

MAX BRAND

WAY OF THE
LAWLESS

Max Brand

Way of the Lawless

«Public Domain»

Brand M.

Way of the Lawless / M. Brand — «Public Domain»,

© Brand M.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER 1	5
CHAPTER 2	8
CHAPTER 3	10
CHAPTER 4	13
CHAPTER 5	16
CHAPTER 6	18
CHAPTER 7	20
CHAPTER 8	23
CHAPTER 9	26
CHAPTER 10	28
CHAPTER 11	30
CHAPTER 12	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

Max Brand

Way of the Lawless

CHAPTER 1

Beside the rear window of the blacksmith shop Jasper Lanning held his withered arms folded against his chest. With the dispassionate eye and the aching heart of an artist he said to himself that his life work was a failure. That life work was the young fellow who swung the sledge at the forge, and truly it was a strange product for this seventy-year-old veteran with his slant Oriental eyes and his narrow beard of white. Andrew Lanning was not even his son, but it came about in this way that Andrew became the life work of Jasper.

Fifteen years before, the father of Andy died, and Jasper rode out of the mountain desert like a hawk dropping out of the pale-blue sky. He buried his brother without a tear, and then sat down and looked at the slender child who bore his name. Andy was a beautiful boy. He had the black hair and eyes, the well-made jaw, and the bone of the Lannings, and if his mouth was rather soft and girlish he laid the failing to the weakness of childhood. Jasper had no sympathy for tenderness in men. His own life was as littered with hard deeds as the side of a mountain with boulders. But the black, bright eyes and the well-made jaw of little Andy laid hold on him, and he said to himself: "I'm fifty-five. I'm about through with my saddle days. I'll settle down and turn out one piece of work that'll last after I'm gone, and last with my signature on it!"

That was fifteen years ago. And for fifteen years he had labored to make Andy a man according to a grim pattern which was known in the Lanning clan, and elsewhere in the mountain desert. His program was as simple as the curriculum of a Persian youth. On the whole, it was even simpler, for Jasper concentrated on teaching the boy how to ride and shoot, and was not at all particular that he should learn to speak the truth. But on the first two and greatest articles of his creed, how Jasper labored!

For fifteen years he poured his heart without stint into his work! He taught Andy to know a horse from hock to teeth, and to ride anything that wore hair. He taught him to know a gun as if it were a sentient thing. He taught him all the draws of old and new pattern, and labored to give him both precision and speed. That was the work of fifteen years, and now at the end of this time the old man knew that his life work was a failure, for he had made the hand of Andrew Lanning cunning, had given his muscles strength, but the heart beneath was wrong.

It was hard to see Andy at the first glance. A film of smoke shifted and eddied through the shop, and Andy, working the bellows, was a black form against the square of the door, a square filled by the blinding white of the alkali dust in the road outside and the blinding white of the sun above. Andy turned from the forge, bearing in his tongs a great bar of iron black at the ends but white in the middle. The white place was surrounded by a sparkling radiance. Andy caught up an eight-pound hammer, and it rose and fell lightly in his hand. The sparks rushed against the leather apron of the hammer wielder, and as the blows fell rapid waves of light were thrown against the face of Andrew.

Looking at that face one wondered how the life work of Jasper was such a failure. For Andy was a handsome fellow with his blue-black hair and his black, rather slanting eyes, after the Lanning manner. Yet Jasper saw, and his heart was sick. The face was a little too full; the square bone of the chin was rounded with flesh; and, above all, the mouth had never changed. It was the mouth of the child, soft—too womanly soft. And Jasper blinked.

When he opened his eyes again the white place on the iron had become a dull red, and the face of the blacksmith was again in shadow. All Jasper could see was the body of Andy, and that was much better. Red light glinted on the sinewy arms and the swaying shoulders, and the hammer

swayed and fell tirelessly. For fifteen years Jasper had consoled himself with the strength of the boy, smooth as silk and as durable; the light form which would not tire a horse, but swelled above the waist into those formidable shoulders.

Now the bar was lifted from the anvil and plunged, hissing, into the bucket beside the forge; above the bucket a cloud of steam rose and showed clearly against the brilliant square of the door, and the peculiar scent which came from the iron went sharply to the nostrils of Jasper. He got up as a horseman entered the shop. He came in a manner that pleased Jasper. There was a rush of hoofbeats, a form darting through the door, and in the midst of the shop the rider leaped out of the saddle and the horse came to a halt with braced legs.

"Hey, you!" called the rider as he tossed the reins over the head of his horse. "Here's a hoss that needs iron on his feet. Fix him up. And look here"—he lifted a forefoot and showed the scales on the frog and sole of the hoof—"last time you shod this hoss you done a sloppy job, son. You left all this stuff hangin' on here. I want it trimmed off nice an' neat. You hear?"

The blacksmith shrugged his shoulders.

"Spoils the hoof to put the knife on the sole, Buck," said the smith. "That peels off natural."

"H'm," said Buck Heath. "How old are you, son?"

"Oh, old enough," answered Andy cheerily. "Old enough to know that this exfoliation is entirely natural."

The big word stuck in the craw of Buck Heath, who brought his thick eyebrows together. "I've rid horses off and on come twenty-five years," he declared, "and I've rid 'em long enough to know how I want 'em shod. This is my hoss, son, and you do it my way. That straight?"

The eye of old Jasper in the rear of the shop grew dim with wistfulness as he heard this talk. He knew Buck Heath; he knew his kind; in his day he would have eaten a dozen men of such rough words and such mild deeds as Buck. But searching the face of Andy, he saw no resentment. Merely a quiet resignation.

"Another thing," said Buck Heath, who seemed determined to press the thing to a disagreeable point. "I hear you don't fit your shoes on hot. Well?"

"I never touch a hoof with hot iron," replied Andy. "It's a rotten practice."

"Is it?" said Buck Heath coldly. "Well, son, you fit my hoss with hot shoes or I'll know the reason why."

"I've got to do the work my own way," protested Andy.

A spark of hope burned in the slant eyes of Jasper.

"Otherwise I can go find another gent to do my shoein'?" inquired Buck.

"It looks that way," replied the blacksmith with a nod.

"Well," said Buck, whose mildness of the last question had been merely the cover for a bursting wrath that now sent his voice booming, "maybe you know a whole pile, boy—I hear Jasper has give you consid'able education—but what you know is plumb wasted on me. Understand? As for lookin' up another blacksmith, you ought to know they ain't another shop in ten miles. You'll do this job, and you'll do it my way. Maybe you got another way of thinkin'?"

There was a little pause.

"It's your horse," repeated Andy. "I suppose I can do him your own way."

Old Jasper closed his eyes in silent agony. Looking again, he saw Buck Heath grinning with contempt, and for a single moment Jasper touched his gun. Then he remembered that he was seventy years old. "Well, Buck?" he said, coming forward. For he felt that if this scene continued he would go mad with shame.

There was a great change in Buck as he heard this voice, a marked respect was in his manner as he turned to Jasper. "Hello, Jas," he said. "I didn't know you was here."

"Come over to the saloon, Buck, and have one on me," said Jasper. "I guess Andy'll have your hoss ready when we come back."

"Speakin' personal," said Buck Heath with much heartiness, "I don't pass up no chances with no man, and particular if he's Jasper Lanning." He hooked his arm through Jasper's elbow. "Besides, that boy of yours has got me all heated up. Where'd he learn them man-sized words, Jas?"

All of which Andy heard, and he knew that Buck Heath intended him to hear them. It made Andy frown, and for an instant he thought of calling Buck back. But he did not call. Instead he imagined what would happen. Buck would turn on his heel and stand, towering, in the door. He would ask what Andy wanted. Andy chose the careful insult which he would throw in Buck's face. He saw the blow given. He felt his own fist tingle as he returned the effort with interest. He saw Buck tumble back over the bucket of water.

By this time Andy was smiling gently to himself. His wrath had dissolved, and he was humming pleasantly to himself as he began to pull off the worn shoes of Buck's horse.

CHAPTER 2

Young Andrew Lanning lived in the small, hushed world of his own thoughts. He neither loved nor hated the people around him. He simply did not see them. His mother—it was from her that he inherited the softer qualities of his mind and his face—had left him a little stock of books. And though Andy was by no means a reader, he had at least picked up that dangerous equipment of fiction which enables a man to dodge reality and live in his dreams. Those dreams had as little as possible to do with the daily routine of his life, and certainly the handling of guns, which his uncle enforced upon him, was never a part of the future as Andy saw it.

It was now the late afternoon; the alkali dust in the road was still in a white light, but the temperature in the shop had dropped several degrees. The horse of Buck Heath was shod, and Andy was laying his tools away for the day when he heard the noise of an automobile with open muffler coming down the street. He stepped to the door to watch, and at that moment a big blue car trundled into view around the bend of the road. The rear wheels struck a slide of sand and dust, and skidded; a girl cried out; then the big machine gathered out of the cloud of dust, and came toward Andy with a crackling like musketry, and it was plain that it would leap through Martindale and away into the country beyond at a bound. Andy could see now that it was a roadster, low-hung, ponderous, to keep the road.

Pat Gregg was leaving the saloon; he was on his horse, but he sat the saddle slanting, and his head was turned to give the farewell word to several figures who bulged through the door of the saloon. For that reason, as well as because of the fumes in his brain, he did not hear the coming of the automobile. His friends from the saloon yelled a warning, but he evidently thought it some jest, as he waved his hand with a grin of appreciation. The big car was coming, rocking with its speed; it was too late now to stop that flying mass of metal.

But the driver made the effort. His brakes shrieked, and still the car shot on with scarcely abated speed, for the wheels could secure no purchase in the thin sand of the roadway. Andy's heart stood still in sympathy as he saw the face of the driver whiten and grow tense. Charles Merchant, the son of rich John Merchant, was behind the wheel. Drunken Pat Gregg had taken the warning at last. He turned in the saddle and drove home his spurs, but even that had been too late had not Charles Merchant taken the big chance. At the risk of overturning the machine he veered it sharply to the left. It hung for a moment on two wheels. Andy could count a dozen heartbeats while the plunging car edged around the horse and shoved between Pat and the wall of the house—inches on either side. Yet it must have taken not more than the split part of a second.

There was a shout of applause from the saloon; Pat Gregg sat his horse, mouth open, his face pale, and then the heavy car rolled past the blacksmith shop. Andy, breathing freely and cold to his finger tips, saw young Charlie Merchant relax to a flickering smile as the girl beside him caught his arm and spoke to him.

And then Andy saw her for the first time.

In the brief instant as the machine moved by, he printed the picture to be seen again when she was gone. What was the hair? Red bronze, and fiery where the sun caught at it, and the eyes were gray, or blue, or a gray-green. But colors did not matter. It was all in her smile and the turning of her eyes, which were very wide open. She spoke, and it was in the sound of her voice. "Wait!" shouted Andy Lanning as he made a step toward them. But the car went on, rocking over the bumps and the exhaust roaring. Andy became aware that his shout had been only a dry whisper. Besides, what would he say if they did stop?

And then the girl turned sharply about and looked back, not at the horse they had so nearly struck, but at Andy standing in the door of his shop. He felt sure that she would remember his face; her smile had gone out while she stared, and now she turned her head suddenly to the front. Once

more the sun flashed on her hair; then the machine disappeared. In a moment even the roar of the engine was lost, but it came back again, flung in echoes from some hillside.

Not until all was silent, and the boys from the saloon were shaking hands with Pat and laughing at him, did Andy turn back into the blacksmith shop. He sat down on the anvil with his heart beating, and began to recall the picture. Yes, it was all in the smile and the glint of the eyes. And something else—how should he say it?—of the light shining through her.

He stood up presently, closed the shop, and went home. Afterward his uncle came in a fierce humor, slamming the door. He found Andy sitting in front of the table staring down at his hands.

"Buck Heath has been talkin' about you," said Jasper.

Andy raised his head. "Look at 'em!" he said as he spread out his hands. "I been scrubbin' 'em with sand soap for half an hour, and the oil and the iron dust won't come out."

Uncle Jasper, who had a quiet voice and gentle manners, now stood rigid. "I wisht to God that some iron dust would work its way into your soul," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothin' you could understand; you need a mother to explain things to you."

The other got up, white about the mouth. "I think I do," said Andy. "I'm sick inside."

"Where's supper?" demanded Jasper.

Andy sat down again, and began to consider his hands once more. "There's something wrong—something dirty about this life."

"Is there?" Uncle Jasper leaned across the table, and once again the old ghost of a hope was flickering behind his eyes. "Who's been talkin' to you?"

He thought of the grinning men of the saloon; the hidden words. Somebody might have gone out and insulted Andy to his face for the first time. There had been plenty of insults in the past two years, since Andy could pretend to manhood, but none that might not be overlooked. "Who's been talkin' to you?" repeated Uncle Jasper. "Confound that Buck Heath! He's the cause of all the trouble!"

"Buck Heath! Who's he? Oh, I remember. What's he got to do with the rotten life we lead here, Uncle Jas?"

"So?" said the old man slowly. "He ain't nothin'?"

"Bah!" remarked Andy. "You want me to go out and fight him? I won't. I got no love for fighting. Makes me sort of sickish."

"Heaven above!" the older man invoked. "Ain't you got shame? My blood in you, too!"

"Don't talk like that," said Andy with a certain amount of reserve which was not natural to him. "You bother me. I want a little silence and a chance to think things out. There's something wrong in the way I've been living."

"You're the last to find it out."

"If you keep this up I'm going to take a walk so I can have quiet."

"You'll sit there, son, till I'm through with you. Now, Andrew, these years I've been savin' up for this moment when I was sure that—"

To his unutterable astonishment Andy rose and stepped between him and the door. "Uncle Jas," he said, "mostly I got a lot of respect for you and what you think. Tonight I don't care what you or anybody else has to say. Just one thing matters. I feel I've been living in the dirt. I'm going out and see what's wrong. Good night."

CHAPTER 3

Uncle Jas was completely bowled over. Over against the wall as the door closed he was saying to himself: "What's happened? What's happened?" As far as he could make out his nephew retained very little fear of the authority of Jasper Lanning.

One thing became clear to the old man. There had to be a decision between his nephew and some full-grown man, otherwise Andy was very apt to grow up into a sneaking coward. And in the matter of a contest Jasper could not imagine a better trial horse than Buck Heath. For Buck was known to be violent with his hands, but he was not likely to draw his gun, and, more than this, he might even be bluffed down without making a show of a fight. Uncle Jasper left his house supperless, and struck down the street until he came to the saloon.

He found Buck Heath warming to his work, resting both elbows on the bar. Bill Dozier was with him, Bill who was the black sheep in the fine old Dozier family. His brother, Hal Dozier, was by many odds the most respected and the most feared man in the region, but of all the good Dozier qualities Bill inherited only their fighting capacity. He fought; he loved trouble; and for that reason, and not because he needed the money, he was now acting as a deputy sheriff. He was jesting with Buck Heath in a rather superior manner, half contemptuous, half amused by Buck's alcoholic swaggerings. And Buck was just sober enough to perceive that he was being held lightly. He hated Dozier for that treatment, but he feared him too much to take open offense. It was at this opportune moment that old man Lanning, apparently half out of breath, touched Buck on the elbow.

As Buck turned with a surly "What the darnation?" the other whispered: "Be on your way, Buck. Get out of town, and get out of trouble. My boy hears you been talkin' about him, and he allows as how he'll get you. He's out for you now."

The fumes cleared sufficiently from Buck Heath's mind to allow him to remember that Jasper Lanning's boy was no other than the milk-blooded Andy. He told Jasper to lead his boy on. There was a reception committee waiting for him there in the person of one Buck Heath.

"Don't be a fool, Buck," said Jasper, glancing over his shoulder. "Don't you know that Andy's a crazy, man-killin' fool when he gets started? And he's out for blood now. You just slide out of town and come back when his blood's cooled down."

Buck Heath took another drink from the bottle in his pocket, and then regarded Jasper moodily. "Partner," he declared gloomily, putting his hand on the shoulder of Jasper, "maybe Andy's a man-eater, but I'm a regular Andy-eater, and here's the place where I go and get my feed. Lemme loose!"

He kicked open the door of the saloon. "Where is he?" demanded the roaring Andy-eater. Less savagely, he went on: "I'm lookin' for my meat!"

Jasper Lanning and Bill Dozier exchanged glances of understanding. "Partly drunk, but mostly yaller," observed Bill Dozier. "Soon as the air cools him off outside he'll mount his hoss and get on his way. But, say, is your boy really out for his scalp?" "Looks that way," declared Jasper with tolerable gravity.

"I didn't know he was that kind," said Bill Dozier. And Jasper flushed, for the imputation was clear. They went together to the window and looked out.

It appeared that Bill Dozier was right. After standing in the middle of the street in the twilight for a moment, Buck Heath turned and went straight for his horse. A low murmur passed around the saloon, for other men were at the windows watching. They had heard Buck's talk earlier in the day, and they growled as they saw him turn tail.

Two moments more and Buck would have been on his horse, but in those two moments luck took a hand. Around the corner came Andrew Lanning with his head bowed in thought. At once a roar went up from every throat in the saloon: "There's your man. Go to him!"

Buck Heath turned from his horse; Andrew lifted his head. They were face to face, and it was hard to tell to which one of them the other was the least welcome. But Andrew spoke first. A thick silence had fallen in the saloon. Most of the onlookers wore careless smiles, for the caliber of these two was known, and no one expected violence; but Jasper Lanning, at the door, stood with a sick face. He was praying in the silence.

Every one could hear Andrew say: "I hear you've been making a talk about me, Buck?"

It was a fair enough opening. The blood ran more freely in the veins of Jasper. Perhaps the quiet of his boy had not been altogether the quiet of cowardice.

"Aw," answered Buck Heath, "don't you be takin' everything you hear for gospel. What kind of talk do you mean?"

"He's layin' down," said Bill Dozier, and his voice was soft but audible in the saloon. "The skunk!"

"I was about to say," said Andrew, "that I think you had no cause for talk. I've done you no harm, Buck."

The hush in the saloon became thicker; eyes of pity turned on that proved man, Jasper Lanning. He had bowed his head. And the words of the younger man had an instant effect on Buck Heath. They seemed to infuriate him.

"You've done me no harm?" he echoed. He let his voice out; he even glanced back and took pleasurable note of the crowded faces behind the dim windows of the saloon. Just then Geary, the saloon keeper, lighted one of the big lamps, and at once all the faces at the windows became black silhouettes. "You done me no harm?" repeated Buck Heath. "Ain't you been goin' about makin' a talk that you was after me? Well, son, here I am. Now let's see you eat!"

"I've said nothing about you," declared Andy. There was a groan from the saloon. Once more all eyes flashed across to Jasper Lanning.

"Bah!" snorted Buck Heath, and raised his hand. To crown the horror, the other stepped back. A little puff of alkali dust attested the movement.

"I'll tell you," roared Buck, "you ain't fittin' for a man's hand to touch, you ain't. A hosswhip is more your style."

From the pommel of his saddle he snatched his quirt. It whirled, hummed in the air, and then cracked on the shoulders of Andrew. In the dimness of the saloon door a gun flashed in the hand of Jasper Lanning. It was a swift draw, but he was not in time to shoot, for Andy, with a cry, ducked in under the whip as it raised for the second blow and grappled with Buck Heath. They swayed, then separated as though they had been torn apart. But the instant of contact had told Andy a hundred things. He was much smaller than the other, but he knew that he was far and away stronger after that grapple. It cleared his brain, and his nerves ceased jumping.

"Keep off," he said. "I've no wish to harm you."

"You houn' dog!" yelled Buck, and leaped in with a driving fist.

It bounced off the shoulder of Andrew. At the same time he saw those banked heads at the windows of the saloon, and knew it was a trap for him. All the scorn and the grief which had been piling up in him, all the cold hurt went into the effort as he stepped in and snapped his fist into the face of Buck Heath. He rose with the blow; all his energy, from wrist to instep, was in that lifting drive. Then there was a jarring impact that made his arm numb to the shoulder. Buck Heath looked blankly at him, wavered, and pitched loosely forward on his face. And his head bounced back as it struck the ground. It was a horrible thing to see, but it brought one wild yell of joy from the saloon—the voice of Jasper Lanning.

Andrew had dropped to his knees and turned the body upon its back. The stone had been half buried in the dust, but it had cut a deep, ragged gash on the forehead of Buck. His eyes were open, glazed; his mouth sagged; and as the first panic seized Andy he fumbled at the heart of the senseless man and felt no beat.

"Dead!" exclaimed Andy, starting to his feet. Men were running toward him from the saloon, and their eagerness made him see a picture he had once seen before. A man standing in the middle of a courtroom; the place crowded; the judge speaking from behind the desk: "—to be hanged by the neck until—"

A revolver came into the hand of Andrew. And when he found his voice, there was a snapping tension in it.

"Stop!" he called. The scattering line stopped like horses thrown back on their haunches by jerked bridle reins. "And don't make no move," continued Andy, gathering the reins of Buck's horse behind him. A blanket of silence had dropped on the street.

"The first gent that shows metal," said Andy, "I'll drill him. Keep steady!"

He turned and flashed into the saddle. Once more his gun covered them. He found his mind working swiftly, calmly. His knees pressed the long holster of an old-fashioned rifle. He knew that make of gun from toe to foresight; he could assemble it in the dark.

"You, Perkins! Get your hands away from your hip. Higher, blast you!"

He was obeyed. His voice was thin, but it kept that line of hands high above their heads. When he moved his gun the whole line winced; it was as if his will were communicated to them on electric currents. He sent his horse into a walk; into a trot; then dropped along the saddle, and was plunging at full speed down the street, leaving a trail of sharp alkali dust behind him and a long, tingling yell.

CHAPTER 4

Only one man in the crowd was old enough to recognize that yell, and the one man was Jasper Lanning. A great, singing happiness filled his heart and his throat. But the shouting of the men as they tumbled into their saddles cleared his brain. He called to Deputy Bill Dozier, who was kneeling beside the prostrate form of Buck Heath: "Call 'em off, Bill. Call 'em off, or, by the Lord, I'll take a hand in this! He done it in self-defense. He didn't even pull a gun on Buck. Bill, call 'em off!"

And Bill did it most effectually. He straightened, and then got up. "Some of you fools get some sense, will you?" he called. "Buck ain't dead; he's just knocked out!"

It brought them back, a shamefaced crew, laughing at each other. "Where's a doctor?" demanded Bill Dozier.

Someone who had an inkling of how wounds should be cared for was instantly at work over Buck. "He's not dead," pronounced this authority, "but he's danged close to it. Fractured skull, that's what he's got. And a fractured jaw, too, looks to me. Yep, you can hear the bone grate!"

Jasper Lanning was in the midst of a joyous monologue. "You seen it, boys? One punch done it. That's what the Lannings are—the one-punch kind. And you seen him get to his gun? Handy! Lord, but it done me good to see him mosey that piece of iron off'n his hip. And see him take that saddle? Where was you with your gal, Joe? Nowhere! Looked to me like—"

The voice of Bill Dozier broke in: "I want a posse. Who'll ride with Bill Dozier tonight?"

It sobered Jasper Lanning. "What d'you mean by that?" he asked. "Didn't the boy fight clean?"

"Maybe," admitted Dozier. "But Buck may kick out. And if he dies they's got to be a judge talk to your boy. Come on. I want volunteers."

"Dozier, what's all this fool talk?"

"Don't bother me, Lanning. I got a duty to perform, ain't I? Think I'm going to let 'em say later on that anybody done this and then got away from Bill Dozier? Not me!"

"Bill," said Jasper, "I read in your mind. You're lookin' for action, and you want to get it out of Andy."

"I want nothin' but to get him back."

"Think he'll let you come close enough to talk? He'll think you want him for murder, that's what. Keep off of this boy, Bill. Let him hear the news; then he'll come back well enough."

"You waste my time," said Bill, "and all the while a man that the law wants is puttin' ground between him and Martindale. Now, boys, you hear me talk. Who's with Bill Dozier to bring back this milk-fed kid?"

It brought a snarl from Jasper Lanning. "Why don't you go after him by yourself, Dozier? I had your job once and I didn't ask no helpers on it."

But Bill Dozier apparently had no liking for a lonely ride. He made his demand once more, and the volunteers came out. In five minutes he had selected five sturdy men, and every one of the five was a man whose name was known.

They went down the street of Martindale without shouting and at a steady lope which their horses could keep up indefinitely. Old Jasper followed them to the end of the village and kept on watching through the dusk until the six horsemen loomed on the hill beyond against the sky line. They were still cantering, and they rode close together like a tireless pack of wolves. After this old Jasper went back to his house, and when the door closed behind him a lonely echo went through the place.

"Bah!" said Jasper. "I'm getting soft!"

In the meantime the posse went on, regardless of direction. There were only two possible paths for a horseman out of Martindale; east and west the mountains blocked the way, and young Lanning had started north. Straight ahead of them the mountains shot up on either side of Grant's Pass, and toward this natural landmark Bill Dozier led the way. Not that he expected to have to travel as far as

this. He felt fairly certain that the fugitive would ride out his horse at full speed, and then he would camp for the night and make a fire.

Andrew Lanning was town bred and soft of skin from the work at the forge. When the biting night air got through his clothes he would need warmth from a fire.

Bill Dozier led on his men for three hours at a steady pace until they came to Sullivan's ranch house in the valley. The place was dark, but the deputy threw a loose circle of his men around the house, and then knocked at the front door. Old man Sullivan answered in his bare feet. Did he know of the passing of young Lanning? Not only that, but he had sold Andrew a horse. It seemed that Andrew was making a hurried trip; that Buck Heath had loaned him his horse for the first leg of it, and that Buck would call later for the animal. It had sounded strange, but Sullivan was not there to ask questions. He had led Andrew to the corral and told him to make his choice.

"There was an old pinto in there," said Sullivan, "all leather in that hoss. You know him, Joe. Well, the boy runs his eye over the bunch, and then picks the pinto right off. I said he wasn't for sale, but he wouldn't take anything else. I figured a stiff price, and then added a hundred to it. Lanning didn't wink. He took the horse, but he didn't pay cash. Told me I'd have to trust him."

Bill Dozier bade Sullivan farewell, gathered his five before the house, and made them a speech. Bill had a long, lean face, a misty eye, and a pair of drooping, sad mustaches. As Jasper Lanning once said: "Bill Dozier always looked like he was just away from a funeral or just goin' to one." This night the dull eye of Bill was alight.

"Gents," he said, "maybe you-all is disappointed. I heard some talk comin' up here that maybe the boy had laid over for the night in Sullivan's house. Which he may be a fool, but he sure ain't a plumb fool. But, speakin' personal, this trail looks more and more interestin' to me. Here he's left Buck's hoss, so he ain't exactly a hoss thief—yet. And he's promised to pay for the pinto, so that don't make him a crook. But when the pinto gives out, Andy'll be in country where he mostly ain't known. He can't take things on trust, and he'll mostly take 'em, anyway. Boys, looks to me like we was after the real article. Anybody weakenin'?"

It was suggested that the boy would be overtaken before the pinto gave out; it was even suggested that this waiting for Andrew Lanning to commit a crime was perilously like forcing him to become a criminal. To all of this the deputy listened sadly, combing his mustaches. The hunger for the manhunt is like the hunger for food, and Bill Dozier had been starved for many a day.

"Partner," said Bill to the last speaker, "ain't we makin' all the speed we can? Ain't it what I want to come up to the fool kid and grab him before he makes a hoss thief or somethin' out of himself? You gents feed your hosses the spur and leave the thinkin' to me. I got a pile of hunches."

There was no questioning of such a known man as Bill Dozier. The six went rattling up the valley at a smart pace. Yet Andy's change of horses at Sullivan's place changed the entire problem. He had ridden his first mount to a stagger at full speed, and it was to be expected that, having built up a comfortable lead, he would settle his second horse to a steady pace and maintain it.

All night the six went on, with Bill Dozier's long-striding chestnut setting the pace. He made no effort toward a spurt now. Andrew Lanning led them by a full hour's riding on a comparatively fresh horse, and, unless he were foolish enough to indulge in another wild spurt, they could not wear him down in this first stage of the journey. There was only the chance that he would build a fire recklessly near to the trail, but still they came to no sign of light, and then the dawn broke and Bill Dozier found unmistakable signs of a trotting horse which went straight up the valley. There were no other fresh tracks pointing in the same direction, and this must be Andy's horse. And the fact that he was trotting told many things. He was certainly saving his mount for a long grind. Bill Dozier looked about at his men in the gray morning. They were a hard-faced lot; he had not picked them for tenderness. They were weary now, but the fugitive must be still wearier, for he had fear to keep him company and burden his shoulders.

And now they came to a surprising break in the trail. It twisted from the floor of the valley up a steep slope, crossed the low crest of the hills, and finally came out above a broad and open valley.

"What does he mean," said Bill Dozier aloud, "by breakin' for Jack Merchant's house?"

CHAPTER 5

The yell with which Andrew Lanning had shot out of Martindale, and which only Jasper Lanning had recognized, was no more startling to the men of the village than it was to Andrew himself. Mingled in an ecstasy of emotion, there was fear, hate, anger, grief, and the joy of freedom in that cry; but it froze the marrow of Andy's bones to hear it.

Fear, most of all, was driving him out of the village. Just as he rushed around the bend of the street he looked back to the crowd of men tumbling upon their horses; every hand there would be against him. He knew them. He ran over their names and faces. Thirty seconds before he would rather have walked on the edge of a cliff than rouse the anger of a single one among these men, and now, by one blow, he had started them all after him.

Once, as he topped the rise, the folly of attempting to escape from their long-proved cunning made him draw in on the rein a little; but the horse only snorted and shook his head and burst into a greater effort of speed. After all, the horse was right, Andy decided. For the moment he thought of turning and facing that crowd, but he remembered stories about men who had killed the enemy in fair fight, but who had been tried by a mob jury and strung to the nearest tree.

Any sane man might have told Andrew that those days were some distance in the past, but Andy made no distinction between periods. He knew the most exciting events which had happened around Martindale in the past fifty years, and he saw no difference between one generation and the next. Was not Uncle Jasper himself continually dinning into his ears the terrible possibilities of trouble? Was not Uncle Jasper, even in his old age, religiously exacting in his hour or more of gun exercise each day? Did not Uncle Jasper force Andy to go through the same maneuvers for twice as long between sunset and sunrise? And why all these endless preparations if these men of Martindale were not killers?

It might seem strange that Andy could have lived so long among these people without knowing them better, but he had taken from his mother a little strain of shyness. He never opened his mind to other people, and they really never opened themselves to Andy Lanning. The men of Martindale wore guns, and the conclusion had always been apparent to Andy that they wore guns because, in a pinch, they were ready to kill men.

To Andy Lanning, as fear whipped him north out of Martindale, there seemed no pleasure or safety in the world except in the speed of his horse and the whirl of the air against his face. When that speed faltered he went to the quirt. He spurred mercilessly. Yet he had ridden his horse out to a stagger before he reached old Sullivan's place. Only when the forefeet of the mustang began to pound did he realize his folly in exhausting his horse when the race was hardly begun. He went into the ranch house to get a new mount.

When he was calmer, he realized that he had played his part well—astonishingly well. His voice had not quivered. His eye had met that of the old rancher every moment. His hand had been as steady as iron.

Something that Uncle Jasper had said recurred to him, something about iron dust. He felt now that there was indeed a strong, hard metal in him; fear had put it there—or was it fear itself? Was it not fear that had brought the gun into his hand so easily when the crowd rushed him from the door of the saloon? Was it not fear that had made his nerves so rocklike as he faced that crowd and made his get-away?

He was on one side now, and the world was on the other. He turned in the saddle and probed the thick blackness with his eyes; then he sent the pinto on at an easy, ground-devouring lope. Sometimes, as the ravine narrowed, the close walls made the creaking of the saddle leather loud in his ears, and the puffing of the pinto, who hated work; sometimes the hoofs scuffed noisily through gravel; but usually the soft sand muffled the noise of hoofs, and there was a silence as dense as the night around Andy Lanning.

Thinking back, he felt that it was all absurd and dreamlike. He had never hurt a man before in his life. Martindale knew it. Why could he not go back, face them, give up his gun, wait for the law to speak?

But when he thought of this he thought a moment later of a crowd rushing their horses through the night, leaning over their saddles to break the wind more easily, and all ready to kill on this man trail.

All at once a great hate welled up in him, and he went on with gritting teeth.

It was out of this anger, oddly enough, that the memory of the girl came to him. She was like the falling of this starlight, pure, aloof, and strange and gentle. It seemed to Andrew Lanning that the instant of seeing her outweighed the rest of his life, but he would never see her again. How could he see her, and if he saw her, what would he say to her? It would not be necessary to speak. One glance would be enough.

But, sooner or later, Bill Dozier would reach him. Why not sooner? Why not take the chance, ride to John Merchant's ranch, break a way to the room where the girl slept this night, smash open the door, look at her once, and then fight his way out?

He swung out of the ravine and headed across the hills. From the crest the valley was broad and dark below him, and on the opposite side the hills were blacker still. He let the pinto go down the steep slope at a walk, for there is nothing like a fast pace downhill to tear the heart out of a horse. Besides, it came to him after he started, were not the men of Bill Dozier apt to miss this sudden swinging of the trail?

In the floor of the valley he sent the pinto again into the stretching canter, found the road, and went on with a thin cloud of the alkali dust about him until the house rose suddenly out of the ground, a black mass whose gables seemed to look at him like so many heads above the tree-tops.

CHAPTER 6

The house would have been more in place on the main street of a town than here in the mountain desert; but when the first John Merchant had made his stake and could build his home as it pleased him to build, his imagination harked back to a mid-Victorian model, built of wood, with high, pointed roofs, many carved balconies and windows, and several towers. Here the second John Merchant lived with his son Charles, whose taste had quite outgrown the house.

But to the uneducated eye of Andrew Lanning it was a great and dignified building. He reined the pinto under the trees to look up at that tall, black mass. It was doubly dark against the sky, for now the first streaks of gray light were pale along the eastern horizon, and the house seemed to tower up into the center of the heavens. Andy sighed at the thought of stealing through the great halls within. Even if he could find an open window, or if the door were unlatched, how could he find the girl?

Another thing troubled him. He kept canting his ear with eternal expectation of hearing the chorus of many hoofs swinging toward him out of the darkness. After all, it was not a simple thing to put Bill Dozier off the trail. When a horse neighed in one of the corrals, Andy started violently and laid his fingertips on his revolver butt.

That false alarm determined him to make his attempt without further waste of time. He swung from the stirrups and went lightly up the front steps. His footfall was a feathery thing that carried him like a shadow to the door. It yielded at once under his hand, and, stepping through, he found himself lost in utter blackness.

He closed the door, taking care that the spring did not make the lock click, and then stood perfectly motionless, listening, probing the dark.

After a time the shadows gave way before his eyes, and he could make out that he was in a hall with lofty ceiling. Something wound down from above at a little distance, and he made out that this was the stairway. Obviously the bedrooms would be in the second story.

Andy began the ascent.

He had occasion to bless the thick carpet before he was at the head of the stairs; he could have run up if he had wished, and never have made a sound. At the edge of the second hall he paused again. The sense of people surrounded him. Then directly behind him a man cleared his throat. As though a great hand had seized his shoulder and wrenched him down, Andy whirled and dropped to his knees, the revolver in his hand pointing uneasily here and there like the head of a snake laboring to find its enemy.

But there was nothing in the hall. The voice became a murmur, and then Andy knew that it had been some man speaking in his sleep.

At least that room was not the room of the girl. Or was she, perhaps, married? Weak and sick, Andy rested his hand against the wall and waited for his brain to clear. "She won't be married," he whispered to himself in the darkness.

But of all those doors up and down the hall, which would be hers? There was no reasoning which could help him in the midst of that puzzle. He walked to what he judged to be the middle of the hall, turned to his right, and opened the first door. A hinge creaked, but it was no louder than the rustle of silk against silk.

There were two windows in that room, and each was gray with the dawn, but in the room itself the blackness was unrelieved. There was the one dim stretch of white, which was the covering of the bed; the furniture, the chairs, and the table were half merged with the shadows around them. Andy slipped across the floor, evaded a chair by instinct rather than by sight, and leaned over the bed. It was a man, as he could tell by the heavy breathing; yet he leaned closer in a vain effort to make surer by the use of his eyes.

Then something changed in the face of the man in the bed. It was an indescribable change, but Andrew knew that the man had opened his eyes. Before he could straighten or stir, hands were thrown up. One struck at his face, and the fingers were stiff; one arm was cast over his shoulders, and Andy heard the intake of breath which precedes a shriek. Not a long interval—no more, say, than the space required for the lash of a snapping blacksnake to flick back on itself—but in that interim the hands of Andy were buried in the throat of his victim.

His fingers, accustomed to the sway and quiver of eight-pound hammers and fourteen-pound sledges, sank through the flesh and found the windpipe. And the hands of the other grappled at his wrists, smashed into his face. Andy could have laughed at the effort. He jammed the shin of his right leg just above the knees of the other, and at once the writhing body was quiet. With all of his blood turned to ice, Andy found, what he had discovered when he faced the crowd in Martindale, that his nerves did not jump and that his heart, instead of trembling, merely beat with greater pulses. Fear cleared his brain; it sent a tremendous nervous power thrilling in his wrists and elbows. All the while he was watching mercilessly for the cessation of the struggles. And when the wrenching at his forearms ceased he instantly relaxed his grip.

For a time there was a harsh sound filling the room, the rough intake of the man's breath; he was for the time being paralyzed and incapable of any effort except the effort to fill his lungs. By the glint of the metal work about the bits Andy made out two bridles hanging on the wall near the bed. Taking them down, he worked swiftly. As soon as the fellow on the bed would have his breath he would scream. Yet the time sufficed Andy; he had his knife out, flicked the blade open, and cut off the long reins of the bridles. Then he went back to the bed and shoved the cold muzzle of his revolver into the throat of the other.

There was a tremor through the whole body of the man, and Andy knew that at that moment the senses of his victim had cleared.

He leaned close to the ear of the man and whispered: "Don't make no loud talk, partner. Keep cool and steady. I don't aim to hurt you unless you play the fool."

Instantly the man answered in a similar whisper, though it was broken with panting: "Get that coat of mine out the closet. There—the door is open. You'll find my wallet in the inside pocket and about all you can want will be in it."

"That's the way," reassured Andy. "Keep your head and use sense. But it isn't the coin I want. You've got a red-headed girl in this house. Where's her room?"

His hand which held the revolver was resting on the breast of the man, and he felt the heart of the other leap. Then there was a current of curses, a swift hissing of invective. And suddenly it came over Andy that since he had killed one man, as he thought, the penalty would be no greater if he killed ten. All at once the life of this prostrate fellow on the bed was nothing to him.

When he cut into that profanity he meant what he said. "Partner, I've got a pull on this trigger. There's a slug in this gun just trembling to get at you. And I tell you honest, friend, I'd as soon drill you as turn around. Now tell me where that girl's room is?"

"Anne Withero?" Only his breathing was heard for a moment. Then: "Two doors down, on this side of the hall. If you lay a hand on her I'll live to—"

"Partner, so help me heaven, I wouldn't touch a lock of her hair. Now lie easy while I make sure of you."

And he promptly trussed the other in the bridle reins. Out of a pillowcase folded hard he made a gag and tied it into the mouth of the man. Then he ran his hands over the straps; they were drawn taut.

"If you make any noise," he warned the other, "I'll come back to find out why. S'long."

CHAPTER 7

Every moment was bringing on the dawn more swiftly, and the eyes of Andy were growing more accustomed to the gloom in the house. He found the door of the girl's room at once. When he entered he had only to pause a moment before he had all the details clearly in mind. Other senses than that of sight informed him in her room. There was in the gray gloom a touch of fragrance such as blows out of gardens across a road; yet here the air was perfectly quiet and chill. The dawn advanced. But all that he could make out was a faint touch of color against the pillow—and that would be her hair. Then with astonishing clearness he saw her hand resting against her breast. Andy stood for a moment with his eyes closed, a great tenderness falling around him. The hush kept deepening, and the sense of the girl drew out to him as if a light were brightening about her.

He stepped back to the table against the wall, took the chimney from the lamp, and flicked a match along his trousers, for in that way a match would make the least noise. Yet to the hair-trigger nerves of Andy the spurt and flare of the match was like the explosion of a gun. He lighted the lamp, turned down the wick, and replaced the chimney. Then he turned as though someone had shouted behind him. He whirled as he had whirled in the hall, crouching, and he found himself looking straight into the eyes of the girl as she sat up in bed.

Truly he did not see her face at first, but only the fear in it, parting her lips and widening her eyes. She did not speak; her only movement was to drag up the coverlet of the bed and hold it against the base of her throat.

Andy drew off his hat and stepped a little closer. "Do you know me?" he asked.

He watched her as she strove to speak, but if her lips stirred they made no sound. It tortured him to see her terror, and yet he would not have had her change. This crystal pallor or a flushed joy—in one of the two she was most beautiful.

"You saw me in Martindale," he continued. "I am the blacksmith. Do you remember?"

She nodded, still watching him with those haunted eyes.

"I saw you for the split part of a second," said Andy, "and you stopped my heart. I've come to see you for two minutes; I swear I mean you no harm. Will you let me have those two minutes for talk?" Again she nodded. But he could see that the terror was being tempered a little in her face. She was beginning to think, to wonder. It seemed a natural thing for Andy to go forward a pace closer to the bed, but, lest that should alarm her, it seemed also natural for him to drop upon one knee. It brought the muzzle of the revolver jarringly home against the floor.

The girl heard that sound of metal and it shook her; but it requires a very vivid imagination to fear a man upon his knees. And now that she could look directly into his face, she saw that he was only a boy, not more than two or three years older than herself. For the first time she remembered the sooty figure which had stood in the door of the blacksmith shop. The white face against the tawny smoke of the shop; that had attracted her eyes before. It was the same white face now, but subtly changed. A force exuded from him; indeed, he seemed neither young nor old.

She heard him speaking in a voice not louder than a whisper, rapid, distinct.

"When you came through the town you waked me up like a whiplash," he was saying. "When you left I kept thinking about you. Then along came a trouble. I killed a man. A posse started after me. It's on my heels, but I had to see you again. Do you understand?"

A ghost of color was going up her throat, staining her cheeks.

"I had to see you," he repeated. "It's my last chance. Tomorrow they may get me. Two hours from now they may have me salted away with lead. But before I kick out I had to have one more look at you. So I swung out of my road and came straight to this house. I came up the stairs. I went into a room down the hall and made a man tell me where to find you."

There was a flash in the eyes of the girl like the wink of sun on a bit of quartz on a far-away hillside, but it cut into the speech of Andrew Lanning. "He told you where to find me?" she asked in a voice no louder than the swift, low voice of Andy. But what a world of scorn!

"He had a gun shoved into the hollow of his throat," said Andy. "He had to tell—two doors down the hall—"

"It was Charlie!" said the girl softly. She seemed to forget her fear. Her head raised as she looked at Andy. "The other man—the one you—why—"

"The man I killed doesn't matter," said Andy. "Nothing matters except that I've got this minute here with you."

"But where will you go? How will you escape?"

"I'll go to death, I guess," said Andy quietly. "But I'll have a grin for Satan when he lets me in. I've beat 'em, even if they catch me."

The coverlet dropped from her breast; her hand was suspended with stiff fingers. There had been a sound as of someone stumbling on the stairway, the unmistakable slip of a heel and the recovery; then no more sound. Andy was on his feet. She saw his face whiten, and then there was a glitter in his eyes, and she knew that the danger was nothing to him. But Anne Withero whipped out of her bed.

"Did you hear?"

"I tied and gagged him," said Andy, "but he's broken loose, and now he's raising the house on the quiet."

For an instant they stood listening, staring at each other.

"They—they're coming up the hall," whispered the girl. "Listen!"

It was no louder than a whisper from without—the creak of a board. Andrew Lanning slipped to the door and turned the key in the lock. When he rejoined her in the middle of the room he gave her the key.

"Let 'em in if you want to," he said.

But the girl caught his arm, whispering: "You can get out that window onto the top of the roof below, then a drop to the ground. But hurry before they think to guard that way!" "Anne!" called a voice suddenly from the hall.

Andy threw up the window, and, turning toward the door, he laughed his defiance and his joy.

"Hurry!" she was demanding. A great blow fell on the door of her room, and at once there was shouting in the hall: "Pete, run outside and watch the window!"

"Will you go?" cried the girl desperately.

He turned toward the window. He turned back like a flash and swept her close to him.

"Do you fear me?" he whispered.

"No," said the girl.

"Will you remember me?"

"Forever!"

"God bless you," said Andy as he leaped through the window. She saw him take the slope of the roof with one stride; she heard the thud of his feet on the ground below. Then a yell from without, shrill and high and sharp.

When the door fell with a crash, and three men were flung into the room, Charles Merchant saw her standing in her nightgown by the open window. Her head was flung back against the wall, her eyes closed, and one hand was pressed across her lips.

"He's out the window. Down around the other way," cried Charles Merchant.

The stampede swept out of the room. Charles was beside her.

She knew that vaguely, and that he was speaking, but not until he touched her shoulder did she hear the words: "Anne, are you unhurt—has—for heaven's sake speak, Anne. What's happened?"

She reached up and put his hand away.

"Charles," she said, "call them back. Don't let them follow him!"

"Are you mad, dear?" he asked. "That murdering—"

He found a tigress in front of him. "If they hurt a hair of his head, Charlie, I'm through with you. I'll swear that!"

It stunned Charles Merchant. And then he went stumbling from the room.

His cow-punchers were out from the bunk house already; the guests and his father were saddling or in the saddle.

"Come back!" shouted Charles Merchant. "Don't follow him. Come back! No guns. He's done no harm."

Two men came around the corner of the house, dragging a limp figure between them.

"Is this no harm?" they asked. "Look at Pete, and then talk."

They lowered the tall, limp figure of the man in pajamas to the ground; his face was a crimson smear.

"Is he dead?" asked Charles Merchant.

"No move out of him," they answered.

Other people, most of them on horseback, were pouring back to learn the meaning of the strange call from Charles Merchant.

"I can't tell you what I mean," he was saying in explanation. "But you, dad, I'll be able to tell you. All I can say is that he mustn't be followed—unless Pete here—"

The eyes of Pete opportunely opened. He looked hazily about him.

"Is he gone?" asked Pete.

"Yes."

"Thank the Lord!"

"Did you see him? What's he like?"

"About seven feet tall. I saw him jump off the roof of the house. I was right under him. Tried to get my gun on him, but he came up like a wild cat and went straight at me. Had his fist in my face before I could get my finger on the trigger. And then the earth came up and slapped me in the face." "There he goes!" cried some one.

The sky was now of a brightness not far from day, and, turning east, in the direction pointed out, Charles Merchant saw a horseman ride over a hilltop, a black form against the coloring horizon. He was moving leisurely, keeping his horse at the cattle pony's lope. Presently he dipped away out of sight.

John Merchant dropped his hand on the shoulder of his son. "What is it?" he asked.

"Heaven knows! Not I!"

"Here are more people! What's this? A night of surprise parties?"

Six riders came through the trees, rushing their horses, and John Merchant saw Bill Dozier's well-known, lanky form in the lead. He brought his horse from a dead run to a halt in the space of a single jump and a slide. The next moment he was demanding fresh mounts.

"Can you give 'em to me, Merchant? But what's all this?"

"You make your little talk," said Merchant, "and then I'll make mine."

"I'm after Andy Lanning. He's left a gent more dead than alive back in Martindale, and I want him. Can you give me fresh horses for me and my boys, Merchant?"

"But the man wasn't dead? He wasn't dead?" cried the voice of a girl. The group opened; Bill Dozier found himself facing a bright-haired girl wrapped to the throat in a long coat, with slippers on her feet.

"Not dead and not alive," he answered. "Just betwixt and between."

"Thank God!" whispered the girl. "Thank God!"

There was only one man in the group who should not have heard that whispered phrase, and that man was Charles Merchant. He was standing at her side.

CHAPTER 8

It took less than five minutes for the deputy sheriff to mount his men; he himself had the pick of the corral, a dusty roan, and, as he drew the cinch taut, he turned to find Charles Merchant at his side.

"Bill," said the young fellow, "what sort of a man is this Lanning?"

"He's been a covered card, partner," said Bill Dozier. "He's been a covered card that seemed pretty good. Now he's in the game, and he looks like the rest of the Lannings—a good lump of daring and defiance. Why d'you ask?"

"Are you keen to get him, Bill?" continued Charlie Merchant eagerly.

"I could stand it. Again, why?"

"You'd like a little gun play with that fellow?"

"I wouldn't complain none."

"Ah? One more thing. Could you use a bit of ready cash?"

"I ain't pressed," said Bill Dozier. "On the other hand, I ain't of a savin' nature."

Then he added: "Get it out, Charlie. I think I follow your drift. And you can go as far as you like." He put out his jaw in an ugly way as he said it.

"It would be worth a lot to me to have this cur done for, Bill. You understand?"

"My time's short. Talk terms, Charlie."

"A thousand."

"The price of a fair hoss."

"Two thousand, old man."

"Hoss and trimmin's."

"Three thousand." "Charlie, you seem to forget that we're talkin' about a man and a gun."

"Bill, it's worth five thousand to me."

"That's turkey. Let me have your hand."

They shook hands.

"And if you kill the horses," said Charles Merchant, "you won't hurt my feelings. But get him!"

"I've got nothing much on him," said Bill Dozier, "but some fools resist arrest."

He smiled in a manner that made the other shudder. And a moment later the deputy led his men out on the trail.

They were a weary lot by this time, but they had beneath the belt several shots of the Merchant whisky which Charles had distributed. And they had that still greater stimulus—fresh horses running smooth and strong beneath them. Another thing had changed. They saw their leader, Bill Dozier, working at his revolver and his rifle as he rode, looking to the charges, trying the pressure of the triggers, getting the balance of the weapons with a peculiar anxiety, and they knew, without a word being spoken, that there was small chance of that trail ending at anything short of a red mark in the dust.

It made some of them shrug their shoulders, but here again it was proved that Bill Dozier knew the men of Martindale, and had picked his posse well. They were the common, hard-working variety of cow-puncher, and presently the word went among them from the man riding nearest to Bill that if young Lanning were taken it would be worth a hundred dollars to each of them. Two months' pay for two days' work. That was fair enough. They also began to look to their guns. It was not that a single one of them could have been bought for a mankilling at that or any other price, perhaps, but this was simply a bonus to carry them along toward what they considered an honest duty.

Nevertheless, it was a different crew that rode over the hills away from the Merchant place. They had begun for the sake of the excitement. Now they were working carefully, riding with less abandon, jockeying their horses, for each man was laboring to be in on the kill.

They had against them a good horse and a stanch horseman. Never had the pinto dodged his share of honest running, and this day was no exception. He gave himself whole-heartedly to his task, and he stretched the legs of the ponies behind him. Yet he had a great handicap. He was tough, but the ranch horses of John Merchant came out from a night of rest. Their legs were full of running. And the pinto, for all his courage, could not meet that handicap and beat it.

That truth slowly sank in upon the mind of the fugitive as he put the game little cattle pony into his best stride. He tried the pinto in the level going. He tried him in the rough. And in both conditions the posse gained slowly and steadily, until it became apparent to Andrew Lanning that the deputy held him in the hollow of his hand, and in half an hour of stiff galloping could run his quarry into the ground whenever he chose.

Andy turned in the saddle and grinned back at the followers. He could distinguish Bill Dozier most distinctly. The broad brim of Bill's hat was blown up stiffly. And the sun glinted now and again on those melancholy mustaches of his. Andy was puzzled. Bill had horses which could outrun the fugitive, and why did he not use them?

Almost at once Andy received his answer.

The deputy sheriff sent his horse into a hard run, and then brought him suddenly to a standstill. Looking back, Andy saw a rifle pitch to the shoulder of the deputy. It was a flashing line of light which focused suddenly in a single, glinting dot. That instant something hummed evilly beside the ear of Andy. A moment later the report came barking and echoing in his ear with the little metallic ring in it which tells of the shiver of a gun barrel.

That was the beginning of a running fusillade. Technically these were shots fired to warn the fugitive that he was wanted by the law, and to tell him that if he did not halt he would be shot at to be killed. But the deputy did not waste warnings. He began to shoot to kill. And so did the rest of the posse. They saw the deputy's plan at once, and then grinned at it. If they rode down in a mob the boy would no doubt surrender. But if they goaded him in this manner from a distance he would probably attempt to return the fire. And if he fired one shot in reply, unwritten law and strong public opinion would be on the side of Bill Dozier in killing this criminal without quarter. In a word, the whisky and the little promise of money were each taking effect on the posse.

They spurted ahead in pairs, halted, and delivered their fire; then the next pair spurted ahead and fired. Every moment or so two bullets winged through the air nearer and nearer Andy. It was really a wonder that he was not cleanly drilled by a bullet long before that fusillade had continued for ten minutes. But it is no easy thing to hit a man on a galloping horse when one sits on the back of another horse, and that horse heaving from a hard run. Moreover, Andy watched, and when the pairs halted he made the pinto weave.

At the first bullet he felt his heart come into his throat. At the second he merely raised his head. At the next he smiled, and thereafter he greeted each volley with a yell and with a wave of his hat. It was like dancing, but greater fun. The cold, still terror was in his heart every moment, but yet he felt like laughing, and when the posse heard him their own hearts went cold.

It disturbed their aim. They began to snarl at each other, and they also pressed their horses closer and closer before they even attempted to fire. And the result was that Andy, waving his hat, felt it twitch sharply in his hand, and then he saw a neat little hole clipped out of the very edge of the brim. It was a pretty trick to see, until Andy remembered that the thing which had nicked that hole would also cut its way through him, body and bone. He leaned over the saddle and spurred the pinto into his racing gait.

"I nicked him!" yelled the deputy. "Come on, boys! Close in!"

But within five minutes of racing, Andy drew the pinto to a sudden halt and raised his rifle. The posse laughed. They had been shooting for some time, and always for a distance even less than Andy's; yet not one of their bullets had gone home. So they waved their hats recklessly and continued

to ride to be in at the death. And every one knew that the end of the trail was not far off when the fugitive had once begun to turn at bay.

Andy knew it as well as the rest, and his hand shook like a nervous girl's, while the rifle barrel tilted up and up, the blue barrel shimmering wickedly. In a frenzy of eagerness he tried to line up the sights. It was in vain. The circle through which he squinted wobbled crazily. He saw two of the pursuers spurt ahead, take their posts, raise their rifles for a fire which would at least disturb his. For the first time they had a stationary target.

And then, by chance, the circle of Andy's sight embraced the body of a horseman. Instantly the left arm, stretching out to support his rifle, became a rock; the forefinger of his right hand was as steady as the trigger it pressed. It was like shooting at a target. He found himself breathing easily.

It was very strange. Find a man with his sights? He could follow his target as though a magnetic power attracted his rifle. The weapon seemed to have a volition of its own. It drifted along with the canter of Bill Dozier. With incredible precision the little finger of iron inside the circle dwelt in turn on the hat of Bill Dozier, on his sandy mustaches, on his fluttering shirt. And Andy knew that he had the life of a man under the command of his forefinger.

And why not? He had killed one. Why not a hundred?

The punishment would be no greater. And to tempt him there was this new mystery, this knowledge that he could not miss. It had been vaguely present in his mind when he faced the crowd at Martindale, he remembered now. And the same merciless coldness had been in his hand when he pressed his gun into the throat of Charles Merchant.

He turned his eyes and looked down the guns of the two men who had halted. Then, hardly looking at his target, he snapped his rifle back to his shoulder and fired. He saw Bill Dozier throw up his hands, saw his head rock stupidly back and forth, and then the long figure toppled to one side. One of the posse rushed alongside to catch his leader, but he missed, and Bill, slumping to the ground, was trampled underfoot.

CHAPTER 9

At the same time the rifles of the two men of the posse rang, but they must have seen the fall of their leader, for the shots went wild, and Andy Lanning took off his hat and waved to them. But he did not flee again. He sat in his saddle with the long rifle balanced across the pommel while two thoughts went through his mind. One was to stay there and watch. The other was to slip the rifle back into the holster and with drawn revolver charge the five remaining members of the posse. These were now gathering hastily about Bill Dozier. But Andy knew their concern was in vain. He knew where that bullet had driven home, and Bill Dozier would never ride again.

One by one he picked up those five figures with his eyes, fighting temptation. He knew that he could not miss if he fired again. In five shots he knew that he could drop as many men, and within him there was a perfect consciousness that they would not hit him when they returned the fire.

He was not filled with exulting courage. He was cold with fear. But it was the sort of fear which makes a man want to fling himself from a great height. But, sitting there calmly in the saddle, he saw a strange thing—the five men raising their dead leader and turning back toward the direction from which they had come. Not once did they look toward the form of Andy Lanning. They knew what he could not know, that the gate of the law had been open to this man as a retreat, but the bullet which struck down Bill Dozier had closed the gate and thrust him out from mercy. He was an outlaw, a leper now. Any one who shared his society from this moment on would fall under the heavy hand of the law.

But as for running him into the ground, they had lost their appetite for such fighting. They had kept up a long running fight and gained nothing; but a single shot from the fugitive had produced this result. They turned now in silence and went back, very much as dogs turn and tuck their tails between their legs when the wolf, which they have chased away from the precincts of the ranch house, feels himself once more safe from the hand of man and whirls with a flash of teeth. The sun gleamed on the barrel of Andy Lanning's rifle, and these men rode back in silence, feeling that they had witnessed one of those prodigies which were becoming fewer and fewer around Martindale—the birth of a desperado.

Andrew watched them skulking off with the body of Bill Dozier held upright by a man on either side of the horse. He watched them draw off across the hills, still with that nervous, almost irresistible impulse to raise one wild, long cry and spur after them, shooting swift and straight over the head of the pinto. But he did not move, and now they dropped out of sight. And then, looking about him, Andrew Lanning felt how vast were those hills, how wide they stretched, and how small he stood among them. He was utterly alone. There was nothing but the hills and a sky growing pale with heat and the patches of olive-gray sagebrush in the distance.

A great melancholy dropped upon Andy. He felt a childish weakness; dropping his elbows upon the pommel of the saddle, he buried his face in his hands. In that moment he needed desperately something to which he could appeal for comfort.

The weakness passed slowly.

He dismounted and looked his horse over carefully. The pinto had many good points. He had ample girth of chest at the cinches, where lung capacity is best measured. He had rather short forelegs, which promised weight-carrying power and some endurance, and he had a fine pair of sloping shoulders. But his croup sloped down too much, and he had a short neck. Andy knew perfectly well that no horse with a short neck can run fast for any distance. He had chosen the pinto for endurance, and endurance he undoubtedly had; but he would need a horse which could put him out of short-shooting distance, and do it quickly.

There were no illusions in the mind of Andrew Lanning about what lay before him. Uncle Jasper had told him too many tales of his own experiences on the trail in enemy country.

"There's three things," the old man had often said, "that a man needs when he's in trouble: a gun that's smooth as silk, a hoss full of running, and a friend."

For the gun Andy had his Colt in the holster, and he knew it like his own mind. There were newer models and trickier weapons, but none which worked so smoothly under the touch of Andy. Thinking of this, he produced it from the holster with a flick of his fingers. The sight had been filed away. When he was a boy in short trousers he had learned from Uncle Jasper the two main articles of a gun fighter's creed—that a revolver must be fired by pointing, not sighting, and that there must be nothing about it liable to hang in the holster to delay the draw. The great idea was to get the gun on your man with lightning speed, and then fire from the hip with merely a sense of direction to guide the bullet.

He had a gun, therefore, and one necessity was his. Sorely he needed a horse of quality as few men needed one. And he needed still more a friend, a haven in time of crisis, an adviser in difficulties. And though Andy knew that it was death to go among men, he knew also that it was death to do without these two things.

He believed that there was one chance left to him, and that was to outdistance the news of the two killings by riding straight north. There he would stop at the first town, in some manner fill his pockets with money, and in some manner find both horse and friend.

Andrew Lanning was both simple and credulous; but it must be remembered that he had led a sheltered life, comparatively speaking; he had been brought up between a blacksmith shop on the one hand and Uncle Jasper on the other, and the gaps in his knowledge of men were many and huge. The prime necessity now was speed to the northward. So Andy flung himself into the saddle and drove his horse north at the jogging, rocking lope of the cattle pony.

He was in a shallow basin which luckily pointed in the right direction for him. The hills sloped down to it from either side in long fingers, with narrow gullies between, but as Andy passed the first of these pointing fingers a new thought came to him.

It might be—why not?—that the posse had made only a pretense of withdrawing at once with the body of the dead man. Perhaps they had only waited until they were out of sight and had then circled swiftly around, leaving one man with the body. They might be waiting now at the mouth of any of these gullies.

No sooner had the thought come to Andy than he whitened. The pinto had been worked hard that morning and all the night before, but now Andy sent the spurs home without mercy as he shot up the basin at full speed, with his revolver drawn, ready for a snap shot and a drop behind the far side of his horse.

For half an hour he rode in this fashion with his heart beating at his teeth. And each cañon as he passed was empty, and each had some shrub, like a crouching man, to startle him and upraise the revolver. At length, with the pinto wheezing from this new effort, he drew back to an easier gait. But still he had a companion ceaselessly following like the shadow of the horse he rode. It was fear, and it would never leave him.

CHAPTER 10

After that forced and early rising, the rest of the house had remained awake, but Anne Withero was gifted with an exceptionally strong set of nerves. She had gone back to bed and fallen promptly into a pleasant sleep. And when she wakened all that happened in the night was filmed over and had become dreamlike. No one disturbed her rest; but when she went down to a late breakfast she found Charles Merchant lingering in the room. He had questioned her closely, and after a moment of thought she told him exactly what had happened, because she was perfectly aware that he would not believe a word of it. And she was right. He had sat opposite her, drumming his fingers without noise on the table, with a smile now and then which was tinged, she thought, with insolence.

Yet he seemed oddly undisturbed. She had expected some jealous outburst, some keen questioning of the motives which had made her beg them not to pursue this man. But Charles Merchant was only interested in what the fellow had said and done when he talked with her. "He was just like a man out of a book," said the girl in conclusion, "and I'll wager that he's been raised on romances. He had the face for it, you know—and the wild look!"

"A blacksmith—in Martindale—raised on romances?" Charles had said as he fingered his throat, which was patched with black and blue.

"A blacksmith—in Martindale," she had repeated slowly. And it brought a new view of the affair home to her. Now that they knew from Bill Dozier that the victim in Martindale had been only injured, and not actually killed, the whole matter became rather a farce. It would be an amusing tale. But now, as Charles Merchant repeated the words, "blacksmith"—"Martindale," the new idea shocked her, the new idea of Andrew Lanning, for Charles had told her the name.

The new thought stayed with her when she went back to her room after breakfast, ostensibly to read, but really to think. Remembering Andrew Lanning, she got past the white face and the brilliant black eyes; she felt, looking back, that he had shown a restraint which was something more than boyish. When he took her in his arms just before he fled he had not kissed her, though, for that matter, she had been perfectly ready to let him do it.

That moment kept recurring to her—the beating on the door, the voices in the hall, the shouts, and the arms of Andrew Lanning around her, and his tense, desperate face close to hers. It became less dreamlike that moment. She began to understand that if she lived to be a hundred, she would never find that memory dimmer.

A half-sad, half-happy smile was touching the corners of her mouth, when Charles Merchant knocked at her door. She gave herself one moment in which to banish the queer pain of knowing that she would never see this wild Andrew again, and then she told Charles to come in.

In fact, he was already opening the door. He was calm of face, but she guessed an excitement beneath the surface.

"I've got something to show you," he said.

A great thought made her sit up in the chair; but she was afraid just then to stand up. "I know. The posse has reached that silly boy and brought him back. But I don't want to see him again. Handcuffed, and all that."

"The posse is here, at least," said Charles noncommittally. She was finding something new in him. The fact that he could think and hide his thoughts from her was indeed very new; for, when she first met him, he had seemed all surface, all clean young manhood without a stain.

"Do you want me to see the six brave men again?" she asked, smiling, but really she was prying at his mind to get a clew of the truth. "Well, I'll come down."

And she went down the stairs with Charles Merchant beside her; he kept looking straight ahead, biting his lips, and this made her wonder. She began to hum a gay little tune, and the first bar made

the man start. So she kept on. She was bubbling with apparent good nature when Charles, all gravity, opened the door of the living room.

The shades were drawn. The quiet in that room was a deadly, living thing. And then she saw, on the sofa at one side of the place, a human form under a sheet.

"Charles!" whispered the girl. She put out her hand and touched his shoulder, but she could not take her eyes off that ghastly dead thing. "They—they—he's dead—Andrew Lanning! Why did you bring me here?"

"Take the cloth from his face," commanded Charles Merchant, and there was something so hard in his voice that she obeyed.

The sheet came away under her touch, and she was looking into the sallow face of Bill Dozier. She had remembered him because of the sad mustaches, that morning, and his big voice.

"That's what your romantic boy out of a book has done," said Charles Merchant. "Look at his work!"

But she dropped the sheet and whirled on him.

"And they left him—" she said.

"Anne," said he, "are you thinking about the safety of that murderer—now? He's safe, but they'll get him later on; he's as good as dead, if that's what you want to know."

"God help him!" said the girl.

And going back a pace, she stood in the thick shadow, leaning against the wall, with one hand across her lips. It reminded Charles of the picture he had seen when he broke into her room after Andrew Lanning had escaped. And she looked now, as, then, more beautiful, more wholly to be desired than he had ever known her before. Yet he could neither move nor speak. He saw her go out of the room. Then, without stopping to replace the sheet, he followed.

He had hoped to wipe the last thought of that vagabond blacksmith out of her mind with the shock of this horror. Instead, he knew now that he had done quite another thing. And in addition he had probably made her despise him for taking her to confront such a sight.

All in all, Charles Merchant was exceedingly thoughtful as he closed the door and stepped into the hall. He ran up the stairs to her room. The door was closed. There was no answer to his knock, and by trying the knob he found that she had locked herself in. And the next moment he could hear her sobbing. He stood for a moment more, listening, and wishing Andrew Lanning dead with all his heart.

Then he went down to the garage, climbed into his car, and burned up the road between his place and that of Hal Dozier. There was very little similarity between the two brothers. Bill had been tall and lean; Hal was compact and solid, and he had the fighting agility of a starved coyote. He had a smooth-shaven face as well, and a clear gray eye, which was known wherever men gathered in the mountain desert. There was no news to give him. A telephone message had already told him of the death of Bill Dozier.

"But," said Charles Merchant, "there's one thing I can do. I can set you free to run down this Lanning."

"How?"

"You're needed on your ranch, Hal; but I want you to let me stand the expenses of this trip. Take your time, make sure of him, and run him into the ground."

"My friend," said Hal Dozier, "you turn a pleasure into a real party."

And Charles Merchant left, knowing that he had signed the death warrant of young Lanning. In all the history of the mountain desert there was a tale of only one man who had escaped, once Hal Dozier took his trail, and that man had blown out his own brains.

CHAPTER 11

Far away in the western sky Andy Lanning saw a black dot that moved in wide circles and came up across the heavens slowly, and he knew it was a buzzard that scented carrion and was coming up the wind toward that scent. He had seen them many a time before on their gruesome trails, and the picture which he carried was not a pleasant one.

But now the picture that drifted through his mind was still more horrible. It was a human body lying face downward in the sand with the wind ruffling in the hair and the hat rolled a few paces off and the gun close to the outstretched hand. He knew from Uncle Jasper that no matter how far the trail led, or how many years it was ridden, the end of the outlaw was always the same—death and the body left to the buzzards. Or else, in some barroom, a footfall from behind and a bullet through the back.

The flesh of Andy crawled. It was not possible for him to relax in vigilance for a moment, lest danger come upon him when he least expected it. Perhaps, in some open space like this. He went on until the sun was low in the west and all the sky was rimmed with color.

Dusk had come over the hills in a rush, when he saw a house half lost in the shadows. It was a narrow-fronted, two-storied, unpainted, lonely place, without sign of a porch. Here, where there was no vestige of a town near, and where there was no telephone, the news of the deaths of Bill Dozier and Buck Heath could not have come. Andy accepted the house as a blessing and went straight toward it.

But the days of carelessness were over for Andy, and he would never again approach a house without searching it like a human face. He studied this shack as he came closer. If there were people in the building they did not choose to show a light.

Andy went around to the rear of the house, where there was a low shed beside the corral, half tumbled down; but in the corral were five or six fine horses—wild fellows with bright eyes and the long necks of speed. Andy looked upon them wistfully. Not one of them but was worth the price of three of the pinto; but as for money there was not twenty dollars in the pocket of Andy.

Stripping the saddle from the pinto, he put it under the shed and left the mustang to feed and find water in the small pasture. Then he went with the bridle, that immemorial sign of one who seeks hospitality in the West, toward the house. He was met halfway by a tall, strong man of middle age or more. There was no hat on his head, which was covered with a shock of brown hair much younger than the face beneath it. He beheld Andy without enthusiasm.

"You figure on layin' over here for the night, stranger?" he asked.

"That's it," said Andy.

"I'll tell you how it is," said the big man in the tone of one who is willing to argue a point. "We ain't got a very big house—you see it—and it's pretty well filled right now. If you was to slope over the hills there, you'd find Gainorville inside of ten miles."

Andy explained that he was at the end of a hard ride. "Ten more miles would kill the pinto," he said. "But if you don't mind, I'll have a bit of chow and then turn in out there in the shed. That won't crowd you in your sleeping quarters, and it'll be fine for me."

The big man opened his mouth to say something more, then turned on his heel.

"I guess we can fix you up," he said. "Come on along."

At another time Andy would have lost a hand rather than accept such churlish hospitality, but he was in no position to choose. The pain of hunger was like a voice speaking in him.

It was a four-room house; the rooms on the ground floor were the kitchen, where Andy cooked his own supper of bacon and coffee and flapjacks, and the combination living room, dining room, and, from the bunk covered with blankets on one side, bedroom. Upstairs there must have been two more rooms of the same size.

Seated about a little kitchen table in the front room, Andy found three men playing an interrupted game of blackjack, which was resumed when the big fellow took his place before his

hand. The three gave Andy a look and a grunt, but otherwise they paid no attention to him. And if they had consulted him he could have asked for no greater favor. Yet he had an odd hunger about seeing them. They were the last men in many a month, perhaps, whom he could permit to see him without a fear. He brought his supper into the living room and put his cup of coffee on the floor beside him. While he ate he watched them.

They were, all in all, the least prepossessing group he had ever seen. The man who had brought him in was far from well favored, but he was handsome compared with the others. Opposite him sat a tall fellow very erect and stiff in his chair. A candle had recently been lighted, and it stood on the table near this man. It showed a wan face of excessive leanness. His eyes were deep under bony brows, and they alone of the features showed any expression as the game progressed, turning now and again to the other faces with glances that burned; he was winning steadily. A red-headed man was on his left, with his back to Andy; but now and again he turned, and Andy saw a heavy jowl and a skin blotched with great, rusty freckles. His shoulders over-flowed the back of his chair, which creaked whenever he moved. The man who faced the redhead was as light as his companion was ponderous. His voice was gentle, his eyes large and soft, and his profile was exceedingly handsome. But in the full view Andy saw nothing except a grisly, purple scar that twisted down beneath the right eye of the man. It drew down the lower lid of that eye, and it pulled the mouth of the man a bit awry, so that he seemed to be smiling in a smug, half-apologetic manner. In spite of his youth he was unquestionably the dominant spirit here. Once or twice the others lifted their voices in argument, and a single word from him cut them short. And when he raised his head, now and again, to look at Andy, it gave the latter a feeling that his secret was read and all his past known.

These strange fellows had not asked his name, and neither had they introduced themselves, but from their table talk he gathered that the redhead was named Jeff, the funereal man with the bony face was Larry, the brown-haired one was Joe, and he of the scar and the smile was Henry. It occurred to Andy as odd that such rough boon companions had not shortened that name for convenience.

They played with the most intense concentration. As the night deepened and the windows became black slabs Joe brought another candle and reenforced this light by hanging a lantern from a nail on the wall. This illuminated the entire room, but in a partial and dismal manner. The game went on. They were playing for high stakes; Andrew Lanning had never seen so much cash assembled at one time. They had stacks of unmistakable yellow gold before them—actually stacks. The winner was Larry. That skull-faced gentleman was fairly barricaded behind heaps of money. Andy estimated swiftly that there must be well over two thousand dollars in those stacks.

He finished his supper, and, having taken the tin cup and plate out into the next room and cleaned them, he had no sooner come back to the door, on the verge of bidding them good night, then Henry invited him to sit down and take a hand.

CHAPTER 12

He had never studied any men as he was watching these men at cards. Andrew Lanning had spent most of his life quite indifferent to the people around him, but now it was necessary to make quick and sure judgments. He had to read unreadable faces. He had to guess motives. He had to sense the coming of danger before it showed its face. And, watching them with close intentness, he understood that at least three of them were cheating at every opportunity. Henry, alone, was playing a square game; as for the heavy winner, Larry, Andrew had reason to believe that he was adroitly palming an ace now and then—luck ran too consistently his way. For his own part, he was no card expert, and he smiled as Henry made his offer.

"I've got eleven dollars and fifty cents in my pocket," Andrew said frankly. "I won't sit in at that game."

"Then the game is three-handed," said Henry as he got up from his chair. "I've fed you boys enough," he continued in his soft voice. "I know a three-handed game is no good, but I'm through. Unless you'll try a round or two with 'em, stranger? They've made enough money. Maybe they'll play for silver for the fun of it, eh, boys?"

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.