez doing down in greaser land? Thought you was rustling cows for a living somewheres in sunburnt Arizona," he grinned amiably.

"Me? Oh, I came down on business. We'll talk about that presently. How's your one-hawss revolution getting along, Reddy? I hope it's right peart and healthy."

O'Halloran's eyes flashed a warning, with the slightest nod in

the world toward the boy.

"Don't worry about him. He's straight as a string and knows how to keep his mouth shut. You can tell him anything you would me." He turned to the boy sitting quietly in an inconspicuous corner. "Mum's the word, Frank. You understand that, of course?"

The boy nodded. "I'll go into the next room, if you like."

"It isn't necessary. Fire ahead, Mike."

The latter got up, tiptoed to each door in turn, flung it suddenly open to see that nobody was spying behind it, and then turned the lock. "I have use for me head for another year or two, and it's just as well to see that nobody is spying. You understand, Bucky, that I'm risking me life in telling you what I'm going to. If you have any doubts about this lad--" He stopped, keen eyes fixed on Frank.

"He's as safe as I am, Mike. Is it likely I would take any risks about a thing of that sort with my old bunkie's tough neck inviting the hangman?" asked O'Connor quietly.

"Good enough. The kid looks stanch, and, anyhow, if you guarantee him that's enough for me." He accepted another of the ranger's cigars, puffed it to a red glow, and leaned back to smile at his friend. "Glory, but it's good to see ye, Bucky, me bye. You'll never know how a man's eyes ache to see a straight-up white man in this land of greasers. It's the God's truth I'm telling ye when I say that I haven't had a scrimmage with me hands since I came here. The only idea this forsaken country has of exchanging compliments is with a knife in the dark." He shook his flaming head regretfully at the deplorably lost condition of a country where the shillalah was unknown as a social institution.

"If I wasn't tied up with this Valdez bunch I'd get out to-morrow, and sometimes I have half a mind to pull out anyhow. If you've never been associated, me lad, with half a dozen most divilishly polite senors, each one of them watching the others out of the corner of his slant eyes for fear they are going to betray him or assassinate him first, you'll never know the joys of life in this peaceful and contented land of indolence. Life's loaded to the guards with uncertainties, so eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow you hang, or your friend will carve ye in the back with a knife, me old priest used to say, or something like it. 'Tis certain he must have had in mind the Spanish-American, my son."

"Which is why you're here, you old fraud," smiled Bucky. "You've got to grumble, of course, but you couldn't be dragged away while there's a chance of a row. Don't I know you of old, Reddy?"

"Anyway, here I am, with me neck so near to the rope it fairly

aches sometimes. If you have any inclinations toward suicide, I'll be glad to introduce ye to me revolutionary friends."

"Thank you, no. The fact is that we have a little private war of our own on hand, Mike. I was thinking maybe you'd like to enlist, old filibuster."

"Is the pay good?"

"Nothing a day and find yourself," answered Bucky promptly.

"No reasonable man could ask fairer than that," agreed O'Halloran, his grin expanding. "Well, then, what's the row? Would ye like to be dictator of Chihuahua or Emperor of Mexico?"

"There's an American in the government prison here under a life sentence. He is not guilty, and he has already served fifteen years."

"He is like to serve fifteen more, if he lives that long."

"Wrong guess. I mean to get him out."

"And I'm meaning to go to Paradise some day, but will I?"

"You're going to help me get him out, Mike."

"Who told ye that, me optimistic young friend?"

"I didn't need to be told."

"Well, I'll not lift a finger, Bucky--not a finger."

"I knew you wouldn't stand to see a man like Henderson rot in a dungeon. No Irishman would."

"You needn't blarney me. I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff. It's a dirty shame, of course, about this man Henderson, but I'm not running the criminal jurisprudence of Mexico meself."

"And I said to Webb Mackenzie: 'Mickey O'Halloran is the man to see; he'll know the best way to do it as nobody else would.' I knew I could depend on you."

"You've certainly kissed the blarney stone, Mr. O'Connor," returned the revolutionist dryly. "Well, then, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing much. Get Henderson out and help us to get safely from the country whose reputation you black-eye so cheerfully."

"Mercy of Hiven! Bring me the moon and a handful of stars, says he, as cool as you please."

The ranger told the story of Henderson and Mackenzie's lost child in such a way that it lost nothing in the telling. O'Halloran was moved. "'Tis a damned shame about this man Henderson," he blurted out.

Bucky leaned back comfortably and waved airily his brown hand. "It's up to you," his gay, impudent eyes seemed to say.

"I don't say I won't be able to help you," conceded O'Halloran. "It happens, me bye, that you've dropped in on me just before the band begins to play." He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "There's a shipment of pianos being brought down the line this week. The night after they arrive I'm looking for music."

"I see. The piano boxes are filled with rifles and ammunition. "

"You have a mind like a tack, Bucky. Rifles is the alias of them pianos. They'll make merry music once we get them through."

"That's all very well, but have you reckoned with the government at Mexico? Chihuahua isn't the whole country, Mickey. Suppose President Diaz takes a hand in the game and sends troops in on you?"

"He won't," answered the other, with a wink. "He's been seen. The president isn't any too friendly to that old tyrant Megales, who is now governor here. There's an election next week. The man that gets most votes will be elected, and I'm thinking, Bucky, that the man with most rifles will the most votes. Now, says Diaz, in effect, with an official wave of his hand, 'Settle your own rows, gentlemen. I don't give a damn whether Megales or Valdez is governor of Chihuahua, subject, of coorse, to the will of the people.' Then he winks at Valdez wid his off eye as much as to say: 'Go in an' win, me boy; me prayers are supporting ye. But be sure ye do nothing too illegal.' So there ye are, Bucky. If ould Megales was to wake up election morning and find that the polling-places was in our hands, his soldiers disarmed or bought over, and everything contributing smoothly to express the will of the people in electing him to take a swift hike out of Chihuahua, it is likely that he might accept the inevitable as the will of fate and make a strategic retreat to climes more healthy."

"And if in the meantime he should discover those rifles, or one of those slant-eyed senors should turn out a Benedict Arnold, what then, my friend?"

"Don't talk in that cruel way. You make me neck ache in anticipation," returned O'Halloran blithely.

"I think we'll not travel with you in public till after the election, Mr. O'Halloran," reflected Bucky aloud.

"'Twould be just as well, me son. My friends won't be overpopular with Megales if the cards fall his way."

"If you win, I suppose we may count Henderson as good as a free man?"

"It would be a pity if me pull wouldn't do a little thing like that," scoffed the conspirator genially.

"But, win or lose, I may be able to help you. We need musicians to play those pianos we're bringing in. Well, the most dependable men we can set to play some of them are the prisoners in the fortress. There's likely to be a wholesale jail delivery the night before the election. Now, it's just probable that the lads we free will fight to keep their freedom. That's why we use them. They HAVE to be true to us because, if they don't, WHICHEVER SIDE WINS back they go to jail."

"Of course. I wish I could take a hand myself. But I can't, because I'm a soldier of a friendly power. We'll get Henderson out the night before the election and leave on the late train. You'll have to arrange the program in time for us to catch that train. "

O'Halloran looked drolly at him. "I'm liking your nerve, young man. I pull the chestnuts out of the fire for yez and, likely enough, get burned. You walk off with your chestnut, and never a 'Thank ye' for poor Mickey the catspaw."

"It doesn't look like quite a square deal, does it?" laughed the ranger. "Well, we might vary the program a bit. Bucky O'Connor, Arizona ranger, can't stop and take a hand in such a game, but I don't know anything to prevent a young gipsy from Spain staying over a few days."

"If you stay, I shall," announced the boy Frank.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, seh. You'll do just as I say, according to the agreement you made with me when I let you come," was Bucky's curt answer. "We're not playing this game to please you, Master Frank."

Yet though the ranger spoke curtly, though he still tried to hold toward his comrade precisely the same attitude as he had before discovering her sex, he could not put into his words the same peremptory sting that, he had done before when he found that occasionally necessary. For no matter how severely he must seem to deal with her to avoid her own suspicions as to what he knew, as well as to keep from arousing those of others, his heart was telling a very different story all the time. He could see again the dainty grace with which she had danced for him, heard again that low voice breaking into a merry piping lilt, warmed once more to the living, elusive smile, at once so tender and mocking.

He might set his will to preserve an even front to her gay charm, but it was beyond him to control the thrills that shot his pulses.

CHAPTER 8. FIRST BLOOD!

Occasionally Alice Mackenzie met Collins on the streets of Tucson. Once she saw him at the hotel where she was staying, deep in a discussion with her father of ways and means of running down the robbers of the Limited. He did not, however, make the least attempt to push their train acquaintanceship beyond the give and take of casual greeting. Without showing himself unfriendly, he gave her no opportunity to determine how far they would go with each other. This rather piqued her, though she would probably have rebuffed him if he had presumed far. Of which probability Val Collins was very well aware.

They met one morning in front of a drug store downtown. She carried a parasol that was lilac-trimmed, which shade was also the outstanding note of her dress. She was looking her very best, and no doubt knew it. To Val her dainty freshness seemed to breathe the sweetness of spring violets.

"Good morning, Miss Mackenzie. Weather like this I'm awful glad I ain't a mummy," he told her. "The world's mighty full of beautiful things this glad day."

"Essay on the Appreciation of Nature, by Professor Collins," she smiled.

"To be continued in our next," he amended. "Won't you come in and have a sundae? You look as if you didn't know it, but the rest of us have discovered it's a right warm morning."

Looking across the little table at him over her sundae, she questioned him with innocent impudence. "I saw you and dad deep in plans Tuesday. I suppose by now you have all the train robbers safely tucked away in the penitentiary?"

"Not yet," he answered cheerfully.

"Not yet!" Her lifted eyebrows and the derisive flash beneath mocked politely his confidence. "By this time I should think they might be hunting big game in deepest Africa."

"They might be, but they're not."

"What about that investment in futurities you made on the train? The month is more than half up. Do you see any chance of realizing?"

"It looks now as if I might be a false prophet, but I feel way down deep that I won't. In this prophet's business confidence is half the stock in trade."

"Really. I'm very curious to know what it is you predicted. Was it something good?"

"Good for me," he nodded.

"Then I think you'll get it," she laughed. "I have noticed that it is the people that expect things--and then go out and take them--that inherit the earth these days. The meek have been dispossessed."

"I'm glad I have your good wishes."

"I didn't say you had, but you'll get along just as well without them," she answered with a cool little laugh as she rose.

"I'd like to discuss that proposition with you more at length. May I call on you some evening this week, Miss Mackenzie?"

There was a sparkle of hidden malice in her answer. "You're too late, Mr. Collins. We'll have to leave it undiscussed. I'm going to leave to-day for my uncle's ranch, the Rocking Chair."

He was distinctly disappointed, though he took care not to show it. Nevertheless, the town felt empty after her train had gone. He was glad when later in the day a message came calling him to Epitaph. It took him at least seventy-five miles nearer her.

Before he had been an hour at Epitaph the sheriff knew he had struck gold this time. Men were in town spending money lavishly, and at a rough description they answered to the ones he wanted. Into the Gold Nugget Saloon that evening dropped Val Collins, big, blond, and jaunty. He looked far less the vigorous sheriff out for business than the gregarious cowpuncher on a search for amusement.

Del Hawkes, an old-time friend of his staging days, pounced on him and dragged him to the bar, whence his glance fell genially on the roulette wheel and its devotees, wandered casually across the impassive poker and Mexican monte players, took in the enthroned musicians, who were industriously murdering "La Paloma," and came to rest for barely an instant at a distant faro table. In the curly-haired good-looking young fellow facing the dealer he saw one of the men he had come seeking. Nor did he need to look for the hand with the missing trigger finger to be sure it was York Neil--that same gay, merry-hearted York with whom he used to ride the range, changed now to a miscreant who had elected to take the short cut to wealth.

But the man beside Neil, the dark-haired, pallid fellow from

whose presence something at once formidable and sinister and yet gallant seemed to breathe--the very sight of him set the mind of Collins at work busily upon a wild guess. Surely here was a worthy figure upon whom to set the name and reputation of the notorious Wolf Leroy.

Yet the sheriff's eyes rested scarce an instant before they went traveling again, for he wanted to show as yet no special interest in the object of his suspicions. The gathering was a motley one, picturesque in its diversity. For here had drifted not only the stranded derelicts of a frontier civilization, but selected types of all the turbid elements that go to make up its success. Mexican, millionaire, and miner brushed shoulders at the roulette-wheel. Chinaman and cow-puncher, Papago and plainsman, tourist and tailor, bucked the tiger side by side with a democracy found nowhere else in the world. The click of the wheel, the monotonous call of the croupier, the murmur of many voices in alien tongues, and the high-pitched jarring note of boisterous laughter, were all merged in a medley of confusion as picturesque as the scene itself.

"Business not anyways slack at the Nugget," ventured Collins, to the bartender.

"No, I don't know as 'tis. Nearly always somethin' doing in little old Epitaph," answered the public quencher of thirsts, polishing the glass top of the bar with a cloth.

"Playing with the lid off back there, ain't they?" The sheriff's nod indicated the distant faro-table.

"That's right, I guess. Only blue chips go."

"It's Wolf Leroy--that Mexican-looking fellow there," Hawkes explained in a whisper. "A bad man with the gun, they say, too. Well, him and York Neil and Scott Dailey blew in last night from their mine, up at Saguache. Gave it out he was going to break the bank, Leroy did. Backing that opinion usually comes high, but Leroy is about two thousand to the good, they say."

"Scott Dailey? Don't think I know him."

"That shorthorn in chaps and a yellow bandanna is the gentleman; him that's playing the wheel so constant. You don't miss no world-beater when you don't know Scott. He's Leroy's Man Friday. Understand they've struck it rich. Anyway, they're hitting high places while the mazuma lasts."

"I can't seem to locate their mine. What's its brand?"

"The Dalriada. Some other guy is in with them; fellow by the name of Hardman, if I recollect; just bought out a livery barn in town here."

"Queer thing, luck; strikes about as unexpected as lightning.
Have another, Del?"

"Don't care if I do, Val. It always makes me thirsty to see
people I like. Anything new up Tucson way?"

The band had fallen on "Manzanilla," and was rending it with
variations when Collins circled round to the wheel and began
playing the red. He took a place beside the bow-legged vaquero
with the yellow bandanna knotted loosely round his throat. For
five minutes the cow-puncher attended strictly to his bets. Then
he cursed softly, and asked Collins to exchange places with him.

"This place is my hoodoo. I can't win--" The sentence died in the
man's throat, became an inarticulate gurgle of dismay.

He had looked up and met the steady eyes of the sheriff, and the
surprise of it had driven the blood from his heart. A revolver
thrust into his face could not have shaken him more than that
serene smile.

Collins took him by the arm with a jovial laugh meant to cover
their retreat, and led him into one of the curtained alcove
rooms. As they entered he noticed out of the corner of his eye
that Leroy and Neil were still intent on their game. Not for a
moment, not even while the barkeeper was answering their call for
liquor, did the sheriff release Scott from the rigor of his eyes,
and when the attendant drew the curtain behind him the officer
let his smile take on a new meaning.

"What did I tell you, Scott?"

"Prove it," defied Scott. "Prove it--you can't prove it."

"What can't I prove?"

"Why, that I was in that " Scott stopped abruptly, and watched
the smile broaden on the strong face opposite him. His dull brain
had come to his rescue none too soon.

"Now, ain't it funny how people's thoughts get to running on the
same thing? Last time I met up with you there you was collecting
a hundred dollars and keep-the-change cents from me, and now here
you are spending it. It's ce'tinly curious how both of us are
remembering that little seance in the Pullman car."

Scott took refuge in a dogged silence. He was sweating fear.

"Yes, sir. It comes up right vivid before me. There was you
a-trainin' your guns on me--"

"I wasn't," broke in Scott, falling into the trap.

"That's right. How come I to make such a mistake? Of cou'se you carried the sack and York Neil held the guns."

The man cursed quietly, and relapsed into silence.

"Always buy your clothes in pairs?"

The sheriff's voice showed only a pleasant interest, but the outlaw's frightened eyes were puzzled at this sudden turn.

"Wearing a bandanna same color and pattern as you did the night of our jamboree on the Limited, I see. That's mightily careless of you, ain't it?"

Instinctively a shaking hand clutched at the kerchief. "It don't cut any ice because a hold-up wears a mask made out of stuff like this "

"Did I say it was a mask he wore?" the gentle voice quizzed.

Scott, beads of perspiration on his forehead, collapsed as to his defense. He fell back sullenly to his first position: "You can't prove anything."

"Can't I?" The sheriff's smile went out like a snuffed candle. Eyes and mouth were cold and hard as chiseled marble. He leaned forward far across the table, a confident, dominating assurance painted on his face. "Can't I? Don't you bank on that. I can prove all I need to, and your friends will prove the rest. They'll be falling all over themselves to tell what they know--and Mr. Dailey will be holding the sack again, while Leroy and the rest are slipping out."

The outlaw sprang to his feet, white to the lips.

"It's a damned lie. Leroy would never--" He stopped, again just in time to bite back the confession hovering on his lips. But he had told what Collins wanted to know.

The curtain parted, and a figure darkened the doorway--a slender, lithe figure that moved on springs. Out of its sardonic, devil-may-care face gleamed malevolent eyes which rested for a moment on Dailey, before they came home to the sheriff.

"And what is it Leroy would never do?" a gibing voice demanded silkily.

Scott pulled himself together and tried to bluff, but at the look on his chief's face the words died in his throat.

Collins did not lift a finger or move an eyelash, but with the first word a wary alertness ran through him and starched his

figure to rigidity. He gathered himself together for what might come.

"Well, I am waiting. What it is Leroy would never do?" The voice carried a scoff with it, the implication that his very presence had stricken conspirators dumb.

Collins offered the explanation.

"Mr. Dailey was beginning a testimonial of your virtues just as you right happily arrived in time to hear it. Perhaps he will now proceed."

But Dailey had never a word left. His blunders had been crying ones, and his chief's menacing look had warned him what to expect. The courage oozed out of his heart, for he counted himself already a dead man.

"And who are you, my friend, that make so free with Wolf Leroy's name?" It was odd how every word of the drawling sentence contrived to carry a taunt and a threat with it, strange what a deadly menace the glittering eyes shot forth.

"My name is Collins."

"Sheriff of Pica County?"

"Yes."

The eyes of the men met like rapiers, as steady and as searching as cold steel. Each of them was appraising the rare quality of his opponent in this duel to the death that was before him.

"What are you doing here? Ain't Pica County your range?"

"I've been discussing with your friend the late hold-up on the Transcontinental Pacific."

"Ah!" Leroy knew that the sheriff was serving notice on them of his purpose to run down the bandits. Swiftly his mind swept up the factors of the situation. Should he draw now and chance the result, or wait for a more certain ending? He decided to wait, moved by the consideration that even if he were victorious the lawyers were sure to draw out of the fat-brained Scott the cause of the quarrel.

"Well, that don't interest me any, though I suppose you have to explain a heap how come they to hold you up and take your gun. I'll leave you and your jelly-fish Scott to your gabfest. Then you better run back home to Tucson. We don't go much on visiting sheriffs here." He turned on his heel with an insolent laugh, and left the sheriff alone with Dailey.

The superb contempt of the man, his readiness to give the sheriff a chance to pump out of Dailey all he knew, served to warn Collins that his life was in imminent danger. On no hypothesis save one--that Leroy had already condemned them both to death in his mind--could he account for such rashness. And that the blow would fall soon, before he had time to confer with other officers, was a corollary to the first proposition.

"He'll surely kill me on sight," Scott burst out.

"Yes, he'll kill you," agreed the sheriff, "unless you move first."

"Move how?"

"Against him. Protect yourself by lining up with me. It's your only show on earth."

Dailey's eyes flashed. "Then, by thunder, I ain't taking it! I'm no coyote, to round on my pardners."

"I give it to you straight. He means murder."

Perspiration poured from the man's face. "I'll light out of the country."

The sheriff shook his head. "You'd never get away alive. Besides, I want you for holding up the Limited. The safest place for you is in jail, and that's where I'm going to put you. Drop that gun! Quick! That's right. Now, you and I are going out of this saloon by the back door. I'm going to walk beside you, and we're going to laugh and talk as if we were the best of friends, but my hand ain't straying any from the end of my gun. Get that, amigo? All right. Then we'll take a little pasear."

As Collins and his prisoner reappeared in the main lobby of the Gold Nugget, a Mexican slipped out of the back door of the gambling-house. The sheriff called Hawkes aside.

"I want you to call a hack for me, Del. Bring it round to the back door, and arrange with the driver to whip up for the depot as soon as we get in. We ought to catch that 12:20 up-train. When the hack gets here just show up in the door. If you see Leroy or Neil hanging around the door, put your hand up to your tie. If the coast is clear, just move off to the bar and order something."

"Sure," said Hawkes, and was off at once, though just a thought unsteady from his frequent libations.

Both hands of the big clock on the wall pointed to twelve when Hawkes appeared again in the doorway at the rear of the Gold Nugget. With a wink at Collins, he made straight for the cocktail

he thought he needed.

"Now," said the sheriff, and immediately he and Dailey passed through the back door.

Instantly two shots rang out. Collins lurched forward to the ground, drawing his revolver as he fell. Scott, twisting from his grasp, ran in a crouch toward the alley along the shadow of the buildings. Shots spattered against the wall as his pursuers gave chase. When the Gold Nugget vomited from its rear door a rush of humanity eager to see the trouble, the noise of their footsteps was already dying in the distance.

Hawkes found his friend leaning against the back of the hack, his revolver smoking in his hand.

"For God's sake, Vall!" screamed Hawkes. "Did they get you?"

"Punctured my leg. That's all. But I expect they'll get Dailey."

"How come you to go out when I signaled you to stay?"

"Signaled me to stay, why--"

Collins stopped, unwilling to blame his friend. He knew now that Hawkes, having mixed his drinks earlier in the evening, had mixed his signals later.

"Get me a horse, Del, and round up two or three of the boys. I've got to get after those fellows. They are the ones that held up the Limited last week. Find out for me what hotel they put up at here. I want their rooms searched. Send somebody round to the corrals, and let me know where they stabled their horses. If they left any papers or saddle-bags, get them for me."

Fifteen minutes later Collins was in the saddle ready for the chase, and only waiting for his volunteer posse to join him. They were just starting when a frightened Chinaman ran into the plaza with the news that there had been shooting just back of his laundry on the edge of town and that a man had been killed.

When the sheriff reached the spot, he lowered himself from the saddle and limped over to the black mass huddled against the wall in the bright moonlight. He turned the riddled body over and looked down into the face of the dead man. It was that of the outlaw, Scott Dailey. That the body had been thoroughly searched was evident, for all around him were scattered his belongings. Here an old letter and a sack of tobacco, its contents emptied on the ground; there his coat and vest, the linings of each of them ripped out and the pockets emptied. Even the boots and socks of the man had been removed, so thorough had been the search. Whatever the murderers had been looking for it was not money, since his purse, still fairly well lined with greenbacks, was

found behind a cactus bush a few yards away.

"What in time were they after?" frowned Collins. "If it wasn't his money--and it sure wasn't--what was it? I certainly would like to know what the Wolf wanted so blamed bad. Guess I'll not follow Mr. Leroy just now till my leg is in better shape. Maybe I had better investigate a little bit round town first."

The body was taken back to the Gold Nugget and placed on a table, pending the arrival of the undertaker. It chanced that Collins, looking absently over the crowd, glimpsed a gray felt hat that looked familiar by reason of a frayed silver band found it. Underneath the hat was a Mexican, and him the sheriff ordered to step forward.

"Where did you get that hat, Manuel?"

"My name is Jose--Jose Archuleta," corrected the olive-hued one.

"I ain't worrying about your name, son. What I want to know is where you found that hat."

"In the alley off the plaza, senior."

"All right. Chuck it up here."

"Muy bien, senior." And the dusty hat was passed from hand to hand till it reached the sheriff.

Collins ripped off the silver band and tore out the sweat-pad. It was an off chance--one in a thousand--but worth trying none the less. And a moment later he knew it was the chance that won. For sewed to the inside of the discolored sweat-pad was a little strip of silk. With his knife he carefully removed the strip, and found between it and the leather a folded fragment of paper closely covered with writing. He carried this to the light, and made it out to be a memorandum of direction of some sort. Slowly he spelled out the poorly written words:

From Y. N. took Unowhat. Went twenty yards strate for big rock. Eight feet direckly west. Fifty yards in direcksion of suthern Antelope Peke. Then eighteen to nerest cotonwood. J. H. begins hear.

Collins read the scrawl twice before an inkling of its meaning came home to him. Then in a flash his brain was lighted. It was a memorandum of the place where Dailey's share of the plunder was buried.

His confederates had known that he had it, and had risked capture to make a thorough search for the paper. That they had not found it was due only to the fact that the murdered man had lost his hat as he scurried down the streets before them.

The doctor, having arrived, examined the wound and suggested an anaesthetic. Collins laughed.

"I reckon not, doc. You round up that lead pill and I'll endure the grief without knockout drops."

While the doctor was probing for the bullet lodged in his leg, the sheriff studied the memorandum found in Dailey's hat. He found it blind, disappointing work, for there was no clearly indicated starting-point. Bit by bit he took it:

From Y. N. took Unowhat.

This was clear enough, so far as it went. It could only mean that from York Neil the writer had taken the plunder to hide. But--WHERE did he take it? From what point? A starting-point must be found somewhere, or the memorandum was of no use. Probably only Neil could supply the needed information, now that Dailey was dead.

Went twenty yards strate for big rock. Eight feet direckly west. Fifty yards in direcksion of suthern Antelope Peke. Then eighteen to nerest cotonwood.

All this was plain enough, but the last sentence was the puzzler.

J. H. begins hear.

Was J. H. a person? If so, what did he begin. If Dailey had buried his plunder, what had J. H. left to do?

But had he buried it? Collins smiled. It was not likely he had handed it over to anybody else to hide for him. And yet--

He clapped his hand down on his knee. "By the jumping California frog, I've got it!" he told himself. "They hid the bulk of what they got from the Limited all together. Went out in a bunch to hide it. Blind-folded each other, and took turn about blinding up the trail. No one of them can go get the loot without the rest. When they want it, every one of these memoranda must be Johnny-on-the-spot before they can dig up the mazuma. No wonder Wolf Leroy searched so thorough for this bit of paper. I'll bet a stack of blue chips against Wolf's chance of heaven that he's the sorest train-robber right this moment that ever punctured a car-window."

Collins laughed softly, nor had the smile died out of his eyes when Hawkes came into the room with information to the point. He had made a round of the corrals, and discovered that the outlaws' horses had been put up at Jay Hardman's place, a tumble-down feed-station on the edge of town.

"Jay didn't take kindly to my questions," Hawkes explained, "but after a little rock-me-to-sleep-mother talk I soothed him down some, and cut the trail of Wolf Leroy and his partners. The old man give me several specimens of langwidge unwashed and uncombed when I told him Wolf and York was outlaws and train-robbers. Didn't believe a word of it, he said. 'Twas just like the fool officers to jump an innocent party. I told Jay to keep his shirt on--he could turn his wolf lose when they framed up that he was in it. Well, sir! I plumb thought for a moment he was going to draw on me when I said that. Say he must be the fellow that's in on that mine, with Leroy and York Neil. He's a big, long-haired guy."

Collins' eyes narrowed to slits, as they always did when he was thinking intensely. Were their suspicions of the showman about to be justified? Did Jay Hardman's interest in Leroy have its source merely in their being birds of a feather, or was there a more direct community of lawlessness between them? Was he a member of Wolf Leroy's murderous gang? Three men had joined in the chase of Dailey, but the tracks had told him that only two horses had galloped from the scene of the murder into the night. The inference left to draw was that a local accomplice had joined them in the chase of Scott, and had slipped back home after the deed had been finished.

What more likely than that Hardman had been this accomplice? Hawkes said he was a big long-haired fellow. So was the man that had held up the engineer of the Limited. He was--"J. H. begins hear." Like a flash the ill-written scrawl jumped to his sight. "J. H." was Jay Hardman. What luck!

The doctor finished his work, and Collins tested his leg gingerly. "Del, I'm going over to have a little talk with the old man. Want to go along?"

"You bet I do, Val"--from Del Hawkes.

"You mustn't walk on that leg for a week or two yet, Mr. Collins," the doctor explained, shaking his head.

"That so, doctor? And it nothing but a nice clean flesh-wound! Sho! I've a deal more confidence in you than that. Ready, Del?"

"It's at your risk then, Mr. Collins."

"Sure." The sheriff smiled. "I'm living at my own risk, doctor. But I'd a heap rather be alive than daid, and take all the risk that's coming, too. But since you make a point of it, I'll do most of my walking on a bronco's back."

They found Mr. Hardman just emerging from the stable with a saddle-pony when they rode into the corral. At a word from Collins, Hawkes took the precaution to close the corral gate.

The fellow held a wary position on the farther side of his horse, the while he ripped out a raucous string of invectives.

"Real fluent, ain't he?" murmured Hawkes, as he began to circle round to flank the enemy.

"Stay right there, Del Hawkes. Move, you redhaired son of a brand blotter, and I'll pump holes in you!" A rifle leveled across the saddle emphasized his sentiments.

"Plumb hospitable," grinned Hawkes, coming promptly to a halt.

Collins rode slowly forward, his hand on the butt of the revolver that still lay in its scabbard. The Winchester covered every step of his progress, but he neither hastened nor faltered, though he knew his life hung in the balance. If his steely blue eyes had released for one moment the wolfish ones of the villain, if he had hesitated or hurried, he would have been shot through the head.

But the eyes of a brave man are the king of weapons. Hardman's fingers itched at the trigger he had not the courage to pull. For such an unflawed nerve he knew himself no match.

"Keep back," he screamed. "Damn it, another step and I'll fire!"

But he did not fire, though Collins rode up to him, dismounted, and threw the end of the rifle carelessly from him.

"Don't be rash, Hardman. I've come here to put you under arrest for robbing the T. P. Limited, and I'm going to do it."

The indolent, contemptuous drawl, so free of even a suggestion of the strain the sheriff must have been under, completed his victory. The fellow lowered his rifle with a peevish oath.

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Mr. Collins."

"I guess not," retorted the sheriff easily. "Del, you better relieve Mr. Hardman of his ballast. He ain't really fit to be trusted with a weapon, and him so excitable. That Winchester came awful near going off, friend. You don't want to be so careless when you're playing with firearms. It's a habit that's liable to get you into trouble."

Collins had not shaved death so closely without feeling a reaction of boyish gaiety at his adventure. It bubbled up in his talk like effervescing soda.

"Now we'll go into a committee of the whole, gentlemen, adjourn to the stable, and have a little game of 'Button, button, who's got the button?' You first, Mr. Hardman. If you'll kindly shuck

your coat and vest, we'll begin button-hunting."

They diligently searched the miscreant without hiding anything pertaining to "J. H. begins hear."

"He's bound to have it somewhere," asseverated Collins. "It don't stand to reason he was making his getaway without that paper. We got to be more thorough, Del."

Hawkes, under the direction of his friend, ripped up linings and tore away pockets from clothing. The saddle on the bronco and the saddle-blankets were also torn to pieces in vain.

Finally Hawkes scratched his poll and looked down on the wreckage. "I hate to admit it, Val, but the old fox has got us beat; it ain't on his person."

"Not unless he's got it under his skin," agreed Collins, with a grin.

"Maybe he ate it. Think we better operate and find out?"

An idea hit the sheriff. He walked up to Hardman and ordered him to open his mouth.

The jaws set like a vise.

Collins poked his revolver against the closed mouth. "Swear for us, old bird. Get a move on you."

The mouth opened, and Collins inserted two fingers. When he withdrew them they brought a set of false teeth. Under the plate was a tiny rubber bag that stuck to it. Inside the bag was a paper. And on it was written four lines in Spanish. Those lines told what he wanted to know. They, too, were part of a direction for finding hidden treasure.

The sheriff wired at once to Bucky, in Chihuahua. Translated into plain English, his cipher dispatch meant: "Come home at once. Trail getting red hot."

But Bucky did not come. As it happened, that young man had other fish to fry.

CHAPTER 9. "ADORE HAS ONLY ONE D."

After all, adventures are to the adventurous. In this prosaic twentieth century the Land of Romance still beckons to eager eyes and gallant hearts. The ruttid money-grabber may deny till he is a nerve-racked counting-machine, but youth, even to the end of time, will laugh to scorn his pessimism and venture with elastic

heel where danger and mystery offer their dubious hazards.

So it was that Bucky and his little comrade found nothing of dulness in the mission to which they had devoted themselves. In their task of winning freedom for the American immured in the Chihuahua dungeon they already found themselves in the heart of a web of intrigue, the stakes of which were so high as to carry life and death with them in the balance. But for them the sun shone brightly. It was enough that they played the game and shared the risks together. The jocund morning was in their hearts, and brought with it an augury of success based on nothing so humdrum or tangible as reason.

O'Connor carried with him to the grim fortress not only his permit for an inspection, but also a note from O'Halloran that was even more potent in effect. For Colonel Ferdinand Gabilonda, warden of the prison, had a shrewd suspicion that a plot was under way to overthrow the unpopular administration of Megales, and though he was an office-holder under the present government he had no objection to ingratiating himself with the opposition, providing it could be done without compromising himself openly. In other words, the warden was sitting on the fence waiting to see which way the cat would jump. If the insurgents proved the stronger party, he meant to throw up his hat and shout "Viva Valdez." On the other hand, if the government party crushed them he would show himself fussily active in behalf of Megales. Just now he was exerting all his diplomacy to maintain a pleasant relationship with both. Since it was entirely possible that the big Irishman O'Halloran might be the man on horseback within a very few days, the colonel was all suave words and honeyed smiles to his friend the ranger.

Indeed he did him the unusual honor of a personally conducted inspection. Gabilonda was a fat little man, with a soft, purring voice and a pompous manner. He gushed with the courteous volubility of his nation, explaining with great gusto this and that detail of the work. Bucky gave him outwardly a deferent ear, but his alert mind and eyes were scanning the prisoners they saw. The ranger was trying to find in one of these scowling, defiant faces some resemblance to the picture his mind had made of Henderson.

But Bucky looked in vain. If the man he wanted was among these he had changed beyond recognition. In the end he was forced to ask Gabilonda plainly if he would not take him to see David Henderson, as he knew a man in Arizona who was an old friend of his, and he would like to be able to tell him that he had seen his friend.

Henderson was breaking stone when O'Connor got his first glimpse of him. He continued to swing his hammer listlessly, without looking up, when the door opened to let in the warden and his guests. But something in the ranger's steady gaze drew his eyes.

They were dull eyes, and sullen, but when he saw that Bucky was an American, the fire of intelligence flashed into them.

"May I speak to him?" asked O'Connor.

"It is against the rules, senior, but if you will be brief--" The colonel shrugged, and turned his back to them, in order not to see. It must be said for Gabilonda that his capacity for blinking what he did not think it judicious to see was enormous.

"You are David Henderson, are you not?" The ranger asked, in a low voice.

Surprise filtered into the dull eyes. "That was my name," the man answered bitterly. "I have a number now."

"I come from Webb Mackenzie to get you out of this," the ranger said.

The man's eyes were no longer dull now, but flaming with hatred. "Curse him, I'll take nothing from his hands. For fifteen years he has let me rot in hell without lifting a hand for me."

"He thought you dead. It can all be explained. It was only last week that the mystery of your disappearance was solved."

"Then why didn't he come himself? It was to save his little girl I got myself into this place. If I had been in his shoes I would have come if I'd had to crawl on my hands and knees."

"He doesn't know yet you are here. I wrote him simply that I knew where you were, and then I came at once." Bucky glanced round warily at the fat colonel gazing placidly out of the barred window. "I mean to rescue you, and I knew if he were here his impulsiveness would ruin everything."

"Do you mean it? For God's sake! don't lie to me. If there's no hope for me, don't say there is." The prisoner's voice shook and his hands trembled. He was only the husk of the man he had been, but it did Bucky's heart good to see that the germ of life was still in him. Back in Arizona, on the Rocking Chair Ranch, with the free winds of the plains beating on his face, he would pick up again the old strands of his broken life, would again learn to love the lowing of cattle and the early morning call of the hooter to his mate.

"I mean it. As sure as I stand here I'll get you out, or, if I don't, Webb Mackenzie will. We're calling the matter to the attention of the United States Government, but we are not going to wait till that time to free you. Keep up your courage, man. It is only for a little time now."

Tears leaped to the prisoner's eyes. He had been a game man in

the dead years that were past, none gamer in Texas, and he could still face his jailers with an impassive face; but this first kindly word from his native land in fifteen years to the man buried alive touched the fount of his emotions. He turned away and leaned against the grating of his cell, his head resting on his forearm. "My God! man, you don't know what it means to me. Sometimes I think I shall go mad and rave. After all these years But I know you'll fail--It's too good to be true," he finished quietly.

"I'll not fail, though I may be delayed. But I can't say more. Gabilonda is coming back. Next time I see you it will be to take you out to freedom. Think of that always, and believe it."

Gabilonda bowed urbanely. "If the senor has seen all he cares to of this department we will return to the office," he suggested suavely.

"Certainly, colonel. I can't appreciate too much your kindness in allowing me to study your system so carefully."

"Any friend of my friend the Senor O'Halloran is cherished deeply in my heart," came back the smiling colonel, with a wave of his plump, soft hand.

"I am honored, sir, to receive such consideration at the hands of so distinguished a soldier as Colonel Gabilonda," bowed Bucky gravely, in his turn, with the most flowery Spanish he could muster.

There was another half-hour of the mutual exchange of compliments before O'Connor could get away. Alphonse and Gaston were fairly outdone, for the Arizonian, with a smile hidden deep behind the solemnity of his blue eyes, gave as good as he got. When he was at last fairly in the safety of his own rooms he gave way to limp laughter while describing to his little friend that most ceremonious parting.

"He pressed me to his manly bay window, Curly, and allowed he was plumb tickled to death to have met me. Says I, coming back equal strong, 'twas the most glorious day of my life."

"Oh, I know YOU," answered young Hardman, with a smile.

"A friend of his friend O'Halloran--"

"Mr. O'Halloran was here while you were away. He seemed very anxious to see you; said he would call again in an hour. I think it must be important."

Came at that instant O'Halloran's ungentle knock, on the heels of which his red head came through the open door.

"You're the very lad I'm wanting to see, Bucky," he announced, and followed this declaration by locking all the doors and beckoning him to the center of the room.

"Is that tough neck of yours aching again, Reddy?" inquired his friend whimsically.

"It is that, me bye. There's the very devil to pay," he whispered.

"Cough it out, Mike."

"That tyrant Megales is onto our game. Somebody's leaked, or else he has a spy in our councils--as we have in his, the ould scoundrel."

"I see. Your spy has told you that his spy has reported to him--"

"That the guns are to be brought in to-night. He has sent out a guard to bring them in safely to him. If he gets them, our game is up, me son, and you can bet your last nickle on that."

"If he gets them! Is there a chance for us?"

"Glory be! there is. You see, he doesn't know that we know what he has done. For that reason he sent out only a guard of forty men. If he sent more we would suspect what he was doing, ye see. That is the way the old fox reasoned. But forty--they were able to slip out of the city on last night's train in civilian's clothes and their arms in a couple of coffins."

"Why didn't he send a couple of hundred men openly, and at the same time arrest you all?"

"That doesn't suit his book at all. For one thing, he probably doesn't know all of us, and he doesn't want to bag half of us and throw the rest into immediate rebellion. It's his play not to force the issue until after the election, Bucky. He controls all the election machinery and will have himself declared reelected, the old scamp, notwithstanding that he's the most unpopular man in the State. To precipitate trouble now would be just foolishness, he argues. So he'll just capture our arms, and after the election give me and my friends quiet hell. Nothing public, you know--just unfortunate assassinations that he will regret exceedingly, me bye. But I have never yit been assassinated, and, on principle, I object to being trated so. It's very destructive to a man's future usefulness."

"And so?" laughed the ranger.

"And so we've arranged to take a few lads up the line and have a train hold-up. I'm the robber-in-chief. Would ye like to be second in command of the lawless ruffians, me son?"

Bucky met his twinkling eye gaily. "Mr. O'Connor is debarred from taking part in such an outrageous affair by international etiquette, but he knows a gypsy lad would be right glad to join, I reckon."

"Bully for him. If you'll kindly have him here I'll come around and collect him this evening at eight-thirty sharp."

"I hope you'll provide a pleasant entertainment for him."

"We'll do our best," grinned the revolutionist. "Music provided by Megales' crack military band. A lively and enjoyable occasion guaranteed to all who attend. Your friend will meet some of the smartest officers in the State. It promises to be a most sumptuous affair."

"Then my friend accepts with pleasure."

After the conspirator had gone, Frank spoke up. "You wouldn't go away with him and leave me here alone, would you?"

"I ce'tainly shouldn't take you with me, kid. I don't want my little friend all shot up by greasers."

"If you're going, I want to go, too. Supposing-- if anything were to happen to you, what could I do?"

"Leave the country by the next train. Those are the orders."

"You're always talking about a square deal. Do you think that is one? I might say that I don't want YOU shot. You don't care anything about my feelings." The soft voice had a little break in it that Bucky loved.

He walked across to his partner, that rare, tender smile of his in his eyes. "If I'm always talking about a square deal I reckon I have got to give you one. Now, what would you think a square deal, Curly? Would it be square for me to let my friend O'Halloran stand all the risk of this and then me take the reward when Henderson has been freed by him? Would that be your notion of the right telling?"

"I didn't say that, though I don't see why you have to mix yourself up in his troubles. Why should you go out and kill these soldiers that haven't injured you?"

"I'm not going to kill any of them," he smiled "Besides, that isn't the way I look at it. This fellow Megales is a despot. He has made out to steal the liberty of the people from them. President Diaz can't interfere because the old rascal governor does everything with that smooth, oily way of his under cover of law. It's up to some of the people to put up a good strong kick

for themselves. I ain't a bit sorry to give them the loan of my foot while they are doing it."

"Then can't I go, too? I don't want to be left alone here and you away fighting."

Bucky's eyes gleamed. He dared an experiment in an indifferent drawl. "Whyfor don't you want to stay alone, kid? Are you afraid for yourself or for me?"

His partner's cheeks were patched with roses. Shyly the long, thick lashes lifted and let the big brown eyes meet his blue ones. "Maybe I'm afraid for both of us."

"Would you care if one of their pills happened along in the scrimmage and put me out of business? Honest, would you?"

"You haven't any right to talk that way. It's cruel," was the reply that burst from the pretty lips, and he noticed that at his suggestion the roses had died from soft cheeks.

"Well, I won't talk that way any more, little partner," he answered gaily, taking the small hand in his. "For reasons good. I'm fire-proof. The Mexican bullet hasn't been cast yet that can find Bucky O'Connor's heart."

"But you mustn't think that, either, and be reckless," was the next injunction. The shy laugh rang like music. "That's why I want to go along, to see that you behave yourself properly."

"Oh, I'll behave," he laughed; for the young man found it very easy to be happy when those sweet eyes were showing concern for him. "I've got several good reasons why I don't aim to get bumped off just yet. Heaps of first-rate reasons. I'll tell you what some of them are one of these days," he dared to add.

"You had better tell me now." The gaze that fell before his steady eyes was both shy and eager.

"No, I reckon I'll wait, Curly," he answered, turning away with a long breath. "Well, we better go out and get some grub, tortillas and frijoles, don't you think?"

"Just as you like." The lad's breath was coming a little fast. They had been on the edge of some moment of intimacy that Bucky's partner both longed for and dreaded. "But you have not told me yet whether I can go with you."

"You can't. I'm sorry. I'd like first-rate to take you, if you want to go, but I can't do it. I hate to disappoint you if you're set on it, but I've got to, kid. Anything else you want I'll be glad to do."

He added this last because Frank looked so broken. hearted about it.

"Very well." Swift as a flash came the demand: "Tell me these heaps of first-rate reasons you were mentioning just now."

Under the sun-tan he flushed. "I reckon I'll have to make another exception, Curly. Those reasons ain't ripe yet for telling."

"Then if you are--if anything happens--I'll never know them. And you promised you would tell me--you, who pretend to hate a liar so," she scoffed.

"Would it do if I wrote those reasons and left them in a sealed envelope? Then in case anything happened you could open it and satisfy that robust curiosity of yours." He recognized that he had trapped himself, and he was making the best bargain left him.

"You may write them, if you like. But I'm going to open the letter, anyway. The reasons belong to me now. You promised."

"I'll make a new deal with you, then," he smiled. "I'll take awful good care of myself to-night if you'll promise not to open the envelope for two weeks unless--well, unless that something happens that we ain't expecting."

"Call it a week, and it's a bargain."

"Better say when we're back across the line again. That may be inside of three days, if everything goes well," he threw in as a bait.

"Done. I'm to open the letter when we cross the line into Texas."

Bucky shook the little hand that was offered him and wished mightily that he had the right to celebrate with more fervent demonstrations.

That afternoon the ranger wrote with a good deal of labor the letter he had promised. It appeared to be a difficult thing for him to deliver himself even on paper of those good and sufficient reasons. He made and destroyed no less than half a dozen openings before at last he was fairly off. Meanwhile, Master Frank, busy over some alterations in Bucky's gypsy suit, took pleasure in deriding with that sweet voice the harassed correspondent.

"It might be a love letter from the pains you take with it. Would you like me to come and help you with it?" the sewer railed merrily.

"I ain't used to letter writing much," apologized the scribe, wiping his bedewed brow, which had suddenly gone a shade more flushed.

"Apparently not. I expect, from the time you give it, the result will be a literary classic."

"Don't you disturb me, Curly, or I'll never get done," implored the tortured ranger.

"You're doing well. You've only been an hour and a half on six lines," the tormentor mocked.

Womanlike, she was quite at her ease, since he was very far indeed from being at his. Yet she had a problem of her own she was trying to decide.

Had he discovered, after all, that she was not a boy, and had his reasons--the ones he was trying to tell in that disturbing letter--anything to do with that discovery? Such a theory accounted for several things she had noticed in him of late. There was an added respect in his manner for her. He never now invaded the room recognized as hers without a specific invitation, nor did he seem any longer to chafe at the little personal marks of fastidiousness that had at first appeared to annoy him. To be sure, he ordered her about, just as he had been in the habit of doing at first. But it was conceivable that this might be a generous blind to cover up his knowledge of her sex.

"How do you spell guessed--one s or two?" he presently asked, out of the throes of composition.

She spelled it, and added demurely: "Adore has only one d"

Bucky laid down his pen and pretended to glare at him. "You young rascal, what do you mean by bothering me like that? Act like that, you young imp, and you'll never grow up to be a gentleman."

Their glances caught and held, the minds of each of them busy over that last prediction of his. For one long instant masks were off and both were trying to find an answer to a question in the eyes opposite. Then voluntarily each gaze released the other in a confusion of sweet shame. For the beating of a lash, soul had looked into naked soul, all disguise stripped from them. She knew that he knew. Yet in that instant when his secret was surprised from him another secret, sweeter than the morning song of birds, sang its way into both their hearts.

CHAPTER 10. THE HOLD-UP OF THE M. C. P. FLYER

Agua Negra is twelve miles from Chihuahua as the crow flies, but if one goes by rail one twists round thirty sinuous miles of rough mountainous country in the descent from the pass to the capital of the State. The ten men who slipped singly or by twos

out of the city in the darkness that evening and met at the rendezvous of the Santa Dolorosa mission did not travel by rail to the pass, but followed a horseback trail which was not more than half the distance.

At the mission O'Halloran and his friend found gathered half a dozen Mexicans, one or two of them tough old campaigners, the rest young fellows eager for the excitement of their first active service.

"Is Juan Valdez here yet?" asked O'Halloran, peering around in the gloom.

"Not yet; nor Manuel Garcia," answered a young fellow.

Bucky was introduced to those present under the name of Alessandro Perdoza, and presently also to the two missing members of the party who arrived together a few moments later. Juan Valdez was the son of the candidate who was opposing the reelection of Megales, and Manuel Garcia was his bosom friend, and the young man to whom his sister was engaged. They were both excellent types of the honorable aristocratic young Mexican. They were lightly built, swarthy young men, possessed of that perfect grace and courtesy which can be found at its best in the Spanish races. Gay, handsome young cavaliers as they were, filled with the pride of family, Bucky thought them almost ideal companions for such a harebrained adventure as this. The ranger was a social democrat to the marrow. He had breathed in with the Southwest breezes the conviction that every man must stand on his own bottom, regardless of adventitious circumstance, but he was not fool enough to think all men equal. It had been his experience that some men, by grace of the strength in them, were born to be masters and others by their weakness to be servants. He knew that the best any civilization can offer a man is a chance. Given that, it is up to every man to find his own niche.

But though he had no sense of deference to what is known as good blood, Bucky had too much horse sense to resent the careless, half-indifferent greeting which these two young sprouts of aristocracy bestowed on the rest of the party. He understood that it was the natural product of their education and of that of the others.

"Are we all here?" asked Garcia.

"All here," returned O'Halloran briskly. "Rodrigo will guide the party. I ride next with Senor Garcia. Perdoza and Senor Valdez will bring up the rear. Forward, gentlemen, and may the Holy Virgin bring a happy termination to our adventure." He spoke in Mexican, as they all did, though for the next two hours conversation was largely suspended, owing to the difficulty of the precipitous trail they were following.

Coming to a bit of the road where they were able to ride two abreast, O'Connor made comment on the smallness of their number. "O'Halloran must have a good deal of confidence in his men. Forty to ten is rather heavy odds, is it not, senor?"

"There are six more to join us at the pass. The wagons have gone round by the road and the drivers will assist in the attack."

"Of course it is all in the surprise. I have seen three men hold up a train with five hundred people on it. Once I knew a gang to stick up a treasure train with three heavily armed guards protecting the gold. They got them right, with the drop on them, and it was good-by to the mazuma."

"Yes, if they have had any warning or if our plans slip a cog anywhere we shall be repulsed to a certainty."

By the light of a moon struggling out from behind rolling clouds Bucky read eleven-thirty on his watch when the party reached Agua Negra. It was still thirty minutes before the Flyer was due, and O'Halloran disposed his forces with explicit directions as to the course to be followed by each detail. Very rapidly he sketched his orders as to the present disposition of the wagons and the groups of attackers. When the train slowed down to remove the obstacles they placed on the track, Garcia and another young man were to command parties covering the train from both sides, while Rodrigo and one of the drivers were to cover the engineer and the fireman.

O'Halloran himself, with Bucky and young Valdez, rode rapidly in the direction of the approaching train. At Concho the engine would take on water for the last stiff climb of the ascent, and here he meant to board the train unnoticed, just as it was pulling out, in order to emphasize the surprise at the proper moment and render resistance useless. If the troopers were all together in the car next the one with the boxes of rifles, he calculated that they might perhaps be taken unawares so sharply as to render bloodshed unnecessary.

Concho was two miles from the summit, and when the three men galloped down to the little station the headlight of the approaching engine was already visible. They tied their horses in the mesquit and lurked in the thick brush until the engine had taken water and the signal for the start was given. Then O'Halloran and Bucky slipped across in the darkness to the train and swung themselves to the platform of the last car. To Valdez, very much against his will, had fallen the task of taking the horses back to Agua Negra. Since the track wound round the side of the mountain in such a way as to cover five miles in making the summit from Concho, the young Mexican had ample time to get back to the scene of action before the train arrived.

The big Irishman and Bucky rested quietly in the shadows of the

back platform for some time. Then they entered the last car, passed through it, and on to the next. In the sleeper they met the conductor, but O'Halloran quietly paid their fares and passed forward. As they had hoped, the whole detail of forty men were in a special car next to the one containing the arms consigned to Michael O'Halloran, importer of pianos.

Lieutenant Chaves, in charge of the detail sent out to see that the rifles reached Governor Megales instead of the men who had paid for them, was finding his assignment exceedingly uninteresting. There was at Chihuahua a certain black-eyed dona with whom he had expected to enjoy a pleasant evening's flirtation. It was confounded luck that it had fallen to him to take charge of the escort for the guns. He had endured in consequence an unpleasant day of dusty travel and many hours of boredom through the evening. Now he was cross and sleepy, which latter might also be said of the soldiers in general.

He was connected with a certain Arizona outfit which of late had been making money very rapidly. If one more coup like the last could be pulled off safely by his friend Wolf Leroy he would resign from the army and settle down. It would then no longer be necessary to bore himself with such details as this.

There was, of course, no necessity for alertness in his present assignment. The opposition was scarcely mad enough to attempt taking the guns from forty armed men. Chaves devoutly hoped they would, in order that he might get a little glory, at least, out of the affair. But of course such an expectation would be ridiculous. No, the journey would continue to be humdrum to the end, he was wearily assured of that, and consequently attempted to steal a half hour's sleep while propped against a window with his feet in the seat opposite.

The gallant lieutenant was awakened by a cessation of the drumming of the wheels. Opening his eyes, he saw that the train was no longer in motion. He also saw--and his consciousness of that fact was much more acute--the rim of a revolver about six inches from his forehead. Behind the revolver was a man, a young Spanish gypsy, and he was offering the officer very good advice.

"Don't move, sir. No cause for being uneasy. Just sit quiet and everything will be serene. No, I wouldn't reach for that revolver, if I were you."

Chaves cast a hurried eye down the car, and at the end of it beheld the huge Irishman, O'Halloran, dominating the situation with a pair of revolvers. Chaves' lambs were ranged on either side of the car, their hands in the air. Back came the lieutenant's gaze to the impassive face in front of him. Taken by and large, it did not seem an auspicious moment for garnering glory. He decided to take the advice bestowed on him.

"Better put your hands up and vote with your men. Then you won't be tempted to play with your gun and commit suicide. That's right, sir. I'll relieve you of it if you don't object."

Since the lieutenant had no objections to offer, the smiling gypsy possessed himself of the revolver. At the same instant two more men appeared at the end of the car. One of them was Juan Valdez and another one of the mule-skinners. Simultaneously with their entrance rang out a most disconcerting fusillade of small arms in the darkness without. Megales' military band, as O'Halloran had facetiously dubbed them to the ranger, arrived at the impression that there were about a thousand insurgents encompassing the train. Chaves choked with rage, but the rest of the command yielded to the situation very tranquilly, with no desire to offer themselves as targets to this crackling explosion of Colts. Muy bien! After all, Valdez was a better man to serve than the fox Megales.

Swiftly Valdez and the wagon driver passed down the car and gathered the weapons from the seats of the troopers. Raising a window, they passed them out to their friends outside. Meanwhile, the sound of an axe could be heard battering at the door of the next car, and presently the crash of splintering wood announced that an entrance had been forced.

"Breaking furniture, I reckon," drawled Bucky, in English, for the moment forgetful of the part he was playing. "I hope they'll be all right careful of them pianos and not mishandle them so they'll get out of tune."

"So, senior, you are American," said Chaves, in English, with a sinister smile.

O'Connor shrugged, answering in Spanish: "I am Romany. Who shall say, whether American, or Spanish, or Bohemian? All nations call to me, but none claim me, senior."

The lieutenant continued to smile his meaning grin. "Yet you are American," he persisted.

"Oh, as you please. I am what you will, lieutenant."

"You speak the English like a native."

"You are complimentary."

Chaves lifted his eyebrows. "For believing that you are in costume, that you are wearing a disguise, Mr. American?"

Bucky laughed outright, and offered a gay retort. "Believe me, lieutenant, I am no more disguised as a gypsy than you are as a soldier."

The Mexican officer flushed with anger at the suggestion of contempt in the careless voice. His generalship was discredited. He had been outwitted and made to yield without a blow. But to have it flung in his teeth with such a debonair insolence threw him into a fury.

"If you and I ever meet on equal terms, senior, God pity you," he ground out between his set jaws.

Bucky bowed, answering the furious anger in the man's face as much as his words. "I shall try to be careful not to offer myself a sheath for a knife some dark night," he scoffed.

A whistle blew, and then again. The revolver of Bucky rang out almost on the same instant as those of O'Halloran. Under cover of the smoke they slipped out of the car just as Rodrigo leaped down from the cab of the engine. Slowly the train began to back down the incline in the same direction from which it had come. The orders given the engineer were to move back at a snail's pace until he reached Concho again. There he was to remain for two hours. That Chaves would submit to this O'Halloran did not for a moment suspect.

But the track would be kept obstructed till six o'clock in the morning, and a sufficient guard would wait in the underbrush to see that the right of way was not cleared. In the meantime the wagons would be pushing toward Chihuahua as fast as they could be hurried, and the rest of the riders would guard them till they separated on the outskirts of the town and slipped quietly in. In order to forestall any telegraphic communication between Lieutenant Chaves and his superiors in the city, the wires had been cut. On the face of it, the guns seemed to be safe. Only one thing had O'Halloran forgotten. Eight miles across the hills from Concho ran the line of the Chihuahua Northern.

CHAPTER 11. "STONE WALLS DO NOT A PRISON MAKE."

The two young Spanish aristocrats rode in advance of the convoy on the return trip, while O'Halloran and Bucky brought up the rear. The roads were too rough to permit of rapid travel, but the teams were pushed as fast as it could safely be done in the dark. It was necessary to get into the city before daybreak, and also before word reached Megales of the coup his enemies had made. O'Halloran calculated that this could be done, but he did not want to run his margin of time too fine.

"When the governor finds we have recaptured the arms, will he not have all your leaders arrested today and thrown into the prison?" asked the ranger.

"He will--if he can lay hands on them. But he had better catch

his hare before he cooks it. I'm thinking that none of us will be at home to-day when his men come with a polite invitation to go along with them."

"Then he'll spend all day strengthening his position. With this warning he will be a fool if he can't make himself secure before night, when the army is on his side."

"Oh, the army is on his side, is it? Now, what would you say if most of the officers were ready to come over to us as soon as we declare ourselves? And ye speak of strengthening his position. The beauty of his position, me lad, from our point of view, is that he doesn't know his weak places. He'll be the most undeceived man in the State when the test comes--unless something goes wrong."

"When do you propose to attack the prison?"

"To-night. To-morrow is election day, and we want all the byes we can on hand to help us out."

"Do you expect to throw the prison doors wide open--let every scoundrel in Chihuahua loose on the public."

"We couldn't do that, since half of them are loose already," retorted O'Halloran dryly. "And as for the rest--we expect to make a selection, me son, to weed out a few choice ruffians and keep them behind the bars. But if ye know anything about the prisons of this country, you're informed, sir, that half the poor fellows behind bars don't belong there so much as the folk that put them there. I'm Irish, as ye are yourself, and it's me instinct to fight for the under dog. Why shouldn't the lads rotting behind those walls have another chance at the game? By the mother of Moses! they shall, if Mike O'Halloran has anything to say about it."

"You ce'tainly conduct your lawful elections in a beautifully lawless way," grinned the ranger.

"And why not? Isn't the law made for man?"

"For which man--Megales?"

"In order to give the greatest liberty to each individual man. But here comes young Valdez riding back as if he were in a bit of a hurry."

The filibuster rode forward and talked with the young man for a few minutes in a low voice. When he rejoined Bucky he nodded his head toward the young man, who was again headed for the front of the column. "There's the best lad in the State of Chihuahua. He's a Mexican, all right, but he has as much sense as a white man. He doesn't mix issues. Now, the lad's in love with Carmencita

Megales, the prettiest black-eyed lass in Mexico, and, by the same token, so is our friend Chaves, who just gave us the guns a little while ago. But Valdez is a man from the heel of him to the head. Miss Carmencita has her nose in the air because Juan doesn't snuggle up to our Megales and flatter him the same way young Chaves does. So the lad is persona non grata at court with the lady, and that tin soldier who gave up the guns without a blow gets the lady's smiles. But it's my opinion that, for all her haughty ways, Miss would rather have our honest fighting lad than a roomful of the imitation toy kind."

A couple of miles from the outskirts of the city the wagons separated, and each was driven to the assigned place for the hiding of the rifles till night. At the edge of the town Bucky made arrangements to join his friend again at the monument in the centre of the plaza within fifteen minutes. He was to bring his little partner with him, and O'Halloran was to take them to a place where they might lie in hiding till the time set for the rising.

"I would go with ye, but I want to take charge of the unloading. Don't lose any time, lad, for as soon as Megales learns of what has happened his fellows will scour the town for every mother's son of us. Of course you have been under surveillance, and it's likely he'll try to bag you with the rest of us. It was a great piece of foolishness me forgetting about the line of the Chihuahua Northern and its telegraph. But there's a chance Chaves has forgot, too. Anyway, get back as soon as you can; after we're hidden, it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack to put his fat finger on us."

Bucky went singing up the stairway of the hotel to his room. He was keen to get back to his little friend after the hazards of the night, eager to see the brown eyes light up with joy at sight of him and to hear the soft voice with the trailing inflection drawl out its shy questions. So he took the stairs three at a time, with a song on his lips and in his heart.

"'Tis you shall reign, shall reign alone
My dark Rosaleen! My own Rosaleen!
'Tis you shall have the golden throne,
'Tis you shall reign, and reign alone
My dark Rosaleen!"

O'Connor, somewhat out of breath, was humming the last line when he passed through the gypsy apartments and opened his own door, to meet one of the surprises of his life. Yet he finished the verse, though he was looking down the barrels of two revolvers in the hands of a pair of troopers, and though Lieutenant Chaves, very much at his ease, sat on the table dangling his feet.

Bucky's sardonic laughter rang out gayly. "I certainly didn't expect to meet you here, lieutenant. May I ask if you have

wings?"

"Not exactly, señor. But it is quite possible you may have before twenty-four hours," came the swift retort.

"Interesting, if true," remarked the ranger carelessly, tossing his gloves on the bed. "And may I ask to what I am indebted for the pleasure of a visit from you?"

"I am returning your call, sir, and at the very earliest opportunity. I assure you that I have been in the city less than ten minutes, Señor whatever-you-choose-to-call-yourself. My promptness I leave you to admire."

"Oh, you're prompt enough, lieutenant. I noticed that when you handed over your gun to me so lamblike." He laughed it out flippantly, buoyantly, though it was on his mind to wonder whether the choleric little officer might not kill him out of hand for it.

But Chaves merely folded his arms and looked sternly at the American with a manner very theatrical. "Miguel, disarm the prisoner," he ordered.

"So I'm a prisoner," mused Bucky aloud. "And whyfor, lieutenant?"

"Stirring up insurrection against the government. The prisoner will not talk," decreed his captor, a frowning gaze attempting to quell him.

But here the popinjay officer reckoned without his host, for that gentleman had the most indomitable eyes in Arizona. It was not necessary for him to stiffen his will to meet the other's attack. His manner was still lazy, his gaze almost insolent in its indolence, but somewhere in the blue eyes was that which told Chaves he was his master. The Mexican might impotently rebel--and did; he might feed his vanity with the swiftness of his revenge, but in his heart he knew that the moment was not his, after all, or that it was his at least with no pleasure unalloyed.

"The prisoner will not talk," repeated Bucky, with drawling mockery. "Sure he will, general. There's several things he's awful curious to know. One of them is how you happen to be Johnnie-on-the-spot so opportune."

The lieutenant's dignity melted before his vanity. Having so excellent a chance to sun the latter, he delivered himself of an oration. After all, silent contempt did not appear to be the best weapon to employ with this impudent fellow.

"Señor, no Chaves ever forgets an insult. Last night you, a common American, insulted me grossly--me, Lieutenant Ferdinand Chaves, me, of the bluest Castilian blood." He struck himself

dramatically on the breast. "I submit, senor, but I vow revenge. I promised myself to spit on you, to spit on your Stars and Stripes, the flag of a nation of dirty traders. Ha! I do so now in spirit. The hour I have longed for is come."

Bucky took one step forward. His eyes had grown opaque and flinty. "Take care, you cur."

Swiftly Chaves hurried on without pressing the point. He had a prophetic vision of his neck in the vise grip of those brown, sinewy hands, and, though his men would afterward kill the man, small good would he get from that if the life were already squeezed out of him.

"And so what do I do? I think, and having thought I act with the swiftness of a Chaves. How? I ride across country. I seize a hand car. My men pump me to town on the roadbed of the Northern. I telephone to the hotels and find where Americans are staying. Then I come here like the wind, arrest your friend, and send him to prison, arrest you also and send you to the gallows."

"That's real kind of you, general," replied Bucky, in irony sportive. "But you really are putting yourself out too much for me. I reckon I'll not trouble you to go so far. By the way, did I understand you to say you had arrested a friend of mine?"

Indifferently he flung out the question, if his voice were index of his feeling, but his heart was pumping faster than it normally ought.

"He is in prison, where you will shortly join him. Soldiers, to the commandant with your captive."

If Bucky had had any idea of attempting escape, he now abandoned it at once. The place of all places where he most ardently desired to be at that moment was in the prison with his little comrade. His desire marched with that of Chaves so far, and the latter could not hurry him there too fast to suit him.

One feature of the situation made him chuckle, and that was this: The fiery lieutenant, intent first of all on his revenge, had given first thought to the capture of the man who had made mincemeat of his vanity and rendered him a possible subject of ridicule to his fellow officers. So eager had he been to accomplish this that he had failed as yet to notify his superiors of what had happened, with the result that the captured guns had been safely smuggled in and hidden. Bucky thought he could trust O'Halloran to see that he did not stay long behind bars and bolts, unless indeed the game went against that sanguine and most cheerful plotter. In which event--well, that was a contingency that would certainly prove embarrassing to the ranger. It might indeed turn out to be a good deal more than embarrassing in the end. The thing that he had done would bear a plain name if the

Megales faction won the day--and the punishment for it would be easy to guess. But it was not of himself that O'Connor was thinking. He had been in tight places before and squeezed safely out. But his little friend, the one he loved better than his life, must somehow be extricated, no matter how the cards fell.

The ranger was taken at once before General Carlo, the ranking army officer at Chihuahua, and, after a sharp preliminary examination, was committed to prison. The impression that O'Connor got of Carlo was not a reassuring one. The man was a military despot, apparently, and a stickler for discipline. He had a hanging face, and, in the Yaqui war, had won the nickname of 'the butcher' for his merciless treatment of captured natives. If Bucky were to get the same short shrift as they did--and he began to suspect as much when his trial was set for the same day before a military tribunal--it was time for him to be setting what few worldly affairs he had in order. Technically, Megales had a legal right to have him put to death and the impression lingered with Bucky that the sly old governor would be likely to do that very thing and later be full of profuse regrets to the United States Government that inadvertently a citizen of the great republic had been punished by mistake.

Bucky was registered and receipted for at the prison office, after which he was conducted to his cell. The corridors dripped as he followed under ground the guide who led the way with a flickering lantern. It was a gruesome place to contemplate as a permanent abode. But the young American knew that his stay here would be short, whether the termination of it were liberty or the gallows.

Reaching the end of a narrow, crooked corridor that sloped downward, the turnkey unlocked a ponderous iron door with a huge key, and one of the guards following at Bucky's heels, pushed him forward. He fell down two or three steps and came to a sprawling heap on the floor of the cell.

From the top of the steps came a derisive laugh as the door swung to and left him in utter darkness.

Stiffly the ranger got to his knees and was about to rise when a sound stopped him. Something was panting in deep breaths at the other side of the cell. A shiver of terror went goose-quilling down O'Connor's back. Had they locked him up with some wild beast, to be torn to pieces? Or was this the ghost of some previous occupant? In such blackness of gloom it was easy to believe, or, at least, to imagine impossible conceptions that the light of day would have scattered in an instant. He was afraid--afraid to the marrow.

And then out of the darkness came a small, trembling voice: "Are you a prisoner, too, sir?"

Bucky wanted to shout aloud his relief--and his delight. The sheer joy of his laughter told him how badly he had been frightened. That voice--were he sunk in twice as deep and dark an inferno--he would know it among a thousand. He groped his way forward toward it.

"Oh, little pardner, I'm plumb tickled to death you ain't a ghost," he laughed.

"It is--Bucky?" The question joyfully answered itself.

"Right guess. Bucky it is."

He had hold of her hands by this time, was trying to peer down into the happy-brown eyes he knew were scanning him. "I can't see you yet, Curly Haid, but it's sure you, I reckon. I'll have to pass my hand over your face the way a blind man does," he laughed, and, greatly daring, he followed his own suggestion, and let his fingers wander across her crisp, thick hair, down her soft, warm cheeks, and over the saucy nose and laughing mouth he had often longed to kiss.

Presently she drew away shyly, but the lilt of happiness in her voice told him she was not offended. "I can see you, Bucky." The last word came as usual, with that sweet, hesitating, upward inflection that made her familiarity wholly intoxicating, even while the comradeship of it left room for an interpretation either of gay mockery or something deeper. "Yes, I can see you. That's because I have been here longer and am more used to the darkness. I think I've been here about a year." He felt her shudder. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

"No gladder than I am to feel you," he answered gayly. "It's worth the price of admission to find you here, girl o'mine."

He had forgotten the pretense that still lay between them, so far as words went when they had last parted. Nor did it yet occur to him that he had swept aside the convention of her being a boy. But she was vividly aware of it, and aware, too, of the demand his last words had made for a recognition of the relationship that existed in feeling between them.

"I knew you knew I was a girl," she murmured.

"You knew more than that," he challenged joyfully.

But, in woman's way, she ignored his frontal attack. He was going at too impetuous a speed for her reluctance. "How long have you known that I wasn't a boy--not from the first, surely?"

"I don't know why I didn't, but I didn't. I was sure locoed," he confessed. "It was when you came out dressed as a gypsy that I knew. That explained to me a heap of things I never had

understood before about you."

"It explained, I suppose, why I never had licked the stuffing out of any other kid, and why you did not get very far in making a man out of me as you promised," she mocked.

"Yes, and it explained how you happened to say you were eighteen. By mistake you let the truth slip out. Course I wouldn't believe it."

"I remember you didn't. I think you conveyed the impression to me diplomatically that you had doubts."

"I said it was a lie," he laughed. "I sure do owe you a heap of apologies for being so plumb dogmatic when you knew best. You'll have to sit down on me hard once in a while, or there won't be any living with me."

Blushingly she did some more ignoring. "That was the first time you threatened to give me a whipping," she recalled aloud.

"My goodness! Did I ever talk so foolish?"

"You did, and meant it."

"But somehow I never did it. I wonder why I didn't."

"Perhaps I was so frail you were afraid you would break me."

"No, that wasn't it. In the back of my haid somewhere there was an instinct that said: 'Bucky, you chump, if you don't keep your hands off this kid you'll be right sorry all your life.' Not being given to many ideas, I paid a heap of respect to that one."

"Well, it's too bad, for I probably needed that whipping, and now you'll never be able to give it to me."

"I shan't ever want to now."

Saucily her merry eyes shot him from under the long lashes. "I'm not so sure of that. Girls can be mighty aggravating."

"That's the way girls are meant to be, I expect," he laughed.

"But fifteen-year-old boys have to be herded back into line. There's a difference."

She rescued her hands from him and led the way to a bench that served for a seat. "Sit down here, sir. There are one or two things that I have to explain." She sat down beside him at the farther end of the bench.

"This light is so dim, I can't see you away over there," he pleaded, moving closer.

"You don't need to see me. You can hear me, can't you?"

"I reckon."

She seemed to find a difficulty in beginning, even though the darkness helped her by making it impossible for him to see her embarrassment. Presently he chuckled softly. "No, ma'am, I can't even hear you. If you're talking, I'll have to come closer."

"If you do, I'll get up. I want you to be really earnest."

"I never was more earnest in my life, Curly."

"Please, Bucky? It isn't easy to say it, and you mustn't make it harder."

"Do you have to say it, pardner?" he asked, more seriously.

"Yes, I have to say it." And swiftly she blurted it out. "Why do you suppose I came with you to Mexico?"

"I don't know." He grappled with her suggestion for a moment. "I suppose--you said it was because you were afraid of Hardman."

"Well, I wasn't. At least, I wasn't afraid that much. I knew that I would have been quite safe next time with the Mackenzies at the ranch."

"Then why was it?"

"You can't think of any reason?" She leaned forward and looked directly into his eyes--eyes as honest and as blue as an Arizona sky.

But he stood unconvicted--nay, acquitted. The one reason she had dreaded he might offer to himself had evidently never entered his head. Whatever guesses he might have made on the subject, he was plainly guiltless of thinking she might have come with him because she was in love with him.

"No, I can't think of any other reason, if the one you gave isn't the right one."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite sure, pardner."

"Think! Why did you come to Chihuahua?"

"To run down Wolf Leroy's gang and to get Dave Henderson out of prison."

"Perhaps there is a reason why I should want him out of prison, a better reason than you could possibly have."

"I don't savvy it. How can there be? You don't know him, do you? He's been in prison almost ever since you were born." And on top of his last statement Bucky's eyes began to open with a new light. "Good heavens! It can't be possible. You're not Webb Mackenzie's little girl, are you?"

She did not answer him in words, but from her neck she slipped a chain and handed it to him. On the chain hung a locket.

The ranger struck a match and examined the trinket. "It's the very missing locket. See! Here's the other one. Compare them together." He touched the spring and it opened, but the match was burned out and he had to light another. "Here's the mine map that has been lost all these years. How did you get this? Have you always had it? And how long have you known that you were Frances Mackenzie?"

His questions tumbled out one upon another in his excitement.

She laughed, answering him categorically. "I don't know, for sure. Yes, at least a great many years. Less than a week."

"But--I don't understand--"

"And won't until you give me a chance to do some of the talking," she interrupted dryly.

"That's right. I reckon I am getting off left foot first. It's your powwow now," he conceded.

"So long as I can remember exactly I have always lived with the man Hardman and his wife. But before that I can vaguely recall something different. It has always seemed like a kind of fairyland, for I was a very little tot then. But one of the things I seem to remember was a sweet, kind-eyed mother and a big, laughing father. Then, too, there were horses and lots of cows. That is about all, except that the chain around my neck seemed to have some connection with my early life. That's why I always kept it very carefully, and, after one of the lockets broke, I still kept it and the funny-looking paper inside of it."

"I don't understand why Hardman didn't take the paper," he interrupted.

"I suppose he did, and when he discovered that it held only half the secret of the mine he probably put it back in the locket. I see you have the other part."

"It was lost at the place where the robbers waited to hold up the T. P. Limited. Probably you lost it first and one of the robbers

found it."

"Probably," she said, in a queer voice.

"What was the first clue your father had had for many years about his little girl. He happened to be at Aravaipa the day you and I first met. I guess he took a fancy to me, for he asked me to take this case up for him and see if I couldn't locate you. I ran Hardman down and made him tell me the whole story. But he lied about some of it, for he told me you were dead."

"He is a born liar," the girl commented. "Well, to get on with my story. Anderson, or Hardman, as he now calls himself, except when he uses his stage name of Cavallado, went into the show business and took me with him. When I was a little bit of a girl he used to use me for all sorts of things, such as a target for his knife throwing and to sell medicine to the audience. Lots of people would buy because I was such a morsel of a creature, and I suppose he found me a drawing card. We moved all over the country for years. I hated the life. But what could I do?"

"You poor little lamb," murmured the man. "And when did you find out who you were?"

"I heard you talking to him the night you took him back to Epitaph, and then I began to piece things together. You remember you went over the whole story with him again just before we reached the town."

"And you knew it was you I was talking about?"

"I didn't know. But when you mentioned the locket and the map, I knew. Then it seemed to me that since this man Henderson had lost so many years of his life trying to save me I must do something for him. So I asked you to take me with you. I had been a boy so long I didn't think you would know the difference, and you did not. If I hadn't dressed as a girl that time you would not know yet."

"Maybe, and maybe not," he smiled. "Point is, I do know, and it makes a heap of difference to me."

"Yes, I know," she said hurriedly. "I'm more trouble now."

"That ain't it," he was beginning, when a thought brought him up short. As the daughter of Webb Mackenzie this girl was no longer a penniless outcast, but the heiress of one-half interest in the big Rocking Chair Ranch, with its fifteen thousand head of cattle. As the first he had a perfect right to love her and to ask her to marry him, but as the latter--well, that was quite a different affair. He had not a cent to bless himself with outside of his little ranch and his salary, and, though he might not question his own motives under such circumstances, there would be

plenty who would question them for him. He was an independent young man as one could find in a long day's ride, and his pride rose up to padlock his lips.

She looked across at him in shy surprise, for all the eagerness had in an instant been sponged from his face. With a hard, impassive countenance he dropped the hand he had seized and turned away.

"You were saying--" she suggested.

"I reckon I've forgot what it was. It doesn't matter, anyhow."

She was hurt, and deeply. It was all very well for her to try her little wiles to delay him, but in her heart she longed to hear the words he had been about to say. It had been very sweet to know that this brown, handsome son of Arizona loved her, very restful to know that for the first time in her life she could trustfully let her weakness lean on the strength of another. And, more than either, though she sometimes smilingly pretended to deny it to herself, was the ultimate fact that she loved him. His voice was music to her, his presence joy. He brought with him sunshine, and peace, and happiness.

He was always so reliable, so little the victim of his moods. What could have come over him now to change him in that swift instant? Was she to blame? Had she unknowingly been at fault? Or was there something in her story that had chilled him? It was characteristic of her that it was herself she doubted and not him; that it never occurred to her that her hero had feet of clay like other men.

She felt her heart begin to swell, and choked back a sob. It wrung him to hear the little breath catch, but he was a man, strong-willed and resolute. Though he dug his finger nails into his palms till the flesh was cut he would not give way to his desire.

"You're not angry at me--Bucky?" she asked softly.

"No, I'm not angry at you." His voice was cold because he dared not trust himself to let his tenderness creep into it.

"I haven't done anything that I ought not to? Perhaps you think it wasn't--wasn't nice to--to come here with you."

"I don't think anything of the kind," his hard voice answered. "I think you're a prince, if you want to know."

She smiled a little wanly, trying to coax him back into friendliness. "Then if I'm a prince you must be a princess," she teased.

"I meant a prince of good fellows" "Oh!" She could be stiff, too, if it came to that.

And at this inopportune moment the key turned harshly and the door swung open.

CHAPTER 12. A CLEAN WHITE MAN'S OPTION

The light of a lantern coming down the steps blinded them for a moment. Behind the lantern peered the yellow face of the turnkey. "Ho, there, Americano! They want you up above," the man said. "The generals, and the colonels, and the captains want a little talk with you before they hang you, senior."

The two soldiers behind the fellow cackled merrily at his wit, and the encouraged turnkey tried again.

"We shall trouble you but a little time. Only a few questions, senior, an order, and then poco tiempo, after a short walk to the gallows--paradise."

"What--what do you mean?" gasped the girl whitely.

"Never mind, muchacho. This is no affair of yours. Your turn will come later. Have no fear of that," nodded the wrinkled old parchment face.

"But--but he hasn't done anything wrong."

"Ho, ho! Let him explain that to the generals and the colonels," croaked the old fellow. "And that you may explain the sooner, senior, hurry--let your feet fly!"

Bucky walked across to the girl he loved and took her hands in his.

"If I don't come back before three hours read the letter that I wrote you yesterday, dear. I have left matches on that bench so that you may have a light. Be brave, pardner. Don't lose your nerve, whatever you do. We'll both get out of this all right yet."

He spoke in a low voice, so that the guards might not hear, and it was in kind that she answered.

"I'm afraid, Bucky; afraid away down deep. You don't half believe yourself what you say. I can't stand it to be here alone and not know what's going on. They might be--be doing what that man said, and I not know anything about it till afterward." She broke down and began to sob. "Oh, I know I'm a dreadful little coward, but I can't be like you--and you heard what he said."

"Sho! What he says is nothing. I'm an American citizen, and I reckon that will carry us through all right. Uncle Sam has awful long arms, and these greasers know it. I'm expecting to come back here again, little pardner. But if I don't make it, I want you, just as soon as they turn you loose, to go straight to your father's ranch."

"Come! This won't do. Look alive, senior," the turnkey ordered, and to emphasize his words reached a hand forward to pluck away the sobbing lad. Bucky caught his wrist and tightened on it like a vise. "Hands off, here!" he commanded quietly.

The man gave a howl of pain and nursed his hand gingerly after it was released.

"Oh, Bucky, make him let me go, too," the girl wailed, clinging to his coat.

Gently he unfastened her fingers. "You know I would if I could, Curly; but it isn't my say-so."

And with that he was gone. Ashen-faced she watched him go, and as soon as the door had closed groped her way to the bench and sank down on it, her face covered with her hands. He was going to his death. Her lover was going to his death. Why had she let him go? Why had she not done something--thought of some way to save him?

The ranger's guards led him to the military headquarters in the next street from the prison. He observed that nearly a whole company of Rurales formed the escort, and this led him to conclude that the government party was very uneasy as to the situation and had taken precautions against a possible attempt at rescue. But no such attempt was made. The sunny streets were pretty well deserted, except for a few lounging peons hardly interested enough to be curious. The air of peace, of order, sat so incongruously over the plaza that Bucky's heart fell. Surely this was the last place on earth for a revolution to make any headway of consequence. His friends were hidden away in holes and cellars, while Megales dominated the situation with his troops. To expect a reversal of the situation was surely madness.

Yet even while the thought was in his mind he caught a glimpse in a doorway of a man he recognized. It was Rodrigo, one of his allies of the previous night's escapade, and it seemed to him that the man was trying to tell him something with his eyes. If so, the meaning of his message failed to carry home, for after the ranger had passed he dared not look back again.

So far as the trial itself went, O'Connor hoped for nothing and was the less disappointed. One glance at his judges was enough to convince him of the futility of expectation. He was tried by a court-martial presided over by General Carlo. Beside him sat a

Colonel Onate and Lieutenant Chaves. In none of the three did he find any room for hope. Carlo was a hater of Americans and a butcher by temperament and choice, Chaves a personal enemy of the prisoner, and Onate looked as grim an old scoundrel as Jeffreys the hanging judge of James Stuart. Governor Megales, though not technically a member of the court, was present, and took an active part in the prosecution. He was a stout, swarthy little man, with black, beady eyes that snapped restlessly to and fro, and from his manner to the officers in charge of the trial it was plain that he was a despot even in his own official family.

The court did not trouble itself with forms of law. Chaves was both principal witness and judge, notwithstanding the protest of the prisoner. Yet what the lieutenant had to offer in the way of testimony was so tinctured with bitterness that it must have been plain to the veriest novice he was no fit judge of the case.

But Bucky knew as well as the judges that his trial was a merely perfunctory formality. The verdict was decided ere it began, and, indeed, so eager was Megales to get the farce over with that several times he interrupted the proceedings to urge haste.

It took them just fifteen minutes from the time the young American was brought into the room to find him guilty of treason and to decide upon immediate execution as the fitting punishment.

General Carlo turned to the prisoner. "Have you anything to say before I pronounce sentence of death upon you?"

"I have," answered Bucky, looking him straight in the eyes. "I am an American, and I demand the rights of a citizen of the United States."

"An American?" Incredulously Megales lifted his eyebrows. "You are a Spanish gypsy, my friend."

The ranger was fairly caught in his own trap. He had donned the gypsy masquerade because he did not want to be taken for what he was, and he had succeeded only too well. He had played into their hands. They would, of course, claim, in the event of trouble with the United States, that they had supposed him to be what his costume proclaimed him, and they would be able to make good their pretense with a very decent appearance of candor. What an idiot of sorts he had been!

"We understand each other perfectly, governor. I know and you know that I am an American. As a citizen of the United States I claim the protection of that flag. I demand that you will send immediately for the United States consul to this city."

Megales leaned forward with a thin, cruel smile on his face. "Very well, senior. Let it be as you say. Your friend, Senior O'Halloran, is the United States consul. I shall be very glad to

send for him if you can tell me where to find him. Having business with him to-day, I have despatched messengers who have been unable to find him at home. But since you know where he is, and are in need of him, perhaps you can assist me with information of value."

Again Bucky was fairly caught. He had no reason to doubt that the governor spoke truth in saying that O'Halloran was the United States consul. There were in the city as permanent residents not more than three or four citizens of the United States. With the political instinct of the Irish, it would be very characteristic of O'Halloran to work his "pull" to secure for himself the appointment. That he had not happened to mention the fact to his friend could be accounted for by reason of the fact that the duties of the office at that place were few and unimportant.

"We are waiting, senor. If you will tell us where we may send?" hinted Megales.

"I do not know any more than you do, if he is not at home."

The governor's eyes glittered. "Take care, senor. Better sharpen your memory."

"It's pretty hard to remember what one never knew," retorted the prisoner.

The Mexican tyrant brought his clinched fist slowly down on the table in front of him. "It is necessary to remember, sir. It is necessary to answer a few questions. If you answer them to our satisfaction you may yet save your life."

"Indeed!" Bucky swept his fat bulk scornfully from head to foot. "If I were what you think me, do you suppose I would betray my friends?"

"You have no option, sir. Answer my questions, or die like a dog."

"You mean that you would not think you had any option if you were in my place, but since I'm a clean white man there's an option. By God! sir, it doesn't take me a whole lot of time to make it, either. I'll see you rot in hell before I'll play Judas."

The words rang like a bell through the room, not loud, but clear and vibrant. There was a long instant's silence after the American finished speaking, and as his eyes swept from one to another of the enemy Bucky met with a surprise. On Colonel Onate's face was a haggard look of fear--surely it was fear--that lifted in relief at the young man's brave challenge. He had been dreading something, and the dread was lifted. Onate! Onate! The ranger's memory searched the past few days to locate the name. Had O'Halloran mentioned it? Was this man one of the officers

expected to join the opposition when it declared itself against Megales? He had a vague recollection of the name, and he could have heard it only through his friend.

"Was Juan Valdez a member of the party that took the rifles from Lieutenant Chaves and his escort?"

Bucky laughed out his contempt.

"Speak, sir," broke in Chaves. "Answer the governor, you dog."

"If I speak, it will be to tell you what a cur I think you."

Chaves flushed angrily and laid a hand on his revolver. "Who are you that play dice with death, like a fool?"

"My name, seh, is Bucky O'Connor."

At the words a certain fear, followed by a look of triumph, passed over the face of Chaves. It was as if he had had an unpleasant shock that had instantly proved groundless. Bucky did not at the time understand it.

"Why don't you shoot? It's about your size, you pinhead, to kill an unarmed man."

"Tell all you know and I promise you your life." It was Megales who spoke.

"I'll tell you nothing, except that I'm Bucky O'Connor, of the Arizona Rangers. Chew on that a while, governor, and see how it tastes. Kill me, and Uncle Sam is liable to ask mighty loud whyfor; not because I'm such a mighty big toad in the puddle, but because any man that stands under that flag has back of him the biggest, best, and gamest country on God's green footstool." Bucky spoke in English this time, straight as he could send it.

"In that case, I think sentence may now be pronounced, general."

"I warn you that the United States will exact vengeance for my death."

"Indeed!" Politely the governor smiled at him with a malice almost devilish. "If so, it will be after you are dead, Senor Bucky O'Connor, of the Arizona Rangers."

Colonel Onate leaned forward and whispered something to General Carlo, who shook his head and frowned. Presently the black head of Chaves joined them, and the three were in excited discussion. Arms waved like signals, as is usual among the Latin races who talk with their hands and expressive shrugs of the shoulders. Outvoted by two to one, Onate appealed to the governor, who came up and listened, frowning, to both sides of the debate. In their

excitement the voices raised, and to Bucky came snatches of phrases that told him his life hung in the balance. Carlo and Chaves were for having him executed out of hand, at latest, by sunset. The latter was especially vindictive. Indeed, it seemed to the ranger that ever since he had mentioned his name this man had set himself more malevolently to compass his death. Onate maintained, on the other hand, that their prisoner was worth more to them alive than dead. There was a chance that he might weaken before morning and tell secrets. At worst they would still have his life as a card to hold in case of need over the head of the rebels. If it should turn out that this was not needed, he could be executed in the morning as well as to-night.

It may be conceived with what anxiety Bucky listened to the whispered conversation and waited for the decision of the governor. He was a game man, noted even in a country famous for its courageous citizens, but he felt strangely weak now as he waited with that leather-crusted face of his bereft of all expression.

"Give him till morning to weaken. If he still stays obstinate, hang him in the dawn," decided the governor, his beady eyes fixed on the prisoner.

Not a flicker of the eyelid betrayed the Arizonian's emotion, but for an instant the world swam dizzily before him. Safe till morning! Before then a hundred chances might change the current of the game in his favor. How brightly the sunshine flooded the room! What a glorious world it was, after all! Through the open window poured the rich, full-throated song of a meadow lark, and the burden of its blithe song was, "How good is this life the mere living."

CHAPTER 13. BUCKY'S FIRST-RATE REASONS

How long Frances Mackenzie gave herself up to despair she never knew, but when at last she resolutely took herself in hand it seemed hours later. "Bucky told me to be brave, he told me not to lose my nerve," she repeated to herself over and over again, drawing comfort from the memory of his warm, vibrant voice. "He said he would come back, and he hates a liar. So, of course, he will come." With such argument she tried to allay her wild fears.

But on top of all her reassurances would come a swift, blinding vision of gallant Bucky being led to his death that crumpled her courage as a hammer might an empty egg shell. What was the use of her pretending all was well when at that very moment they might be murdering him? Then in her agony she would pace up and down, wringing her hands, or would beat them on the stone walls till the soft flesh was bruised and bleeding.

It was in the reaction, after one of these paroxysms of despair, that in her groping for an anchor to make fast her courage she thought of his letter.

"He said in three hours I was to read it if he didn't come back. It must be more than three hours now," she said aloud to herself, and knew a fresh dread at his prolonged absence beyond the limit he had set.

In point of fact, he had been gone less than three-quarters of an hour, but in each one of them she had lived a lifetime of pain and died many deaths.

By snatches she read her letter, a sentence or a fragment of a sentence at a time as the light served. Luckily he had left a case nearly full of matches, and one after another of them dropped, charred and burned out, before she had finished reading. After she had read it, her first love letter, she must needs go over it again, to learn by heart the sweet phrases in which he had wooed her. It was a commonplace note enough, far more neutral than the strong, virile writer who had lacked the cunning to transmit his feeling to ink and paper. But, after all, it was from him, and it told the divine message, however haltingly. No wonder she burned her little finger tips from the flame of the matches creeping nearer unheeded. No wonder she pressed it to her lips in the darkness and dreamed her happy dream in those few moments when she was lost in her love before cruel realities pressed home on her again.

"I told you, Little Curly Haid, that I had first-rate reasons for not wanting to be killed by these Mexicans. So I have, the best reasons going. But they are not ripe to tell you, and so I write them.

"I guessed your secret, little pardner, right away when I seen you in a girl's outfit. If I hadn't been blind as a bat I would have guessed it long since, for all the time my feelings were telling me mighty loud that you were the lovinest little kid Bucky had ever come across.

"I'll not leave you to guess my secret the way you did me yours, dear Curly, but right prompt I'll set down adore (with one D) and say you hit the bull's-eye that time without expecting to. But if I was saying it I would not use any French words sweetheart, but plain American. And the word would be I-o-v-e, without any D's. Now you have got the straight of it, my dear. I love you--love you--love you, from the crown of that curly hear to the soles of your little feet. What's more, you have got to love me, too, since I am,

"Your future husband,

"BUCKY O CONNOR.

"P. S.--And now, Curly, you know my first-rate reasons for not meaning to get shot up by any of these Mexican fellows."

So the letter ran, and it went to her heart directly as rain to the thirsty roots of flowers. He loved her. Whatever happened, she would always have that comfort. They might kill him, but they could not take away that. The words of an old Scotch song that Mrs. Mackenzie sang came back to her:

"The span o' life's nae large eneugh,
Nor deep eneugh the sea,
Nor braid eneugh this weary world,
To part my love frae me."

No, they could not part their hearts in this world or the next, and with this sad comfort she flung herself on the rough bed and sobbed. She would grieve still, but the wildness of her grief and despair was gone, scattered by the knowledge that however their troubles eventuated they were now one in heart.

She was roused after a long time by the sound of the huge key grating in the lock. Through the opened door a figure descended, and by an illuminating swing of the turnkey's lantern she saw that it was Bucky. Next moment the door had closed and they were in each other's arms. Bucky's stubborn pride, the remembrance of the riches which of a sudden had transformed his little partner into an heiress and set a high wall of separation between them, these were swept clean away on a great wave of love which took Bucky off his feet and left him breathless.

"I had almost given you up," she cried joyfully.

Again he passed his hand across her face. "You've been crying, little pardner. Were you crying on account of me?"

"On account of myself, because I was afraid I had lost you. Oh, Bucky, isn't it too good to be true?"

The ranger smiled, remembering that he had about fourteen hours to live, if the Megales faction triumphed. "Good! I should think it is. Bully! I've been famished to see Curly Haid again."

"And to know that everything is going to come out all right and that we love each other."

"That's right good hearing and most ce'tainly true on my side of it. But how do you happen to know it so sure?" he laughed gayly.

"Why, your letter, Bucky. It was the dearest letter. I love it."

"But you weren't to read it for three hours," he pretended to reprove, holding her at arm's length to laugh at her.

"Wasn't it three hours? It seemed ever so much longer."

"You little rogue, you didn't play fair." And to punish her he drew her soft, supple body to him in a close embrace, and for the first time kissed the sweet mouth that yielded itself to him.

"Tell me all about what happened to you," she bade him playfully, after speech was again in order.

"Sure." He caught her hand to lead her to the bench and she winced involuntarily.

"I burned it," she explained, adding, with a ripple of shy laughter: "When I was reading your letter. It doesn't really hurt, though."

But he had to see for himself and make much over the little blister that the flame of a match revealed to him. For they were both very much in love, and, in consequence, bubbling over with the foolishness that is the greatest inherited wisdom of the ages.

But though her lover had acquiesced so promptly to her demand for a full account of his adventures since leaving her, that young man had no intention of offering an unexpurgated edition of them. It was his hope that O'Halloran would storm the prison during the night and effect a rescue. If so, good; if not, there was no need of her knowing that for them the new day would usher in fresh sorrow. So he gave her an account of his trial and its details, told her how he had been convicted, and how Colonel Onate had fought warily to get the sentence of execution postponed in order to give their friends a chance to rescue them.

"When Megales remanded me to prison I wanted to let out an Arizona yell, Curly. It sure seemed too good to be true."

"But he may want the sentence carried out some time, if he changes his mind. Maybe in a week or two he may take a notion that " She stopped, plainly sobered by the fear that the good news of his return might not be final.

"We won't cross that bridge till we come to it. You don't suppose our friends are going to sit down and fold their hands, do you? Not if I've got Mike O'Halloran and young Valdez sized up right. Fur is going to begin to fly pretty soon in this man's country. But it's up to us to help all we can, and I reckon we'll begin by taking a preliminary survey of this wickiup."

Wickiup was distinctly good, since the word is used to apply to a frail Indian hut, and this cell was nothing less than a tomb built in the solid rock by blowing out a chamber with dynamite and covering the front with a solid sheet of iron, into which a

door fitted. It did not take a very long investigation to prove to Bucky that escape was impossible by any exit except the door, which meant the same thing as impossible at all under present conditions. Yet he did not yield to this opinion without going over every inch of the walls many times to make sure that no secret panel opened into a tunnel from the room.

"I reckon they want to keep us, Curly. Mr. Megales has sure got us real safe this time. I'd be plumb discouraged about breaking jail out of this cage. It's ce'tainly us to stay hitched a while."

About dark tortillas and frioles were brought down to them by the facetious turnkey, who was accompanied as usual by two guards.

"Why don't my little birdies sing?" he asked, with a wink at the soldiers. "One of them will not do any singing after daybreak to-morrow. Ho, ho, my larks! Tune up, tune up!"

"What do you mean about one not singing after daybreak?" asked the girl, with eyes dilating.

"What! Hasn't he told you? Senor the ranger is to be hanged at the dawn unless he finds his tongue for Governor Megales. Ho, ho! Our birdie must speak even if he doesn't sing." And with that as a parting shot the man clanged the door to after him and locked it.

"You never told me, Bucky. You have been trying to deceive me," she groaned.

He shrugged his shoulders. "What was the use, girlie? I knew it would worry you, and do no good. Better let you sleep in peace, I thought."

"While you kept watch alone and waited through the long night. Oh, Bucky!" She crept close to him and put her arms around his neck, holding him tight, as if in the hope that she could keep him against the untoward fate that was reaching for him. "Oh, Bucky, if I could only die for you!"

"Don't give up, little friend. I don't. Somehow I'll slip out, and then you'll have to live for me and not die for me."

"What is it that the governor wants you to say that you won't?"

"Oh, he wants me to sell our friends. I told him to go climb a giant cactus."

"Of course you couldn't do that," she sighed regretfully.

He laughed. "Well, hardly, and call myself a white man."

"But--" She blanched at the alternative. "Oh, Bucky, we must do something. We must-- we must."

"It ain't so bad as it looks, honey. You want to remember that Mike O'Halloran is on deck. What's the matter with him knocking out a home run and bringing us both in. I put a heap of confidence in that red-haired Irishman," he answered cheerfully.

"You say that just to--to give me courage. You don't really think he can do anything," she said wanly.

"That's just what I think, Curly. Some men have a way of getting things done. When you look at O'Halloran you feel this, the same as you do when you look at Val Collins. Oh, he'll get us out all right. I've been in several tighter holes than this one." His mention of Collins suggested a diversion, and he took up a less distressing theme lightly. "Wonder what Val is doing at this precise moment. I'll bet he's beginning to make things warm for Wolf Leroy's bunch of miscreants. We'll have the robbers of the Limited behind the bars within two weeks now, or I miss my guess."

He had succeeded in diverting her attention better than he had dared to hope. Her big eyes fixed on his much as if he had raised for her some forgotten spectre.

"That's another thing I must tell you. I didn't think to before. But I want you to know all about me now. Don't think me bad, Bucky. I'm only a girl. I couldn't help myself," she pleaded.

"What is it you have done that is so awful?" he smiled, and went to gather her into his arms.

She stayed him with a gesture of her hand. "No, not yet. Mebbe after you know you won't want to. I was one of the robbers of the Limited."

"You--what!" he exclaimed, for once struck dumb with sheer amazement.

"Yes, Bucky. I expect you'll hate me now. What is it you called me--a miscreant? Well, that's what I am."

His arms slipped round her as she began to sob, and he gentled her till she could again speak. "Tell me all about it, little Curly," he said.

"I didn't go into it because I wanted to. My master made me. I don't know much about the others, except that I heard the names they called each other."

"Would you know them again if you saw them? But of course you

would."

"Yes. But that's it, Bucky. I hated them all, and I was in mortal fear all the time. Still--I can't betray them. They thought I went in freely with them--all but Hardman. It wouldn't be right for me to tell what I know. I've got to make you see that, dear."

"You'll not need to argue that with me, honey. I see it. You must keep quiet. Don't tell anybody else what you've told me."

"And will they put me in the penitentiary when the rest go there?"

"Not while Bucky O'Connor is alive and kicking," he told her confidently.

But the form in which he had expressed his feeling was unfortunate. It brought them back to the menace of their situation. Neither of them could tell how long he would be alive and kicking. She flung herself into his arms and wept till she could weep no more.

CHAPTER 14. LE ROI EST MORT; VIVE LE ROI

When the news reached O'Halloran that Megales had scored on the opposition by arresting Bucky O'Connor, the Irishman swore fluently at himself for his oversight in forgetting the Northern Chihuahua. So far as the success of the insurgents went, the loss of the ranger was a matter of no importance, since O'Halloran knew well that nothing in the way of useful information could be cajoled or threatened out of him. But, personally, it was a blow to the filibuster, because he knew that the governor would not hesitate to execute his friend if his fancy or his fears ran that way, and the big, red-headed Celt would not have let Bucky go to death for a dozen teapot revolutions if he could help it.

"And do you think you're fit to run even a donation party, you great, blundering gumph?" Mike asked himself, in disgust. "You a conspirator! You a leader of a revolution! By the ghost of Brian Boru, you had better run along back to the kindergarten class."

But he was not the man to let grass grow under his feet while he hesitated how to remedy his mistake. Immediately he got in touch with Valdez and a few of his party, and decided on a bold counterstroke that, if successful, would oppose a checkmate to the governor's check and would also make unnecessary the unloosing of the State prisoners on the devoted heads of the people.

"But mind, gentlemen," said Juan Valdez plainly, "the governor must not be injured personally. I shall not consent to any

violence, no matter what the issue. Furthermore, I should like to be given charge of the palace, in order to see that his wants are properly provided for. We cannot afford to have our movement discredited at the outset by unnecessary bloodshed or by any wanton outrages."

O'Halloran smothered a smile. "Quite right, senior. Success at all hazards, but, if possible, success with peace. And, faith, subject to the approval of the rest of those present, I do hereby appoint you keeper of the governor's person and his palace, as well as all that do dwell therein, including his man servants, his maid servants, and his daughter. We hold you personally responsible for their safe keeping. See that none of them cherish the enemy or give aid and comfort to them." The Irishman finished, with a broad smile that seemed to say: "Begad, there's a clear field. Go in and win, me bye."

Nothing could be done in broad daylight, while the troops of the government party patrolled the streets and were prepared to pounce on the first suspects that poked their noses out of the holes where they were hidden. Nevertheless, their spies were busy all day, reporting to the opposition leaders everything that happened of interest. In the course of the day General Valdez, the father of Juan, was arrested on suspicion of complicity and thrown into prison, as were a score of others thought to be in touch with the Valdez faction. All day the troops of the governor were fussily busy, but none of the real leaders of the insurgents was taken. For General Valdez, though he had been selected on account of his integrity and great popularity to succeed Megales, was unaware of the plot on foot to retire the dictator from power.

It was just after nightfall that a farmer drove into Chihuahua with a wagonload of alfalfa. He was halted once or twice by guards on the streets, but, after a very cursory inspection, was allowed to pass. His route took him past the back of the governor's palace, an impressive stone affair surrounded by beautiful grounds. Here he stopped, as if to fasten a tug. Out of the hay tumbled fifteen men armed with rifles and revolvers, all of them being careful to leave the wagon on the side farthest from the palace.

"Now, me lads, we're all heroes by our talk. It's up to us to make good. I can promise one thing: by this time to-morrow we'll all be live patriots or dead traitors. Which shall it be?"

O'Halloran's concluding question was a merely rhetorical one, for without waiting for an answer he started at the double toward the palace, taking advantage of the dense shrubbery that offered cover up to the last twenty yards. This last was covered with a rush so rapid that the guard was surprised into a surrender without a protest.

Double guard was on duty on account of the strained situation, but the officer in charge, having been won over to the Valdez side, had taken care to pick them with much pains. As a consequence, the insurgents met friends in place of enemies, and within three minutes controlled fully the palace. Every entrance was at once closed and guarded, so that no news of the reversal could reach the military barracks.

So silently had the palace been taken that, except the guards and one or two servants held as prisoners, not even those living within it were aware of anything unusual.

"Senor Valdez, you are appointed to notify the senorita that she need not be alarmed at what has occurred. Senor Garcia will act as captain of the day, and allow nobody to leave the building under any pretext whatever. I shall personally put the tyrant under arrest. Rodrigo and Jose will accompany me."

O'Halloran left his subordinates at the door when he entered the apartments of the governor. The outer room was empty, and the Irishman passed through it to the inner one, where Megales was accustomed to take his after-dinner siesta.

To-night, however, that gentleman was in no mood for peaceful reflection followed by slumber. He was on the edge of a volcano, and he knew it. The question was whether he could hold the lid on without an eruption. General Valdez he dared not openly kill, on account of his fame and his popularity, but that pestilent Irishman O'Halloran could be assassinated and so could several of his allies--if they only gave him time. That was the rub. The general dissatisfaction at his rule had been no secret, of course, but the activity of the faction opposing him, the boldness and daring with which it had risked all to overthrow him, had come as so complete a surprise that he had been unprepared to meet it. Everywhere to-night his guards covered the city, ready to crush rebellion as soon as it showed its head. Carlo was in personal charge of the troops, and would remain so until after the election to-morrow, at which he would be declared formally reelected. If he could keep his hands on the reins for twenty-four hours more the worst would be past. He would give a good deal to know what that mad Irishman, O'Halloran, was doing just now. If he could once get hold of him, the opposition would collapse like a house of cards.

At that precise moment in walked the mad Irishman pat to the Mexican's thought of him.

"Buenos noches, excellency. I understand you have been looking for me. I am, senor, yours to command." The big Irishman brought his heels together and gave a mocking military salute.

The governor's first thought was that he was a victim of treachery, his second that he was a dead man, his third that he

would die as a Spanish gentleman ought. He was pale to the eyes, but he lost no whit of his dignity.

"You have, I suppose, taken the palace," he said quietly.

"As a loan, excellency, merely as a loan. After to-morrow it will be returned you in the event you still need it," replied O'Halloran blandly.

"You expect to murder me, of course?"

The big Celt looked shocked. "Not at all! The bulletins may perhaps have to report you accidentally killed or a victim of suicide. Personally I hope not."

"I understand; but before this lamentable accident happens I beg leave to assure myself that the palace really is in your hands, senor. A mere formality, of course." The governor smiled his thin-lipped smile and touched a bell beside him.

Twice Megales pressed the electric bell, but no orderly appeared in answer to it. He bowed to the inevitable.

"I grant you victor, Senor O'Halloran. Would it render your victory less embarrassing if I were to give you material immediately for that bulletin on suicide?" He asked the question quite without emotion, as courteously as if he were proposing a stroll through the gardens.

O'Halloran had never liked the man. The Irish in him had always boiled at his tyranny. But he had never disliked him so little as at this moment. The fellow had pluck, and that was one certain passport to the revolutionist's favor.

"On the contrary, it would distress me exceedingly. Let us reserve that bulletin as a regrettable possibility in the event that less drastic measures fail."

"Which means, I infer, that you have need of me before I pass by the Socratic method," he suggested, still with that pale smile set in granite "I shall depend on you to let me know at what precise hour you would like to order an epitaph written for me. Say the word at your convenience, and within five minutes your bulletin concerning the late governor will have the merit of truth."

"Begad, excellency, I like your spirit. If it's my say-so, you will live to be a hundred. Come the cards are against you. Some other day they may fall more pat for you. But the jig's up now."

"I am very much of your opinion, sir," agreed Megales.

"Then why not make terms?"

"Such as--"

"Your life and your friends' lives against a graceful capitulation."

"Our lives as prisoners or as free men?"

"The utmost freedom compatible with the circumstances. Your friends may either leave or remain and accept the new order of things. I'm afraid it will be necessary for you and General Carlo to leave the state for your own safety. You have both many enemies."

"With our personal possessions?"

"Of course. Such property as you cannot well take may be left in the hands of an agent and disposed of later."

Megaes eyed him narrowly. "Is it your opinion, on honor, that the general and I would reach the boundaries of the State without being assassinated?"

"I pledge you my honor and that of Juan Valdez that you will be safely escorted out of the country if you will consent to a disguise. It is only fair to him to say that he stands strong for your life."

"Then, sir, I accept your terms if you can make it plain to me that you are strong enough to take the city against General Carlo."

From his pocket O'Halloran drew a typewritten list and handed it to the governor, who glanced it over with interest.

"These army officers are all with you?"

"As soon as the word is given."

"You will pardon me if I ask for proof?"

"Certainly. Choose the name of any one of them you like and send for him. You are at liberty to ask him whether he is pledged to us."

The governor drew a pencil-mark through a name. O'Halloran clapped his hands and Rodrigo came into the room.

"Rodrigo, the governor desires you to carry a message to Colonel Onate. He is writing it now. You will give Colonel Onate my compliments and ask him to make as much haste as is convenient."

Megaes signed and sealed the note he was writing and handed it

to O'Halloran, who in turn passed it to Rodrigo.

"Colonel Onate should be here in fifteen minutes at the farthest. May I in the meantime offer you a glass of wine, Dictator O'Halloran?" At the Irishman's smile, the Mexican governor hastened to add, misunderstanding him purposely: "Perhaps I assume too much in taking the part of host here. May I ask whether you will be governor in person or by deputy, senor?"

"You do me too much honor, excellency. Neither in person nor by deputy, I fear. And, as for the glass of wine--with all my heart. Good liquor is always in order, whether for a funeral or a marriage."

"Or an abdication, you might add. I drink to a successful reign, Senor Dictator: Le roi est mort; vive le roi!"

The Irishman filled a second glass. "And I drink to Governor Megales, a brave man. May the cards fall better for him next time he plays."

The governor bowed ironically. "A brave man certainly, and you might add: 'Who loses his stake without striking one honest blow for it.' "

"We play with stacked cards, excellency. Who can forestall the treachery of trusted associates?"

"Sir, your apology for me is very generous, no less so than the terms you offer," returned Megales sardonically.

O'Halloran laughed. "Well, if you don't like my explanations I shall have to let you make your own. And, by the way, may I venture on a delicate personal matter, your excellency?"

"I can deny you nothing to-night, senor," answered Megales, mocking at himself.

"Young Valdez is in love with your daughter. I am sure that she is fond of him, but she is very loyal to you and flouts the lad. I was thinking, sir, that--"

The Spaniard's eye flashed, but his answer came suavely as he interrupted: "Don't you think you had better leave Senor Valdez and me to arrange our own family affairs? We could not think of troubling you to attend to them."

"He is a good lad and a brave."

Megales bowed. "Your recommendation goes a long way with me, senor, and, in truth, I have known him only a small matter of twenty years longer than you."

"Never a more loyal youngster in the land."

"You think so? A matter of definitions, one may suppose. Loyal to the authorized government of his country, or to the rebels who would illegally overthrow it?"

"Egad, you have me there, excellency. 'Tis a question of point of view, I'm thinking. But you'll never tell me the lad pretended one thing and did another. I'll never believe you like that milksop Chaves better."

"Must I choose either a fool or a knave?"

"I doubt it will be no choice of yours. Juan Valdez is an ill man to deny what he sets his heart on. If the lady is willing--"

"I shall give her to the knave and wash my hands of her. Since treason thrives she may at last come back to the palace as its mistress. Quien sabe?"

"Less likely things have happened. What news, Rodrigo?" This last to the messenger, who at that moment appeared at the door.

"Colonel Onate attends, senior."

"Show him in."

Onate was plainly puzzled at the summons to attend the governor, and mixed with his perplexity was a very evident anxiety. He glanced quickly at O'Halloran as he entered, as if asking for guidance, and then as questioningly at Megales. Had the Irishman played Judas and betrayed them all? Or was the coup already played with success?

"Colonel Onate, I have sent for you at the request of Governor Megales to set his mind at rest on a disturbing point. His health is failing and he considers the advisability of retiring from the active cares of state. I have assured him that you, among others, would, under such circumstances, be in a friendly relation to the next administration. Am I correct in so assuring him?"

Megales pierced him with his beady eyes. "In other words, Colonel Onate, are you one of the traitors involved in this rebellion?"

"I prefer the word patriot, senior," returned Onate, flushing.

"Indeed I have no doubt you do. I am answered," he exclaimed scornfully. "And what is the price of patriotism these days, colonel?"

"Sir!" The colonel laid his hand on his sword.

"I was merely curious to know what position you would hold under

the new administration."

O'Halloran choked a laugh, for by chance the governor had hit the nail on the head. Onate was to be Secretary of State under Valdez, and this was the bait that had been dangled temptingly under his nose to induce a desertion of Megales.

"If you mean to reflect upon my honor I can assure you that my conscience is clear," answered Onate blackly.

"Indeed, colonel, I do not doubt it. I have always admired your conscience and its adaptability." The governor turned to O'Halloran. "I am satisfied, Senior Dictator. If you will permit me--"

He walked to his desk, unlocked a drawer, and drew forth a parchment, which he tossed across to the Irishman. "It is my commission as governor. Allow me to place it in your hands and put myself at the service of the new administration."

"If you will kindly write notes, I will send a messenger to General Carlo and another to Colonel Gabilonda requesting their attendance. I think affairs may be quickly arranged."

"You are irresistible, senior. I hasten to obey."

Megales sat down and wrote two notes, which he turned over to O'Halloran. The latter read them, saw them officially sealed, and dispatched them to their destinations.

When Gabilonda was announced, General Carlo followed almost at his heels. The latter glanced in surprise at O'Halloran.

"Where did you catch him, excellency?" he asked.

"I did not catch him. He has caught me, and, incidentally, you, general," answered the sardonic Megales.

"In short, general," laughed the big Irishman, "the game is up. "

"But the army--You haven't surrendered without a fight?"

"That is precisely what I have done. Cast your eye over that paper, general, and then tell me of what use the army would be to us. Half the officers are with the enemy, among them the patriotic Colonel Onate, whom you see present. A resistance would be futile, and would only result in useless bloodshed."

"I don't believe it," returned Carlo bluntly.

"Seeing is believing, general," returned O'Halloran, and he gave a little nod to Onate.

The colonel left the room, and two or three minutes later a bell began to toll.

"What does that mean?" asked Carlo.

"The call to arms, general. It means that the old regime is at an end in Chihuahua. VIVA VALDEZ."

"Not without a struggle," cried the general, rushing out of the room.

O'Halloran laughed. "I'm afraid he will not be able to give the countersign to Garcia. In the meantime, excellency, pending his return, I would suggest that you notify Colonel Gabilonda to turn over the prison to us without resistance."

"You hear your new dictator, colonel," said Megales.

"Pardon me, your excellency, but a written order--"

"Would relieve you of responsibility. So it would. I write once more."

He was interrupted as he wrote by a great shout from the plaza. "VIVA VALDEZ!" came clearly across the night air, and presently another that stole the color from the cheek of Megales.

"Death to the tyrant! Death to Megales!" repeated the governor, after the shouts reached them.

"I fear, Senor Dictator, that your pledge to see me across the frontier will not avail against that mad-dog mob." He smiled, waving an airy hand toward the window.

The Irishman set his bulldog jaw. "I'll get you out safely or, begad! I'll go down fighting with you."

"I think we are likely to have interesting times, my dear dictator. Be sure I shall watch your doings with interest so long as your friends allow me to watch anything in this present world." The governor turned to his desk and continued the letter with a firm hand. "I think this should relieve you of responsibility, colonel."

By this time General Carlo had reentered the room, with a crestfallen face.

O'Halloran had been thinking rapidly. "Governor, I think the safest place for you and General Carlo, for a day or two, will be in the prison. I intend to put my friend O'Connor in charge of its defense, with a trustworthy command. There is no need of word reaching the mob as to where you are hidden. I confess the quarters will be narrows but--"

"No narrower than those we shall occupy very soon if we do not accept your suggestion," smiled Megales. "Bueartos! Anything to escape the pressing attentions of your friends outside. I ask only one favor, the loan of a revolver, in order that we may disappoint the mad dogs if they overpower the guard of Senor O'Connor."

Hastily O'Halloran rapped out orders, gathered together a little force of five men, and prepared to start. Both Carlo and Megales he furnished with revolvers, that they might put an end to their lives in case the worst happened. But before they had started Juan Valdez and Carmencita Megales came running toward them.

"Where are you going? It is too late. The palace is surrounded!" cried the young man. "Look!" He swept an excited arm toward the window. "There are thousands and thousands of frenzied people calling for the lives of the governor and General Carlo."

Carlo shook like a leaf, but Megales only smiled at O'Halloran his wintry smile. "That is the trouble in keeping a mad dog, senor. One never knows when it may get out of leash and bite perhaps even the hand that feeds it."

Carmencita flung herself, sobbing, into the arms of her father and filled the palace with her screams. Megales handed her over promptly to her lover.

"To my private office," he ordered briskly. "Come, general, there is still a chance."

O'Halloran failed to see it, but he joined the little group that hurried to the private office. Megales dragged his desk from the corner where it set and touched a spring that opened a panel in the wall. Carlo, blanched with fear at the threats and curses that filled the night, sprang toward the passageway that appeared.

Megales plucked him back. "One moment, general. Ladies first. Carmencita, enter."

Carlo followed her, after him the governor, and lastly Gabilonda, tearing himself from a whispered conversation with O'Halloran. The panel swung closed again, and Valdez and O'Halloran lifted back the desk just as Garcia came running in to say that the mob would not be denied. Immediately O'Halloran threw open a French window and stepped out to the little railed porch upon which it opened. He had the chance of his life to make a speech, and that is the one thing that no Irishman can resist. He flung out from his revolver three shots in rapid succession to draw the attention of the mob to him. In this he succeeded beyond his hopes. The word ran like wildfire that the mad Irishman, O'Halloran, was about to deliver a message to them, and from all

sides of the building they poured to hear it. He spoke in Mexican, rapidly, his great bull voice reaching to the utmost confines of the crowd.

"Fellow lovers of liberty, the hour has struck that we have worked and prayed for. The glorious redemption of our State has been accomplished by your patriotic hands. An hour ago the tyrants, Megales and Carlo, slipped out of the palace, mounted swift horses, and are galloping toward the frontier."

A roar of rage, such as a tiger disappointed of its kill might give, rose into the night. Such a terrible cry no man made of flesh and blood could hear directed at him and not tremble.

"But the pursuit is already on. Swift riders are in chase, with orders not to spare their horses so only they capture the fleeing despots. We expect confidently that before morning the tyrants will be in our hands. In the meantime, let us show ourselves worthy of the liberty we have won. Let us neither sack nor pillage, but show our great president in the City of Mexico that not ruffians but an outraged people have driven out the oppressors."

The huge Celt was swimming into his periods beautifully, but it was very apparent to him that the mob must have a vent for its stored excitement. An inspiration seized him.

"But one sacred duty calls to us from heaven, my fellow citizens. Already I see in your glorious faces that you behold the duty. Then forward, patriots! To the plaza, and let us tear down, let us destroy by fire, let us annihilate the statue of the dastard Megales which defaces our fair city. Citizens, to your patriotic duty!"

Another wild yell rang skyward, and at once the fringes of the crowd began to vanish plazaward, its centre began to heave, its flanks to stir. Three minutes later the grounds of the palace were again dark and empty. The Irishman's oratory had won the day.

CHAPTER 15. IN THE SECRET CHAMBER

The escaping party groped its way along the passage in the wall, down a rough, narrow flight of stone steps to a second tunnel, and along this underground way for several hundred yards. Since he was the only one familiar with the path they were traversing, the governor took the lead and guided the others. At a distance of perhaps an eighth of a mile from the palace the tunnel forked. Without hesitation, Megales kept to the right. A stone's throw beyond this point of divergence there began to be apparent a perceptible descent which terminated in a stone wall that blocked

completely the way.

Megales reached up and put his weight on a rope suspended from the roof. Slowly the solid masonry swung on a pivot, leaving room on either side for a person to squeeze through. The governor found it a tight fit, as did also Gabilonda.

"I was more slender last time I passed through there. It has been several years since then," said the governor, giving his daughter a hand to assist her through.

They found themselves in a small chamber fitted up as a living room in a simple way. There were three plain chairs, a bed, a table, and a dresser, as well as a cooking stove.

"This must be close to the prison. We have been coming in that direction all the time. It is strange that it could be so near and I not know of it," said the warden, looking around curiously.

Megales smiled. "I am the only person alive that knew of the existence of this room or of the secret passage until half an hour ago. I had it built a few years since by Yaquis when I was warden of the prison. The other end, the one opening from the palace, I had finished after I became governor."

"But surely the men who built it know of its existence."

Again Megales smiled. "I thought you knew me better, Carlo. The Yaquis who built this were condemned raiders. I postponed their execution a few months while they were working on this. It was a convenience both to them and to me."

"And is also a convenience to me," smiled Carlo, who was beginning to recover from his terror.

"But I don't quite understand yet how we are to get out of here except by going back the way we came," said Gabilonda.

"Which for some of us might prove a dangerously unhealthy journey. True, colonel, and therefore one to be avoided." Megales stepped to the wall, spanned with his fingers a space from the floor above a joint in the masonry, and pressed against the concrete. Inch by inch the wall fell back and opened into a lower corridor of the prison, the very one indeed which led to the cell in which Bucky and his love were imprisoned. Cautiously the Spaniard's glance traveled down the passage to see it was empty before he opened the panel door more than enough to look through. Then he beckoned to Gabilonda. "Behold, doubting Thomas!"

The warden gasped. "And I never knew it, never had a suspicion of it."

"But this only brings us from one prison to another," objected

the general. "We might be penned in here as well as at the castle."

"Even that contingency has been provided for. You noticed, perhaps, where the tunnel forked. The left branch runs down to the river-wash, and by ten minutes' digging with the tools lying there one can force an exit."

"Your excellency is certainly a wonder, and all this done without arousing the least suspicion of anybody," admired the warden.

"The wise man, my dear colonel, prepares for emergencies; the fool trusts to his luck," replied the governor dryly.

"Are we to stay here for the present, colonel?" broke in the governor's daughter. "And can you furnish accommodations for the rest of us if we stay all night, as I expect we must?"

"My dear senorita, I have accommodations and to spare. But the trouble is that your presence would become known. I should be the happiest' man alive to put my all at the accommodation of Chihuahua's fairest daughter. But if it should get out that you are here--" Gabilonda stopped to shrug his fat shoulders at the prospect.

"We shall have to stay here, or, at least, in the lower tier of cells. I'm sorry, Carmencita, but there is no other course compatible with safety," decided Megales promptly.

The warden's face cleared. "That is really not a point for me to decide, governor. This young American, O'Connor, is now in charge of the prison. I must release him at once, and shall then bring him here to confer with you as to means of safety."

Bucky's eyes opened wide when Gabilonda and Megales came alone and without a lantern to his cell. In the darkness it was impossible to recognize them, but once within the closed cell the warden produced a dark lantern from under his coat.

"Circumstances have arisen that make the utmost vigilance necessary," explained the warden. "I may begin my explanations by congratulating you and your young friend. Let me offer a thousand felicitations. Neither of you are any longer prisoners."

If he expected either of them to fall on his neck and weep tears of gratitude at his pompous announcement, the colonel was disappointed. From the darkness where the ranger's little partner sat on the bed came a deep sigh of relief, but O'Connor did not wink an eyelash.

"I may conclude, then, that Mike O'Halloran has been getting in his work?" was his cool reply.

"Exactly, señor. He is the man on horseback and I travel afoot," smiled Megales.

Bucky looked him over coolly from head to foot. "Still I can't quite understand why your ex-excellency does me the honor of a personal visit."

"Because, señor, in the course of human events Providence has seen fit to reverse our positions. I am now your prisoner and you my jailer," explained Megales, and urbanely added a whimsical question. "Shall you have me hanged at dawn?"

"It would be a pleasure, and, I reckon, a duty too. But I can't promise till I've seen Mike. Do some more explaining, colonel. I want to know all about the round-up O'Halloran is boss of. Did he make a right good gather?"

The subtleties of American humor baffled the little Mexican, but he appreciated the main drift of the ranger's query, and narrated with much gesticulation the story of the coup that O'Halloran had pulled off in capturing the government leaders.

"It was an exceedingly neat piece of strategy," its victim admitted. "I would give a good deal to have the privilege of hanging your red-headed friend, but since that is denied me, I must be grateful he does not take a fancy to hang me."

"In case he doesn't, your excellency," was Bucky's addendum.

"I understand he has decided to deport me," retorted Megales lightly. "It is perhaps better politics, on the whole, better even than a knife in the back."

"Unless rumor is a lying jade, you should be a good judge of that, governor," said the American, eyeing him sternly.

Megales shrugged. "One of the penalties of fame is that one gets credit for much he does not deserve. There was your immortal General Lincoln, a wit so famous in your country that every good story is fathered upon him, I understand. So with your humble servant. Let a man accomplish his vendetta upon the body of an enemy, and behold! the world cries: 'A victim of Megales.'"

"Still, if you deserve your reputation as much as our immortal General Lincoln deserves his, the world may be pardoned for an occasional error." O'Connor turned to the warden. "What does he mean by saying that he is my prisoner? Have you a message for me from O'Halloran, colonel?"

"It is his desire, señor, that, pending the present uncertain state of public opinion, you accept the command of the prison and hold safe all persons detained here, including his excellency and General Carlo. He desired me to assure you that as soon as is

possible he will arrive to confer with you in person."

"Good enough, and are you a prisoner, too, colonel?"

"I did not so understand Senor O'Halloran."

"If you're not you have to earn your grub and lodgings. I'll appoint you my deputy, colonel. And, first off, my orders are to lock up his excellency and General Carlo in this cell till morning."

"The cell, Senor O'Connor, is damp and badly ventilated," protested Gabilonda.

"I know that a heap better than you do, colonel," said Bucky dryly. "But if it was good enough for me and my pardner, here, I reckon it's good enough for them. Anyhow, we'll let them try it, won't we, Frank;"

"If you think best, Bucky."

"You bet I do."

"And what about the governor's daughter?" asked Gabilonda.

"You don't say! Is she a guest of this tavern?"

The colonel explained how they had reached the prison and the circumstances that had led to their hurried flight, while the ranger whistled the air of a cowboy song, his mind busy with this new phase of the case.

"She's one of these here Spanish blue-blooded señoritas used to guitar serenades under her window. Now, what would you do with her in a jail, Bucky?" he asked himself, in humorous dismay; but even as he reflected on it his roving eye fell on his friend.

"The very thing. I'll take Curly Haid in to her and let them fall in love with each other. You're liable to be some busy, Bucky, and shy on leisure to entertain a lady, let alone two."

And so he arranged it. Leaving the former governor and General Carlo in the cell just vacated by them, Frances and he accompanied Gabilonda to the secret room behind the corridor wall.

All three parties to the introduction that followed acknowledged secretly to a surprise. Miss Carmencita had expected the friend of big, rough, homely O'Halloran to resemble him in kind, at least. Instead, she looked on a bronzed young Apollo of the saddle with something of that same lithe grace she knew and loved in Juan Valdez. And the shy boy beside him--why, the darling was sweet enough to kiss. The big, brown, helpless eyes, the blushing, soft cheeks, the crop of thick, light curls were

details of an extraordinarily taking picture. Really, if these two were fair specimens, Americans were not so bad, after all. Which conclusion Juan Valdez's fondness for that race may have helped in part to form.

But if the young Spanish girl found a little current of pleasure in her surprise, Bucky and his friend were aware of the same sensation. All the charm of her race seemed summed up in Carmencita Megales. She was of blue blood, every feature and motion told that. The fine, easy set of her head, the fire in the dark, heavy-lashed eyes, the sweep of dusky chin and cheek and throat certified the same story. She had, too, that coquettish hint of uncertainty, that charm of mystery so fatal in its lure to questing man. Even physically the contradiction of sex attracted. Slender and lissom as a fawn, she was yet a creature of exquisitely rounded curves. Were her eyes brown or black or--in the sunlight--touched with a gleam of copper? There was always uncertainty. But much more was there fire, a quality that seemed to flash out from her inner self. She was a child of whims, a victim of her moods. Yet in her, too, was a passionate loyalty that made fickleness impossible. She knew how to love and how to hate, and, despite her impulses, was capable of surrender complete and irrevocable.

All of this Bucky did not read in that first moment of meeting, but the shrewd judgment behind the level blue eyes came to an appraisal roughly just. Before she had spoken three sentences he knew she had all her sex's reputed capacity for injustice as well as its characteristic flashes of generosity.

"Are you one of the men who have rebelled against my father and attempted to murder him?" she flashed.

"I'm the man he condemned to be hanged tomorrow morning at dawn for helping Juan Valdez take the guns," retorted Bucky, with a laugh.

"You are his enemy, and, therefore, mine."

"I'm a friend of Michael O'Halloran, who stood between him and the mob that wanted to kill him."

"Who first plotted against him and seduced his officers to betray him," she quickly replied.

"I reckon, ma'am, we better agree to disagree on politics," said Bucky good-naturedly. "We're sure liable to see things different from each other. Castile and Arizona don't look at things with the same eyes."

She looked at him just then with very beautiful and scornful ones, at any rate. "I should hope not."

"You see, we're living in the twentieth century up in the sunburned State," said Bucky, with smiling aplomb.

"Indeed! And we poor Chihuahuans?"

"When I see the ladies I think you're certainly in the golden age, but when I break into your politics, I'm some reminded of that Richard Third fellow in the Shakespeare play."

"Referring, I presume, to my father?" she demanded haughtily.

"In a general way, but eliminating the most objectionable points of the king fellow."

"You're very kind." She interrupted her scorn to ask him where he meant her to sleep.

He glanced over the room. "This might do right here, if we had that bed aired."

"Do you expect to put me in irons?"

"Not right away. Colonel, I'll ask you to go to the office and notify me as soon as Senor O'Halloran arrives." He waited till the colonel had gone before adding: "I'm going to leave this boy with you, senorita, for a while. He'll explain some things to you that I can't. In about an hour I'll be back, perhaps sooner. So long, Curly. Tell the lady your secret." And with that Bucky was out of the room.

"Your secret, child! What does he mean?"

The flame of color that swept into the cheeks of Frances, the appeal in the shamed eyes, held Carmencita's surprised gaze. Then coolly it traveled over the girl and came back to her burning face.

"So that's it, is it?"

But the scorn in her voice was too much for Frances. She had been judged and condemned in that cool stare, and all the woman in her protested at its injustice.

"No, no, no!" she cried, running forward and catching at the other's hand. "I'm not that. You don't understand."

Coldly Carmencita disengaged her hand and wiped it with her kerchief. "I understand enough. Please do not touch me."

"May I not tell you my story?"

"I'll not trouble you. It does not interest me."

"But you will listen?" implored the other.

"I must ask to be excused."

"Then you are a heartless, cruel woman," flamed Frances. "I'm good--as good as you are." The color patched her cheek and ebbed again. "I wouldn't treat a dog as you do me. Oh, cruel, cruel!"

The surprising extravagance of her protest, the despair that rang in the fresh young voice, caught the interest of the Mexican girl. Surely such a heart-broken cry did not consist with guilt. But the facts--when a young and pretty girl masquerades through the country in the garb of a boy with a handsome young man, not much room for doubt is left.

Frances was quick to see that the issue was reopened. "Oh, senorita, isn't as you think. Do I look like--" She broke off to cover with her hands a face in which the pink and white warred with alternate success. "I ought not to have come. I ought never to have come. I see that now. But I didn't think he would know. You see, I had always passed as a boy when I wanted to."

"A remarkably pretty one, child," said Miss Carmencita, a smile dimpling her cheeks. "But how do you mean that you had passed as a boy?"

Frances explained, giving a rapid sketch of her life with the Hardmans during which she had appeared every night on the stage as a boy without the deception being suspected. She had cultivated the tricks and ways of boys, had tried to dress to carry out the impression, and had always succeeded until she had made the mistake of putting on a gypsy girl's dress a couple of days before.

Carmencita heard her out, but not as a judge. Very early in the story her doubts fled and she succumbed to the mothering instinct in her. She took the American girl in her arms and laughed and cried with her; for her imagination seized on the romance of the story and delighted in its fresh unconventionality. Since she had been born Carmencita's life had been ordered for her with precision by the laws of caste. Her environment wrapped her in so that she must follow a set and beaten path. It was, to be sure, a flower-strewn one, but often she impotently rebelled against its very orderliness. And here in her arms was a victim of that adventurous romance she had always longed so passionately to know. Was it wonder she found it in her heart to both love and envy the subject of it?

"And this young cavalier--the Senor Bucky, is it you call him?--surely you love him, my dear."

"Oh, senorita!" The blushing face was buried on her new friend's shoulder. "You don't know how good he is."

"Then tell me," smiled the other. "And call me Carmencita."

"He is so brave, and patient, and good. I know there was never a man like him."

Miss Carmencita thought of one and demurred silently. "I'm sure this paragon of lovers is at least part of what you say. Does he love you? But I am sure he couldn't help it."

"Sometimes I think he does, but once--" Frances broke off to ask, in a pink flame: "How does a lover act?"

Miss Carmencita's laughter rippled up. "Gracious me, have you never had one before."

"Never."

"Well, he should make verses to you and pretty speeches. He should sing serenades about undying love under your window. Bonbons should bombard you, roses make your rooms a bower. He should be ardent as Romeo, devoted as a knight of old. These be the signs of a true love," she laughed.

Frances' face fell. If these were the tokens of true love, her ranger was none. For not one of the symptoms could fairly be said to fit him. Perhaps, after all, she had given him what he did not want.

"Must he do all that? Must he make verses?" she asked blankly, not being able to associate Bucky with poetasting.

"He must," teased her tormentor, running a saucy eye over her boyish garb. "And why not with so fair a Rosalind for a subject?" She broke off to quote in her pretty, uncertain English, acquired at a convent in the United States, where she had attended school:

"From the east to western Ind,
No jewel is like Rosalind.
Her worth being mounted on the wind,
Through all the world bears Rosalind.

All the pictures, fairest lin'd,
Are but black to Rosalind.
Let no face be kept in mind
But the fair of Rosalind."

So your Shakespeare has it, does he not?" she asked, reverting again to the Spanish language, in which they had been talking. But swift on the heels of her raillery came repentance. She caught the dispirited girl to her embrace laughingly. "No, no, child! Nonsense ripples from my tongue. These follies are but for a carpet lover. You shall tell me more of your Senor Bucky and I

shall make no sport of it."

When Bucky returned at the expiration of the time he had set himself, he found them with their arms twined about each other's waists, whispering the confidences that every girl on the threshold of womanhood has to tell her dearest friend.

"I reckon you like my pardner better than you do me," smiled Bucky to Miss Carmencita.

"A great deal better, sir, but then I know him better."

Bucky's eyes rested for a moment almost tenderly on Frances. "I reckon he is better worth knowing," he said.

"Indeed! And you so brave, and patient, and good?" she mocked.

"Oh! Am I all that?" asked Bucky easily.

"So I have been given to understand."

Out of the corner of his eye O'Connor caught the embarrassed, reproachful look that Frances gave her audacious friend, and he found it easy to fit quotation marks round the admirable qualities that had just been ascribed to him. He guessed himself blushing a deuce with his little friend, and also divined Miss Carmencita's roguish merriment at their confusion.

"I AM all those things you mentioned and a heap more you forgot to say," claimed the ranger boldly, to relieve the situation.

"Only I didn't know for sure that folks had found it out. My mind's a heap easier to know I'm being appreciated proper at last."

Under her long, dark lashes Miss Carmencita looked at him in gentle derision. "I'm of opinion, sir, that you get all the appreciation that is good for you."

Bucky carried the war into the enemy's country. "Which same, I expect, might be said of Chihuahua's most beautiful belle. And, talking of Senor Valdez reminds me that I owe a duty to his father, who is confined here. I'll be saying good night ladies."

"It's high time," agreed Miss Megales. "Talking of Senor Valdez, indeed!"

"Good night, Curly Haid."

"Good night, Bucky."

To which, in mocking travesty, added, in English, Miss Carmencita, who seemed to have an acute attack of Shakespeare:

"Good night, good night; parting is such sweet sorrow
That I shall say good night till
It be morrow."

CHAPTER 16. JUAN VALDEZ SCORES

The first thing Bucky did after leaving the two young women was to go down in person with one of the guards to the cell of David Henderson. The occupant of the cell was asleep, but he woke up when the two men entered.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"Webb Mackenzie's man come to release you," answered Bucky.

The prisoner fell to trembling like an aspen. "God, man, do you mean it?" he begged. "You wouldn't deceive an old man who has lived fifteen years in hell?"

"It's true, friend, every word of it. You'll live to ride the range again and count your cattle on the free hillside. Come with me up to the office and we'll talk more of it."

"But may I? Will they let me?" trembled Henderson, fearful lest his cup of joy be dashed from him. "I'm not dreaming, am I? I'll not wake the way I often do and find that it is all a dream, will I?" He caught at the lapel of O'Connor's coat and searched his face.

"No, your dreams are true at last, Dave Henderson. Come, old friend, take a drink of this to steady you. It's all coming out right now."

Tears streamed down the face of the man rescued from a living grave. He dashed them away impatiently with a shaking hand. "I used to be as game as other men, young man, and now you see what a weakling I am. Don't judge me too hard. Happiness is a harder thing to stand than pain or grief. They've tried to break my spirit many a time and they couldn't, but you've done it now with a word."

"You'll be all right as soon as you are able to realize it. I don't wonder the shock unnerves you. Have you anything you want to take out of here with you before you leave forever?"

Pathetically the prisoner looked round on his few belongings. Some of them had become endeared to him by years of use and association, but they had served their time. "No, I want to forget it all. I came in with nothing. I'll take out nothing. I want to blot it all out like a hideous nightmare."

Bucky ordered Colonel Gabilonda to bring up from his cell General Valdez and the other arrested suspects. They reached the office at the same time as Mike O'Halloran, who greeted them with the good news that the day was won. The Megales faction had melted into mist, and all over the city a happy people was shouting for Valdez.

"I congratulate you, general. We have just telegraphed the news over the State that Megales has resigned and fled. There can be no doubt that you will be elected governor to-morrow and that the people's party will win the day with an unprecedented vote. Glory be, Chihuahua is at last free from the heel of tyranny. Viva Valdez! Viva Chihuahua libra!"

Bucky at once introduced to General Valdez the American prisoner who had suffered so long and unjustly. He recited the story of the abduction of the child, of Henderson's pursuit, of the killing of the trooper, and of the circumstantial evidence that implicated the Texan and upon which he was convicted. He then drew from his pocket a signed and attested copy of the confession of the knife thrower and handed it to the general.

Valdez looked it over, asked an incisive question or two of Bucky, heard from Henderson his story, and, after a few moments' discussion of the matter with O'Halloran, promised a free pardon as his first official act after being elected to the governorship, in case he should be chosen.

The vote next day amply justified the hopes of O'Halloran and his friends. The whole ticket, sent out by telegraph and messengers throughout the State, was triumphantly elected by large majorities. Only in one or two out-of-the-way places, where the news of the fall of Megales did not arrive in time to affect the voting, did the old government party make any showing worthy of consideration.

It was after Valdez's election had been made certain by the returns that O'Halloran and Juan Valdez posted to the prison and visited father and daughter. They separated in the lower corridor, one to visit the defeated governor, the other Miss Carmencita. The problem before Juan Valdez was to induce that young woman to remain in Chihuahua instead of accompanying her father in his flight. He was a good fighter, and he meant to win, if it were a possibility. She had tacitly admitted that she loved him, but he knew that she felt that loyalty demanded she stay by her father in his flight.

When O'Halloran was admitted to the cell where the governor and the general were staying he laughed aloud.

"Faith, gentlemen, is this the best accommodation Governor Valdez can furnish his guests? We must petition him to improve the sanitation of his hotel."

"We are being told, one may suppose, that General Valdez is the newly elected governor?"

"Right, your excellency, elected by a large majority to succeed the late Governor Megales."

"Late!" The former governor lifted his eyebrows. "Am I also being told that necessity demands the posting of the suicide bulletin, after all?"

"Not at all. Sure, I gave you my word, excellency. And that is one of the reasons why I am here. We have arranged to run a special down the line to-night, in order to avoid the risk of the news leaking out that you are still here. Can you make your arrangements to take that train, or will it hurry your packing too much?"

Megales laughed. "I have nothing to take with me except my daughter. The rest of my possessions may be forwarded later."

"Oh, your daughter! Well, that's pat, too. What about the lad, Valdez?"

"Are you his representative, senor?"

"Oh, he can talk for himself." O'Halloran grinned. "He's doing it right now, by the same token. Shall we interrupt a tete-a-tete and go pay our compliments to Miss Carmencita? You will want to find out whether she goes with you or stays here."

"Assuredly. Anything to escape this cave."

Miss Carmencita was at that moment reiterating her everlasting determination to go wherever her father went. "If you think, sir, that your faithlessness to him is a recommendation of your promised faithfulness to me, I can only wish you more light on the feelings of a daughter," she was informing Valdez, when her father slipped through the panel door and stood before her.

"Brava, senorita!" he applauded, with subtle irony, clapping his hands. "Brava, brava!"

That young woman swam blushing toward him and let her face disappear in an embrace.

"You see, one can't have everything, Senor Valdez," continued Megales lightly. "For me, I cannot have both Chihuahua and my life; you, it seems, cannot have both your successful revolution and my daughter."

"Your excellency, she loves me. Of that I am assured. It rests with you to say whether her life will be spoiled or not. You know

what I can offer her in addition to a heart full of devotion. It is enough. Shall she be sacrificed to her loyalty to you?" the young man demanded, with all the ardor of his warm-blooded race.

"It is no sacrifice to love and obey my father," came a low murmur from the former governor's shoulder.

"Since the world began it has been the law of life that the young should leave their parents for a home of their own," Juan protested.

"So the Scripture says," agreed Megales sardonically. "It further counsels to love one's enemies, but, I think, omits mention of the enemies of one's father."

"Sir, I am not your enemy. Political exigencies have thrown us into different camps, but we are not so small as to let such incidentals come between us as a vital objection in such a matter."

"You argue like a lawyer," smiled the governor. "You forget that I am neither judge nor jury. Tyrant I may have been to a fickle people that needed a firm hand to rule them, but tyrant I am not to my only daughter."

"Then you consent, your excellency?" cried Valdez joyously.

"I neither consent nor refuse. You must go to a more final authority than mine for an answer, young man."

"But you are willing she should follow where her heart leads?"

"But certainly."

"Then she is mine," cried Valdez.

"I am not," replied the girl indignantly over her shoulder.

Megales turned her till her unconsenting eyes met his. "Do you want to marry this young man, Carmencita?"

"I never told him anything of the sort," she flamed.

"I didn't quite ask what you had told him. The question is whether you love him."

"But no; I love you," she blushed.

"I hope so," smiled her father. "But do you love him? An honest answer, if you please."

"Could I love a rebel?"

"No Yankee answers, muchacha. Do you love Juan Valdez?"

It was Valdez that broke triumphantly the moment's silence that followed. "She does. She does. I claim the consent of silence."

But victory spoke too prematurely in his voice. Cried the proud Spanish girl passionately: "I hate him!"

Megales understood the quality of her hate, and beckoned to his future son-in-law. "I have some arrangements to make for our journey to-night. Would it distress you, señor, if I were to leave you for a while?"

He slipped out and left them alone.

"Well?" asked O'Halloran, who had remained in the corridor.

"I think, Señor Dictator, I shall have to make the trip with only General Carlo for a companion," answered the Spaniard.

The Irishman swung his hat. "Hip, hip, hurrah! You're a gentleman I could find it in me heart to both love and hate, governor."

"And you're a gentleman," returned the governor, with a bow, "I could find it in my heart to hang high as Haman without love or hate."

Michael linked his arm in that of his excellency.

"Sure, you're a broth of a lad, Señor Megales," he said irreverently, in good, broad Irish brogue. "Here, me bye, where are you hurrying?" he added, catching at the sleeve of Frances Mackenzie, who was slipping quietly past.

"Please, Mr. O'Halloran, I've been up to the office after water. I'm taking it to Senorita Carmencita."

"She doesn't want water just now. You go back to the office, son, and stay there thirty minutes. Then you take her that water," ordered O'Halloran.

"But she wanted it as soon as I could get it, sir."

"Forget it, kid, just as she has. Water! Why, she's drinking nectar of the gods. Just you do as I tell ye."

Frances was puzzled, but she obeyed, even though she could not understand his meaning. She understood better when she slid back the panel at the expiration of the allotted time and caught a glimpse of Carmencita Megales in the arms of Juan Valdez.

CHAPTER 17. HIDDEN VALLEY

Across the desert into the hills, where the sun was setting in a great splash of crimson in the saddle between two distant peaks, a bunch of cows trailed heavily. Their tongues hung out and they panted for water, stretching their necks piteously to low now and again. For the heat of an Arizona summer was on the baked land and in the air that palpitated above it.

But the end of the journey was at hand and the cowpuncher in charge of the drive relaxed in the saddle after the easy fashion of the vaquero when he is under no tension. He did not any longer cast swift, anxious glances behind him to make sure no pursuit was in sight. For he had reached safety. He knew the 'Open sesame' to that rock wall which rose sheer in front of him. Straight for it he and his companion took their gather, swinging the cattle adroitly round a great slab which concealed a gateway to the secret canon. Half a mile up this defile lay what was called Hidden Valley, an inaccessible retreat known only to those who frequented it for nefarious purposes.

It was as the man in charge circled round to head the lead cows in that a faint voice carried to him. He stopped, listening. It came again, a dry, parched call for help that had no hope in it. He wheeled his pony as on a half dollar, and two minutes later caught sight of an exhausted figure leaning against a cottonwood. He needed no second guess to surmise that she was lost and had been wandering over the sandy desert through the hot day. With a shout, he loped toward her, and had his water bottle at her lips before she had recovered from her glad surprise at sight of him.

"You'll feel better now," he soothed. "How long you been lost, ma'am?"

"Since ten this morning. I came with my aunt to gather poppies, and somehow I got separated from her and the rig. These hills look so alike. I must have got turned round and mistaken one for another."

"You have to be awful careful here. Some one ought to have told you," he said indignantly.

"Oh, they told me, but of course I knew best," she replied, with quick scorn of her own self-sufficiency.

"Well, it's all right now," the cowpuncher told her cheerfully. He would not for a thousand dollars have told her how near it had come to being all wrong, how her life had probably depended upon that faint wafted call of hers.

He put her on his horse and led it forward to the spot where the cattle waited at the gateway. Not until they came full upon them did he remember that it was dangerous for strange young women to

see him with those cattle and at the gateway to the Hidden canon.

"They are my uncle's cattle. I could tell the brand anywhere. Are you one of his riders? Are we close to the Rocking Chair Ranch?" she cried.

He flung a quick glance at her. "Not very close. Are you from the Rocking Chair?"

"Yes. I'm Mr. Mackenzie's niece."

"Major Mackenzie's daughter?" demanded the man quickly.

"Yes." She said it with a touch of annoyance, for he looked at her as a man does who has heard of her before. She knew that the story had been bruited far and wide of how she had passed through the hands of the train robbers carrying thirty thousand dollars on her person. She had no doubt that it was in this connection her rescuer had heard of her.

He drew off to one side and called his companion to him.

"Hardman, you ride up to the ranch and tell Leroy I've just found Miss Mackenzie wandering around on the desert, lost. Ask him whether I'm to bring her up. She's played out and can't travel far, tell him."

The showman rode on his errand and the other returned to Helen.

"You better light, ma'am. We'll have to wait here a few minutes," he explained.

He helped her dismount. She did not understand why it was necessary to wait, but that was his business and not hers. Her roving eyes fell upon the cattle again.

"They ARE my uncle's, aren't they?"

"They were," he corrected. "Cattle change hands a good deal in this country," he added dryly.

"Then you're not one of his riders?" Her stark eyes passed over him swiftly.

"No, ma'am."

"Are we far from the Rocking Chair?"

"A right smart distance. You've been traveling, you see, for eight or nine hours."

It occurred to her that there was something elusive, something not quite frank, about the replies of this young man. Her glance

raked him again and swept up the details of his person. One of them that impressed itself upon her mind was the absence of a finger on his right hand. Another was that he was a walking arsenal. This startled her, though she was not yet afraid. She relapsed into silence, to which he seemed willing to consent. Once and again her glance swept him. He looked a tough, weather-beaten Westerner, certainly not a man whom a woman need be afraid to meet alone on the plains, but the oftener she looked the more certain she became that he was not a casual puncher busy at the legitimate work of his craft.

"Do you--live near here?" she asked presently.

"I live under my hat, ma'am," he told her.

"Sometimes near here, sometimes not so near."

This told her exactly nothing.

"How far did you say it was to the Rocking Chair?"

"I didn't say."

At the sound of a horse's footfall she turned, and she saw that whereas they had been two, now they were three. The newcomer was a slender, graceful man, dark and lithe, with quick, piercing eyes, set deep in the most reckless, sardonic face she had ever seen.

The man bowed, with a sweep of his hat almost derisive. "Miss Mackenzie, I believe."

She met him with level eyes that confessed no fear.

"Who are you, sir?"

"They call me Wolf Leroy."

Her heart sank. "You and he are the men that held up the Limited."

"If we are, you are the young lady that beat us out of thirty thousand dollars. We'll collect now," he told her, with a silky smile and a glitter of white, even teeth.

"What do you mean? Do you think I carry money about with me?"

"I didn't say that. We'll put it up to your father."

"My father?"

"He'll have to raise thirty thousand dollars to redeem his daughter." He let his bold eyes show their admiration. "And she's

worth every cent of it."

"Do you mean--" She read the flash of triumph in his ribald eyes and broke off. There was no need to ask him what he meant.

"That's what I mean exactly, ma'am. You're welcome to the hospitality of Hidden Valley. What's ours is yours. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, but I reckon YOU'RE NOT WELCOME TO GO WHENEVER YOU WANT TO--not till we get that thirty thousand."

"You talk as if he were a millionaire," she told him scornfully.

"The major's got friends that are. If it's a showdown he'll dig the dough up. I ain't a bit worried about that. His brother, Webb, will come through."

"Why should he?" She stood as straight and unbending as a young pine, courage regnant in the very poise of the fine head. "You daren't harm a hair of my head, and he knows it. For your life, you daren't."

His eyes glittered. Wolf Leroy was never a safe man to fling a challenge at. "Don't you be too sure of that, my dear. There ain't one thing on this green earth I daren't do if I set my mind to it. And your friends know it."

The other man broke in, easy and unmoved. "Hold yore hawses, cap. We got no call to be threatening this young lady. We keep her for a ransom because that's business. But she's as safe here as she would be at the Rocking Chair. She's got York Neil's word for that."

The Wolf snarled. "The word of a miscreant. That'll comfort her a heap. And York Neil's word don't always go up here."

The cowpuncher's steady eyes met him. "It'll go this time."

The girl gave her champion a quiet little nod and a low "Thank you." It was not much, but enough. For on the frontier "white men" do not war on women. Her instinct gave just the right manner of treating his help. It assumed that since he was what he was he could do no less. Moreover, it had the unexpected effect of spurring the Wolf's vanity, or something better than his vanity. She could see the battle in his face, and the passing of its evil, sinister expression.

"Beg your pardon, Miss Mackenzie. York's right. I'll add my word to his about your safety. I'm a wolf, they'll tell you. But when I give my word I keep it."

They turned and followed through the gateway the cattle which Hardman and another rider were driving up the canon. Presently

the walls fell back, the gulch opened to a saucer-shaped valley in which nestled a little ranch.

Leroy indicated it with a wave of his hand. "Welcome to Hidden Valley, Miss Mackenzie," he said cynically.

"Afraid I'm likely to wear my welcome out if you keep me here until my father raises thirty thousand dollars," she said lightly.

"Don't you worry any about that. We need the refining influences of ladies' society here. I can see York's a heap improved already. Just to teach us manners you're worth your board and keep." Then hardily, with a sweeping gesture toward the weary cattle: "Besides, your uncle has sent up a contribution to help keep you while you visit with us."

York laughed. "He sent it, but he didn't know he was sending it."

Leroy surrendered his room to Miss Mackenzie and put at her service the old Mexican woman who cooked for him. She was a silent, taciturn creature, as wrinkled as leather parchment and about as handsome, but Alice found safety in the very knowledge of the presence of another woman in the valley. She was among robbers and cutthroats, but old Juanita lent at least a touch of domesticity to a situation that would otherwise have been impossible. The girl was very uneasy in her mind. A cold dread filled her heart, a fear that was a good deal less than panic-terror, however. For she trusted the man Neil even as she distrusted his captain. Miscreant he had let himself be called, and doubtless was, but she knew no harm could befall her from his companions while he was alive to prevent it. A reassurance of this came to her that evening in the fragment of a conversation she overheard. They were passing her window which she had raised on account of the heat when the low voices of two men came to her.

"I tell you I'm not going, Leroy. Send Hardman," one said.

"Are you running this outfit, or am I, Neil?"

"You are. But I gave her my word. That's all there's to it."

Alice was aware that they had stopped and were facing each other tensely.

"Go slow, York. I gave her my word, too. Do you think I'm allowing to break it while you're away?"

"No, I don't. Look here, Phil. I'm not looking for trouble. You're major-domo of this outfit What you say goes--except about this girl. I'm a white man, if I'm a scoundrel."

"And I'm not?"

"I tell you I'm not sayin' that," the other answered doggedly.

"You're hinting it awful loud. I stand for it this time, York, but never again. You butt in once more and you better reach for your hardware simultaneous. Stick a pin in that."

They had moved on again, and she did not hear Neil's answer. Nevertheless, she was comforted to know she had one friend among these desperate outlaws, and that comfort gave her at least an hour or two of broken, nappy sleep.

In the morning when she had dressed she found her room door unlocked, and she stepped outside into the sunshine. York Neil was sitting on the porch at work on a broken spur strap. Looking up, he nodded a casual good morning. But she knew why he was there, and gratitude welled up in her heart. Not a young woman who gave way to every impulse, she yielded to one now, and shook hands with him. Their eyes met for a moment and he knew she was thanking him.

An eye derisive witnessed the handshake. "An alliance against the teeth of the wolf, I'll bet. Good mo'ning, Miss Mackenzie," drawled Leroy.

"Good morning," she answered quietly, her hands behind her.

"Sleep well?"

"Would you expect me to?"

"Why not, with York here doing the virgin-knight act outside your door?"

Her puzzled eyes discovered that Neil's face was one blush of embarrassment.

"He slept here on the po'ch," explained Leroy, amused. "It's a great fad, this outdoor sleeping. The doctors recommend it strong for sick people. You wouldn't think to look at him York was sick. He looks plumb husky. But looks are right deceptive. It's a fact, Miss Mackenzie, that he was so sick last night I wasn't dead sure he'd live till mo'ning."

The eyes of the men met like rapiers. Neil said nothing, and Leroy dropped him from his mind as if he were a trifle and devoted his attention to Alice.

"Breakfast is ready, Miss Mackenzie. This way, please."

The outlaw led her to the dining room, where the young woman met a fresh surprise. The table was white with immaculate linen and

shone with silver. She sat down to breakfast food with cream, followed by quail on toast, bacon and eggs, and really good coffee. Moreover, she discovered that this terror of the border knew how to handle his knife and fork, was not deficient in the little niceties of table decorum. He talked, and talked well, ignoring, like a perfect host, the relation that existed between them. They sat opposite each other and ate alone, waited upon by the Mexican woman. Alice wondered if he kept solitary state when she was not there or ate with the other men.

It was evening before Hardman returned from the mission upon which he had been sent in place of the obstinate Neil. He reported at once to Leroy, who came smilingly to the place where she was sitting on the porch to tell her his news.

"Webb Mackenzie's going to raise that thirty thousand, all right. He's promised to raise it inside of three days," he told her triumphantly.

"And shall I have to stay here three whole days?"

He looked with half-shut, smoldering eyes at her slender exquisiteness, compact of a strange charm that was both well-bred and gypsyish. There was a scarce-veiled passion in his gaze that troubled her. More than once that day she had caught it.

"Three days ain't so long. I could stand three months of you and wish for more," he told her.

Lightly she turned the subject, but not without a chill of fear. Three days was a long time. Much might happen if this wolf slipped the leash of his civilization.

It was next day that an incident occurred which was to affect the course of events more than she could guess at the time. A bunch of wild hill steers had been driven down by Hardman, Reilly, and Neil in the afternoon and were inclosed in the corral with the cows from the Rocking Chair Ranch. Just before sunset Leroy, who had been away all day, returned and sauntered over from the stable to join Alice. It struck the girl from his flushed appearance that he had been drinking. In his eye she found a wild devil of lawlessness that set her heart pounding. If Neil and he clashed now there would be murder done. Of that she felt sure.

That she set herself to humor the Wolf's whims was no more for her own safety than for that of the man who had been her friend. She curbed her fears, clamped down her startled maiden modesty, parried his advances with light words and gay smiles. Once Neil passed, and his eyes asked a question. She shook her head, unnoticed by Leroy. She would fight her own battle as long as she could. It was to divert him that she proposed they go down to the corral and look at the wild cattle the men had driven down. She told him she had heard a great deal about them, but had never

seen any. If he would go with her she would like to look at them.

The outlaw was instantly at her service, and they sauntered across. In her hand the girl carried a closed umbrella she had been using to keep off the sun.

They stood at the gate of the corral looking at the long-legged, shaggy creatures, as wild and as active almost as hill deer. On horseback one could pass to and fro among them without danger, but in a closed corral a man on foot would have taken a chance. Nobody knew this better than Leroy. But the liquor was still in his head, and even when sober he was reckless beyond other men.

"They need water," he said, and with that opened the gate and started for the windmill.

He sauntered carelessly across, with never a glance at the dangerous animals among which he was venturing. A great bull pawed the ground lowered its head, and made a rush at the unconscious man. Alice called to him to look out, then whipped open the gate and ran after him. Leroy turned, and, in a flash, saw that which for an instant filled him with a deadly paralysis. Between him and the bull, directly in the path of its rush, stood this slender girl, defenseless.

Even as his revolver flashed out from the scabbard the outlaw knew he was too late to save her, for she stood in such a position that he could not hit a vital spot. Suddenly her umbrella opened in the face of the animal. frightened, it set its feet wide and slithered to a halt so close to her that its chorus pierced the silk of the umbrella. With one hand Leroy swept the girl behind him; with the other he pumped three bullets into the forehead of the bull. Without a groan it keeled over, dead before it reached the ground.

Alice leaned against the iron support of the windmill. She was so white that the man expected her to sink down. One glance showed him other cattle pawing the ground angrily.

"Come!" he ordered, and, putting an arm round her waist, he ran with her to the gate. Yet a moment, and they were through in safety.

She leaned against him helpless for an instant before she had strength to disengage herself. "Thank you. I'm all right now."

"I thought you were going to faint," he explained.

She nodded. "I nearly did."

His face was colorless. "You saved my life."

"Then we're quits, for you saved mine," she answered, with a

shaken attempt at a smile.

He shook his head. "That's not the same at all. I had to do that, and there was no risk to it. But you chose to save me, to risk your life for mine."

She saw that he was greatly moved, and that his emotion had swept away the effects of the liquid as a fresh breeze does a fog.

"I didn't know I was risking my life. I saw you didn't see."

"I didn't think there was a woman alive had the pluck to do it--and for me, your enemy. That what you count me, isn't it--an enemy?"

"I don't know. I can't quite think of you as friend, can I?"

"And yet I would have protected you from any danger at any cost."

"Except the danger of yourself," she said, in low voice, meeting him eye to eye.

He accepted her correction with a groan, and wheeled away, leaning his arms on the corral fence and looking away to that saddle between the peak which still glowed with sunset light.

"I haven't met a woman of your kind before in ten years," he said presently. "I've lived on you looks, your motions, the inflections of your voice. I suppose I've been starved for that sort of thing and didn't know it till you came. It's been like a glimpse of heaven to me." He laughed bitterly: and went on: "Of course, I had to take to drinking and let you see the devil I am. When I'm sober you would be as safe with me as with York. But the excitement of meeting you-- I have to ride my emotions to death so as to drain them to the uttermost. Drink stimulates the imagination, and I drank."

"I'm sorry."

Her voice said more than the words. He looked at her curiously.

"You're only a girl. What do you know about men of my sort? You have been wrapped and sheltered all your life. And yet you understand me better than any of the people I meet. All my life I have fought with myself. I might have been a gentleman and I'm only a wolf. My appetites and passions, stronger than myself dragged me down. It was Kismet, the destiny ordained for me from my birth."

"Isn't there always hope for a man who knows his weaknesses and fights against them?" she asked timidly.

"No, there is not," came the harsh answer. "Besides, I don't fight. I yield to mine. Enough of that. It is you we have to

consider, not me. You have saved my life, and I have got to pay the debt."

"I didn't think who you were," her honesty compelled her to say.

"That doesn't matter. you did it. I'm going to take you back to your father and straight as I can."

Her eyes lit. "Without a ransom?"

"Yes."

"You pay your debts like a gentleman, sir."

"I'm not coyote all through."

She could only ignore the hunger that stared out of his eyes for her. "What about your friends? Will they let me go?"

"They'll do as I say. What kicking they do will be done mostly in private, and when they're away from me."

"I don't want to make trouble for you."

"You won't make trouble for me. If there's any trouble it will be for them," he said grimly.

Neither of them made any motion toward the house. The girl felt a strange impulse of tenderness toward this man who had traveled so fast the road to destruction. She had seen before that deep hunger of the eyes, for she was of the type of woman that holds a strong attraction for men. It told her that he had looked in the face of his happiness too late--too late by the many years of a misspent life that had decreed inexorably the character he could no longer change.

"I am sorry," she said again. "I didn't see that in you at first. I misjudged you. One can't label men just good or bad, as the novelists used to. You have taught me that--you and Mr. Neil."

His low, sardonic laughter rippled out. "I'm bad enough. Don't make any mistake about that, Miss Mackenzie. York's different. He's just a good man gone wrong. But I'm plain miscreant."

"Oh, no," she protested.

"As bad as they make them, but not wolf clear through," he said again. "Something's happened to me to-day. It won't change me. I've gone too far for that. But some morning when you read in the papers that Wolf Leroy died with his boots on and everybody in sight registers his opinion of the deceased you'll remember one thing. He wasn't a wolf to you--not at the last."

"I'll not forget," she said, and the quick tears were in her eyes.

York Neil came toward them from the house. It was plain from his manner he had a joke up his sleeve.

"You're wanted, Phil," he announced.

"Wanted where?"

"You got a visitor in there," Neil said, with a grin and a jerk of his thumb toward the house. "Came blundering into the draw sorter accidental-like, but some curious. So I asked him if he wouldn't light and stay a while. He thought it over, and figured he would."

"Who is it?" asked Leroy.

"You go and see. I ain't giving away what your Christmas presents are. I aim to let Santa surprise you a few.

Miss Mackenzie followed the outlaw chief into the house, and over his shoulder glimpsed two men. One of them was the Irishman, Cork Reilly, and he sat with a Winchester across his knees. The other had his back toward them, but he turned as they entered, and nodded casually to the outlaw. Helen's heart jumped to her throat when she saw it was Val Collins.

The two men looked at each other steadily in a long silence. Wolf Leroy was the first to speak.

"You damn fool!" The swarthy face creased to an evil smile of derision.

"I ce'tainly do seem to butt in considerable, Mr. Leroy," admitted Collins, with an answering smile.

Leroy's square jaw set like a vise. "It won't happen again, Mr. Sheriff."

"I'd hate to gamble on that heavy," returned Collins easily. Then he caught sight of the girl's white face, and rose to his feet with outstretched hand.

"Sit down," snapped out Reilly.

"Oh, that's all right I'm shaking hands with the lady. Did you think I was inviting you to drill a hole in me, Mr. Reilly?"

"I thought we bumped you off down at Epitaph," Leroy said.

"Along with Scott? Well, no. You see, I'm a regular cat to kill, Mr. Leroy, and I couldn't conscientiously join the angels with so lame a story as a game laig to explain my coming," said Collins cheerfully.

"In that case--"

"Yes, I understand. You'd be willing to accommodate with a hole in the haid instead of one in the laig. But I'll not trouble you."

"What are you doing here? Didn't I warn you to attend to your own business and leave me alone?"

"Seems to me you did load me up with some good advice, but I plumb forgot to follow it."

The Wolf cursed under his breath. "You came here at your own risk, then?"

"Well, I did and I didn't," corrected the sheriff easily. "I've got a five-thousand policy in the Southeastern Life Insurance Company, so I reckon it's some risk to them. And, by the way, it's a company I can recommend."

"Does it insure against suicide?" asked Leroy, his masked, smiling face veiling thinly a ruthless purpose.

"And against hanging. Let me strongly urge you to take out a policy at once," came the prompt retort.

"You think it necessary?"

"Quite. When you and York Neil and Hardman made an end of Scott you threw ropes round your own necks. Any locoed tenderfoot would know that."

The sheriff's unflinching look met the outlaw's black frown serene and clear-eyed.

"And would he know that you had committed suicide when you ran this place down and came here?" asked Leroy, with silken cruelty.

"Well, he ought to know it. The fact is, Mr. Leroy, that it hadn't penetrated my think-tank that this was your hacienda when I came mavericking in."

"Just out riding for your health?"

"Not exactly. I was looking for Miss Mackenzie. I cut her trail about six miles from the Rocking Chair and followed it where she

wandered around. The trail led directly away from the ranch toward the mountains. That didn't make me any easy in my mind. So I just jogged along and elected myself an investigating committee. I arrived some late, but here I am, right side up--and so hearty welcome that my friend Cork won't hear of my leaving at all. He don't do a thing but entertain me--never lets his attention wander. Oh, I'm the welcome guest, all right. No doubt about that."

Wolf Leroy turned to Alice. "I think you had better go to your room," he said gently.

"Oh, no, no; let me stay," she implored. "You would never--you would never--" The words died on her white lips, but the horror in her eyes finished the question.

He met her gaze fully, and answered her doggedly. "You're not in this, Miss Mackenzie. It's between him and me. I shan't allow even you to interfere."

"But--oh, it is horrible! for two minutes."

He shook his head.

"You must! Please."

"What use?"

Let me see you alone

Her troubled gaze shifted to the strong, brown, sun-baked face of the man who had put himself in this deadly peril to save her. His keen, blue-gray eyes, very searching and steady, met hers with a courage she thought splendid, and her heart cried out passionately against the sacrifice.

"You shall not do it. Oh, please let me talk it over with you."

"No."

"Have you forgotten already?--and you said you would always remember." She almost whispered it.

She had stung his consent at last. "Very well," he said, and opened the door to let her pass into the inner room.

But she noticed that his eyes were hard as jade.

"Don't you see that he came here to save me?" she cried, when they were alone. "Don't you see it was for me? He didn't come to spy out your place of hiding."

"I see that he has found it. If I let him go, he will bring back

a posse to take us."

"You could ride across the line into Mexico."

"I could, but I won't."

"But why?"

"Because, Miss Mackenzie, the money we took from the express car of the Limited is hidden here, and I don't know where it is; because the sun won't ever rise on a day when Val Collins will drive me out of Arizona."

"I don't know what you mean about the money, but you must let him go. You spoke of a service I had done you. This is my pay."

"To turn him loose to hunt us down?"

"He'll not trouble you if you let him go."

A sardonic smile touched his face. "A lot you know of him. He thinks it his duty to rid the earth of vermin like us. He'd never let up till he got us or we got him. Well, we've got him now, good and plenty. He took his chances, didn't he? It isn't as if he didn't know what he was up against. He'll tell you himself it's a square deal. He's game, and he won't squeal because we win and he has to pay forfeit."

The girl wrung her hands despairingly.

"It's his life or mine--and not only mine, but my men's," continued the outlaw. "Would you turn a wolf loose from your sheep pen to lead the pack to the kill?"

"But if he were to promise "

"We're not talking about the ordinary man--he'd promise anything and lie to-morrow. But Sheriff Collins won't do it. If you think you can twist a promise out of him not to take advantage of what he has found out you're guessing wrong. When you think he's a quitter, just look at that cork hand of his, and remember how come he to get it. He'll take his medicine proper, but he'll never crawl."

"There must be some way," she cried desperately,

"Since you make a point of it, I'll give him his chance."

"You'll let him go?" The joy in her voice was tremulously plain.

He laughed, leaning carelessly against the mantelshelf. But his narrowed eyes watched her vigilantly. "I didn't say I would let him go. What I said was that I'd give him a chance."

"How?"

"They say he's a dead shot. I'm a few with a gun myself. We'll ride down to the plains together, and find a good lonely spot suitable for a graveyard. Then one of us will ride away, and the other will stay, or perhaps both of us will stay."

She shuddered. "No--no--no. I won't have it."

"Afraid something might happen to me, ma'am?" he asked, with a queer laugh,

"I won't have it."

"Afraid, perhaps, he might be the one left for the coyotes and the buzzards?"

She was white to the lips, but at his next word the blood came flaming back to her cheeks.

"Why don't you tell the truth? Why don't you; say you love him, and be done with it? Say it and I'll take him back to Tucson with you safe as if he were a baby."

She covered her face with her hands, but with two steps he had reached her and captured her hands.

"The truth," he demanded, and his eyes compelled.

"It is to save his life?"

He laughed harshly. "Here's melodrama for you! Yes--to save your lover's life."

She lifted her eyes to his bravely. "What you say is true. I love him."

Leroy bowed ironically. "I congratulate Mr. Collins, who is now quite safe, so far as I am concerned. Meanwhile, lest he be jealous of your absence, shall we return now?"

Some word of sympathy for the reckless scamp trembled on her lips, but her instinct told her would hold it insult added to injury, and she left her pity unvoiced.

"If you please."

But as he heeled away she laid a timid hand on his arm. He turned and looked grimly down at the working face, at the sweet, soft, pitiful eyes brimming with tears. She was pure woman now, all the caste pride dissolved in yearning pity.

"Oh, you lamb--you precious lamb," he groaned, and clicked his teeth shut on the poignant pain of his loss.

"I think you're splendid," she told him. "Oh, I know what you've done--that you are not good. I know you've wasted your life and lived with your hand against every man's. But I can't help all that. I look for the good in you, and I find it. Even in your sins you are not petty. You know how to rise to an opportunity."

This man of contradictions, forever the creature of his impulses, gave the lie to her last words by signally failing to rise to this one. He snatched her to him, and looked down hungry-eyed at her sweet beauty, as fresh and fragrant as the wild rose in the copse.

"Please," she cried, straining from him with shy, frightened eyes.

For answer he kissed her fiercely on the cheeks, and eyes, and mouth.

"The rest are his, but these are mine," he laughed mirthlessly.

Then, flinging her from him, he led the way into the next room. Flushed and disheveled, she followed. He had outraged her maiden instincts and trampled down her traditions of caste, but she had no time to think of this now.

"If you're through explaining the mechanism of that Winchester to Sheriff Collins we'll reluctantly dispense with your presence, Mr. Reilly. We have arranged a temporary treaty of peace," the chief outlaw said.

Reilly, a huge lout of a fellow with a lowering countenance, ventured to expostulate. "Ye want to be careful of him. He's quicker'n chain lightning."

His chief exploded with low-voiced fury. "When I ask your advice, give it, you fat-brained son of a brand blotter. Until then padlock that mouth of yours. Vamos."

Reilly vanished, his face a picture of impotent malice, and Leroy continued:

"We're going to the Rocking Chair in the morning, Mr. Collins--at least, you and Miss Mackenzie are going there. I'm going part way. We've arranged a little deal all by our lones, subject to your approval. You get away without that hole in your head. Miss Mackenzie goes with you, and I get in return the papers you took off Scott and Webster."

"You mean I am to give up the hunt?" asked Collins.

"Not at all. I'll be glad to death to see you blundering in again when Miss Mackenzie isn't here to beg you off. The point is that in exchange for your freedom and Miss Mackenzie's I get those papers you left in a safety-deposit vault in Epitaph. It'll save me the trouble of sticking up the First National and winging a few indiscreet citizens of that burgh. Savvy?"

"That's all you ask?" demanded the surprised sheriff.

"All I ask is to get those papers in my hand and a four-hour start before you begin the hunt. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal, but I give it to you straight that I'll be after you as soon as the four hours are up," returned Collins promptly. "I don't know what magic Miss Mackenzie used. Still, I must compliment her on getting us out mighty easy."

But though the sheriff looked smilingly at Alice, that young woman, usually mistress of herself in all emergencies, did not lift her eyes to meet his. Indeed, he thought her strangely embarrassed. She was as flushed and tongue-tied as a country girl in unaccustomed company. She seemed another woman than the self-possessed young beauty he had met a month before on the Limited, but he found her shy abashment charming.

"I guess you thought you had come to the end of the passage, Mr. Collins," suggested the outlaw, with listless curiosity.

"I didn't know whether to order the flowers or not, but 'way down in my heart I was backing my luck," Collins told him.

"Of course it's understood that you are on parole until we separate," said Leroy curtly.

"Of course."

"Then we'll have supper at once, for we'll have to be on the road early." He clapped his hands together, and the Mexican woman appeared. Her master flung out a command or two in her own language.

"--poco tiempo,--" she answered, and disappeared.

In a surprisingly short time the meal was ready, set out on a table white with Irish linen and winking with cut glass and silver.

"Mr. Leroy does not believe at all in doing when in Rome as the Romans do," Alice explained to Collins, in answer to his start of amazement. "He's a regular Aladdin. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to see electric lights come on next."

"One has to attempt sometimes to blot out the forsaken desert,"

said Leroy. "Try this cut of slow elk, Miss Mackenzie. I think you'll like it."

"Slow elk! What is that?" asked the girl, to make talk.

"Mr. Collins will tell you," smiled Leroy.

She turned to the sheriff, who first apologized, with a smile, to his host. "Slow elk, Miss Mackenzie, is veal that has been rustled. I expect Mr. Leroy has pressed a stray calf into our Service "

"I see," she flashed. "Pressed veal."

The outlaw smiled at her ready wit, and took on himself the burden of further explanation. "And this particular slow elk comes from a ranch on the Aravaipa owned by Mr. Collins. York shot it up in the hills a day or two ago."

"Shouldn't have been straying so far from its range," suggested Collins, with a laugh. "But it's good veal, even if I say it that shouldn't."

"Thank you," burlesqued the bandit gravely, with such an ironic touch of convention that Alice smiled.

After dinner Leroy produced cigars, and with the permission of Miss Mackenzie the two men smoked while the conversation ran on a topic as impersonal as literature. A criticism of novels and plays written to illustrate the frontier was the line into which the discussion fell, and the girl from the city, listening with a vivid interest, was pleased to find that these two real men talked with point and a sense of dexterous turns. She felt a sort of proud proprietorship in their power, and wished that some of the tailors' models she had met in society, who held so good a conceit of themselves, might come under the spell of their strong, tolerant virility. Whatever the difference between them, it might be truly said of both that they had lived at first hand and come in touch closely with all the elemental realities. One of them was a romantic villain and the other an unromantic hero, but her pulsing emotions morally condemned one no more than the other.

This was the sheer delight of her esthetic sense of fitness, that strong men engaged in a finish fight could rise to so perfect a courtesy that an outsider could not have guessed the antagonism that ran between them, enduring as life.

Leroy gave the signal for breaking up by looking at his watch. "Afraid I must say 'Lights out.' It's past eleven. We'll have to be up and on our way with the hooters. Sleep well, Miss Mackenzie. You don't need to worry about waking. I'll have you called in good time. Buenos noches."

He held the door for her as she passed out; and, in passing, her eyes rose to meet his.

"--Buenos noches, señor;--I'm sure I shall sleep well to-night," she said.

It had been the day of Alice Mackenzie' life. Emotions and sensations, surging through her, had trodden on each other's heels. Woman-like, she welcomed the darkness to analyze and classify the turbid chaos of her mind. She had been swept into sympathy with an outlaw, to give him no worse name. She had felt herself nearer to him than to some honest men she could name who had offered her their love.

Surely, that had been bad enough, but worse was to follow. This discerning scamp had torn aside her veils of maiden reserve and exposed the secret fancy of her heart, unknown before even to herself. She had confessed love for this big-hearted sheriff and frontiersman. Here she could plead an ulterior motive. To save his life any deception was permissible. Yes, but where lay the truth? With that insistent demand of the outlaw had rushed over her a sudden wave of joy. What could it mean unless it meant what she would not admit that it could mean? Why, the man was impossible. He was not of her class. She had scarce seen him a half-dozen times. Her first meeting with him had been only a month ago. One month ago--

A remembrance flashed through her that brought her from the bed in a barefoot search for matches. When the candle was relit he slipped a chamoisskin pouch from her neck and from it took a sealed envelope. It was the note in which the sheriff on the night of the train robbery had written his prediction of how the matter would come out. She was to open the envelope in a month, and the month was up to-night.

As she tore open the flap it came to her with one of her little flashing smiles that she could never have guessed under what circumstances she would read it. By the dim flame of a guttering candle, in a cotton nightgown borrowed from a Mexican menial, a prisoner of the very man who had robbed her and the recipient of a practical confession of love from him not three hours earlier! Surely here was a situation to beggar romance. But before she had finished reading the reality was still more unbelievable.

I have just met for the first time the woman I am going to marry if God is good to one. I am writing this because I want her to know it as soon as I decently can. Of course, I am not worthy of her, but then I don't know any man that is.

So the fact goes--I'm bound to marry her if there's nobody else in the way. This isn't conceit. It is a deep-seated certainty I can't get away from, and don't want to. When she reads this, she

will think it a piece of foolish presumption. My hope is she will not always think so. Her Lover,

VAL COLLINS.

Her swift-pulsing heart was behaving very queerly. It seemed to hang delightfully still, and then jump forward with odd little beats of joy. She caught a glimpse of her happy face, and blew out the light for shame, groping her way back to bed with the letter carefully guarded against crumpling by her hand.

Foolish presumption indeed. Why, he had only seen her once, and he said he would marry her with never a by-your-leave! Wasn't that what he had said? She had to strike another match to learn the lines that had not stuck word for word in her mind, and after that another match to get a picture of the scrawl to visualize in the dark.

How dared he take her for granted? But what a masterly way of wooing for the right man! What idiotic folly if he had been the wrong one! Was he, then, the right one? She questioned herself closely, but came to no more definite answer than this--that her heart went glad with a sweet joy to know he wanted to marry her.

She resolved to put him from her mind, and in this resolve she fell at last into smiling sleep.

CHAPTER 19. A VILLON OF THE DESERT

When Alice Mackenzie looked back in after years upon the incidents connected with that ride to the Rocking Chair, it was always with a kind of glorified pride in her villain-hero. He had his moments, had this twentieth-century Villon, when he represented not unworthily the divinity in man; and this day held more than one of them. Since he was what he was, it also held as many of his black moods.

The start was delayed, owing to a cause Leroy had not foreseen. When York went, sleepy-eyed, to the corral to saddle the ponies, he found the bars into the pasture let clown, and the whole remunda kicking up its heels in a paddock large as a goodsized city. The result was that it took two hours to run up the bunch of ponies and another half-hour to cut out, rope, and saddle the three that were wanted. Throughout the process Reilly sat on the fence and scowled.

Leroy, making an end of slapping on and cinching the last saddle, wheeled suddenly on the Irishman. "What's the matter, Reilly?"

"Was I saying anything was the matter?"

"You've been looking it right hard. Ain't you man enough to say it instead of playing dirty little three-for-a-cent tricks--like letting down the corral-bars?"

Reilly flung a look at Neil that plainly demanded support, and then descended with truculent defiance from the fence.

"Who says I let down the bars? You bet I am man enough to say what I think; and if ye think I ain't got the nerve--"

His master encouraged him with ironic derision. "That's right, Reilly. Who's afraid? Cough it up and show York you're game."

"By thunder, I AM game. I've got a kick coming, sorr."

"Yes?" Leroy rolled and lit a cigarette, his black eyes fixed intently on the malcontent. "Well, register it on the jump. I've got to be off."

"That's the point." The curly-headed Neil had lounged up to his comrade's support. "Why have you got to be off? We don't savvy your game, cap."

"Perhaps you would like to be major-domo of this outfit, Neil?" scoffed his chief, eying him scornfully.

"No, sir. I ain't aimin' for no such thing. But we don't like the way things are shaping. What does all this here funny business mean, anyhow?" His thumb jerked toward Collins, already mounted and waiting for Leroy to join him. "Two days ago this world wasn't big enough to hold him and you. Well, I git the drop on him, and then you begin to cotton up to him right away. Big dinner last night--champagne corks popping, I hear. What I want to know is what it means. And here's this Miss Mackenzie. She's good for a big ransom, but I don't see it ambling our way. It looks darned funny."

"That's the ticket, York," derided Leroy. "Come again. Turn your wolf loose."

"Oh! I ain't afraid to say what I think."

"I see you're not. You should try stump-speaking, my friend. There's a field fox you there."

"I'm asking you a question, Mr. Leroy."

"That's whatever," chipped in Reilly.

"Put a name to it."

"Well, I want to know what's the game, and where we come in."

"Think you're getting the double-cross?" asked Leroy pleasantly, his vigilant eyes covering them like a weapon.

"Now you're shouting. That's what I'd like right well to know. There he sits"--with another thumbjerk at Collins--"and I'm a Chink if he ain't carryin' them same two guns I took offen him, one on the train and one here the other day. I ain't sayin' it ain't all right, cap. But what I do say is--how about it?"

Leroy did some thinking out loud. "Of course I might tell you boys to go to the devil. That's my right, because you chose me to run this outfit without any advice from the rest of you. But you're such infants, I reckon I had better explain. You're always worrying those fat brains of yours with suspicions. After we stuck up the Limited you couldn't trust me to take care of the swag. Reilly here had to cook up a fool scheme for us all to hide it blindfold together. I told you straight what would happen, and it did. When Scott crossed the divide we were in a Jim Dandy of a hole. We had to have that paper of his to find the boodle. Then Hardman gets caught, and coughs up his little recipe for helping to find hidden treasure. Who gets them both? Mr. Sheriff Collins, of course. Then he comes visiting us. Not being a fool, he leaves the documents behind in a safety-deposit vault. Unless I can fix up a deal with him, Mr. Reilly's wise play buncoes us and himself out of thirty thousand dollars."

"Why don't you let him send for the papers first?"

"Because he won't do it. Threaten nothing! Collins ain't that kind of a hairpin. He'd tell us to shoot and be damned."

"So you've got it fixed with him?" demanded Neil.

"You've a head like a sheep, York," admired Leroy. "YOU don't need any brick-wall hints to hit you. As your think-tank has guessed, I have come to an understanding with Collins."

"But the gyurl--I allow the old major would come down with a right smart ransom."

"Wrong guess, York. I allow he would come down with a right smart posse and wipe us off the face of the earth. Collins tells me the major has sent for a couple of Apache trailers from the reservation. That means it's up to us to hike for Sonora. The only point is whether we take that buried money with us or leave it here. If I make a deal with Collins, we get it. If I don't, it's somebody else's gold-mine. Anything more the committee of investigation would like to know?" concluded Leroy, as his cold eyes raked them scornfully and came to rest on Reilly.

"Not for mine," said Neil, with an apologetic laugh. "I'm satisfied. I just wanted to know. And I guess Cork corroborates."

Reilly growled something under his breath, and turned to hulk away.

"One moment. You'll listen to me, now. You have taken the liberty to assume I was going to sell you out. I'll not stand that from any man alive. To-morrow night I'll get back from Tucson. We'll dig up the loot and divide it. And right then we quit company. You go your way and I go mine." And with that as a parting shot, Leroy turned on his heel and went direct to his horse.

Alice Mackenzie might have searched the West with a fine-tooth comb and not found elsewhere two such riders for an escort as fenced her that day. Physically they were a pair of superb animals, each perfect after his fashion. If the fair-haired giant, with his lean, broad shoulders and rippling flow of muscles, bulked more strikingly in a display of sheer strength, the sinewy, tigerish grace of the dark Apollo left nothing to be desired to the eye. Both of them had been brought up in the saddle, and each was fit to the minute for any emergency likely to appear.

But on this pleasant morning no test of their power seemed likely to arise, and she could study them at her ease without hindrance. She had never seen Leroy look more the vagabond enthroned. For dress, he wore the common equipment of Cattleland--jingling spurs, fringed chaps, leather cuffs, gray shirt, with kerchief knotted loosely at the neck, and revolver ready to his hand. But he carried them with an air, an inimitable grace, that marked him for a prince among his fellows. Something of the kind she hinted to him in jesting paradoxical fashion, making an attempt to win from his sardonic gloom one of his quick, flashing smiles.

He countered by telling her what he had heard York say to Reilly of her. "She's a princess, Cork," York had said. "Makes my Epitaph gyurl look like a chromo beside her. Somehow, when she looks at a fellow, he feels like a whitewashed nigger."

All of them laughed at that, but both Leroy and the sheriff tried to banter her by insisting that they knew exactly what York meant.

"You can be very splendid when you want to give a man that whitewashed feeling; he isn't right sure whether he's on the map or not," reproached the train-robber.

She laughed in the slow, indolent way she had, taking the straw hat from her dark head to catch better the faint breath of wind that was souging across the plains.

"I didn't know I was so terrible. I don't think yon ever had any awe of anybody, Mr. Leroy." Her soft cheek flushed in unexpected memory of that moment when he had brushed aside all her maiden reserves and ravished mad kisses from her. "And Mr. Collins is

big enough to take care of himself," she added hastily, to banish the unwelcome recollection.

Collins, with his eyes on the light-shot waves that crowned her vivid face, wondered whether he was or not. If she had been a woman to desire in the queenly, half-insolent indifference of manner with which she had first met him, how much more of charm lay in this piquant gaiety, in the warm sweetness of her softer and more pliant mood! It seemed to him she had the gift of comradeship to perfection.

They unsaddled and ate lunch in the shade of the live-oaks at El Dorado Springs, which used to be a much-frequented watering-hole in the days when Camp Grant thrived and mule-skinners freighted supplies in to feed Uncle Sam's pets. Two hours later they stopped again at the edge of the Santa Cruz wash, two miles from the Rocking Chair Ranch.

It was while they were resaddling that Collins caught sight of a cloud of dust a mile or two away. He unslung his field-glasses, and looked long at the approaching dust-swirl. Presently he handed the binoculars to Leroy.

"Five of them; and that round-bellied Papago pony in front belongs to Sheriff Forbes, or I'm away wrong."

Leroy lowered the glasses, after a long, unflurried inspection. "Looks that way to me. Expect I'd better be burning the wind."

In a few sentences he and Collins arranged a meeting for next day up in the hills. He trailed his spurs through the dust toward Alice Mackenzie, and offered her his brown hand and wistful smile irresistible. "Good-by. This is where you get quit of me for good."

"Oh, I hope not," she told him impulsively. "We must always be friends."

He laughed ruefully. "Your father wouldn't indorse those unwise sentiments, I reckon--and I'd hate to bet your husband would," he added audaciously, with a glance at Collins. "But I love to hear you say it, even though we never could be. You're a right game, stanch little pardner. I'll back that opinion with the lid off."

"You should be a good judge of those qualities. I'm only sorry you don't always use them in a good cause."

He swung himself to his saddle. "Good-by."

"Good-by--till we meet again."

"And that will be never. So-long, sheriff. Tell Forbes I've got a particular engagement in the hills, but I'll be right glad to

meet him when he comes."

He rode up the draw and disappeared over the brow of the hillock. She caught another glimpse of him a minute later on the summit of the hill beyond. He waved a hand at her, half-turning in his saddle as he rode.

Presently she lost him, but faintly the wind swept back to her a haunting snatch of uncouth song:

"Oh, bury me out on the lone prairie,
In my narrow grave just six by three,"

Were the words drifted to her by the wind. She thought it pathetically likely he might get the wish of his song.

To Sheriff Forbes, dropping into the draw a few minutes later with his posse, Collins was a well of misinformation literally true. Yes, he had followed Miss Mackenzie's trail into the hills and found her at a mountain ranch-house. She had been there a couple of days, and was about to set out for the Rocking Chair with the owner of the place, when he arrived and volunteered to see her as far as her uncle's ranch.

"I reckon there ain't any use asking you if you seen anything of Wolf Leroy's outfit," said Forbes, a weather-beaten Westerner with a shrewd, wrinkled face.

"No, I reckon there's no use asking me that," returned Collins, with a laugh that deceptively seemed to include the older man in the joke.

"We're after them for rustling a bunch of Circle 33 cows. Well, I'll be moving. Glad you found the lady, Val. She don't look none played out from her little trek across the desert. Funny, ain't it, how she could have wandered that far and her afoot?"

The Arizona sun was setting in its accustomed blaze of splendor, when Val Collins and Alice Mackenzie put their horses again toward the ranch and the rainbow-hued west. In his contented eyes were reflected the sunshine and a serenity born of life in the wide, open spaces. They rode in silence for long, the gentle evening breeze blowing in soughs.

"Did you ever meet a man of such promises gone wrong so utterly? He might have been anything--and it has come to this, that he is hunted like a wild beast. I never saw anything so pitiful. I would give anything to save him."

He had no need to ask to whom she was referring. "Can't be done. Good qualities bulge out all over him, but they don't count for anything. 'Unstable as water.' That's what's the matter with him. He is the slave of his own whims. Hence he is only the splendid

wreck of a man, full of all kinds of rich outcropping pay-ore that pinch out when you try to work them. They don't raise men gamer, but that only makes him a more dangerous foe to society. Same with his loyalty and his brilliancy. He's got a haid on him that works like they say old J. E. B. Stuart's did. He would run into a hundred traps, but somehow he always worked his men out of them. That's Leroy, too. If he had been an ordinary criminal he would have been rounded up years ago. It's his audacity, his iron nerve, his good horse-sense judgment that saves his skin. But he's ce'tainly up against it at last."

"You think Sheriff Forbes will capture him?"

He laughed. "I think it more likely he'll capture Forbes. But we know now where he hangs out, and who he is. He has always been a mystery till now. The mystery is solved, and unless he strikes out for Sonora, Leroy is as good as a dead man."

"A dead man?"

"Does he strike you as a man likely to be taken alive? I look to see a dramatic exit to the sound of cracking Winchesters."

"Yes, that would be like him," she confessed with shudder. "I think he was made to lead a forlorn hope. Pity it won't be one worthy of the best in him."

"I guess he does have more moments set to music than most of us, and I'll bet, too, he has hidden way in him a list of 'Thou shalt nots.' I read a book once by a man named Stevenson that was sure virgin gold. He showed how every man, no matter how low he falls, has somewhere in him a light that burns, some rag of honor for which he is still fighting I'd hate to have to judge Leroy. Some men, I reckon, have to buck against so much in themselves that even failure is a kind of success for them."

"Yet you will go out to hunt him down?" she' said, marveling at the broad sympathy of the man.

"Sure I will. My official duty is to look out for society. If something in the machine breaks loose and goes to ripping things to pieces, the engineer has to stop the damage, even if he has to smash the rod that's causing the trouble."

The ponies dropped down again into the bed of the wash, and plowed across through the heavy sand. After they had reached the solid road, Collins resumed conversation at a new point.

"It's a month and a day since I first met you Miss Mackenzie," he said, apparently apropos of nothing.

She felt her blood begin to choke. "Indeed!"

"I gave you a letter to read when I was on the train."

"A letter!" she exclaimed, in well-affected surprise.

"Did you think it was a book of poems? No, ma'am, it was a letter. You were to read it in a month. Time was up last night. I reckon you read it."

"Could I read a letter I left at Tucson, when it was a hundred miles away?" she smiled with sweet patronage.

"Not if you left it at Tucson," he assented, with an answering smile.

"Maybe I DID lose it." She frowned, trying to remember.

"Then I'll have to tell you what was in it."

"Any time will do. I dare say it wasn't important."

"Then we'll say THIS time."

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Collins. I want to talk about our desert Villon."

"I said in that letter--"

She put her pony to a canter, and they galloped side by side in silence for half a mile. After she had slowed down to a walk, he continued placidly, as if oblivious of an interruption:

"I said in that letter that I had just met the young lady I was expecting to marry."

"Dear me, how interesting! Was she in the smoker?"

"No, she was in Section 3 of the Pullman."

"I wish I had happened to go into the other Pullman, but, of course, I couldn't know the young lady you were interested in was riding there."

"She wasn't."

"But you've just told me "

"That I said in the letter you took so much trouble to lose that I expected to marry the young woman passing under the name of Miss Wainwright."

"Sir!"

"That I expected--"

"Really, I am not deaf, Mr. Collins."

"--expected to marry her, just as soon as she was willing."

"Oh, she is to be given a voice in the matter, is she?"

"Ce'tainly, ma'am."

"And when?"

"Well, I had been thinking now was a right good time."

"It can't be too soon for me," she flashed back, sweeping him with proud, indignant eyes.

"But I ain't so sure. I rather think I'd better wait."

"No, no! Let us have it done with once and for all."

He relapsed into a serene, abstracted silence.

"Aren't you going to speak?" she flamed.

"I've decided to wait."

"Well, I haven't. Ask me this minute, sir, to marry you."

"Ce'tainly, if you cayn't wait. Miss Mackenzie, will you--"

"No, sir, I won't--not if you were the last man on earth," she interrupted hotly, whipping herself into a genuine rage. "I never was so insulted in my life. It would be ridiculous if it weren't so--so outrageous. You EXPECT, do you? And it isn't conceit, but a deep-seated certainty you can't get away from."

He had her fairly. "Then you DID read the letter."

"Yes, sir, I read it--and for sheer, unmatched impudence I have never seen its like."

"Now, I wish you would tell me what you REALLY think," he drawled.

Not being able, for reasons equestrian, to stamp her foot, she gave her bronco the spur.

When Collins again found conversation practicable, the Rocking Chair, a white adobe huddle in the moonlight, lay peacefully beneath them in the alley.

"It's a right quaint old ranch, and it's seen a heap of rough-and-tumble life in its day. If those old adobe bricks could

tell stories, I expect they could put some of these romances out of business." Miss Mackenzie's covert glance questioned suspiciously what this diversion might mean.

"All this country's interesting. Take Tucson now that burg is loaded to the roofs with live stories. It's an all-right business town, too--the best in the territory," he continued patriotically. "She ain't so great as Douglas on ore or as Phoenix on lungers, but when it comes, to the git-up-and-git hustle, she's there rounding up the trade from early morn till dine."

He was still expatiating in a monologue with grave enthusiasm on the town of his choice, when they came to the pasture fence of the ranch.

"Some folks don't like it--call it adobe-town, and say it's full of greasers. Everybody to his taste, I say. Little old Tucson is good enough for me."

She gave a queer little laugh as he talked. She had put a taboo on his love story herself, but she resented the perfectly unmoved good humor with which he seemed to be accepting her verdict. She made up her mind to punish him, but he gave her no chance. As he helped her to dismount, he said:

"I'll take the horses round to the stable, Miss Mackenzie. Probably I won't see you again before I leave, but I'm hoping to meet you again in Tucson one of these days. Good-by."

She nodded a curt good-by and passed into the house. She was vexed and indignant, but had too strong a sense of humor not to enjoy a joke even when it was against herself.

"I forgot to ask him whether he loves me or Tucson more, and as one of the subjects seems to be closed I'll probably never find out," she told herself, but with a queer little tug of pain in her laughter.

Next moment she was in the arms of her father.

CHAPTER 20. BACK TO GOD'S COUNTRY

To minimize the risk, Megales and Carlo left the prison by the secret passage, following the fork to the river bank and digging at the piled-up sand till they had forced an exit. O'Halloran met them here with horses, and the three men followed the riverwash beyond the limits of the town and cut across by a trail to a siding on the Central Mexican Pacific tracks. The Irishman was careful to take no chances, and kept his party in the mesquit till the headlight of an approaching train was visible.

It drew up at the siding, and the three men boarded one of the two cars which composed it. The coach next the engine was occupied by a dozen trusted soldiers, who had formerly belonged to the bodyguard of Megales. The last car was a private one, and in it the three found Henderson, Bucky O'Connor, and his little friend, the latter still garbed as a boy.

Frances was exceedingly eager to don again the clothes proper to her sex, and she had promised herself that, once habited as she desired, nothing could induce her ever to masquerade again. Until she met and fell in love with the ranger she had thought nothing of it, since it had been merely a matter of professional business to which she had been forced. Indeed, she had sometimes enjoyed the humor of the deception. It had lent a spice of enjoyment to a life not crowded with it. But after she met Bucky there had grown up in her a new sensitiveness. She wanted to be womanly, to forget her turbid past and the shifts to which she had sometimes been put. She had been a child; she was now a woman. She wanted to be one of whom he need be in no way ashamed.

When their train began to pull out of the depot at Chihuahua she drew a deep sigh of relief.

"It's good to get away from here back to the States. I'm tired of plots and counterplots. For the rest of my life I want to be just a woman," she said to Bucky.

The young man smiled. "I reckon I must quit trying to make you a gentleman. Fact is, I don't want you to be one any more."

She slanted a look at him to see what that might mean and another up the car to make sure that Henderson was out of hearing.

"It was rather hopeless, wasn't it?" she smiled. "We'll do pretty well if we succeed in making me a lady in course of time. I've a lot to learn, you know."

"Well, you got lots of time to learn it," he replied cheerfully. "And I've got a notion tucked away in the back of my head that you haven't got such a heap to study up. Mrs. Mackenzie will put you next to the etiquette wrinkles where you are shy."

A shadow fell on the piquant, eager face beside him. "Do you think she will love me?"

"I don't think. I know. She can't help it."

"Because she is my mother? Oh, I hope that is true."

"No, not only because she is your mother."

She decided to ask for no more reasons. Henderson, pleased at the

wide stretch of plain as only one who had missed the open air for many years could be, was on the observation platform in the rear of the car, one glance at his empty seat showed her. There was no safety for her shyness in the presence of that proverbial three which makes a crowd, and she began to feel her heart again in panic as once before. She took at once the opening she had given.

"I do need a mother so much, after growing up like Topsy all these years. And mine is the dearest woman in the world. I fell in love with her before, and I did not know who she was when I was at he ranch."

"I'll agree to the second dearest in the world, but I reckon you shoot too high when you say the plumb dearest."

"She is. We'll quarrel if you don't agree," trying desperately to divert him from the topic she knew he meant to pursue. For in the past two days he had been so busy helping O'Halloran that he had not even had a glimpse of her. As a consequence of which each felt half-dubious of the other's love, and Frances felt wholly shy about expressing her own or even listening to his.

"Well, we're due for a quarrel, I reckon. But we'll postpone it till we got more time to give it. He drew a watch from his pocket and glanced at it "In less than fifteen minutes Mike and our two friends who are making their getaway will come in that door Henderson just went out of. That means we won't get a chance to be alone together, for about two days. I've got something to say to you, Curly Haid, that won't keep that long with out running my temperature clear up. So I'm allowing to say it right now immediate. No, you don't need to turn them brown appealers on me. It won't do a mite of good. It's Bucky to the bat and he's bound to make a hit or strike out."

"I think I hear Mr. Henderson coming," murmured Frances, for lack of something more effective to say.

"Not him. He's hogtied to the scenery long enough to do my business. Now, it won't take me long if I get off right foot first. You read my letter, you said?"

"Which letter?" She was examining attentively the fringe of the sash she wore.

"Why, honey, that love-letter I wrote you. If there was more than one it must have been wrote in my sleep, for I ce'tainly disremember it."

He could just hear her confused answer: "Oh, yes, I read that. I told you that before."

"What did you think? Tell me again."

"I thought you misspelled feelings."

"You don't say. Now, ain't that too bad? But, girl o' mine, I expect you were able to make it out, even if I did get the letters to milling around wrong. I meant them feelings all right. Outside of the spelling, did you have any objections to them,

"How can I remember what you wrote in that letter several days ago?"

"I'll bet you know it by heart, honey, and, if you don't, you'll find it in your inside vest pocket, tucked away right close to your heart."

"It isn't," she denied, with a blush.

"Sho! Pinned to your shirt then, little pardner. I ain't particular which. Point is, if you need to refresh that ailin' memory of yours, the document is--right handy. But you don't need to. It just says one little sentence over and over again. All you have got to do is to say one little word, and you don't have to say it but once."

"I don't understand you," her lips voiced.

"You understand me all right. What my letter said was 'I love you,' and what you have got to say is: 'Yes'"

"But that doesn't mean anything."

"I'll make out the meaning when you say it."

"Do I have to say it?"

"You have to if you feel it."

Slowly the big brown eyes came up to meet his bravely. "Yes, Bucky."

He caught her hands and looked down into her pure, sweet soul.

"I'm in luck," he breathed deeply. "In golden luck to have you look at me twice. Are you sure?"

"Sure. I loved you that first day I met you. I've loved you every day since," she confessed simply.

Full on the lips he kissed her.

"Then we'll be married as soon as we reach the Rocking Chair."

"But you once said you didn't want to be my husband," she taunted sweetly. "Don't you remember? In the days when we were gipsies."

"I've changed my mind. I want to, and I'm in a hurry."

She shook her head. "No, dear. We shall have to wait. It wouldn't be fair to my mother to lose me just as soon as she finds me. It is her right to get acquainted with me just as if I belonged to her alone. You understand what I mean, Bucky. She must not feel as if she never had found me, as if she never had been first with me. We can love each other more simply if she doesn't know about you. We'll have it for a secret for a month or two."

She put her little hand on his arm appealingly to win his consent. His eyes rested on it curiously, Then he took it in his big brown one and turned it palm up. Its delicacy and perfect finish moved him, for it seemed to him that in the contrast between the two hands he saw in miniature the difference of sex. His showed strength and competency and the roughness that comes of the struggle of life. But hers was strangely tender and confiding, compact of the qualities that go to make up the strength of the weak. Surely he deserved the worst if he was not good to her, a shield and buckler against the storms that must beat against them in the great adventure they were soon to begin together.

Reverently he raised the little hand and kissed its palm.

"Sure, sweetheart I had forgotten about your mother's claim. We can wait, I reckon," he added with a smile. "You must always set me straight when I lose the trail of what's right, Curly Haid. You are to be a guiding-star to me."

"And you to me. Oh, Bucky, isn't it good?"

He kissed her again hurriedly, for the train was jarring to a halt. Before he could answer in words, O'Halloran burst into the coach, at the head of his little company.

"All serene, Bucky. This is the last scene, and the show went without a hitch in the performance anywhere. "

Bucky smiled at Frances as he answered his enthusiastic friend:

"That's right. Not a hitch anywhere."

"And say, Bucky, who do you think is in the other coach dressed as one of the guards?"

"Colonel Roosevelt," the ranger guessed promptly.

"Our friend Chaves. He's escaping because he thinks we'll have him assassinated in revenge," the big Irishman returned gleefully. "You should have seen his color, me bye, when he caught sight of me. I asked him if he'd been reduced to the

ranks, and he begged me not to tell you he was here. Go in and devil him."

Bucky glanced at his lover. "No, I'm so plumb contented I haven't the heart."

At the Rocking Chair Ranch there was bustle and excitement. Mexicans scrubbed and scoured under the direction of Alice and Mrs. Mackenzie, and vaqueros rode hither and thither on bootless errands devised by their nervous master. For late that morning a telephone call from Aravaipa had brought Webb to the receiver to listen to a telegram. The message was from Bucky, then on the train on his way home.

"The best of news. Reach the Rocking Chair tonight."

That was the message which had disturbed the serenity of big Webb Mackenzie and had given to the motherly heart of his wife an unusual flutter. The best of news it could not be, for the ranger had already written them of the confession of Anderson, which included the statement of the death of their little daughter. But at least he might bring the next best news, information that David Henderson was free at last and his long martyrdom ended.

So all day hurried preparations were being made to receive the honored guests with a fitting welcome. The Rocking Chair was a big ranch, and its hospitality was famous all over the Southwest. It was quite unnecessary to make special efforts to entertain, but Webb and his wife took that means of relieving the strain on them till night.

Higher crept the hot sun of baked Arizona. It passed the zenith and began to descend toward the purple hills in the west, went behind them with a great rainbow splash of brilliancy peculiar to that country. Dusk came, and died away in the midst of a love-concert of quails. Velvet night, with its myriad stars, entranced the land and made magic of its hills and valleys.

For the fiftieth time Webb dragged out his watch and consulted it.

"I wish that young man had let us know which way he was coming, so I could go and meet them. If they come by the river they should be in the Box canyon by this time. But if I was to ride out, like as not they would come by the mesa," he sputtered.

"What time is it, Webb?" asked his wife. scarcely less excited.

He had to look again, so absent-minded had been his last glance at the watch. "Nine-fifteen. Why didn't I telephone to Rogers and ask him to find out which way they were coming? Sometimes I'm

mighty thick-headed."

As Mackenzie had guessed, the party was winding its way through the Box Canyon at that time of speaking. Bucky and Frances led the way, followed by Henderson and the vaquero whom Mackenzie had telephoned to guide them from Aravaipa.

"I reckon this night was made for us, Curly Haid. Even good old Arizona never turned out such a one before. I expect it was ordered for us ever since it was decided we belonged to each other. That may have been thousands of years ago." Bucky laughed, to relieve the tension, and looked up at the milky way above. "We're like those stars, honey. All our lives we have been drifting around, but all the time it had been decided by the God-of-things-as-they-are that our orbits were going to run together and gravitate into the same one when the right time came. It has come now."

"Yes, Bucky," she answered softly. "We belong, dear."

"Hello, here's the end of the canon. The ranch lies right behind that spur."

"Does it?" Presently she added: "I'm all a-tremble, Bucky. To think I'm going to meet my father and my mother for the first time really, for I don't count that other time when we didn't know. Suppose they shouldn't like me."

"Impossible. Suppose something reasonable," her lover replied.

"But they might not. You think, you silly boy, that because you do everybody must. But I'm so glad I'm clothed and in my right mind again. I couldn't have borne to meet my mother with that boys suit on. Do you think I look nice in this? I had to take what I could find ready-made, you know."

Unless his eyes were blinded by the glamour of love, he saw the sweetest vision of loveliness he had known. Such a surpassing miracle of soft, dainty curves, such surplusage of beauty in bare throat, speaking eye, sweet mouth, and dimpled cheeks! But Bucky was a lover, and perhaps no fair judge, for in that touch of vagueness, of fairy-land, lent by the moonlight, he found the world almost too beautiful to believe. Did she look NICE? How beggarly words were to express feelings, after all.

The vaquero with them rode forward and pointed to the valley below, where the ranch-house huddled in a pellucid sea of moonlight.

"That's the Rocking Chair, sir."

Presently there came a shout from the ranch, and a man galloped toward them. He passed Bucky with a wave of his hand and made

directly for Henderson.

"Dave! Dave, old partner," he cried, leaping from his horse and catching the other's hand. "After all these years you've risen from the dead and come back to me." His voice was broken with emotion.

"Come! Let's canter forward to the ranch," said Bucky to Frances and the vaquero, thinking it best to leave the two old comrades together for a while.

Mrs. Mackenzie and Alice met them at the gate. "Did you bring him? Did you bring Dave?" the older lady asked eagerly.

"Yes, we brought him," answered Bucky, helping Frances to dismount.

He led the girl to her mother. "Mrs. Mackenzie, can you stand good news?"

She caught at the gate. "What news? Who is this lady?"

"Her name is Frances."

"Frances what?"

"Frances Mackenzie. She is your daughter, returned, after all these years, to love and be loved."

The mother gave a little throat cry, steadied herself, and fell into the arms of her daughter. "Oh, my baby! My baby! Found at last."

Quietly Bucky slipped away to the stables with the ponies. As quietly Alice disappeared into the house. This was sacred ground, and not even their feet should rest on it just now.

When Bucky returned to the house, he found his sweetheart sitting between her father and mother, each of whom was holding one of her hands. Henderson had retired to clean himself up. Happy tears were coursing down the cheeks of the mother, and Webb found it necessary to blow his nose frequently. He jumped up at sight of the ranger.

"Young man, you're to blame for this. You've found my friend and you've found my daughter. Brought them both back to us on the same day. What do you want? Name it, and it's yours, if I can give it."

Bucky looked at Frances with a smile in his eyes. He knew very well what he wanted, but he was under bonds not to name it yet.

"I'll set you up in the cattle business, sir. I'll buy you sheep,

if you prefer. I'll get you an interest in a mine. Put a name to what you want."

"I'm no robber. You paid the expenses of my trip. That's all I want right now."

"It's not all you'll get. Do you think I'm a cheap piker? No, sir. You've got to let me grub-stake you." Mackenzie thumped a clinched fist down on the table.

"All right, seh. You're the doctor. Give me an interest in that map and I'll prospect the mine this summer, if I can locate it."

"Good enough, and I'll finance the proposition. You and Dave can take half-shares in the property. In the meantime, are you open to an engagement?"

"Depends what it is," replied Bucky cautiously.

"My foreman's quit on me. Gone into business for himself. I'm looking for a good man. Will you be my major-domo?"

Bucky's heart leaped. He had been thinking of how he must report almost immediately to HurryUp Millikan, of the rangers. Now, he could resign from that body and stay near his love. Certainly things were coming his way.

"I'd like to try it, seh," he answered. "I may not make good, but I sure would like to have a chance at it."

"Make good! Of course you'll make good. You're the best man in Arizona, sir," cried Webb extravagantly. He wheeled on his new-found daughter. "Don't you think so, Frankie?"

Frances blushed, but answered bravely: "Yes, sir. He makes everything right when he takes hold of it."

"Good. We're not going to let him get away from us after making us so happy, are we, mother? This young man is going to stay right here. We never had but one son, and we are going to treat him as much like one as we can. Eh, mother?"

"If he will consent, Webb." She went up to the ranger and kissed his tanned cheek. "You must pardon an old woman whom you've made very happy."

Again Bucky's laughing blue eyes met the brown ones of his sweetheart.

"Oh, I'll consent, all right, and I reckon, ma'am, it's mighty good of you to treat me so white. I'll sure try to please you."

Webb thumped him on the back. "Now, you're shouting. We want you

to be one of us, young man."

Once more that happy, wireless message of eyes followed by O'Connor's assent. "That's what I want myself, seh."

Bucky found a surprise waiting for him at the stables. A heavy hand descended upon his shoulder. He whirled, and looked up into the face of Sheriff Collins.

"You here, Val?" he cried in surprise.

"That's what. Any luck, Bucky?"

They went out and sat down on the big rocks back of the corral. Here each told the other his story, with certain reservations. Collins had just got back from Epitaph, where he had been to get the fragments of paper which told the secret of the buried treasure. He was expecting to set out in the early morning to meet Leroy.

"I'll go with you," said Bucky immediately.

Val shook his head. "No, I'm to go alone. That's the agreement."

"Of course if that's the agreement." Nevertheless, the ranger formed a private intention not to be far from the scene of action.

CHAPTER 21. THE WOLF PACK

"Good evening, gentlemen. Hope I don't intrude on the festivities."

Leroy smiled down ironically on the four flushed, startled faces that looked up at him. Suspicion was alive in every rustle of the men's clothes. It breathed from the lowering countenances. It itched at the fingers longing for the trigger. The unending terror of a bandit's life is that no man trusts his fellow. Hence one betrays another for fear of betrayal, or stabs him in the back to avoid it.

The outlaw chief had slipped into the room so silently that the first inkling they had of his presence was that gentle, insulting voice. Now, as he lounged easily before them, leg thrown over the back of a chair and thumbs sagging from his trouser pockets, they looked the picture of schoolboys caught by their master in a conspiracy. How long had he been there? How much had he heard? Full of suspicion and bad whisky as they were, his confident contempt still cowed the very men who were planning his destruction. A minute before they had been full of loud threats and boastings; now they could only search each other's faces

sullenly for a cue.

"Celebrating Chaves' return from manana land, I reckon. That's the proper ticket. I wonder if we couldn't afford to kill another of Collins' fattened calves."

Mr. Hardman, not enjoying the derisive raillery, took a hand in the game. "I expect the boys hadn't better touch the sheriff's calves, now you and him are so thick."

"We're thick, are we?" Leroy's indolent eyes narrowed slightly as they rested on him.

"Ain't you? It sure seemed that way to me when I looked out of that mesquit wash just above Eldorado Springs and seen you and him eating together like brothers and laughing to beat the band. You was so close to him I couldn't draw a bead on him without risking its hitting you."

"Spying, eh?"

"If that's the word you want to use, cap. And you were enjoying yourselves proper."

"Laughing, were we? That must have been when he told me how funny you looked in the 'altogether' shedding false teeth and information about hidden treasure."

"Told you that, did he?" Mr. Hardman incontinently dropped repartee as a weapon too subtle, and fell back on profanity.

"That's right pat to the minute, cap, what you say about the information he leaks," put in Neil. "How about that information? I'll be plumb tickled to death to know you're carrying it in you vest pocket."

"And if I'm not?"

"Then ye are a bigger fool than I had expected sorr, to come back here at all," said the Irishman truculently.

"I begin to think so myself, Mr. Reilly. Why keep faith with a set of swine like you?"

"Are you giving it to us that you haven't got those papers?"

Leroy nodded, watching them with steady, alert eyes. He knew he stood on the edge of a volcano that might explode at any moment.

"What did I tell yez?" Reilly turned savagely to the other disaffected members of the gang. "Didn't I tell yez he was selling us out?"

Somehow Leroy's revolver seemed to jump to his hand without a motion on his part. It lay loosely in his limp fingers, unaimed and undirected.

"SAY THAT AGAIN, PLEASE."

Beneath the velvet of Leroy's voice ran a note more deadly than any threat could have been. It rang a bell for a silence in which the clock of death seemed to tick. But as the seconds fled Reilly's courage oozed away. He dared not accept the invitation to reach for his weapon and try conclusions with this debonair young daredevil. He mumbled a retraction, and flung, with a curse, out of the room.

Leroy slipped the revolver back in his holster and quoted, with a laugh:

"To every coward safety,
And afterward his evil hour."

"What's that?" demanded Neil. "I ain't no coward, even if Jay is. I don't knuckle under to any man. You got a right to ante up with some information. I want to know why you ain't got them papers you promised to bring back with you."

"And I, too, senior. I desire to know what it means," added Chaves, his eyes glittering.

"That's the way to chirp, gentlemen. I haven't got them because Forbes blundered on us, and I had to take a pasear awful sudden. But I made an appointment to meet Collins to-morrow."

"And you think he'll keep it?" scoffed Neil.

"I know he will."

"You seem to know a heap about him," was the significant retort.

"Take care, York."

"I'm not Hardman, cap. I say what I think.

"And you think?" suggested Leroy gently.

"I don't know what to think yet. You're either a fool or a traitor. I ain't quite made up my mind. When I find out you'll ce'tainly hear from me straight. Come on, boys." And Neil vanished through the door.

An hour later there came a knock at Leroy's door. Neil answered his permission to enter, followed by the other trio of flushed beauties. To the outlaw chief it was at once apparent with what Dutch courage they had been fortifying themselves to some

resolve. It was characteristic of him, though he knew on how precarious a thread his life was hanging, that disgust at the foul breaths with which they were polluting the atmosphere was his first dominant emotion.

"I wish, Lieutenant Chaves, next time you emigrate you'd bring another brand of poison out to the boys. I can't go this stuff. Just remember that, will you?"

The outlaw chief's hard eye ran over the rebels and read them like a primer. They had come to depose him certainly, to kill him perhaps. Though this last he doubted. It wouldn't be like Neil to plan his murder, and it wouldn't be like the others to give him warning and meet him in the open. Warily he stood behind the table, watching their awkward embarrassment with easy assurance. Carefully he placed face downward on the table the Villon he had been reading, but he did it without lifting his eyes from them.

"You have business with me, I presume."

"That's what we have," cried Reilly valiantly, from the rear.

"Then suppose we come to it and get the room aired as soon as possible," Leroy said tartly.

"You're such a slap-up dude you'd ought to be a hotel clerk, cap. You're sure wasted out here."

So we boys got together and held a little election. Consequence is, we--fact is, we--"

Neil stuck, but Reilly came to his rescue.

"We elected York captain of this outfit."

"To fill the vacancy created by my resignation. Poor York! You're the sacrifice, are you? On the whole, I think you fellows have made a wise choice. York's game, and he won't squeal on you, which is more than I could say of Reilly, or the play actor, or the gentlemen from Chihuahua. But you want to watch out for a knife in the dark, York. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,' you know."

"We didn't come here to listen to a speech, cap, but to notify you we was dissatisfied, and wouldn't have you run the outfit any longer," explained Neil.

"In that event, having heard the report of the committee, if there's no further new business, I declare this meeting adjourned sine die. Kindly remove the perfume tubs, Captain Neil, at your earliest convenience."

The quartette retreated ignominiously. They had come prepared to

gloat over Leroy's discomfiture, and he had mocked them with that insolent ease of his that set their teeth in helpless rage.

But the deposed chief knew they had not struck their last blow. Throughout the night he could hear the low-voiced murmur of their plottings, and he knew that if the liquor held out long enough there would be sudden death at Hidden Valley before twenty-four hours were up. He looked carefully to his rifle and his revolvers, testing several shells to make sure they had not been tampered with in his absence. After he had made all necessary preparations, he drew the blinds of his window and moved his easy-chair from its customary place beside the fire. Also he was careful not to sit where a shadow would betray his position. Then back he went to his Villon, a revolver lying on the table within reach.

But the night passed without mishap, and with morning he ventured forth to his meeting with the sheriff. He might have slipped out from the back door of his cabin and gained the canyon, by circling unobserved, up the draw and over the hogback, but he would not show by these precautions any fear of the cutthroats with whom he had to deal. As was his scrupulous custom, he shaved and took his morning bath before appearing outdoors. In all Arizona no trimmer, more graceful figure of jaunty recklessness could be seen than this one stepping lightly forth to knock at the bunk-house door behind which he suspected were at least two men determined on his death by treachery.

Neil came to the door in answer to his knock and within he could see the villainous faces at bloodshot eyes of two of the others peering at him.

"Good mo'ning, Captain Neil. I'm on my way to keep that appointment I mentioned last night I'd ce'tainly be glad to have you go along. Nothing like being on the spot to prevent double-crossing."

"I'm with you in the fling of a cow's tail. Come on, boys."

"I think not. You and I will go alone."

"Just as you say. Reilly, I guess you better saddle Two-step and the Lazy B roan."

"I ain't saddling ponies for Mr. Leroy," returned Reilly, with thick defiance.

Neil was across the room in two strides. "When I tell you to do a thing, jump! Get a move on and saddle those broncs."

"I don't know as--"

"Vamos!"

Reilly sullenly slouched out.

"I see you made them jump," commented the former captain audibly, seating himself comfortably on a rock. "It's the only way you'll get along with them. See that they come to time or pump lead into them. You'll find there's no middle way."

Neil and Leroy had hardly passed beyond the rock-slide before the others, suspicion awake in their sodden brains, dodged after them on foot. For three miles they followed the broncos as the latter picked their way up the steep trail that led to the Dalriada Mine.

"If Mr. Collins is here, he's lying almighty low," exclaimed Neil, as he swung from his pony at the foot of the bluff from the brow of which the gray dump of the mine straggled down like a Titan's beard.

"Right you are, Mr. Neil."

York whirled, revolver in hand, but the man who had risen from behind the big boulder beside the trail was resting both hands on the rock before him.

"You're alone, are you?" demanded York.

"I am."

Neil's revolver slid back into its holster. "Mornin', Val. What's new down at Tucson?" he said amiably.

"I understood I was to meet you alone, Mr. Leroy," said the sheriff quickly, his blue-gray eyes on the former chief.

"That was the agreement, Mr. Collins, but it seems the boys are on the anxious seat about these little socials of ours. They've embraced the notion that I'm selling them. I hated to have them harassed with doubts, so I invited the new majordomo of the ranch to come with me. Of cou'se, if you object--"

"I don't object in the least, but I want him to understand the agreement. I've got a posse waiting at Eldorado Springs, and as soon as I get back there we take the trail after you. Bucky O'Connor is at the head of the posse."

York grinned. "We'll be in Sonora then, Val. Think I'm going to wait and let you shoot off my other fingers?"

Collins fished from his vest pocket the papers he had taken from Scott hat and from Webster. "I think I'll be jogging along back to the springs. I reckon these are what you want."

Leroy took them from him and handed them to Neil. "Don't let us detain you any longer, Mr. Collins. I know you're awful busy these days."

The sheriff nodded a good day, cut down the hill on the slant, and disappeared in a mesquit thicket, from the other side of which he presently emerged astride a bay horse.

The two outlaws retraced their way to the foot of the hill and remounted their broncos.

"I want to say, cap, that I'm eating humble-pie in big chunks right this minute," said Neil shamefacedly, scratching his curly poll and looking apologetically at his former chief. "I might 'a' knowed you was straight as a string, all I've seen of you these last two years. If those coyotes say another word, cap--"

An exploding echo seemed to shake the mountain, and then another. Leroy swayed in the saddle, clutching at his side. He pitched forward, his arms round the horse's neck, and slid slowly to the ground.

Neil was off his horse in an instant, kneeling beside him. He lifted him in his arms and carried him behind a great outcropping boulder.

"It's that hound Collins," he muttered, as he propped the wounded man's head on his arm. "By God, I didn't think it of Val."

Leroy opened his eyes and smiled faintly. "Guess again, York."

"You don't mean "

He nodded. "Right this time--Hardman and Chaves and Reilly. They shot to get us both. With us out of the way they could divide the treasure between them."

Neil choked. "You ain't bad hurt, old man. Say you ain't bad hurt, Phil."

"More than I can carry, York; shot through and through. I've been doubtful of Reilly for a long time;"

"By the Lord, if I don't get the rattlesnake for this!" swore Neil between his teeth. "Ain't there nothin' I can do for you, old pardner?"

In sharp succession four shots rang out. Neil grasped his rifle, leaning forward and crouching for cover. He turned a puzzled face toward Leroy. "I don't savvy. They ain't shooting at us."

"The sheriff," explained Leroy. "They forgot him, and he doubled back on them."

"I'll bet Val got one of them," cried Neil, his face lighting.

"He's got one--or he's quit living. That's a sure thing. Why don't you circle up on them from behind, York?"

"I hate to leave you, cap--and you so bad. Can't I do a thing for you?"

Leroy smiled faintly. "Not a thing. I'll be right here when you get back, York."

The curly-headed young puncher took Leroy's hand in his, gulping down a boyish sob. "I ain't been square with you, cap. I reckon after this-- when you git well--I'll not be such a coyote any more."

The dying man's eyes were lit with a beautiful tenderness. "There's one thing you can do for me, York. . . . I'm out of the game, but I want you to make a new start. . . . I got you into this life, boy. Quit it, and live straight. There's nothing to it, York."

The cowboy-bandit choked. "Don't you worry about me, cap. I'm all right. I'd just as lief quit this deviltry, anyhow."

"I want you to promise, boy." A whimsical, half-cynical smile touched Leroy's eyes. "You see, after living like a devil for thirty years, I want to die like a Christian. Now, go, York."

After Neil had left him, Leroy's eyes closed. Faintly he heard two more shots echoing down the valley, but the meaning of them was already lost to his wandering mind.

Neil dodged rapidly round the foot of the mountain with intent to cut off the bandits as they retreated. He found the sheriff crouching behind a rock scarce two hundred yards from the scene of the murder. At the same moment another shot echoed from well over to the left.

"Who can that be?" Neil asked, very much puzzled.

"That's what's worrying me, York," the sheriff returned.

Together they zigzagged up the side of the mountain. Twice from above there came sounds of rifle shots. Neil was the first to strike the trail to the mine. None too soon for as he stepped upon it, breathing heavily from his climb, Reilly swung round a curve and whipped his weapon to his shoulder. The man fired before York could interfere and stood watching tensely the result of his shot. He was silhouetted against the skyline, a beautiful mark, but Neil did not cover him. Instead, he spoke quietly to the other.

"Was it you that killed Phil, Reilly?"

The man whirled and saw Neil for the first time. His answer was instant. Flinging up his rifle, he pumped a shot at York.

Neil's retort came in a flash. Reilly clutched at his heart and toppled backward from the precipice upon which he stood. Collins joined the cowpuncher and together they stepped forward to the point from which Reilly had plunged down two hundred feet to the jagged rocks below.

At the curve they came face to face with Bucky O'Connor. Three weapons went up quicker than the beating of an eyelash. More slowly each went down again

"What are you doing here, Bucky?" the sheriff asked.

"Just pirootin' around, Val. It occurred to me Leroy might not mean to play fair with you, so I kinder invited myself to the party. When I heard shooting I thought it was you they had bushwhacked, so I sat in to the game "

"You guessed wrong, Bucky. Reilly and the others rounded on Leroy. While they were at it they figured to make a clean job and bump off York, too. From what York says Leroy has got his.

The ranger turned a jade eye on the outlaw. Has Mr. Neil turned honest man, Val? Taken him into your posse, have you?" he asked, with an edge of irony in his voice.

The sheriff laid a hand on the shoulder of the man who had been his friend before he turned miscreant.

"Don't you worry about Neil, Bucky," he advised gently. "It was York shot Reilly, after York had cut loose at him, and I shouldn't wonder if that didn't save your life. Neil has got to stand the gaff for what he's done, but I'll pull wires to get his punishment made light."

"Killed Reilly, did he?" repeated O'Connor. "I got Anderson back there."

"That makes only one left to account for. I wonder who he is?" Collins turned absent-mindedly to Neil. The latter looked at him out of an expressionless face. Even though his confederate had proved traitor he would not betray him.

"I wonder," he said.

Bucky laughed. "Made a mistake that time, Val."

"I plumb forgot the situation for a moment," the sheriff grinned.

"Anyhow, we better be hittin' his trail."

"How about Phil?" Neil suggested.

"That's right. One of us has ce'tainly got to go back and attend to him."

"You and Neil go back. I'll follow up this gentleman who is escaping," the ranger said.

And so it was arranged. The two men returned from their grim work of justice to the place where the outlaw chief had been left. His eyes lit feebly at sight of them.

"What news, York?" he asked.

"Reilly and Hardman are killed. How are you feelin', cap?" The cow-puncher knelt beside the dying outlaw and put an arm under his head.

"Shot all to pieces, boy. No, I got no time to have you play doctor with me." He turned to Collins with a gleam of his unconquerable spirit. "You came pretty near making a clean round-up, sheriff. I'm the fourth to be put out of business. You'd ought to be content with that. Let York here go."

"I can't do that, but I'll do my best to see he gets off light."

"I got him into this, sheriff. He was all right before he knew me. I want him to get a chance now. "

"I wish I could give him a pardon, but I can't do it. I'll see the governor for him though."

The wounded man spoke to Collins alone for a few minutes, then began to wander in his mind. He babbled feebly of childhood days back in his Kentucky home. The word most often on his lips was "Mother." So, with his head resting on Neil's arm and his hand in that of his friend, he slipped away to the Great Beyond.

CHAPTER 22. FOR A GOOD REASON

The young ladies, following the custom of Arizona in summer, were riding by the light of the stars to avoid the heat of the day. They rode leisurely, chatting as their ponies paced side by side. For though they were cousins they were getting acquainted with each other for the first time. Both of them found this a delightful process, not the less so because they were temperamentally very different. Each of them knew already that they were going to be great friends. They had exchanged the histories of their lives, lying awake girl fashion to talk into

the small hours, each omitting certain passages, however, that had to do with two men who were at that moment approaching nearer every minute to them.

Bucky O'Connor and Sheriff Collins were returning to the Rocking Chair Ranch from Epitaph, where they had just been to deposit twenty-seven thousand dollars and a prisoner by the name of Chaves. Just at the point where the road climbed from the plains and reached the summit of the first stiff hill the two parties met and passed. The ranger and the sheriff reined in simultaneously. Yet a moment and all four of them were talking at once.

They turned toward the ranch, Bucky and Frances leading the way. Alice, riding beside her lover in the darkness, found the defenses upon which she had relied begin to fail her. Nevertheless, she summoned them to her support and met him full armed with the evasions and complexities of her sex.

"This is a surprise, Mr. Collins," he was informed in her best society voice.

"And a pleasure?"

"Of course. But I'm sorry that father has been called to Phoenix. I suppose you came to tell him about your success."

"To brag about it," he corrected. "But not to your father--to his daughter."

"That's very thoughtful of you. Will you begin now?"

"Not yet. There is something I have to tell you, Miss Mackenzie."

At the gravity in his voice the lightness slipped from her like a cloak.

"Yes. Tell me your news. Over the telephone all sorts of rumors have come to us. But even these were hearsay."

"I thought of telephoning you the facts. Then I decided to ride out and tell you at once. I knew you would want to hear the story at first hand."

Her patrician manner was gone. Her eyes looked their thanks at him. "That was good of you. I have been very anxious to get the facts.

One rumor was that you have captured Sir. Leroy. Is it true?"

It seemed to her that his look was one of grave tenderness. "No, that is not true. You remember what we said of him--of how he might die?"

"He is dead--you killed him," she cried, all the color washed from her face.

"He is dead, but I did not kill him."

"Tell me," she commanded.

He told her, beginning at the moment of his meeting with the outlaws at the Dalriada dump and continuing to the last scene of the tragedy. It touched her so nearly that she could not hear him through dry-eyed.

"And he spoke of me?" She said it in a low voice, to herself rather than to him.

"It was just before his mind began to wander--almost his last conscious thought. He said that when you heard the news you would remember. What you were to remember he didn't say. I took it you would know."

"Yes. I was to remember that he was not all wolf to me." She told it with a little break of tears in her voice.

"Then he told me to tell you that it was the best way out for him. He had come to the end of the road, and it would not have been possible for him to go back." Presently Collins added gently: "If you don't mind my saying so, I think he was right. He was content to go, quite game and steady in his easy way. If he had lived, there could have been no going back for him. It was his nature to go the limit. The tragedy is in his life, not in his death."

"Yes, I know that, but it hurts one to think it had to be--that all his splendid gifts and capabilities should end like this, and that we are forced to see it is best. He might have done so much."

"And instead he became a miscreant. I reckon there was a lack in him somewhere."

"Yes, there was a great lack in him somewhere."

They were silent for a time. She broke it to ask about York Neil.

"You wouldn't send him to prison after doing what he did, would you?"

"Meaning what?"

"You say yourself he helped you against the other outlaws. Then he showed you where to start in finding the buried money. He isn't a bad man. You know how he stood by me when I was a

prisoner," she pleaded.

He nodded. "That goes a long way with me, Miss Mackenzie. The governor is a right good friend of mine. I meant to ask him for a pardon. I reckon Neil means to live straight from now on. He promised Leroy he would. He's only a wild cow-puncher gone wrong, and now he's haided right he'll pull up and walk the narrow trail."

"But can you save him from the penitentiary?"

Collins smiled. "He saved me the trouble. Coming through the Canon Del Oro in the night, he ducked. I reckon he's in Mexico now."

"I'm glad."

"Well, I ain't sorry myself, though I helped Bucky hunt real thorough for him."

"Father will be pleased to know you got the treasure back," Alice said presently, after they had ridden a bit in silence.

"And your father's daughter, Miss Alice--is she pleased?"

"What pleases father pleases me." Her voice, cool as the plash of ice water, might have daunted a less resolute man. But this one had long since determined the manner of his wooing and was not to be driven from it.

"I'm glad of that. Your father's right friendly to me," he announced, with composure.

"Indeed!"

"Sho! I ain't going to run away and hide because you look like you don't know I'm in Arizona. What kind of a lover would I be if I broke for cover every time you flashed those dark eyes at me?"

"Mr. Collins!"

"My friends call me Val," he suggested, smiling.

"I was going to ask, Mr. Collins, if you think you can bully me."

"It might be a first rate thing for you if I did, Miss Mackenzie. All your life you haven't done anything but trample on sissy boys. Now, I expect I'm not a sissy boy, but a fair imitation of a man, and I shouldn't wonder but you'd find me some too restless for a door-mat." His maimed hand happened to be resting on the saddle horn as he spoke, and the story of the maiming emphasized potently the truth of his claim.

"Don't you assume a good deal, Mr. Collins, when you imply that I have any desire to master you?"

"Not a bit," he assured her cheerfully. "Every woman wants to boss the man she's going to marry, but if she finds she can't she's glad of it, because then she knows she's got a man."

"You are quite sure I am going to marry you?" she asked gently--too gently, he thought.

"I'm only reasonably sure," he informed her. "You see, I can't tell for certain whether your pride or your good sense is the stronger."

She caught a detached glimpse of the situation, and it made for laughter.

"That's right, I want you should enjoy it," he said placidly.

"I do. It's the most absurd proposal--I suppose you call it a proposal--that ever I heard."

"I expect you've heard a good many in your time.

"We'll not discuss that, if you please."

"I AM more interested in this one," he agreed.

"Isn't it about time to begin on Tucson?"

"Not to-day, ma'am. There are going to be a lot of to-morrows for you and me, and Tucson will have to wait till then."

"Didn't I give you an answer last week?"

"You did, but I didn't take it. Now I'm ready for your sure-enough answer."

She flashed a look at him that mocked his confidence. "I've heard about the vanity of girls, but never in my experience have I met any so colossal as this masculine vanity now on exhibit. Do you really think, Mr. Collins, that all you have to do to win a woman is to look impressive and tell her that you have decided to marry her?"

"Do I look as if I thought that?" he asked her.

"It is perfectly ridiculous--your absurd attitude of taking everything for granted. Well, it may be the Tucson custom, but where I come from it is not in vogue."

"No, I reckon not. Back there a boy persuades girl he loves her by ruining her digestion with candy and all sorts of ice

arrangements from soda-fountain. But I'm uncivilized enough to assume you're a woman of sense and not a spoiled schoolgirl."

The velvet night was attuned to the rhythm of her love. She felt herself, in this sea of moon romance, being swept from her moorings. Star-eyed, she gazed at him while she still fought again his dominance.

"You ARE uncivilized. Would you beat me when I didn't obey?" she asked tremulously.

He laughed in slow contentment. "Perhaps; but I'd love you while I did it."

"Oh, you would love me." She looked across under her long lashes, not as boldly as she would have liked, and her gaze fell before his. "I haven't heard before that that was in the compact you proposed. I don't think you have remembered to mention it."

He swung from the saddle and put a hand to her bridle rein.

"Get down," he ordered.

"Why?"

"Because I say so. Get down."

She looked down at him, a man out of a thousand and for her one out of a hundred million. Before she was conscious of willing it she stood beside him. He trailed the reins of the ponies, and in two strides came back to her.

"What--do you--want?"

"I want you. girl." His arm swept round her, and he held her while he looked down into her shining eyes. "So I haven't told you that I love you. Did you need to be told?"

"We must go on," she murmured weakly. "Frances and Lieutenant O'Connor--"

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"We'll manage ours and not intrude."

"They might think--"

He laughed in deep delight. "--that we love each other. They're welcome to the thought. I haven't told you that I love you, eh? I tell you now. It's my last trump, and right here I table it. I'm no desert poet, but I love you from that dark crown of yours to those little feet that tap the floor so impatient sometimes. I love you all the time, no matter what mood you're in--when you

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"You can't do it." Her voice was very low and not quite steady.

"Why not--I'll show you."

"But you can't--for a good reason."

"Put a name to it."

"Because. Oh, you big blind man--because I love you already." She burlesqued his drawl with a little joyous laugh: "I reckon if you're right set on it I'll have to marry you, Val Collins."

His arm tightened about her as if he would hold her against the whole world. His ardent eyes possessed hers. She felt herself grow faint with a poignant delight. Her lips met his slowly in their first kiss.

End of Project Gutenberg Etext Bucky O'Connor, by William MacLeod Raine

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