

FRANK NORRIS

A DEAL IN WHEAT AND
OTHER STORIES OF THE
NEW AND OLD WEST

Frank Norris

**A Deal in Wheat and Other
Stories of the New and Old West**

«Public Domain»

Norris F.

A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West /
F. Norris — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

A DEAL IN WHEAT	5
I. THE BEAR—WHEAT AT SIXTY-TWO	5
II. THE BULL—WHEAT AT A DOLLAR-TEN	7
III. THE PIT	9
IV. THE BELT LINE	11
V. THE BREAD LINE	12
THE WIFE OF CHINO	14
I. CHINO'S WIFE	14
II. MADNESS	16
III. CHINO GOES TO TOWN	18
IV. A DESPATCH FROM THE EXPRESS MESSENGER	20
V. THE TRAIL	22
VI. THE DISCOVERY OF FELICE	24
A BARGAIN WITH PEG-LEG	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Frank Norris

A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West

A DEAL IN WHEAT

I. THE BEAR—WHEAT AT SIXTY-TWO

As Sam Lewiston backed the horse into the shafts of his backboard and began hitching the tugs to the whiffletree, his wife came out from the kitchen door of the house and drew near, and stood for some time at the horse's head, her arms folded and her apron rolled around them. For a long moment neither spoke. They had talked over the situation so long and so comprehensively the night before that there seemed to be nothing more to say.

The time was late in the summer, the place a ranch in southwestern Kansas, and Lewiston and his wife were two of a vast population of farmers, wheat growers, who at that moment were passing through a crisis—a crisis that at any moment might culminate in tragedy. Wheat was down to sixty-six.

At length Emma Lewiston spoke.

"Well," she hazarded, looking vaguely out across the ranch toward the horizon, leagues distant; "well, Sam, there's always that offer of brother Joe's. We can quit—and go to Chicago—if the worst comes."

"And give up!" exclaimed Lewiston, running the lines through the torets. "Leave the ranch! Give up! After all these years!"

His wife made no reply for the moment. Lewiston climbed into the buckboard and gathered up the lines. "Well, here goes for the last try, Emmie," he said. "Good-by, girl. Maybe things will look better in town to-day."

"Maybe," she said gravely. She kissed her husband good-by and stood for some time looking after the buckboard traveling toward the town in a moving pillar of dust.

"I don't know," she murmured at length; "I don't know just how we're going to make out."

When he reached town, Lewiston tied the horse to the iron railing in front of the Odd Fellows' Hall, the ground floor of which was occupied by the post-office, and went across the street and up the stairway of a building of brick and granite—quite the most pretentious structure of the town—and knocked at a door upon the first landing. The door was furnished with a pane of frosted glass, on which, in gold letters, was inscribed, "Bridges & Co., Grain Dealers."

Bridges himself, a middle-aged man who wore a velvet skull-cap and who was smoking a Pittsburg stogie, met the farmer at the counter and the two exchanged perfunctory greetings.

"Well," said Lewiston, tentatively, after awhile.

"Well, Lewiston," said the other, "I can't take that wheat of yours at any better than sixty-two."

"Sixty-two."

"It's the Chicago price that does it, Lewiston. Truslow is bearing the stuff for all he's worth. It's Truslow and the bear clique that stick the knife into us. The price broke again this morning. We've just got a wire."

"Good heavens," murmured Lewiston, looking vaguely from side to side. "That—that ruins me. I *can't* carry my grain any longer—what with storage charges and—and—Bridges, I don't see just how I'm going to make out. Sixty-two cents a bushel! Why, man, what with this and with that it's cost me nearly a dollar a bushel to raise that wheat, and now Truslow—"

He turned away abruptly with a quick gesture of infinite discouragement.

He went down the stairs, and making his way to where his buckboard was hitched, got in, and, with eyes vacant, the reins slipping and sliding in his limp, half-open hands, drove slowly back to the ranch. His wife had seen him coming, and met him as he drew up before the barn.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Emmie," he said as he got out of the buckboard, laying his arm across her shoulder, "Emmie, I guess we'll take up with Joe's offer. We'll go to Chicago. We're cleaned out!"

II. THE BULL—WHEAT AT A DOLLAR-TEN

...—and said Party of the Second Part further covenants and agrees to merchandise such wheat in foreign ports, it being understood and agreed between the Party of the First Part and the Party of the Second Part that the wheat hereinbefore mentioned is released and sold to the Party of the Second Part for export purposes only, and not for consumption or distribution within the boundaries of the United States of America or of Canada.

"Now, Mr. Gates, if you will sign for Mr. Truslow I guess that'll be all," remarked Hornung when he had finished reading.

Hornung affixed his signature to the two documents and passed them over to Gates, who signed for his principal and client, Truslow—or, as he had been called ever since he had gone into the fight against Hornung's corner—the Great Bear. Hornung's secretary was called in and witnessed the signatures, and Gates thrust the contract into his Gladstone bag and stood up, smoothing his hat.

"You will deliver the warehouse receipts for the grain," began Gates.

"I'll send a messenger to Truslow's office before noon," interrupted Hornung. "You can pay by certified check through the Illinois Trust people."

When the other had taken himself off, Hornung sat for some moments gazing abstractedly toward his office windows, thinking over the whole matter. He had just agreed to release to Truslow, at the rate of one dollar and ten cents per bushel, one hundred thousand out of the two million and odd bushels of wheat that he, Hornung, controlled, or actually owned. And for the moment he was wondering if, after all, he had done wisely in not goring the Great Bear to actual financial death. He had made him pay one hundred thousand dollars. Truslow was good for this amount. Would it not have been better to have put a prohibitive figure on the grain and forced the Bear into bankruptcy? True, Hornung would then be without his enemy's money, but Truslow would have been eliminated from the situation, and that—so Hornung told himself—was always a consummation most devoutly, strenuously and diligently to be striven for. Truslow once dead was dead, but the Bear was never more dangerous than when desperate.

"But so long as he can't get *wheat*," muttered Hornung at the end of his reflections, "he can't hurt me. And he can't get it. That I *know*."

For Hornung controlled the situation. So far back as the February of that year an "unknown bull" had been making his presence felt on the floor of the Board of Trade. By the middle of March the commercial reports of the daily press had begun to speak of "the powerful bull clique"; a few weeks later that legendary condition of affairs implied and epitomized in the magic words "Dollar Wheat" had been attained, and by the first of April, when the price had been boosted to one dollar and ten cents a bushel, Hornung had disclosed his hand, and in place of mere rumours, the definite and authoritative news that May wheat had been cornered in the Chicago pit went flashing around the world from Liverpool to Odessa and from Duluth to Buenos Ayres.

It was—so the veteran operators were persuaded—Truslow himself who had made Hornung's corner possible. The Great Bear had for once over-reached himself, and, believing himself all-powerful, had hammered the price just the fatal fraction too far down. Wheat had gone to sixty-two—for the time, and under the circumstances, an abnormal price.

When the reaction came it was tremendous. Hornung saw his chance, seized it, and in a few months had turned the tables, had cornered the product, and virtually driven the bear clique out of the pit.

On the same day that the delivery of the hundred thousand bushels was made to Truslow, Hornung met his broker at his lunch club.

"Well," said the latter, "I see you let go that line of stuff to Truslow."

Hornung nodded; but the broker added:

"Remember, I was against it from the very beginning. I know we've cleared up over a hundred thou'. I would have fifty times preferred to have lost twice that and *smashed Truslow dead*. Bet you what you like he makes us pay for it somehow."

"Huh!" grunted his principal. "How about insurance, and warehouse charges, and carrying expenses on that lot? Guess we'd have had to pay those, too, if we'd held on."

But the other put up his chin, unwilling to be persuaded. "I won't sleep easy," he declared, "till Truslow is busted."

III. THE PIT

Just as Going mounted the steps on the edge of the pit the great gong struck, a roar of a hundred voices developed with the swiftness of successive explosions, the rush of a hundred men surging downward to the centre of the pit filled the air with the stamp and grind of feet, a hundred hands in eager strenuous gestures tossed upward from out the brown of the crowd, the official reporter in his cage on the margin of the pit leaned far forward with straining ear to catch the opening bid, and another day of battle was begun.

Since the sale of the hundred thousand bushels of wheat to Truslow the "Hornung crowd" had steadily shouldered the price higher until on this particular morning it stood at one dollar and a half. That was Hornung's price. No one else had any grain to sell.

But not ten minutes after the opening, Going was surprised out of all countenance to hear shouted from the other side of the pit these words:

"Sell May at one-fifty."

Going was for the moment touching elbows with Kimbark on one side and with Merriam on the other, all three belonging to the "Hornung crowd." Their answering challenge of "*Sold*" was as the voice of one man. They did not pause to reflect upon the strangeness of the circumstance. (That was for afterward.) Their response to the offer was as unconscious, as reflex action and almost as rapid, and before the pit was well aware of what had happened the transaction of one thousand bushels was down upon Going's trading-card and fifteen hundred dollars had changed hands. But here was a marvel—the whole available supply of wheat cornered, Hornung master of the situation, invincible, unassailable; yet behold a man willing to sell, a Bear bold enough to raise his head.

"That was Kennedy, wasn't it, who made that offer?" asked Kimbark, as Going noted down the trade—"Kennedy, that new man?"

"Yes; who do you suppose he's selling for; who's willing to go short at this stage of the game?"

"Maybe he ain't short."

"Short! Great heavens, man; where'd he get the stuff?"

"Blamed if I know. We can account for every handful of May. Steady! Oh, there he goes again."

"Sell a thousand May at one-fifty," vociferated the bear-broker, throwing out his hand, one finger raised to indicate the number of "contracts" offered. This time it was evident that he was attacking the Hornung crowd deliberately, for, ignoring the jam of traders that swept toward him, he looked across the pit to where Going and Kimbark were shouting "*Sold! Sold!*" and nodded his head.

A second time Going made memoranda of the trade, and either the Hornung holdings were increased by two thousand bushels of May wheat or the Hornung bank account swelled by at least three thousand dollars of some unknown short's money.

Of late—so sure was the bull crowd of its position—no one had even thought of glancing at the inspection sheet on the bulletin board. But now one of Going's messengers hurried up to him with the announcement that this sheet showed receipts at Chicago for that morning of twenty-five thousand bushels, and not credited to Hornung. Some one had got hold of a line of wheat overlooked by the "clique" and was dumping it upon them.

"Wire the Chief," said Going over his shoulder to Merriam. This one struggled out of the crowd, and on a telegraph blank scribbled:

"Strong bear movement—New man—Kennedy—Selling in lots of five contracts—Chicago receipts twenty-five thousand."

The message was despatched, and in a few moments the answer came back, laconic, of military terseness:

"Support the market."

And Going obeyed, Merriam and Kimbark following, the new broker fairly throwing the wheat at them in thousand-bushel lots.

"Sell May at 'fifty; sell May; sell May." A moment's indecision, an instant's hesitation, the first faint suggestion of weakness, and the market would have broken under them. But for the better part of four hours they stood their ground, taking all that was offered, in constant communication with the Chief, and from time to time stimulated and steadied by his brief, unvarying command:

"Support the market."

At the close of the session they had bought in the twenty-five thousand bushels of May. Hornung's position was as stable as a rock, and the price closed even with the opening figure—one dollar and a half.

But the morning's work was the talk of all La Salle Street. Who was back of the raid?

What was the meaning of this unexpected selling? For weeks the pit trading had been merely nominal. Truslow, the Great Bear, from whom the most serious attack might have been expected, had gone to his country seat at Geneva Lake, in Wisconsin, declaring himself to be out of the market entirely. He went bass-fishing every day.

IV. THE BELT LINE

On a certain day toward the middle of the month, at a time when the mysterious Bear had unloaded some eighty thousand bushels upon Hornung, a conference was held in the library of Hornung's home. His broker attended it, and also a clean-faced, bright-eyed individual whose name of Cyrus Ryder might have been found upon the pay-roll of a rather well-known detective agency. For upward of half an hour after the conference began the detective spoke, the other two listening attentively, gravely.

"Then, last of all," concluded Ryder, "I made out I was a hobo, and began stealing rides on the Belt Line Railroad. Know the road? It just circles Chicago. Truslow owns it. Yes? Well, then I began to catch on. I noticed that cars of certain numbers—thirty-one nought thirty-four, thirty-two one ninety—well, the numbers don't matter, but anyhow, these cars were always switched onto the sidings by Mr. Truslow's main elevator D soon as they came in. The wheat was shunted in, and they were pulled out again. Well, I spotted one car and stole a ride on her. Say, look here, *that car went right around the city on the Belt, and came back to D again, and the same wheat in her all the time.* The grain was reinspected—it was raw, I tell you—and the warehouse receipts made out just as though the stuff had come in from Kansas or Iowa."

"The same wheat all the time!" interrupted Hornung.

"The same wheat—your wheat, that you sold to Truslow."

"Great snakes!" ejaculated Hornung's broker. "Truslow never took it abroad at all."

"Took it abroad! Say, he's just been running it around Chicago, like the supers in 'Shenandoah,' round an' round, so you'd think it was a new lot, an' selling it back to you again."

"No wonder we couldn't account for so much wheat."

"Bought it from us at one-ten, and made us buy it back—our own wheat—at one-fifty."

Hornung and his broker looked at each other in silence for a moment. Then all at once Hornung struck the arm of his chair with his fist and exploded in a roar of laughter. The broker stared for one bewildered moment, then followed his example.

"Sold! Sold!" shouted Hornung almost gleefully. "Upon my soul it's as good as a Gilbert and Sullivan show. And we—Oh, Lord! Billy, shake on it, and hats off to my distinguished friend, Truslow. He'll be President some day. Hey! What? Prosecute him? Not I."

"He's done us out of a neat hatful of dollars for all that," observed the broker, suddenly grave.

"Billy, it's worth the price."

"We've got to make it up somehow."

"Well, tell you what. We were going to boost the price to one seventy-five next week, and make that our settlement figure."

"Can't do it now. Can't afford it."

"No. Here; we'll let out a big link; we'll put wheat at two dollars, and let it go at that."

"Two it is, then," said the broker.

V. THE BREAD LINE

The street was very dark and absolutely deserted. It was a district on the "South Side," not far from the Chicago River, given up largely to wholesale stores, and after nightfall was empty of all life. The echoes slept but lightly hereabouts, and the slightest footfall, the faintest noise, woke them upon the instant and sent them clamouring up and down the length of the pavement between the iron shuttered fronts. The only light visible came from the side door of a certain "Vienna" bakery, where at one o'clock in the morning loaves of bread were given away to any who should ask. Every evening about nine o'clock the outcasts began to gather about the side door. The stragglers came in rapidly, and the line—the "bread line," as it was called—began to form. By midnight it was usually some hundred yards in length, stretching almost the entire length of the block.

Toward ten in the evening, his coat collar turned up against the fine drizzle that pervaded the air, his hands in his pockets, his elbows gripping his sides, Sam Lewiston came up and silently took his place at the end of the line.

Unable to conduct his farm upon a paying basis at the time when Truslow, the "Great Bear," had sent the price of grain down to sixty-two cents a bushel, Lewiston had turned over his entire property to his creditors, and, leaving Kansas for good, had abandoned farming, and had left his wife at her sister's boarding-house in Topeka with the understanding that she was to join him in Chicago so soon as he had found a steady job. Then he had come to Chicago and had turned workman. His brother Joe conducted a small hat factory on Archer Avenue, and for a time he found there a meager employment. But difficulties had occurred, times were bad, the hat factory was involved in debts, the repealing of a certain import duty on manufactured felt overcrowded the home market with cheap Belgian and French products, and in the end his brother had assigned and gone to Milwaukee.

Thrown out of work, Lewiston drifted aimlessly about Chicago, from pillar to post, working a little, earning here a dollar, there a dime, but always sinking, sinking, till at last the ooze of the lowest bottom dragged at his feet and the rush of the great ebb went over him and engulfed him and shut him out from the light, and a park bench became his home and the "bread line" his chief makeshift of subsistence.

He stood now in the enfolding drizzle, sodden, stupefied with fatigue. Before and behind stretched the line. There was no talking. There was no sound. The street was empty. It was so still that the passing of a cable-car in the adjoining thoroughfare grated like prolonged rolling explosions, beginning and ending at immeasurable distances. The drizzle descended incessantly. After a long time midnight struck.

There was something ominous and gravely impressive in this interminable line of dark figures, close-pressed, soundless; a crowd, yet absolutely still; a close-packed, silent file, waiting, waiting in the vast deserted night-ridden street; waiting without a word, without a movement, there under the night and under the slow-moving mists of rain.

Few in the crowd were professional beggars. Most of them were workmen, long since out of work, forced into idleness by long-continued "hard times," by ill luck, by sickness. To them the "bread line" was a godsend. At least they could not starve. Between jobs here in the end was something to hold them up—a small platform, as it were, above the sweep of black water, where for a moment they might pause and take breath before the plunge.

The period of waiting on this night of rain seemed endless to those silent, hungry men; but at length there was a stir. The line moved. The side door opened. Ah, at last! They were going to hand out the bread.

But instead of the usual white-aproned under-cook with his crowded hampers there now appeared in the doorway a new man—a young fellow who looked like a bookkeeper's assistant. He

bore in his hand a placard, which he tacked to the outside of the door. Then he disappeared within the bakery, locking the door after him.

A shudder of poignant despair, an unformed, inarticulate sense of calamity, seemed to run from end to end of the line. What had happened? Those in the rear, unable to read the placard, surged forward, a sense of bitter disappointment clutching at their hearts.

The line broke up, disintegrated into a shapeless throng—a throng that crowded forward and collected in front of the shut door whereon the placard was affixed. Lewiston, with the others, pushed forward. On the placard he read these words:

"Owing to the fact that the price of grain has been increased to two dollars a bushel, there will be no distribution of bread from this bakery until further notice."

Lewiston turned away, dumb, bewildered. Till morning he walked the streets, going on without purpose, without direction. But now at last his luck had turned. Overnight the wheel of his fortunes had creaked and swung upon its axis, and before noon he had found a job in the street-cleaning brigade. In the course of time he rose to be first shift-boss, then deputy inspector, then inspector, promoted to the dignity of driving in a red wagon with rubber tires and drawing a salary instead of mere wages. The wife was sent for and a new start made.

But Lewiston never forgot. Dimly he began to see the significance of things. Caught once in the cogs and wheels of a great and terrible engine, he had seen—none better—its workings. Of all the men who had vainly stood in the "bread line" on that rainy night in early summer, he, perhaps, had been the only one who had struggled up to the surface again. How many others had gone down in the great ebb? Grim question; he dared not think how many.

He had seen the two ends of a great wheat operation—a battle between Bear and Bull. The stories (subsequently published in the city's press) of Truslow's countermove in selling Hornung his own wheat, supplied the unseen section. The farmer—he who raised the wheat—was ruined upon one hand; the working-man—he who consumed it—was ruined upon the other. But between the two, the great operators, who never saw the wheat they traded in, bought and sold the world's food, gambled in the nourishment of entire nations, practised their tricks, their chicanery and oblique shifty "deals," were reconciled in their differences, and went on through their appointed way, jovial, contented, enthroned, and unassailable.

THE WIFE OF CHINO

I. CHINO'S WIFE

On the back porch of the "office," young Lockwood—his boots, stained with the mud of the mines and with candle-drippings, on the rail—sat smoking his pipe and looking off down the cañon.

It was early in the evening. Lockwood, because he had heard the laughter and horseplay of the men of the night shift as they went down the cañon from the bunk-house to the tunnel-mouth, knew that it was a little after seven. It would not be necessary to go indoors and begin work on the columns of figures of his pay-roll for another hour yet. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, refilled and lighted it—stoppering with his match-box—and shot a wavering blue wreath out over the porch railing. Then he resettled himself in his tilted chair, hooked his thumbs into his belt, and fetched a long breath.

For the last few moments he had been considering, in that comfortable spirit of relaxed attention that comes with the after-dinner tobacco, two subjects: first, the beauty of the evening; second, the temperament, character, and appearance of Felice Zavalla.

As for the evening, there could be no two opinions about that. It was charming. The Hand-over-fist Gravel Mine, though not in the higher Sierras, was sufficiently above the level of the mere foot-hills to be in the sphere of influence of the greater mountains. Also, it was remote, difficult of access. Iowa Hill, the nearest post-office, was a good eight miles distant, by trail, across the Indian River. It was sixteen miles by stage from Iowa Hill to Colfax, on the line of the Overland Railroad, and all of a hundred miles from Colfax to San Francisco.

To Lockwood's mind this isolation was in itself an attraction. Tucked away in this fold of the Sierras, forgotten, remote, the little community of a hundred souls that comprised the *personnel* of the Hand-over-fist lived out its life with the completeness of an independent State, having its own government, its own institutions and customs. Besides all this, it had its own dramas as well—little complications that developed with the swiftness of whirlpools, and that trended toward culmination with true Western directness. Lockwood, college-bred—he was a graduate of the Columbia School of Mines—found the life interesting.

On this particular evening he sat over his pipe rather longer than usual, seduced by the beauty of the scene and the moment. It was very quiet. The prolonged rumble of the mine's stamp-mill came to his ears in a ceaseless diapason, but the sound was so much a matter of course that Lockwood no longer heard it. The millions of pines and redwoods that covered the flanks of the mountains were absolutely still. No wind was stirring in their needles. But the chorus of tree-toads, dry, staccato, was as incessant as the pounding of the mill. Far-off—thousands of miles, it seemed—an owl was hooting, three velvet-soft notes at exact intervals. A cow in the stable near at hand lay down with a long breath, while from the back veranda of Chino Zavalla's cabin came the clear voice of Felice singing "The Spanish Cavalier" while she washed the dishes.

The twilight was fading; the glory that had blazed in cloudless vermilion and gold over the divide was dying down like receding music. The mountains were purple-black. From the cañon rose the night mist, pale blue, while above it stood the smoke from the mill, a motionless plume of sable, shot through by the last ruddiness of the afterglow.

The air was full of pleasant odours—the smell of wood fires from the cabins of the married men and from the ovens of the cookhouse, the ammoniacal whiffs from the stables, the smell of ripening apples from "Boston's" orchard—while over all and through all came the perfume of the witch-hazel and tar-weed from the forests and mountain sides, as pungent as myrrh, as aromatic as aloes.

"And if I should fall,
In vain I would call,"

sang Felice.

Lockwood took his pipe from his teeth and put back his head to listen. Felice had as good a voice as so pretty a young woman should have had. She was twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, and was incontestably the beauty of the camp. She was Mexican-Spanish, tall and very slender, black-haired, as lithe as a cat, with a cat's green eyes and with all of a cat's purring, ingratiating insinuation.

Lockwood could not have told exactly just how the first familiarity between him and Felice had arisen. It had grown by almost imperceptible degrees up to a certain point; now it was a chance meeting on the trail between the office and the mill, now a fragment of conversation apropos of a letter to be mailed, now a question as to some regulation of the camp, now a detail of repairs done to the cabin wherein Felice lived. As said above, up to a certain point the process of "getting acquainted" had been gradual, and on Lockwood's part unconscious; but beyond that point affairs had progressed rapidly.

At first Felice had been, for Lockwood, a pretty woman, neither more nor less; but by degrees she emerged from this vague classification: she became a very pretty woman. Then she became a personality; she occupied a place within the circle which Lockwood called his world, his life. For the past months this place had, perforce, to be enlarged. Lockwood allowed it to expand. To make room for Felice, he thrust aside, or allowed the idea of Felice to thrust aside, other objects which long had sat secure. The invasion of the woman into the sphere of his existence developed at the end into a thing veritably headlong. Deep-seated convictions, old-established beliefs and ideals, even the two landmarks right and wrong, were hustled and shouldered about as the invasion widened and penetrated. This state of affairs was further complicated by the fact that Felice was the wife of Chino Zavalla, shift-boss of No. 4 gang in the new workings.

II. MADNESS

It was quite possible that, though Lockwood could not have told when and how the acquaintance between him and Felice began and progressed, the young woman herself could. But this is guesswork. Felice being a woman, and part Spanish at that, was vastly more self-conscious, more disingenuous, than the man, the Anglo-Saxon. Also she had that fearlessness that very pretty women have. In her more refined and city-bred sisters this fearlessness would be called poise, or, at the most, "cheek."

And she was quite capable of making young Lockwood, the superintendent, her employer, and nominally the ruler of her little world, fall in love with her. It is only fair to Felice to say that she would not do this deliberately. She would be more conscious of the business than the man, than Lockwood; but in affairs such as this, involving women like Felice, there is a distinction between deliberately doing a thing and consciously doing it.

Admittedly this is complicated, but it must be understood that Felice herself was complex, and she could no more help attracting men to her than the magnet the steel filings. It made no difference whether the man was the "breed" boy who split logging down by the engine-house or the young superintendent with his college education, his white hands and dominating position; over each and all who came within range of her influence Felice, with her black hair and green eyes, her slim figure and her certain indefinite "cheek"—which must not by any manner of means be considered as "boldness"—cast the weird of her kind.

If one understood her kind, knew how to make allowances, knew just how seriously to take her eyes and her "cheek," no great harm was done. Otherwise, consequences were very apt to follow.

Hicks was one of those who from the very first had understood. Hicks was the manager of the mine, and Lockwood's chief—in a word, *the boss*. He was younger even than Lockwood, a boy virtually, but a wonderful boy—a boy such as only America, western America at that, could produce, masterful, self-controlled, incredibly capable, as taciturn as a sphinx, strong of mind and of muscle, and possessed of a cold gray eye that was as penetrating as chilled steel.

To this person, impersonal as force itself, Felice had once, by some mysterious feminine art, addressed, in all innocence, her little maneuver of fascination. One lift of the steady eyelid, one quiet glint of that terrible cold gray eye, that poniarded her every tissue of complexity, inconsistency, and coquetry, had been enough. Felice had fled the field from this young fellow, so much her junior, and then afterward, in a tremor of discomfiture and distress, had kept her distance.

Hicks understood Felice. Also the great majority of the miners—shift-bosses, chuck-tenders, bed-rock cleaners, and the like—understood. Lockwood did not.

It may appear difficult of belief that the men, the crude, simple workmen, knew how to take Felice Zavalla, while Lockwood, with all his education and superior intelligence, failed in his estimate of her. The explanation lies no doubt in the fact that in these man-and-woman affairs instinct is a surer guide than education and intelligence, unless, indeed, the intelligence is preternaturally keen. Lockwood's student life had benumbed the elemental instinct, which in the miners, the "men," yet remained vigorous and unblunted, and by means of which they assessed Felice and her harmless blandishments at their true worth. For all Lockwood's culture, his own chuck-tenders, unlettered fellows, cumbersome, slow-witted, "knew women"—at least, women of their own world, like Felice—better than he. On the other hand, his intelligence was no such perfected instrument as Hicks's, as exact as logarithms, as penetrating as a scalpel, as uncoloured by emotions as a steel trap.

Lockwood's life had been a narrow one. He had studied too hard at Columbia to see much of the outside world, and he had come straight from his graduation to take his first position. Since then his life had been spent virtually in the wilderness, now in Utah, now in Arizona, now in British Columbia, and now, at last, in Placer County, California. His lot was the common lot of young mining engineers. It might lead one day to great wealth, but meanwhile it was terribly isolated.

Living thus apart from the world, Lockwood very easily allowed his judgment to get, as it were, out of perspective. Class distinctions lost their sharpness, and one woman—as, for instance, Felice—was very like another—as, for instance, the girls his sisters knew "back home" in New York.

As a last result, the passions were strong.

Things were done "for all they were worth" in Placer County, California. When a man worked, he worked hard; when he slept, he slept soundly; when he hated, he hated with primeval intensity; and when he loved he grew reckless.

It was all one that Felice was Chino's wife. Lockwood swore between his teeth that she should be *his* wife. He had arrived at this conclusion on the night that he sat on the back porch of his office and watched the moon coming up over the Hog Back. He stood up at length and thrust his pipe into his pocket, and putting an arm across the porch pillar, leaned his forehead against it and looked out far in the purple shadows.

"It's madness," he muttered; "yet, I know it—sheer madness; but, by the Lord! I *am* mad—and I don't care."

III. CHINO GOES TO TOWN

As time went on the matter became more involved. Hicks was away. Chino Zavalla, stolid, easy-going, came and went about his work on the night shift, always touching his cap to Lockwood when the two crossed each other's paths, always good-natured, always respectful, seeing nothing but his work.

Every evening, when not otherwise engaged, Lockwood threw a saddle over one of the horses and rode in to Iowa Hill for the mail, returning to the mine between ten and eleven. On one of these occasions, as he drew near to Chino's cabin, a slim figure came toward him down the road and paused at his horse's head. Then he was surprised to hear Felice's voice asking, "'Ave you a letter for me, then, Meester Lockwude?"

Felice made an excuse of asking thus for her mail each night that Lockwood came from town, and for a month they kept up appearances; but after that they dropped even that pretense, and as often as he met her Lockwood dismounted and walked by her side till the light in the cabin came into view through the chaparral.

At length Lockwood made a mighty effort. He knew how very far he had gone beyond the point where between the two landmarks called right and wrong a line is drawn. He contrived to keep away from Felice. He sent one of the men into town for the mail, and he found reasons to be in the mine itself whole half-days at a time. Whenever a moment's leisure impended, he took his shotgun and tramped the mine ditch for leagues, looking for quail and gray squirrels. For three weeks he so managed that he never once caught sight of Felice's black hair and green eyes, never once heard the sound of her singing.

But the madness was upon him none the less, and it rode and roweled him like a hag from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn again, till in his complete loneliness, in the isolation of that simple, primitive life, where no congenial mind relieved the monotony by so much as a word, morbid, hounded, tortured, the man grew desperate—was ready for anything that would solve the situation.

Once every two weeks Lockwood "cleaned up and amalgamated"—that is to say, the mill was stopped and the "ripples" where the gold was caught were scraped clean. Then the ore was sifted out, melted down, and poured into the mould, whence it emerged as the "brick," a dun-coloured rectangle, rough-edged, immensely heavy, which represented anywhere from two to six thousand dollars. This was sent down by express to the smelting-house.

But it was necessary to take the brick from the mine to the express office at Iowa Hill.

This duty devolved upon Lockwood and Chino Zavalla. Hicks had from the very first ordered that the Spaniard should accompany the superintendent upon this mission. Zavalla was absolutely trustworthy, as honest as the daylight, strong physically, cool-headed, discreet, and—to Hicks's mind a crowning recommendation—close-mouthed. For about the mine it was never known when the brick went to town or who took it. Hicks had impressed this fact upon Zavalla. He was to tell nobody that he was delegated to this duty. "Not even"—Hicks had leveled a forefinger at Chino, and the cold eyes drove home the injunction as the steam-hammer drives the rivet—"not even your wife." And Zavalla had promised. He would have trifled with dynamite sooner than with one of Hicks's orders.

So the fortnightly trips to town in company with Lockwood were explained in various fashions to Felice. She never knew that the mail-bag strapped to her husband's shoulders on those occasions carried some five thousand dollars' worth of bullion.

On a certain Friday in early June Lockwood had amalgamated, and the brick, duly stamped, lay in the safe in the office. The following night he and Chino, who was relieved from mine duty on these occasions, were to take it in to Iowa Hill.

Late Saturday afternoon, however, the engineer's boy brought word to Chino that the superintendent wanted him at once. Chino found Lockwood lying upon the old lounge in the middle room of the office, his foot in bandages.

"Here's luck, Chino," he exclaimed, as the Mexican paused on the threshold. "Come in and—shut the door," he added in a lower voice.

"*Dios!*" murmured Chino. "An accident?"

"Rather," growled Lockwood. "That fool boy, Davis's kid—the car-boy, you know—ran me down in the mine. I yelled at him. Somehow he couldn't stop. Two wheels went over my foot—and the car loaded, too."

Chino shuddered politely.

"Now here's the point," continued Lockwood. "Um—there's nobody round outside there? Take a look, Chino, by the window there. All clear, eh? Well, here's the point. That brick ought to go in to-night just the same, hey?"

"Oh—of a surety, of a surety." Chino spoke in Spanish.

"Now I don't want to let any one else take my place—you never can tell—the beggars will talk. Not all like you, Chino."

"*Gracias, señor.* It is an honour."

"Do you think you can manage alone? I guess you can, hey? No reason why you couldn't."

Chino shut his eyes tight and put up a palm. "Rest assured of that, Señor Lockwude. Rest assured of that."

"Well, get around here about nine."

"It is understood, señor."

Lockwood, who had a passable knowledge of telegraphy, had wired to the Hill for the doctor. About supertime one appeared, and Lockwood bore the pain of the setting with such fortitude as he could command. He had his supper served in the office. The doctor shared it with him and kept him company.

During the early hours of the evening Lockwood lay on the sofa trying to forget the pain. There was no easier way of doing this than by thinking of Felice. Inevitably his thoughts reverted to her. Now that he was helpless, he could secure no diversion by plunging into the tunnel, giving up his mind to his work. He could not now take down his gun and tramp the ditch. Now he was supine, and the longing to break through the mesh, wrestle free from the complication, gripped him and racked him with all its old-time force.

Promptly at nine o'clock the faithful Chino presented himself at the office. He had one of the two horses that were used by Lockwood as saddle animals, and as he entered he opened his coat and tapped the hilt of a pistol showing from his trousers pocket, with a wink and a grin. Lockwood took the brick from the safe, strapped it into the mail-bag, and Chino, swinging it across his shoulders, was gone, leaving Lockwood to hop back to the sofa, there to throw himself down and face once more his trouble.

IV. A DESPATCH FROM THE EXPRESS MESSENGER

What made it harder for Lockwood just now was that even on that very day, in spite of all precaution, in spite of all good resolutions, he had at last seen Felice. Doubtless the young woman herself had contrived it; but, be that as it may, Lockwood, returning from a tour of inspection along the ditch, came upon her not far from camp, but in a remote corner, and she had of course demanded why he kept away from her. What Lockwood said in response he could not now remember; nor, for that matter, was any part of the conversation very clear to his memory. The reason for this was that, just as he was leaving her, something of more importance than conversation had happened. Felice had looked at him.

And she had so timed her look, had so insinuated it into the little, brief, significant silences between their words, that its meaning had been very clear. Lockwood had left her with his brain dizzy, his teeth set, his feet stumbling and fumbling down the trail, for now he knew that Felice wanted him to know that she regretted the circumstance of her marriage to Chino Zavalla; he knew that she wanted him to know that the situation was as intolerable for her as for him.

All the rest of the day, even at this moment, in fact, this new phase of the affair intruded its pregnant suggestions upon his mind, to the exclusion of everything else. He felt the drift strong around him; he knew that in the end he would resign himself to it. At the same time he sensed the abyss, felt the nearness of some dreadful, nameless cataclysm, a thing of black shadow, bottomless, terrifying.

"Lord!" he murmured, as he drew his hand across his forehead, "Lord! I wonder where this thing is going to fetch up."

As he spoke, the telegraph key on his desk, near at hand, began all at once to click off his call. Groaning and grumbling, Lockwood heaved himself up, and, with his right leg bent, hobbled from chair-back to chair-back over to the desk. He rested his right knee on his desk chair, reached for his key, opened the circuit, and answered. There was an instant's pause, then the instrument began to click again. The message was from the express messenger at Iowa Hill.

Word by word Lockwood took it off as follows:

"Reno—Kid—will—attempt—hold-up—of—brick—on—trail-to-night—
do—not—send—till—advised—at—this—end."

Lockwood let go the key and jumped back from the desk, lips compressed, eyes alight, his fists clenched till the knuckles grew white. The whole figure of him stiffened as tense as drawn wire, braced rigid like a finely bred hound "making game."

Chino was already half an hour gone by the trail, and the Reno Kid was a desperado of the deadliest breed known to the West. How he came to turn up here there was no time to inquire. He was on hand, that was the point; and Reno Kid always "shot to kill." This would be no mere hold-up; it would be murder.

Just then, as Lockwood snatched open a certain drawer of his desk where he kept his revolver, he heard from down the road, in the direction of Chino's cabin, Felice's voice singing:

"To the war I must go,
To fight for my country and you, dear."

Lockwood stopped short, his arm at full stretch, still gripping tight the revolver that he had half pulled from the drawer—stopped short and listened.

The solution of everything had come.

He saw it in a flash. The knife hung poised over the knot—even at that moment was falling. Nothing was asked of him—nothing but inertia.

For an instant, alone there in that isolated mining-camp, high above the world, lost and forgotten in the gloom of the cañons and redwoods, Lockwood heard the crisis of his life come crashing through the air upon him like the onslaught of a whirlwind. For an instant, and no more, he considered. Then he cried aloud:

"No, no; I can't, I *can't*—not this way!" And with the words he threw the belt of the revolver about his hips and limped and scampered from the room, drawing the buckle close.

How he gained the stable he never knew, nor how he backed the horse from the building, nor how, hopping on one leg, he got the headstall on and drew the cinches tight.

But the wrench of pain in his foot as, swinging up at last, he tried to catch his off stirrup was reality enough to clear any confusion of spirit. Hanging on as best he might with his knees and one foot, Lockwood, threshing the horse's flanks with the stinging quirt that tapered from the reins of the bridle, shot from the camp in a swirl of clattering hoofs, flying pebbles and blinding clouds of dust.

V. THE TRAIL

The night was black dark under the redwoods, so impenetrable that he could not see his horse's head, and braced even as he was for greater perils it required all his courage to ride top-speed at this vast slab of black that like a wall he seemed to charge head down with every leap of his bronco's hoofs.

For the first half-hour the trail mounted steadily, then, by the old gravel-pits, it topped the divide and swung down over more open slopes, covered only with chaparral and second growths. Here it was lighter, and Lockwood uttered a fervent "Thank God!" when, a few moments later, the moon shouldered over the mountain crests ahead of him and melted the black shadows to silver-gray. Beyond the gravel-pits the trail turned and followed the flank of the slope, level here for nearly a mile. Lockwood set his teeth against the agony of his foot and gave the bronco the quirt with all his strength.

In another half-hour he had passed Cold Cañon, and twenty minutes after that had begun the descent into Indian River. He forded the river at a gallop, and, with the water dripping from his very hat-brim, drove labouring under the farther slope.

Then he drew rein with a cry of bewilderment and apprehension. The lights of Iowa Hill were not two hundred yards distant. He had covered the whole distance from the mine, and where was Chino?

There was but one answer: back there along the trail somewhere, at some point by which Lockwood had galloped headlong and unheeding, lying up there in the chaparral with Reno's bullets in his body.

There was no time now to go on to the Hill. Chino, if he was not past help, needed it without an instant's loss of time. Lockwood spun the horse about. Once more the ford, once more the cañon slopes, once more the sharp turn by Cold Cañon, once more the thick darkness under the redwoods. Steadily he galloped on, searching the roadside.

Then all at once he reined in sharply, bringing the horse to a standstill, one ear turned down the wind. The night's silence was broken by a multitude of sounds—the laboured breathing of the spent bronco, the saddle creaking as the dripping flanks rose and fell, the touch of wind in the tree-tops and the chorusing of the myriad tree-toads. But through all these, distinct, as precise as a clock-tick, Lockwood had heard, and yet distinguished, the click of a horse's hoof drawing near, and the horse was at a gallop: Reno at last.

Lockwood drew his pistol. He stood in thick shadow. Only some twenty yards in front of him was there any faintest break in the darkness; but at that point the blurred moonlight made a grayness across the trail, just a tone less deep than the redwoods' shadows.

With his revolver cocked and trained upon this patch of grayness, Lockwood waited, holding his breath.

The gallop came blundering on, sounding in the night's silence as loud as the passage of an express train; and the echo of it, flung back from the cañon side, confused it and distorted it till, to Lockwood's morbid alertness, it seemed fraught with all the madness of flight, all the hurry of desperation.

Then the hoof-beats rose to a roar, and a shadow just darker than the darkness heaved against the grayness that Lockwood held covered with his pistol. Instantly he shouted aloud:

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

His answer was a pistol shot.

He dug his heels to his horse, firing as the animal leaped forward. The horses crashed together, rearing, plunging, and Lockwood, as he felt the body of a man crush by him on the trail, clutched into the clothes of him, and, with the pistol pressed against the very flesh, fired again, crying out as he did so:

"Drop your gun, Reno! I know you. I'll kill you if you move again!"

And then it was that a wail rose into the night, a wail of agony and mortal apprehension:
"Sigñor Lockwude, Sigñor Lockwude, for the love of God, don't shoot! 'Tis I—Chino Zavalla."

VI. THE DISCOVERY OF FELICE

An hour later, Felice, roused from her sleep by loud knocking upon her door, threw a blanket about her slim body, serape fashion, and opened the cabin to two gaunt scarecrows, who, the one, half supported by the other, himself far spent and all but swooning, lurched by her across the threshold and brought up wavering and bloody in the midst of the cabin floor.

"*Por Dios! Por Dios!*" cried Felice. "Ah, love of God! what misfortune has befallen Chino!" Then in English, and with a swift leap of surprise and dismay: "Ah, Meester Lockwude, air you hurt? Eh, tell me-a! Ah, it is too draidful!"

"No, no," gasped Lockwood, as he dragged Chino's unconscious body to the bed Felice had just left. "No; I—I've shot him. We met—there on the trail." Then the nerves that had stood strain already surprisingly long snapped and crisped back upon themselves like broken harp-strings.

"*I've shot him! I've shot him!*" he cried. "Shot him, do you understand? Killed him, it may be. Get the doctor, quick! He's at the office. I passed Chino on the trail over to the Hill. He'd hid in the bushes as he heard me coming from behind, then when I came back I took him. Oh, I'll explain later. Get the doctor, quick."

Felice threw on such clothes as came to her hand and ran over to the office, returning with the doctor, half dressed and blinking in the lantern-light. He went in to the wounded man at once, and Lockwood, at the end of all strength, dropped into the hammock on the porch, stretching out his leg to ease the anguish of his broken foot. He leaned back and closed his eyes wearily, aware only of a hideous swirl of pain, of intolerable anxiety as to Chino's wound, and, most of all, of a mere blur of confusion wherein the sights and sounds of the last few hours tore through his brain with the plunge of a wild galloping such as seemed to have been in his ears for years and years.

But as he lay thus he heard a step at his side. Then came the touch of Felice's long brown hand upon his face. He sat up, opening his eyes.

"You aisk me-a," she said, "eef I do onderstaind, eh? Yais, I onderstaind. You—" her voice was a whisper—"you shoot Chino, eh? I know. You do those thing' for me-a. I am note angri, no-a. You ver' sharp man, eh? All for love oaf Felice, eh? Now we be happi, maybe; now we git married soam day byne-by, eh? Ah, you one brave man, Sigñor Lockwude!"

She would have taken his hand, but Lockwood, the pain all forgot, the confusion all vanishing, was on his feet. It was as though a curtain that for months had hung between him and the blessed light of clear understanding had suddenly been rent in twain by her words. The woman stood revealed. All the baseness of her tribe, all the degraded savagery of a degenerate race, all the capabilities for wrong, for sordid treachery, that lay dormant in her, leaped to life at this unguarded moment, and in that new light, that now at last she had herself let in, stood pitilessly revealed, a loathsome thing, hateful as malevolence itself.

"What," shouted Lockwood, "you think—think that I—that I *could*—oh-h, it's monstrous—*you*—" He could find no words to voice his loathing. Swiftly he turned away from her, the last spark of an evil love dying down forever in his breast.

It was a transformation, a thing as sudden as a miracle, as conclusive as a miracle, and with all a miracle's sense of uplift and power. In a second of time the scales seemed to fall from the man's eyes, fetters from his limbs; he saw, and he was free.

At the door Lockwood met the doctor:

"Well?"

"He's all right; only a superficial wound. He'll recover. But you—how about you? All right? Well, that is a good hearing. You've had a lucky escape, my boy."

"I *have* had a lucky escape," shouted Lockwood. "You don't know just how lucky it was."

A BARGAIN WITH PEG-LEG

"Hey, youse!" shouted the car-boy. He brought his trundling, jolting, loose-jointed car to a halt by the face of the drift. "Hey, youse!" he shouted again.

Bunt shut off the Burly air-drill and nodded.

"Chaw," he remarked to me.

We clambered into the car, and, as the boy released the brake, rolled out into the main tunnel of the Big Dipple, and banged and bumped down the long incline that led to the mouth.

"Chaw" was dinner. It was one o'clock in the morning, and the men on the night shift were taking their midnight spell off. Bunt was back at his old occupation of miner, and I—the one loafer of all that little world of workers—had brought him a bottle of beer to go with the "chaw"; for Bunt and I were ancient friends.

As we emerged from the cool, cave-like dampness of the mine and ran out into the wonderful night air of the Sierra foothills, warm, dry, redolent of witch-hazel, the carboy began to cough, and, after we had climbed out of the car and had sat down on the embankment to eat and drink, Bunt observed:

"D'ye hear that bark? That kid's a one-lunger for fair. Which ain't no salubrious graft for him—this hiking cars about in the bowels of the earth, Some day he'll sure up an' quit. Ought to go down to Yuma a spell."

The engineer in the mill was starting the stamps. They got under way with broken, hiccoughing dislocations, bumping and stumbling like the hoofs of a group of horses on the cattle-deck in a gale. Then they jumped to a trot, then to a canter, and at last settled down to the prolonged roaring gallop that reverberated far off over the entire cañon.

"I knew a one-lunger once," Bunt continued, as he uncorked the bottle, "and the acquaintance was some distressful by reason of its bringing me into strained relations with a cow-rustlin', hair-liftin', only-one-born-in-captivity, man-eatin' brute of a one-legged Greaser which he was named Peg-leg Smith. He was shy a leg because of a shotgun that the other man thought wasn't loaded. And this here happens, lemme tell you, 'way down in the Panamint country, where they wasn't no doctor within twenty miles, and Peg-leg outs with his bowie and amputates that leg hisself, then later makes a wood stump outa a ole halter and a table-leg. I guess the whole jing-bang of it turned his head, for he goes bad and loco thereafter, and begins shootin' and r'arin' up an' down the hull Southwest, a-roarin' and a-bellerin' and a-takin' on amazin'. We dasn't say boo to a yaller pup while he's round. I never see such mean blood. Jus' let the boys know that Peg-leg was anyways adjacent an' you can gamble they walked chalk.

"Y'see, this Peg-leg lay it out as how he couldn't abide no cussin' an' swearin'. He said if there was any tall talkin' done he wanted to do it. And he sure could. I've seed him hold on for six minutes by the watch an' never repeat hisself once. An' shoot! Say, lemme tell you he did for two Greasers once in a barroom at La Paz, one in front o' him, t'other straight behind, *him* standing between with a gun in each hand, and shootin' both guns *at the same time*. Well, he was just a terror," declared Bunt, solemnly, "and when he was in real good form there wa'n't a man south o' Leadville dared to call his hand.

"Now, the way I met up with this skunkin' little dewdrop was this-like It was at Yuma, at a time when I was a kid of about nineteen. It was a Sunday mornin'; Peg-leg was in town. He was asleep on a lounge in the back room o' Bud Overick's Grand Transcontinental Hotel. (I used to guess Bud called it that by reason that it wa'n't grand, nor transcontinental, nor yet a hotel—it was a bar.) This was twenty year ago, and in those days I knowed a one-lunger in Yuma named Clarence. (He couldn't help that—he was a good kid—but his name *was* Clarence.) We got along first-rate. Yuma was a great consumptive place at that time. They used to come in on every train; yes, and go out, too—by freight.

"Well, findin' that they couldn't do much else than jes' sit around an' bark and keep their shawls tight, these 'ere chaps kinda drew together, and lay it out to meet every Sunday morning at Bud's to sorta talk it over and have a quiet game. One game they had that they played steady, an' when I drifted into Bud's that morning they was about a dozen of 'em at it—Clarence, too. When I came in, there they be, all sittin' in a circle round a table with a cigar box on it. They'd each put four bits into the box. That was the pot.

"A stranger wouldn't 'a' made nothin' very excitin' out of that game, nor yet would 'a' caught on to what it were. For them pore yaps jes' sat there, each with his little glass thermometer in his mouth, a-waitin' and a-waitin' and never sayin' a word. Then bime-by Bud, who's a-holdin' of the watch on 'em, sings out 'Time!' an' they all takes their thermometers out an' looks at 'em careful-like to see where they stand.

"'Mine's ninety-nine,' says one.

"An' another says:

"'Mine's a hundred.'

"An' Clarence pipes up—coughin' all the time:

"'Mine's a hundred 'n one 'n 'alf.'

"An', no one havin' a higher tempriture than that, Clarence captures the pot. It was a queer kind o' game.

"Well, on that particular Sunday morning they's some unpleasantness along o' one o' the other one-lungers layin' it out as how Clarence had done some monkey-business to make his tempriture so high. It was said as how Clarence had took and drunk some hot tea afore comin' into the game at Bud's. They all began to discuss that same p'int.

"Naturally, they don't go at it polite, and to make their remarks p'inted they says a cuss-word occasional, and Clarence, bein' a high-steppin' gent as takes nobody's dust, slings it back some forceful.

"Then all at once they hears Peg-leg beller from where's he layin' on the lounge (they ain't figured on his bein' so contiguous), and he gives it to be understood, does Peg-leg, as how the next one-lunger that indulges in whatsoever profanity will lose his voice abrupt.

"They all drops out at that, bar the chap who had the next highest tempriture to Clarence. Him having missed the pot by only a degree or so is considerable sore.

"'Why,' says he, 'I've had a reg'lar *fever* since yesterday afternoon, an' only just dodged a hem'rage by a squeak. I'm all legitimate, I am; an' if you-alls misdoubts as how my tempriture ain't normal you kin jes' ask the doctor. I don't take it easy that a strappin', healthy gesabe whose case ain't nowheres near the hopeless p'int yet steps in here with a scalded mouth and plays it low.'

"Clarence he r'ars right up at that an' forgits about Peg-leg an' expresses doubts, not to say convictions, about the one-lunger's chances of salvation. He puts it all into about three words, an' just as quick as look at it we hears ol' Peg-leg's wooden stump a-comin'. We stampedes considerable prompt, but Clarence falls over a chair, an' before he kin get up Peg-leg has him by the windpipe.

"Now I ain't billin' myself as a all-round star hero an' general grand-stand man. But I was sure took with Clarence, an' I'd 'a' been real disappointed if Peg-leg 'ud a-killed him that morning—which he sure was tryin' to do when I came in for a few chips.

"I don' draw on Peg-leg, him being down on his knees over Clarence, an' his back turned, but without sensin' very much *what* I'm a-doin' of I grabs holt o' the first part o' Peg-leg that comes handy, which, so help me, Bob, is his old wooden leg. I starts to pull him off o' Clarence, but instead o' that I pulls off the wooden leg an' goes a-staggerin' back agin the wall with the thing in my fist.

"Y'know how it is now with a fightin' pup if you pull his tail while he's a-chawin' up the other pup. Ye can bat him over the head till you're tired, or kick him till you w'ars your boot out, an' he'll go right on chawin' the harder. But monkey with his tail an' he's that sensitive an' techy about it that he'll take a interest right off.

"Well, it were just so with Peg-leg—though I never knew it. Just by accident I'd laid holt of him where he was tender; an' when he felt that leg go—say, lemme tell you, he was some excited. He forgits all about Clarence, and he lines out for me, a-clawin' the air. Lucky he'd left his gun in the other room.

"Well, sir, y'ought to have seen him, a-hoppin' on one foot, and banging agin the furniture, jes' naturally black in the face with rage, an' doin' his darnedest to lay his hands on me, roarin' all the whiles like a steer with a kinked tail.

"Well, I'm skeered, and I remarks that same without shame. I'm skeered. I don't want to come to no grapples with Peg-leg in his wrath, an' I knows that so long as he can't git his leg he can't take after me very fast. Bud's saloon backs right up agin the bluff over the river. So what do I do but heave that same wooden leg through one o' the back windows, an' down she goes (as I *thought*) mebbe seventy feet into the cañon o' the Colorado? And then, mister man, *I skins out—fast*.

"I takes me headlong flight by way o' the back room and *on-root* pitches Peg-leg's gun over into the cañon, too, an' then whips around the corner of the saloon an' fetches out ag'in by the street in front. With his gun gone an' his leg gone, Peg-leg—so long's y'ain't within arm's reach—is as harmless as a horned toad. So I kinda hangs 'round the neighbourhood jes' to see what-all mout turn up.

"Peg-leg, after hoppin' back to find that his gun was gone, to look for his leg, comes out by the front door, hoppin' from one chair to another, an' seein' me standin' there across the street makes remarks; an' he informs me that because of this same little turn-up this mornin' I ain't never goin' to live to grow hair on my face. His observations are that vigorous an' p'inted that I sure begin to see it that way, too, and I says to myself:

"Now you, Bunt McBride, you've cut it out for yourself good and hard, an' the rest o' your life ain't goin' to be free from nervousness. Either y'ought to 'a' let this here hell-roarin' maverick alone or else you should 'a' put him clean out o' business when you had holt o' his shootin'-iron. An' I ain't a bit happy.' And then jes' at this stage o' the proceedings occurs what youse 'ud call a diversion.

"It seemed that that wood stump didn't go clean to the river as I first figured, but stuck three-fourths the way down. An' a-course there's a fool half-breed kid who's got to chase after it, thinkin' to do Peg-leg a good turn.

"I don't know nothin' about this, but jes' stand there talkin' back to Peg-leg, an' pre-tendin' I ain't got no misgivings, when I sees this kid comin' a-cavoortin' an' a-cayoodlin' down the street with the leg in his hands, hollerin' out:

"Here's your leg, Mister Peg-leg! I went an' got it for you, Mister Peg-leg!"

"It ain't so likely that Peg-leg could 'a' caught me even if he'd had his leg, but I wa'n't takin' no chances. An' as Peg-leg starts for the kid I start, too—with my heart knockin' agin my front teeth, you can bet.

"I never knew how fast a man could hop till that mornin', an', lookin' at Peg-leg with the tail o' my eye as I ran, it seemed to me as how he was a-goin' over the ground like a ole he-kangaroo. But somehow he gets off his balance and comes down all of a smash like a rickety table, an' I reaches the kid first an' takes the leg away from him.

"I guess Peg-leg must 'a' begun to lay it out by then that I held a straight flush to his ace high, for he sits down on the edge of the sidewalk an', being some winded, too, he just glares. Then byme-by he says:

"You think you are some smart now, sonny, but I'm a-studyin' of your face so's I'll know who to look for when I git a new leg; an' believe me, I'll know it, m'son—yours and your friend's too' (he meant Clarence)—an' I guess you'll both be kind o' sick afore I'm done with you. *You!*' he goes on, tremendous disgustful. 'You! an' them one-lungers a-swearin' an' a-cussin' an' bedamnin' an' bedevilin' one a-other. Ain't ye just ashamed o' yourselves?' (he thought I was a one-lunger, too); 'ain't ye ashamed—befoulin' your mouths, and disturbin' the peace along of a quiet Sunday mornin', an' you-alls waist over in your graves? I'm fair sick o' my job,' he remarks, goin' kind o' thoughtful.

'Ten years now I've been range-ridin' all this yere ranch, a-doin' o' my little feeble, or'nary best to clean out the mouths o' you men an' purify the atmosphere o' God's own country, but I ain't made *one* convert. I've pounded 'em an' booted 'em, an' busted 'em an' shot 'em up, an' they go on cussin' each other out harder'n ever. I don't know w'at all to do an' I sometimes gets plumb discouraged-like.'

"Now, hearin' of him talk that-a-way, an' a-knowin' of his weakness, I gits a idea. It's a chanst and mebbee it don't pan out, but I puts it up as a bluff. I don't want, you see, to spend the rest o' my appointed time in this yere vale o' tears a-dodgin' o' Peg-leg Smith, an' in the end, after all, to git between the wind and a forty-eight caliber do-good, sure not. So I puts up a deal. Says I: 'Peg-leg, I'll make a bargint along o' you. You lays it out as how you ain't never converted nobody out o' his swearin' habits. Now if you wants, 'ere's a chanst. You gimme your word as a gent and a good-man-an'-true, as how you won't never make no play to shoot me up, in nowise whatsoever, so long as we both do live, an' promise never to bust me, or otherwise, and promise never to rustle me or interfere with my life, liberty and pursuit o' happiness, an' thereunto you set your seal an' may Lord 'a' mercy on your soul—you promise that, an' I will agree an' covenant with the party o' the first part to abstain an' abjure, early or late, dry or drinkin', in liquor or out, out o' luck or in, rangin' or roundin', from all part an' parcel o' profanity, cuss-words, little or big, several and separate, bar none; this yere agreement to be considered as bindin' an' obligatory till the day o' your demise, decease or death. *There!*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.