MAX BRAND

RIDERS OF THE SILENCES

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Содержание

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Prologue

The Great West, prior to the century's turn, abounded in legend. Stories were told of fabled gunmen whose bullets always magically found their mark, of mighty stallions whose tireless gallop rivaled the speed of the wind, of glorious women whose beauty stunned mind and heart. But nowhere in the vast spread of the mountain-desert country was there a greater legend told than the story of Red Pierre and the phantom gunfighter, McGurk.

These two men of the wilderness, so unalike, of widely-differing backgrounds, had in common a single trait: each was unbeatable. Fate brought them clashing together, thunder to thunder, lightning to lightning. They were destined to meet at the crossroads of a long, long trail … a trail which began in the northern wastes of Canada and led, finally, to a deadly confrontation in the mountains of the Far West.

CHAPTER 1

It seemed that Father Anthony gathered all the warmth of the short northern summer and kept it for winter use, for his good nature was an actual physical force. From his ruddy face beamed such a kindliness that people reached out toward him as they might extend their hands toward a comfortable fire.

All the labors of his work as an inspector of Jesuit institutions across the length and breadth of Canada could not lessen the good father's enthusiasm; his smile was as indefatigable as his critical eyes. The one looked sharply into every corner of a room and every nook and hidden cranny of thoughts and deeds; the other veiled the criticism and soothed the wounds of vanity.

On this day, however, the sharp eyes grew a little less keen and somewhat wider, while that smile was fixed rather by habit than inclination. In fact, his expression might be called a frozen kindliness as he looked across the table to Father Victor.

It required a most indomitable geniality, indeed, to outface the rigid piety of Jean Paul Victor. His missionary work had carried him far north, where the cold burns men thin. The zeal which drove him north and north and north over untracked regions, drove him until his body failed, drove him even now, though his body was crippled.

A mighty yearning, and a still mightier self-contempt whipped him on, and the school over which he was master groaned and

suffered under his régime. Father Anthony said gently: "Are there none among all your lads, dear Father Victor, whom you find something more than imperfect machines?"

The man of the north drew from a pocket of his robe a letter. His lean fingers touched it almost with a caress.

"One. Pierre Ryder. He shall carry on my mission in the north. I, who am silent, have done much; but Pierre will do more. I had to fight my first battle to conquer my own stubborn soul, and the battle left me weak for the great work in the snows, but Pierre will not fight that battle, for I have trained him.

"This letter is for him. Shall we not carry it to him? For two days I have not seen Pierre."

Father Anthony winced.

He said: "Do you deny yourself even the pleasure of the lad's company? Alas, Father Victor, you forge your own spurs and goad yourself with your own hands. What harm is there in being often with the lad?"

The sneer returned to the lips of Jean Paul Victor.

"The purpose would be lost—lost to my eyes and lost to his—the purpose for which I have lived and for which he shall live. When I first saw him he was a child, a baby, but he came to me and took one finger of my hand in his small fist and looked up to me. Ah, Gabrielle, the smile of an infant goes to the heart swifter than the thrust of a knife! I looked down upon him and I knew that I was chosen to teach the child. There was a voice that spoke in me. You will smile, but even now I think I can hear it."

"I swear to you that I believe," said Father Anthony.

"Another man would have given Pierre a Bible and a Latin grammar and a cell. I gave him the testament and the grammar; I gave him also the wild north country to say his prayers in and patter his Latin. I taught his mind, but I did not forget his body.

"He is to go out among wild men. He must have strength of the spirit. He must also have a strength of the body that they will understand and respect. He can ride a horse standing; he can run a hundred miles in a day behind a dog-team. He can wrestle and fight with his hands, for skilled men have taught him. I have made him a thunderbolt to hurl among the ignorant and the unenlightened; and this is the hand which shall wield it. Ha!

"It is now hardly a six month since he saved a trapper from a bobcat and killed the animal with a knife. It must have been my prayers which saved him from the teeth and the claws."

Good Father Anthony rose.

"You have described a young David. I am eager to see him. Let us go."

Father Victor nodded, and the two went out together. The chill of the open was hardly more than the bitter cold inside the building, but there was a wind that drove the cold through the blood and bones of a man.

They staggered along against it until they came to a small house, long and low. On the sheltered side they paused to take breath, and Father Victor explained: "This is his hour in the gymnasium. To make the body strong required thought and care.

Mere riding and running and swinging of the ax will not develop every muscle. Here Pierre works every day. His teachers of boxing and wrestling have abandoned him."

There was almost a smile on the lean face.

"The last man left with a swollen jaw and limping on one leg."

Here he opened the door, and they slipped inside. The air was warmed by a big stove, and the room—for the afternoon was dark—lighted by two swinging lanterns suspended from the low roof. By that illumination Father Anthony saw two men stripped naked, save for a loincloth, and circling each other slowly in the center of a ring which was fenced in with ropes and floored with a padded mat.

Of the two wrestlers, one was a veritable giant, swarthy of skin, hairy-chested. His great hands were extended to grasp or to parry—his head lowered with a ferocious scowl—and across his forehead swayed a tuft of black, shaggy hair. He might have stood for one of those northern barbarians whom the Romans loved to pit against their native champions in the arena. He was the greater because of the opponent he faced, and it was upon this opponent that the eyes of Father Anthony centered.

Like Father Victor, he was caught first by the bright hair. It was a dark red, and where the light struck it strongly there were places like fire. Down from this hair the light slipped like running water over a lithe body, slender at the hips, strong-chested, round and smooth of limb, with long muscles leaping and trembling at every move.

He, like the big fighter, circled cautiously about, but the impression he gave was as different from the other as day is from night. His head was carried high; in place of a scowl, he smiled with a sort of eagerness, a light which was partly exultation and partly mischief sparkled in his eyes. Once or twice the giant caught at the other, but David slipped from under the grip of Goliath easily. It seemed as if his skin were oiled. The big man snarled with anger, and lunged more eagerly at Pierre.

The two, abandoning their feints, suddenly rushed together, and the swarthy arms of the monster slipped around the white body of Pierre. For a moment they whirled, twisting and struggling.

"Now!" murmured Father Victor; and as if in answer to a command, Pierre slipped down, whipped his hands to a new grip, and the two crashed to the mat, with Pierre above.

"Open your eyes, Father Anthony. The lad is safe. How Goliath grunts!" The boy had not cared to follow his advantage, but rose and danced away, laughing softly. The Canuck floundered up and rushed like a furious bull. His downfall was only the swifter. The impact of the two bodies sounded like hands clapped together, and then Goliath rose into the air, struggling mightily, and pitched with a thud to the mat.

He writhed there, for the wind was knocked from his body by the fall. At length he struggled to a sitting posture and glared up at the conqueror. The boy reached out a hand to his fallen foe.

"You would have thrown me that way the first time," he said,

"but you let me change grips on you. In another week you will be too much for me, *bon ami*."

The other accepted the hand after an instant of hesitation and was dragged to his feet. He stood looking down into the boy's face with a singular grin. But there was no triumph in the eye of Pierre—only a good-natured interest.

"In another week," answered the giant, "there would not be a sound bone in my body."

CHAPTER 2

"You have seen him," murmured the tall priest. "Now let us go back and wait for him. I will leave word."

He touched one of the two or three men who were watching the athletes, and whispered his message in the other's ear. Then he went back with Father Anthony. "You have seen him," he repeated, when they sat once more in the cheerless room. "Now pronounce on him."

The other answered: "I have seen a wonderful body—but the mind, Father Victor?"

"It is as simple as that of a child—his thoughts run as clear as spring water."

"But suppose a strange thought came in the mind of your Pierre. It would be like the pebbles in swift-running spring water. He would carry it on, rushing. It would tear away the old boundaries of his mind—it might wipe out the banks you have set down for him—it might tear away the choicest teachings."

Father Victor sat straight and stiff with stern, set lips. He said dryly: "Father Anthony has been much in the world."

"I speak from the best intention, good father. Look you, now, I have seen that same red hair and those same lighted blue eyes before, and wherever I have seen them has been war and trouble and unrest. I have seen that same smile which stirs the heart of a woman and makes a man reach for his revolver. This boy whose

mind is so clear—arm him with a single wrong thought, with a single doubt of the eternal goodness of God's plans, and he will be a thunderbolt indeed, dear Father, but one which even your strong hand could not control."

"I have heard you," said the priest; "but you will see. He is coming now."

There was a knock at the door; then it opened and showed a modest novice in a simple gown of black serge girt at the waist with the flat encircling band. His head was downward; it was not till the blue eyes flashed inquisitively up that Father Anthony recognized Pierre.

The hard voice of Jean Paul Victor pronounced: "This is that Father Anthony of whom I have spoken."

The novice slipped to his knees and folded his hands, while the plump fingers of Father Anthony poised over that dark red hair, pressed smooth on top where the skullcap rested. The blessing which he spoke was Latin, and Father Victor looked somewhat anxiously toward his protege till the latter answered in a diction so pure that Cicero himself would have smiled to hear it.

"Stand up!" cried Father Anthony. "By heavens, Jean Paul, it is the purest Latin I have heard this twelvemonth."

And the lad answered: "It must be pure Latin; Father Victor has taught me."

Gabrielle Anthony stared, and to save him from too obvious confusion the other priest interrupted: "I have a letter for you, my son."

And he passed the envelope to Pierre. The latter examined it with interest. "This comes from the south. It is marked from the United States."

"So far!" exclaimed the tall priest. "Give me the letter, lad."

But here he caught the whimsical eyes of Father Anthony, and he allowed his outstretched hand to fall. Yet he scowled as he said: "No; keep it and read it, Pierre."

"I have no great wish to keep it," answered Pierre, studying anxiously the dark brow of the priest.

"It is yours. Open it and read."

The lad obeyed instantly. He shook out the folded paper and moved a little nearer the light. Then he read aloud, as if it had never entered his mind that what was addressed to him might be meant for his eyes alone.

"Morgantown,

"R.F.D. No. 4.

"SON PIERRE:

"Here I lie with a chunk of lead from the gun of Bob McGurk resting somewheres in the insides of me, and there ain't no way of doubting that I'm about to go out. Now, I ain't complaining none. I've had my fling. I've eat my meat to order, well done and rare—mostly rare. Maybe some folks will be saying that I've got what I've been asking for, and I know that Bob McGurk got me fair and square, shooting from the hip. That don't help me none, lying here with a through ticket to some place that's farther south than Texas.

"Hell ain't none too bad for me, I know. I ain't whining none. I just lie here and watch the world getting dimmer until I begin to be seeing things out of my past. That shows the devil ain't losing no time with me. But the thing that comes back oftenest and hits me the hardest is the sight of your mother, lying with you in the hollow of her arm and looking up at me and whispering, 'Dad,' just before she went out."

The hand of the boy fell, and his eyes sought the face of Father Victor. The latter was standing.

"You told me I had no father—"

An imperious arm stretched toward him.

"Give me the letter."

He moved to obey, and then checked himself.

"This is my father's writing, is it not?"

"No, no! It's a lie, Pierre!"

But Pierre stood with the letter held behind his back, and the first doubt in his life stood up darkly in his eyes. Father Victor sank slowly back into his chair, his gaunt frame trembling.

"Read on," he commanded.

And Pierre, white of face, read on:

"So I got a idea that I had to write to you, Pierre. There ain't nothing I can make up to you, but knowing the truth may help some. Poor kid, you ain't got no father in the eyes of the law, and neither did you have no mother, and there ain't no name that belongs to you by rights.

"I was a man in them days, and your mother was a woman that

brought your heart into your throat and set it singing. She and me, we were too busy being just plain happy to care much about what was right or wrong; so you just sort of happened along, Pierre. Me being so close to hell, I remember her eyes that was bluer than heaven looking up to me, and her hair, that was copper with gold lights in it.

"I buried Irene on the side of the mountain under a big, rough rock, and I didn't carve nothing on the rock. Then I took you, Pierre, and I knew I wasn't no sort of a man to raise up the son of Irene; so I brought you to Father Victor on a winter night and left you in his arms. That was after I'd done my best to raise you and you was just about old enough to chatter a bit. There wasn't nothing else to do. My wife, she went pretty near crazy when I brought you home. And she'd of killed you, Pierre, if I hadn't took you away.

"You see, I was married before I met Irene. So there ain't no alibi for me. But me being so close to hell now, I look back to that time, and somehow I see no wrong in it still.

"And if I done wrong then, I've got my share of hell-fire for it. Here I lie, with my boys, Bill and Bert, sitting around in the corner of the room waiting for me to go out. They ain't men, Pierre. They're wolves in the skins of men. They're the right sons of their mother. When I go out they'll grab the coin I've saved up, and leave me to lie here and rot, maybe.

"Lad, it's a fearful thing to die without having no one around that cares, and to know that even after I've gone out I'm going to

lie here and have my dead eyes looking up at the ceiling. So I'm writing to you, Pierre, part to tell you what you ought to know; part because I got a sort of crazy idea that maybe you could get down here to me before I go out.

"You don't owe me nothing but hard words, Pierre; but if you don't try to come to me, the ghost of your mother will follow you all your life, lad, and you'll be seeing her blue eyes and the red-gold of her hair in the dark of the night as I see it now. Me, I'm a hard man, but it breaks my heart, that ghost of Irene. So here I'll lie, waiting for you, Pierre, and lingering out the days with whisky, and fighting the wolf eyes of them there sons of mine. If I weaken—If they find they can look me square in the eye—they'll finish me quick and make off with the coin. Pierre, come quick.

"MARTIN RYDER."

The hand of Pierre dropped slowly to his side, and the letter fluttered with a crisp rustling to the floor.

CHAPTER 3

Then came a voice that startled the two priests, for it seemed that a fourth man had entered the room, so changed was it from the musical voice of Pierre.

"Father Victor, the roan is a strong horse. May I take him?"

"Pierre!" and the priest reached out his bony hands.

But the boy did not seem to notice or to understand.

"It is a long journey, and I will need a strong horse. It must be eight hundred miles to that town."

"Pierre, what claim has he upon you? What debt have you to repay?"

And Pierre le Rouge answered: "He loved my mother."

"You are going?"

The boy asked in astonishment: "Would you not have me go, Father?"

And Jean Paul Victor could not meet the sorrowful blue eyes.

He bowed his head and answered: "My child, I would have you go. But promise with your hand in mine that you will come back to me when your father is buried."

The lean fingers caught the extended hand of Pierre and froze about it.

"But first I have a second duty in the southland."

"A second?"

"You taught me to shoot and to use a knife. Once you said:

'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' Father Victor, my father was killed by another man."

"Pierre, dear lad, swear to me here on this cross that you will not raise your hands against the murderer. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'"

"He must have an instrument for his wrath. He shall work through me in this."

"Pierre, you blaspheme."

"'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

"It was a demon in me that quoted that in your hearing, and not myself."

"The horse, Father Victor—may I have the roan?"

"Pierre, I command you—"

The light in the blue eyes was as cold and steady as that in the starved eyes of Jean Paul Victor.

"Hush!" he said calmly. "For the sake of the love that I bear for you, do not command me."

The stern priest dropped his head. He said at last: "I have nothing saving one great and terrible treasure which I see was predestined to you. It is the cross of Father Meilan. You have worn it before. You shall wear it hereafter as your own."

He took from his own neck a silver cross suspended by a slender silver chain, and the boy, with startled eyes, dropped to his knees and received the gift.

"It has brought good to all who possessed it, but for every good thing that it works for you it will work evil on some other. Great

is its blessing and great is its burden. I, alas, know; but you also have heard of its history. Do you accept it, Pierre?"

"Dear Father, with all my heart."

The colorless hands touched the dark-red hair.

"God pardon the sins you shall commit."

Pierre crushed the hand of Jean Paul Victor against his lips and rushed from the room, while the tall priest, staring down at the fingers which had been kissed, pronounced: "I have forged a thunderbolt, Father Gabrielle. It is too great for my hand. Listen!" And they heard clearly the sharp clang of a horse's hoofs on the hard-packed snow, loud at first, but fading rapidly away. The wind, increasing suddenly, shook the house furiously about them.

It was a north wind, and traveled south before the rider of the strong roan. Over a thousand miles of plain and hills it passed, and down into the cattle country of the mountain-desert which the Rockies hem on one side and the tall Sierras on the other.

It was a trail to try even the endurance of Pierre and the strong roan, but the boy clung to it doggedly. On a trail that led down from the edges of the northern mountain the roan crashed to the ground in a plunging fall, hitting heavily on his knees. He was dead before the boy had freed his feet from the stirrups.

Pierre threw the saddle over his shoulder and walked eight miles to the nearest ranch house, where he spent practically the last cent of his money on another horse, and drove on south once more.

There was little hope in him as day after day slipped past. Only the ghost of a chance remained that Martin Ryder could fight away death for another fortnight; yet Pierre had seen many a man from the mountain-desert stave off the end through weeks and weeks of the bitterest suffering. His father must be a man of the same hard durable metal, and upon that Pierre staked all his hopes.

And always he carried the picture of the dying man alone with his two wolf-eyed sons who waited for his eyes to weaken. Whenever he thought of that he touched his horse with the spurs and rode fiercely for a time. They were his flesh and blood, the man, and even the two wolf-eyed sons.

So he came at last to a gap in the hills and looked down on Morgantown in the hollow, twoscore unpainted houses sprawling along a single street. The snow was everywhere white and pure, and the town was like a stain on the landscape with wisps of smoke rising and trailing across the hilltops.

Down to the edge of the town he rode, left his cow-pony standing with hanging head outside a saloon, strode through the swinging doors, and asked of the bartender the way to the house of Martin Ryder.

The bartender stopped in his labor of rubbing down the surface of his bar and stared at the black-serge robe of the stranger, with curiosity rather than criticism, for women, madmen, and clergymen have the right-of-way in the mountain-desert.

He said: "Well, I'll be damned!—askin' your pardon. So old Mart Ryder has come down to this, eh? Partner, you're sure going to have a rough ride getting Mart to heaven. Better send a posse along with him, because some first-class angels are going to get considerable riled when they sight him coming. Ha, ha, ha! Sure I'll show you the way. Take the northwest road out of town and go five miles till you see a broken-backed shack lyin' over to the right. That's Mart Ryder's place."

Out to the broken-backed shack rode Pierre le Rouge, Pierre the Red, as everyone in the north country knew him. His second horse, staunch cow-pony that it was, stumbled on with sagging knees and hanging head, but Pierre rode upright, at ease, for his mind was untired.

Broken-backed indeed was the house before which he dismounted. The roof sagged from end to end, and the stove pipe chimney leaned at a drunken angle. Nature itself was withered beside that house; before the door stood a great cottonwood, gashed and scarred by lightning, with the limbs almost entirely stripped away from one side. Under this broken monster Pierre stepped and through the door. Two growls like the snarls of watch-dogs greeted him, and two tall, unshaven men barred his way. Behind them, from the bed in the corner, a feeble voice called: "Who's there?"

"In the name of God," said the boy gravely, for he saw a hollow-eyed specter staring toward him from the bed in the corner, "let me pass! I am his son!"

It was not that which made them give back, but a shrill, faint cry of triumph from the sick man toward which they turned. Pierre slipped past them and stood above Martin Ryder. He was wasted beyond belief—only the monster hand showed what he had been.

"Son?" he queried with yearning and uncertainty.

"Pierre, your son."

And he slipped to his knees beside the bed. The heavy hand fell upon his hair and stroked it.

"There ain't no ways of doubting it. It's red silk, like the hair of Irene. Seein' you, boy, it ain't so hard to die. Look up! So! Pierre, my son! Are you scared of me, boy?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Not with them eyes you ain't. Now that you're here, pay the coyotes and let 'em go off to gnaw the bones."

He dragged out a small canvas bag from beneath the blankets and gestured toward the two lurkers in the corner.

"Take it, and be damned to you!"

A dirty, yellow hand seized the bag; there was a chortle of exultation, and the two scurried out of the room.

"Three weeks they've watched an' waited for me to go out, Pierre. Three weeks they've waited an' sneaked up to my bed an' sneaked away agin, seein' my eyes open."

Looking into their fierce fever brightness, Pierre understood why they had quailed. For the man, though wrecked beyond hope of living, was terrible still. The thick, gray stubble on his face

could not hide altogether the hard lines of mouth and jaw, and on the wasted arm the hand was grotesquely huge. It was horror that widened the eyes of Pierre as he looked at Martin Ryder; it was a grim happiness that made his lips almost smile.

"You've taken holy orders, lad?"

"No."

"But the black dress?"

"I'm only a novice. I've sworn no vows."

"And you don't hate me—you hold no grudge against me for the sake of your mother?"

Pierre took the heavy hand.

"Are you not my father? And my mother was happy with you. For her sake I love you."

"The good Father Victor. He sent you to me."

"I came of my own will. He would not have let me go."

"He—he would have kept my flesh and blood away from me?"

"Do not reproach him. He would have kept me from a sin."

"Sin? By God, boy, no matter what I've done, is it sin for my son to come to me? What sin?"

"The sin of murder!"

"Ha!"

"I have come to find McGurk."

CHAPTER 4

Like some old father-bear watching his cub flash teeth against a stalking lynx, half proud and half fearful of such courage, so the dying cattleman looked at his son. Excitement set a high and dangerous color in his cheek. "Pierre—brave boy! Look at me. I ain't no imitation man, even now, but I ain't a ghost of what I was. There wasn't no man I wouldn't of met fair and square with bare hands or with a gun. Maybe my hands was big, but they were fast on the draw. I've lived all my life with iron on the hip, and my six-gun has seven notches.

"But McGurk downed me fair and square. There wasn't no murder. I was out for his hide, and he knew it. I done the provokin', an' he jest done the finishin', that was all. It hurts me a lot to say it, but he's a better man than I was. A kid like you, why, he'd jest eat you, Pierre."

Pierre le Rouge smiled again. He felt a stern pride to be the son of this man.

"So that's settled," went on Martin Ryder, "an' a damned good thing it is. Son, you didn't come none too soon. I'm goin' out fast. There ain't enough light left in me so's I can see my own way. Here's all I ask: When I die touch my eyelids soft an' draw 'em shut—I've seen the look in a dead man's eyes. Close 'em, and I know I'll go to sleep an' have good dreams. And down in the middle of Morgantown is the buryin'-ground. I've ridden past it a

thousand times an' watched a corner plot, where the grass grows quicker than it does anywheres else in the cemetery. Pierre, I'd die plumb easy if I knew I was goin' to sleep the rest of time in that place."

"It shall be done."

"But that corner plot, it would cost a pile, son. And I've no money. I gave what I had to them wolf-eyed boys, Bill an' Bert. Money was what they wanted, an' after I had Irene's son with me, money was the cheapest way of gettin' rid of 'em."

"I'll buy the plot."

"Have you got that much money, lad?"

"Yes," lied Pierre calmly.

The bright eyes grew dimmer and then fluttered close. Pierre started to his feet, thinking that the end had come. But the voice began again, fainter, slowly.

"No light left inside of me, but dyin' this way is easy. There ain't no wind will blow on me after I'm dead, but I'll be blanketed safe from head to foot in cool, sweet-smellin' sod—the kind that has tangles of the roots of grass. There ain't no snow will reach to me where I lie. There ain't no sun will burn down to me. Dyin' like that is jest—goin' to sleep."

After that he said nothing for a time, and the late afternoon darkened slowly through the room.

As for Pierre, he did not move, and his mind went back. He did not see the bearded wreck who lay dying before him, but a picture of Irene, with the sun lighting her copper hair with places

of burning gold, and a handsome young giant beside her. They rode together on some upland trail at sunset time, sharply framed against the bright sky.

There was a whisper below him: "Irene!"

And Pierre looked down to blankly staring eyes. He groaned, and dropped to his knees.

"I have come for you," said the whisper, "because the time has come, Irene. We have to ride out together. We have a long ways to go. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Pierre.

"Thank God! It's a wonderful night. The stars are asking us out. Quick! Into your saddle. Now the spurs. So! We are alone and free, with the winds around us, and all that we have been forgotten behind us."

The eyes opened wide and stared up; without a stir in the great, gaunt body, he was dead. Pierre reverently drew the eyes shut. There were no tears in his eyes, but a feeling of hollowness about his heart. He straightened and looked about him and found that the room was quite dark.

So in the dimness Pierre fumbled, by force of habit, at his throat, and found the cross which he wore by a silver chain about his throat. He held it in a great grip and closed his eyes and prayed. When he opened his eyes again it was almost deep night in the room, and Pierre had passed from youth to manhood. Through the gloom nothing stood out distinctly save the white face of the dead man, and from that Pierre looked quickly away.

One by one he numbered his obligations to Martin Ryder, and first and last he remembered the lie which had soothed his father. The money for that corner plot where the grass grew first in the spring of the year—where was he to find it? He fumbled in his pocket and found only a single coin.

He leaned back against the wall and strove to concentrate on the problem, but his thoughts wandered in spite of himself. Looking backward, he remembered all things much more clearly than when he had actually seen them. For instance, he recalled now that as he walked through the door the two figures which had started up to block his way had left behind them some playing-cards at the corner table. One of these cards had slipped from the edge of the board and flickered slowly to the floor.

With that memory the thoughts of Pierre le Rouge stopped. The picture of the falling card remained; all else went out in his mind like the snuffing of the candle. Then, as if he heard a voice directing him through the utter blackness of the room, he knew what he must do.

All his wealth was the single half-dollar piece in his pocket, and there was only one way in which that coin could be increased to the sum he would need to buy that corner plot, where the soul of old Martin Ryder could sleep long and deep.

From his brothers he would get no help. The least memory of those sallow, hungry faces convinced him of that.

There remained the gaming table. In the north country he had watched men sit in a silent circle, smoking, drinking, with the

flare of an oil-lamp against deep, seamed faces, and only the slip and whisper of card against card.

Cold conscience tapped the shoulder of Pierre, remembering the lessons of Father Victor, but a moment later his head went up and his eyes were shining through the dark. After all, the end justified the means.

A moment later he was laughing softly as a boy in the midst of a prank, and busily throwing off the robe of serge. Fumbling through the night he located the shirt and trousers he had seen hanging from a nail on the wall. Into these he slipped, and then went out under the open sky.

The rest had revived the strength of the tough little cow-pony, and he drove on at a gallop toward the twinkling lights of Morgantown. There was a new consciousness about Pierre as if he had changed his whole nature with his clothes. The sober sense of duty which had kept him in awe all his life like a lifted finger, was almost gone, and in its place was a joyous freedom.

For the first time he faintly realized what an existence other than that of a priest might be. Now for a brief moment he could forget the part of the subdued novice and become merely a man with nothing about him to distinguish him from other men, nothing to make heads turn at his approach and raise whispers as he passed.

It was a game, but he rejoiced in it as a girl does in her first masquerade. Tomorrow he must be grave and sober-footed and an example to other men; tonight he could frolic as he pleased.

So Pierre le Rouge tossed back his head and laughed up to the frosty stars. The loose sleeves and the skirts of the robe no longer entangled his limbs. He threw up his arms and shouted. A hillside caught the sound and echoed it back to him with a wonderful clearness, and up and down the long ravine beat the clatter of the flying hoofs. The whole world shouted and laughed and rode with him on Morgantown.

If the people in the houses that he passed had known they would have started up from their chairs and taken rifle and horse and chased after him on the trail. But how could they tell from the passing of those ringing hoofs that Pierre, the novice, was dead, and Red Pierre was born?

So they drowsed on about their comfortable fires, and Pierre drew rein with a jerk before the largest of Morgantown's saloons. He had to set his teeth before he could summon the resolution to throw open the door. It was done; he stepped inside, and stood blinking in the sudden rush of light against his face.

It was all bewildering at first; the radiance, the blue tangle of smoke, the storm of voices. For Muldoon's was packed from door to door. Coins rang in a steady chorus along the bar, and the crowd waited three and four deep.

Someone was singing a rollicking song of the range at one end of the bar, and a chorus of four bellowed a profane parody at the other end.

The ears of Pierre le Rouge tingled hotly, and partly to escape the uproar he worked his way to the quieter room at the back of

the saloon.

It was almost as crowded as the bar, but here no one spoke except for an occasional growl. Sudden speaking, and a loud voice, indeed, was hardly safe. Someone cursed at his ill-luck as Pierre entered, and a dozen hands reached for six-guns. In such a place one had to be prepared.

Pierre remembered with quick dismay that he was not armed. All his life the straight black gown had been weapon enough to make all men give way before him. Now he carried no borrowed strength upon his shoulders.

Automatically he slipped his fingers under the breast of his shirt until their tips touched the cold metal of the cross. That gave him stronger courage. The joy of the adventure made his blood warm again as he drew out his one coin and looked for a place to start his venture.

So he approached the nearest table. On the surface of it were marked six squares with chalk, and each with its appropriate number. The man who ran the game stood behind the table and shook three dice. The numbers which turned up paid the gambler. The numbers which failed to show paid the owner of the game.

His luck had been too strong that night, and now only two men faced him, and both of them lost persistently. They were "bucking" the dice with savage stubbornness.

Pierre edged closer, shut his eyes, and deposited his coin. When he looked again he saw that he had wagered on the five.

CHAPTER 5

The dice clattered across the table and were swept up by the hand of the man behind the table before Pierre could note them. Sick at heart, he began to turn away, as he saw that hand reach out and gather in the coins of the other two bettors. It went out a third time and laid another fifty-cent piece upon his. The heart of Pierre bounded up to his throat.

Again the dice rolled, and this time he saw distinctly two fives turn up. Two dollars in silver were dropped upon his, and still he let the money lie. Again, again, and again the dice rolled. And now there were pieces of gold among the silver that covered the square of the five. The other two looked askance at him, and the owner of the game growled: "Gimme room for the coins, stranger, will you?"

Pierre picked up his winnings. In his left hand he held them, and the coins brimmed his cupped palm. With the free hand he placed his new wagers. But he lost now.

"I cannot win forever," thought Pierre, and redoubled his bets in an effort to regain the lost ground.

Still his little fortune dwindled, till the sweat came out on his forehead and the blood that had flushed his face ran back and left him pale with dread. And at last there remained only one gold piece. He hesitated, holding it poised for the wager, while the owner of the game rattled the dice loudly and looked up at

the coin with hungry eyes.

Once more Pierre closed his eyes and laid his wager, while his empty left hand slipped again inside his shirt and touched the metal of the cross, and once more when he opened his eyes the hand of the gambler was going out to lay a second coin over his.

"It is the cross!" thought Pierre. "It is the cross which brings me luck."

The dice rattled out. He won. Again, and still he won. The gambler wiped his forehead and looked up anxiously. For these were wagers in gold, and the doubling stakes were running high. About Pierre a crowd had grown—a dozen cattlemen who watched the growing heap of gold with silent fascination. Then they began to make wagers of their own, and there were faint whispers of wrath and astonishment as the dice clicked out and each time the winnings of Pierre doubled.

Suddenly the dealer stopped and held up his left hand as a warning. With his right, very slowly, inch by inch lest anyone should suspect him of a gunplay, he drew out a heavy forty-five and laid it on the table with the belt of cartridges. "Three years she's been on my hip through thick and thin, stranger. Three years she's shot close an' true. There ain't a butt in the world that hugs your hand tighter. There ain't a cylinder that spins easier. Shoot? Lad, even a kid like you could be a killer with that six-gun. What will you lay ag'in' it?"

And his red-stained eyes glanced covetously at the yellow heap of Pierre's money.

"How much?" said Pierre eagerly. "Is there enough on the table to buy the gun?"

"Buy?" said the other fiercely. "There ain't enough coin west of the Rockies to buy that gun. D'you think I'm yaller enough to sell my six?

No, but I'll risk it in a fair bet. There ain't no disgrace in that; eh, pals?"

There was a chorus of low grunts of assent.

"All right," said Pierre. "That pile against the gun."

"All of it?"

"All."

"Look here, kid, if you're tryin' to play a charity game with me—"

"Charity?"

The frank surprise of that look disarmed the other. He swept up the dice-box, and shook it furiously, while his lips stirred. It was as if he murmured an incantation for success. The dice rolled out, winking in the light, spun over, and the owner of the gun stood with both hands braced against the edge of the table, and stared hopelessly down.

A moment before his pockets had sagged with a precious weight, and there had been a significant drag of the belt over his right hip. Now both burdens were gone.

He looked up with a short laugh.

"I'm dry. Who'll stake me to a drink?"

Pierre scooped up a dozen pieces of the gold.

"Here."

The other drew back. "You're very welcome to it. Here's more, if you'll have it."

"The coin I've lost to you? Take back a gamblin' debt?"

"Easy there," said one of the men. "Don't you see the kid's green?

Here's a five-spot."

The loser accepted the coin as carelessly as if he were conferring a favor by taking it, cast another scowl in the direction of Pierre, and went out toward the bar. Pierre, very hot in the face, pocketed his winnings and belted on the gun. It hung low on his thigh, just in easy gripping distance of his hand, and he fingered the butt with a smile.

"The kid's feelin' most a man," remarked a sarcastic voice. "Say, kid, why don't you try your luck with Mac Hurley? He's almost through with poor old Cochrane."

Following the direction of the pointing finger, Pierre saw one of those mute tragedies of the gambling hall. Cochrane, an old cattleman whose carefully trimmed, pointed white beard and slender, tapering fingers set him apart from the others in the room, was rather far gone with liquor. He was still stiffly erect in his chair, and would be till the very moment consciousness left him, but his eyes were misty, and when he spoke his lips moved slowly, as though numbed by cold.

Beside him stood a tall, black bottle with a little whisky glass to flank it. He made his bets with apparent carelessness, but with

a real and deepening gloom. Once or twice he glanced up sharply as though reckoning his losses, though it seemed to Pierre le Rouge almost like an appeal.

And what appeal could affect Mac Hurley? There was no color in the man, either body or soul. No emotion could show in those pale, small eyes or change the color of the flabby cheeks. If his hands had been cut off, he might have seemed some sodden victim of a drug habit, but the hands saved him.

They seemed to belong to another body—beautiful, swift, and strong, and grafted by some foul mischance onto this rotten hulk. Very white they were, and long, with a nervous uneasiness in every motion, continually hovering around the cards with little touches which were almost caresses.

"It ain't a game," said the man who had first pointed out the group to Pierre, "it's just a slaughter. Cochrane's too far gone to see straight. Look at that deal now! A kid could see that he's crooking the cards!"

It was blackjack, and Hurley, as usual, was dealing. He dealt with one hand, flipping the cards out with a snap of the wrist, the fingers working rapidly over the pack. Now and then he glanced over to the crowd, as if to enjoy their admiration of his skill. He was showing it now, not so much by the deftness of his cheating as by the openness with which he exposed his tricks.

As the stranger remarked to Pierre, a child could have discovered that the cards were being dealt at will from the top and the bottom of the pack, but the gambler was enjoying himself

by keeping his game just open enough to be apparent to every other man in the room—just covert enough to deceive the drink-misted brain of Cochrane. And the pale, swinish eyes twinkled as they stared across the dull sorrow of the old man. There was an ominous sound from Pierre: "Do you let a thing like that happen in this country?" he asked fiercely.

The other turned to him with a sneer.

"*Let* it happen? Who'll stop him? Say, partner, you ain't meanin' to say that you don't know who Hurley is?"

"I don't need telling. I can see."

"What you can't see means a lot more than what you can. I've been in the same room when Hurley worked his gun once. It wasn't any killin', but it was the prettiest bit of cheatin' I ever seen. But even if Hurley wasn't enough, what about Carl Diaz?"

He glared his triumph at Pierre, but the latter was too puzzled to quail, and too stirred by the pale, gloomy face of Cochrane to turn toward the other.

"What of Diaz?"

"Look here, boy. You're a kid, all right, but you ain't that young.

D'you mean to say that you ain't heard of Carlos Diaz?"

It came back to Pierre then, for even into the snowbound seclusion of the north country the shadow of the name of Diaz had gone. He could not remember just what they were, but he seemed to recollect grim tales through which that name figured.

The other went on: "But if you ain't ever seen him before, look

him over now. They's some says he's faster on the draw than Bob McGurk, but, of course, that's stretchin' him out a size too much. What's the matter, kid; you've met McGurk?"

"No, but I'm going to."

"Might even be carried to him, eh—feet first?"

Pierre turned and laid a hand on the shoulder of the other.

"Don't talk like that," he said gently. "I don't like it."

The other reached up to snatch the hand from his shoulder, but he stayed his arm.

He said after an uncomfortable moment of that silent staring: "Well, partner, there ain't a hell of a lot to get sore over, is there? You don't figure you're a mate for McGurk, do you?"

He seemed oddly relieved when the eyes of Pierre moved away from him and returned to the figure of Carlos Diaz. The Mexican was a perfect model for a painting of a melodramatic villain. He had waxed and twirled the end of his black mustache so that it thrust out a little spur on either side of his long face. His habitual expression was a scowl; his habitual position was with a cigarette in the fingers of his left hand, and his right hand resting on his hip. He sat in a chair directly behind that of Hurley, and Pierre's new-found acquaintance explained: "He's the bodyguard for Hurley. Maybe there's some who could down Hurley in a straight gunfight; maybe there's one or two like McGurk that could down Diaz—damn his yellow hide—but there ain't no one can buck the two of 'em. It ain't in reason. So they play the game together. Hurley works the cards and Diaz covers up the retreat.

Can't beat that, can you?"

Pierre le Rouge slipped his left hand once more inside his shirt until the fingers touched the cross.

"Nevertheless, that game has to stop."

"Who'll—say, kid, are you stringin' me, or are you drunk? Look me in the eye!"

CHAPTER 6

Pierre turned and looked calmly upon the other.

And the man whispered in a sort of awe: "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Stand aside!"

The other fell back a pace, and Pierre went straight to the table and said to Cochrane: "Sir, I have come to take you home."

The old man looked up and rubbed his eyes as though waking from a sleep.

"Stand back from the table!" warned Hurley.

"By the Lord, have they been missing me?" queried old Cochrane. "You are waited for," answered Pierre le Rouge, "and I've been sent to take you home."

"If that's the case—"

"It ain't the case. The kid's lying."

"Lying?" repeated Cochrane, as if he had never heard the word before, and he peered with clearing eyes toward Pierre. "No, I think this boy has never lied."

Silence had spread through the place like a vapor. Even the slight sounds in the gaming-room were done now, and one pair after another of eyes swung toward the table of Cochrane and Hurley. The wave of the silence reached to the barroom. No one could have carried the tidings so soon, but the air was surcharged with the consciousness of an impending crisis.

Half a dozen men started to make their way on tiptoe toward the back room. One stood with his whisky glass suspended in midair, and tilted back his head to listen. In the gaming-room Hurley pushed back his chair and leaned to the left, giving him a free sweep for his right hand. The Mexican smiled with a slow and deep content.

"Thank you," answered Pierre, "but I am waiting still, sir."

The left hand of Hurley played impatiently on the table.

He said: "Of course, if you have enough—"

"I—enough?" flared the old aristocrat.

Pierre le Rouge turned fairly upon Hurley.

"In the name of God," he said calmly, "make an end of your game. You're playing for money, but I think this man is playing for his eternal soul."

The solemn, bookish phraseology came smoothly from his tongue. He knew no other. It drew a murmur of amusement from the room and a snarl from Hurley.

"Put on skirts, kid, and join the Salvation Army, but don't get yourself messed all up in here. This is my party, and I'm damned particular who I invite! Now, run along!" The head of Pierre tilted back, and he burst into laughter which troubled even Hurley.

The gambler blurted: "What's happening to you, kid?"

"I've been making a lot of good resolutions, Mr. Hurley, about keeping out of trouble; but here I am in it up to the neck."

"No trouble as long as you keep your hand out of another

man's game, kid."

"That's it. I can't see you rob Mr. Cochrane like this. You aren't gambling—you're digging gold. The game stops now."

It was a moment before the crowd realized what was about to happen; they saw it reflected first in the face of Hurley, which suddenly went taut and pale, and then, even as they looked with a smile of curiosity and derision toward Pierre le Rouge, they saw and understood.

For the moment Pierre said, "The game stops now," the calm which had been with him was gone. It was like the scent of blood to the starved wolf. The last word was scarcely off his tongue when he was crouched with a devil of green fury in his eyes—the light struck his hair into a wave of flame—his face altered by a dozen ugly years.

"D'you mean?" whispered Hurley, as if he feared to break the silence with his full voice.

"Get out of the room."

And the impulse of Hurley, plainly enough, was to obey the order, and go anywhere to escape from that relentless stare. His glance wavered and flashed around the circle and then back to Red Pierre, for the expectancy of the crowd forced him back.

When the leader of the pack springs and fails to kill, the rest of the pack tear him to pieces. Remembering this, Mac Hurley forced his glance back to Pierre. Moreover, there was a soft voice from behind, and he remembered Diaz.

All this had taken place in the length of time that it takes a

heavy body to totter on the brink of a precipice or a cat to regain its feet after a fall. After the voice of Diaz there was a sway through the room, a pulse of silence, and then three hands shot for their hips—Pierre, Diaz, and Hurley.

No stop-watch could have caught the differing lengths of time which each required for the draw. The muzzle of Hurley's revolver was not clear of the holster—the gun of Diaz was nearly at the level when Pierre's weapon exploded at his hip. The bullet cut through the wrist of Hurley. Never again would that slender, supple hand fly over the cards, doing things other than they seemed. He made no effort to escape from the next bullet, but stood looking down at his broken wrist; horror for the moment gave him a dignity oddly out of place with his usual appearance. He alone in all the room was moveless.

The crowd, undecided for an instant, broke for the doors at the first shot; Pierre le Rouge pitched to the floor as Diaz leaped forward, the revolver in either hand spitting lead and fire.

It was no bullet that downed Pierre but his own cunning. He broke his fall with an outstretched left hand, while the bullets of Diaz pumped into the void space which his body had filled a moment before.

Lying there at ease, he leveled the revolver, grinning with the mirthless lust of battle, and fired over the top of the table. The guns dropped from the hands of huge Diaz. He caught at his throat and staggered back the full length of the room, crashing against the wall. When he pitched forward on his face he was

dead before he struck the floor.

Pierre, now Red Pierre, indeed, rose and ran to the fallen man, and, looking at the bulk of the giant, he wondered with a cold heart. He knew before he slipped his hand over the breast of Diaz that this was death. Then he rose again and watched the still fingers which seemed to be gripping at the boards. These he saw, and nothing else, and all he heard was the rattling of the wind of winter, wrenching at some loose shingle on the roof, and he knew that he was alone in the world, for he had put out a life.

He found a strange weight pulling down his right hand, and started when he saw the revolver. He replaced it in the holster automatically, and in so doing touched the barrel and found it warm.

Then fear came to Pierre, the first real fear of his life. He jerked his head high and looked about him. The room was utterly empty. He tiptoed to the door and found even the long bar deserted, littered with tall bottles and overturned glasses. The cold in his heart increased. A moment before he had been hand in hand with all the mirth in that place.

Now the men whose laughter he had repeated with smiles, the men against whose sleeves his elbow had touched, were further away from him than they had been when all the snow-covered miles from Morgantown to the school of Father Victor had laid between them. They were men who might lose themselves in any crowd, but he was set apart with a brand, even as Hurley and Diaz had been set apart that eventful evening.

He had killed a man. That fact blotted out the world. He drew his gun again and stole down the length of the bar. Once he stopped and poised the weapon before he realized that the white, fierce face that squinted at him was his own reflection in a mirror.

Outside the door the free wind caught at his face, and he blessed it in his heart, as if it had been the touch of the hand of a friend. Beyond the long, dark, silent street the moor rose and passed up through the safe, dark spaces of the sky.

He must move quickly now. The pursuit was not yet organized, but it would begin in a space of minutes. From the group of half a dozen horses which stood before the saloon he selected the best —a tall, raw-boned nag with an ugly head. Into the saddle he swung, wondering faintly that the theft of a horse mattered so little to him. His was the greatest sin. All other things mattered nothing.

Down the long street he galloped. The sharp echoes flew out at him from every unlighted house, but not a human being was in sight. So he swung out onto the long road which wound up through the hills, and beside him rode a grim brotherhood, the invisible fellowship of Cain.

The moon rose higher, brighter, and a grotesque black shadow galloped over the snow beside him. He turned his head sharply to the other side and watched the sweep of white hills which reached back in range after range until they blended with the shadows of night.

The road faded to a bridle path, and this in turn he lost among

the windings of the valley. He was lost from even the traces of men, and yet the fear of men pursued him. Fear, and yet with it there was a thrill of happiness, for every swinging stride of the tall, wild roan carried him deeper into freedom, the unutterable fierce freedom of the hunted.

CHAPTER 7

All life was tame compared with this sudden awakening of Pierre. He had killed a man. For fear of it he raced the tall roan furiously through the night.

He had killed a man. For the joy of it he shouted a song that went ringing across the blank, white hills. What place was there in Red Pierre for solemn qualms of conscience? Had he not met the first and last test triumphantly? The oldest instinct in creation was satisfied in him. Now he stood ready to say to all the world: Behold, a man!

Let it be remembered that his early years had been passed in a dull, dun silence, and time had slipped by him with softly padding, uneventful hours. Now, with the rope of restraint snapped, he rode at the world with hands, palm upward, asking for life, and that life which lies under the hills of the mountain-desert heard his question and sent a cold, sharp echo back to answer his lusty singing.

The first answer, as he plunged on, not knowing where, and not caring, was when the roan reeled suddenly and flung forward to the ground. Even that violent stop did not unseat Red Pierre. He jerked up on the reins with a curse and drove in the spurs. Valiantly the horse reared his shoulders up, but when he strove to rise the right foreleg dangled helplessly. He had stepped in some hole and the bone was broken cleanly across.

The rider slipped from the saddle and stood facing the roan, which pricked its ears forward and struggled once more to regain its feet. The effort was hopeless, and Pierre took the broken leg and felt the rough edges of the splintered bone through the skin. The animal, as if it sensed that the man was trying to do it some good, nosed his shoulder and whinnied softly.

Pierre stepped back and drew his revolver. The bullet would do quickly what the cold would accomplish after lingering hours of torture, yet, facing those pricking ears and the trust of the eyes, he was blinded by a mist and could not aim. He had to place the muzzle of the gun against the roan's temple and pull the trigger. When he turned his back he was the only living thing within the white arms of the hills.

Yet, when the next hill was behind him, he had already forgotten the second life which he put out that night, for regret is the one sorrow which never dodges the footsteps of the hunted. Like all his brotherhood of Cain, Pierre le Rouge pressed forward across the mountain-desert with his face turned toward the brave tomorrow. In the evening of his life, if he should live to that time, he would walk and talk with God.

Now he had no mind save for the bright day coming.

He had been riding with the wind and had scarcely noticed its violence in his headlong course. Now he felt it whipping sharply at his back and increasing with each step. Overhead the sky was clear. It seemed to give vision for the wind and cold to seek him out, and the moon made his following shadow long and black

across the snow.

The wind quickened rapidly to a gale that cut off the surface of the snow and whipped volleys of the small particles level with the surface. It cut the neck of Red Pierre, and the gusts struck his shoulders with staggering force like separate blows, twisting him a little from side to side.

Coming from the direction of Morgantown, it seemed as if the vengeance for Diaz was following the slayer. Once he turned and laughed in the teeth of the wind, and shook his fist back at Morgantown and all the avenging powers of the law.

Yet he was glad to turn away from the face of the storm and stride on down-wind. Even traveling with the gale grew more and more impossible. The snowdrifts which the wind picked up and hurried across the hills pressed against Pierre's back like a great, invisible hand, bowing him as if beneath a burden. In the hollows the labor was not so great, but when he approached a summit the gale screamed in his ear and struck him savagely.

For all his optimism, for all his young, undrained strength, a doubt began to grow in the mind of Pierre le Rouge. At length, remembering how that weight of gold came in his pockets, he slipped his left hand into the bosom of his shirt and touched the icy metal of the cross. Almost at once he heard, or thought he heard, a faint, sweet sound of singing.

The heart of Red Pierre stopped. For he knew the visions which came to men perishing with cold; but he grew calmer again in a moment. This touch of cold was nothing compared with

whole months of hard exposure which he had endured in the northland. It had not the edge. If it were not for the wind it was scarcely a threat to life. Moreover, the singing sounded no more. It had been hardly more than a phrase of music, and it must have been a deceptive murmur of the wind.

After all, a gale brought wilder deceptions than that. Some men had actually heard voices declaiming words in such a wind. He himself had heard them tell their stories. So he leaned forward again and gave his stanch heart to the task. Yet once more he stopped, for this time the singing came clearly, sweetly to him.

There was no doubt of it now. Of course it was wildly impossible, absurd; but beyond all question he heard the voice of a girl come whistling down the wind. He could almost catch the words. For a little moment he lingered still. Then he turned and fought his way into the strong arms of the storm.

Every now and then he paused and crouched to the snow. Usually there was only the shriek of the wind in his ears, but a few times the singing came to him and urged him on. If he had allowed the idea of failure to enter his mind, he must have given up the struggle, but failure was a stranger to his thoughts.

He lowered his head against the storm. Sometimes it caught under him and nearly lifted him from his feet. But he clung against the slope of the hill, sometimes gripping hard with his hands. So he worked his way to the right, the sound of the singing coming more and more frequently and louder and louder. When he was almost upon the source of the music it ceased abruptly.

He waited a moment, but no sound came. He struggled forward a few more yards and pitched down exhausted, panting. Still he heard the singing no longer. With a falling heart he rose and resigned himself to wander on his original course with the wind, but as he started he placed his hand once more against the cross, and it was then that he saw her.

For he had simply gone past her, and the yelling of the storm had cut off the sound of her voice. Now he saw her lying, a spot of bright color on the snow. He read the story at a glance. As she passed this steep-sided hill the loosely piled snow had slid down and carried with it the dead trunk of a fallen tree.

Pierre came from behind and stood over her unnoticed. He saw that the oncoming tree, by a strange chance, had knocked down the girl and pinned her legs to the ground. His strength and the strength of a dozen men would not be sufficient to release her. This he saw at the first glance, and saw the bright gold of her hair against the snow. Then he dropped on his knees beside her.

CHAPTER 8

The girl tossed up her arms in a silent greeting, and Pierre caught the small cold hands and saw that she was only a child of twelve or fourteen trapped by the wild storm sweeping over them. He crouched lower still, and when he did so the strength of the wind against his face decreased wonderfully, for the sharp angle of the hill's declivity protected them. Seeing him kneel there, she cried out with a little wail: "Help me—the tree—help me!" And, bursting into a passion of sobbing, she tugged her hands from his and covered her face.

Pierre placed his shoulder under the trunk and lifted till the muscles of his back snapped and cracked. He could not budge the weight; he could not even send a tremor through the mass of wood. He dropped back beside her with a groan. He felt her eyes upon him; she had ceased her sobs, and looked steadily into his face.

It would have been easy for him to meet that look on the morning of this day, but after that night's work in Morgantown he had to brace his nerve to withstand it.

She said: "You can't budge the tree?"

"Yes—in a minute; I will try again."

"You'll only hurt yourself for nothing. I saw how you strained at it."

The greatest miracle he had ever seen was her calm. Her eyes

were wide and sorrowful indeed, but she was almost smiling up to him.

After a while he was able to say, in a faint voice: "Are you very cold?"

She answered: "I'm not afraid. But if you stay longer with me, you may freeze. The snow and even the tree help to keep me almost warm; but you will freeze. Go for help; hurry, and if you can, send it back to me."

He thought of the long miles back to Morgantown; no human being could walk that distance against this wind; not even a strong horse could make its way through the storm. If he went on with the wind, how long would it be before he reached a house? Before him, over range after range of hills, he saw no single sign of a building. If he reached some such place it would be the same story as the trip to Morgantown; men simply could not beat a way against that wind.

Then a cold hand touched him, and he looked up to find her eyes grave and wide once more, and her lips half smiling, as if she strove to deceive him.

"There's no chance of bringing help?"

He merely stared hungrily at her, and the loveliest thing he had ever seen was the play of golden hair beside her cheek. Her smile went out. She withdrew her hand, but she repeated: "I'm not afraid. I'll simply grow numb and then fall asleep. But you go on and save yourself."

Seeing him shake his head, she caught his hands again.

"I'll be unhappy. You'll make me so unhappy if you stay. Please go."

He raised the small hand and pressed it to his lips.

She said: "You are crying!"

"No, no!"

"There! I see the tears shining on my hand. What is your name?"

"Pierre."

"Pierre? I like that name. Pierre, to make me happy, will you go? Your face is all white and touched with a shadow of blue. It is the cold. Oh, won't you go?" Then she pleaded, finding him obdurate: "If you won't go for me, then go for your father."

He raised his head with a sudden laughter, and, raising it, the wind beat into his face fiercely and the particles of snow whipped his skin.

"Dear Pierre, then for your mother?"

He bowed his head.

"Not for all the people who love you and wait for you now by some warm fire—some cozy fire, all yellow and bright?"

He took her hands and with them covered his eyes. "Listen: I have no father; I have no mother."

"Pierre! Oh, Pierre, I'm sorry!"

"And for the rest of 'em, I've killed a man. The whole world hates me; the whole world's hunting me."

The small hands tugged away. He dared not raise his bowed head for fear of her eyes. And then the hands came back to him

and touched his face.

She was saying tremulously: "Then he deserved to be killed. There must be men like that—almost. And I—like you still, Pierre."

"Really?"

"I almost think I like you more—because you could kill a man—and then stay here for me."

"If you were a grown-up girl, do you know what I'd say?"

"Please tell me."

"That I could love you."

"Pierre—"

"Yes."

"My name is Mary Brown."

He repeated several times: "Mary."

"And if I were a grown-up girl, do you know what I would answer?"

"I don't dare guess it."

"That I could love you, Pierre, if you were a grown-up man."

"But I am."

"Not a really one."

And they both broke into laughter—laughter that died out before a sound of rushing and of thunder, as a mass slid swiftly past them, snow and mud and sand and rubble. The wind fell away from them, and when Pierre looked up he saw that a great mass of tumbled rock and soil loomed above them.

The landslide had not touched them, by some miracle, but

in a moment more it might shake loose again, and all that mass of ton upon ton of stone and loam would overwhelm them. The whole mass quaked and trembled, and the very hillside shuddered beneath them.

She looked up and saw the coming ruin; but her cry was for him, not herself.

"Run, Pierre—you can save yourself."

With that terror threatening him from above, he rose and started to run down the hill. A moan of woe followed him, and he stopped and turned back, and fought his way through the wind until he was beside her once more.

She was weeping.

"Pierre—I couldn't help calling out for you; but now I'm strong again, and I won't have you stay. The whole mountain is shaking and falling toward us. Go now, Pierre, and I'll never make a sound to bring you back."

He said: "Hush! I've something here which will keep us both safe.

Look!"

He tore from the chain the little metal cross, and held it high overhead, glimmering in the pallid light. She forgot her fear in wonder.

"I gambled with only one coin to lose, and I came out tonight with hundreds and hundreds of dollars because I had the cross. It is a charm against all danger and against all bad fortune. It has never failed me."

Over them the piled mass slid closer. The forehead of Pierre gleamed with sweat, but a strong purpose made him talk on. At least he could take all the foreboding of death from the child, and when the end came it would be swift and wipe them both out at one stroke. She clung to him, eager to believe.

"I've closed my eyes so that I can believe."

"It has never failed me. It saved me when I fought two men. One of them I crippled and the other died. You see, the power of the cross is as great as that. Do you doubt it now, Mary?"

"Do you believe in it so much—really—Pierre?"

Each time there was a little lowering of her voice, a little pause and caress in the tone as she uttered his name, and nothing in all his life had stirred Red Pierre so deeply with happiness and sorrow.

"Do you believe, Pierre?" she repeated.

He looked up and saw the shuddering mass of the landslide creeping upon them inch by inch. In another moment it would loose itself with a rush and cover them.

"I believe," he said.

"If you should live, and I should die—"

"I would throw the cross away."

"No, you would keep it; and every time you touched it you would think of me, Pierre, would you not?"

"When you reach out to me like that, you take my heart between your hands."

"And I feel grown up and sad and happy both together. After

we've been together on such a night, how can we ever be apart again?"

The mass of the landslide toppled right above them. She did not seem to see.

"I'm so happy, Pierre. I was never so happy."

And he said, with his eyes on the approaching ruin: "It was your singing that brought me to you. Will you sing again?"

"I sang because I knew that when I sang the sound would carry farther through the wind than if I called for help. What shall I sing for you now, Pierre?"

"What you sang when I came to you."

And the light, sweet voice rose easily through the sweep of the wind. She smiled as she sang, and the smile and music were all for Pierre, he knew. Through the last stanza of the song the rumble of the approaching death grew louder, and as she ended he threw himself beside her and gathered her into protecting arms.

She cried: "Pierre! What is it?"

"I must keep you warm; the snow will eat away your strength."

"No; it's more than that. Tell me, Pierre! You don't trust the power of the cross?"

"Are you afraid?"

"Oh, no; I'm not afraid, Pierre."

"If one life would be enough, I'd give mine a thousand times. Mary, we are to die."

An arm slipped around his neck—a cold hand pressed against his cheek.

"Pierre."

"Yes."

The thunder broke above them with a mighty roaring.

"*You* have no fear."

"Mary, if I had died alone I would have dropped down to hell under my sins; but, with your arm around me, you'll take me with you. Hold me close."

"With all my heart, Pierre. See—I'm not afraid. It is like going to sleep. What wonderful dreams we'll have!"

And then the black mass of the landslide swept upon them.

CHAPTER 9

Down all the length of the mountain-desert and across its width of rocks and mountains and valleys and stern plateaus there is a saying: "You can tell a man by the horse he rides." For most other important things are apt to go by opposites, which is the usual way in which a man selects his wife. With dogs, for instance—a quiet man is apt to want an active dog, and a tractable fellow may keep the most vicious of wolf-dogs.

But when it comes to a horse, a man's heart speaks for itself, and if he has sufficient knowledge he will choose a sympathetic mount. A woman loves a neat-stepping saddle-horse; a philosopher likes a nodding, stumble-footed nag which will jog all day long and care not a whit whether it goes up dale or down.

To know the six wild riders who galloped over the white reaches of the mountain-desert this night, certainly their horses should be studied first and the men secondly, for the one explained the other.

They came in a racing triangle. Even the storm at its height could not daunt such furious riders. At the point of the triangle thundered a mighty black stallion, his muzzle and his broad chest flecked with white foam, for he stretched his head out and champed at the bit with ears laid flat back, as though even that furious pace gave him no opportunity to use fully his strength.

He was an ugly headed monster with a savagely hooked Roman nose and small, keen eyes, always red at the corners. A medieval baron in full panoply of plate armor would have chosen such a charger among ten thousand steeds, yet the black stallion needed all his strength to uphold the unarmored giant who bestrode him, a savage figure.

When the broad brim of his hat flapped up against the wind the moonshine caught at shaggy brows, a cruelly arched nose, thin, straight lips, and a forward-thrusting jaw. It seemed as if nature had hewn him roughly and designed him for a primitive age where he could fight his way with hands and teeth.

This was Jim Boone. To his right and a little behind him galloped a riderless horse, a beautiful young animal continually tossing its head and looking as if for guidance at the big stallion.

To the left strode a handsome bay with pricking ears. A mound interfered with his course, and he cleared it in magnificent style that would have brought a cheer from the lips of any English lover of the chase.

Straight in the saddle sat Dick Wilbur, and he raised his face a little to the wind, smiling faintly as if he rejoiced in its fine strength, as handsome as the horse he rode, as cleanly cut, as finely bred. The moon shone a little brighter on him than on any other of the six riders.

Bud Mansie behind, for instance, kept his head slightly to one side and cursed beneath his breath at the storm and set his teeth at the wind. His horse, delicately formed, with long, slender legs,

could not have endured that charge against the storm save that it constantly edged behind the leaders and let them break the wind. It carried less weight than any other mount of the six, and its strength was cunningly nursed by the rider so that it kept its place, and at the finish it would be as strong as any and swifter, perhaps, for a sudden, short effort, just as Bud Mansie might be numbed through all his nervous, slender body, but never too numb for swift and deadly action.

On the opposite wing of the flying wedge galloped a dust-colored gray, ragged of mane and tail, and vindictive of eye, like its down-headed rider, who shifted his glance rapidly from side to side and watched the ground closely before his horse as if he were perpetually prepared for danger.

He distrusted the very ground over which his mount strode. For all this he seemed the least formidable of all the riders. To see him pass none could have suspected that this was Black Morgan Gandil.

Last of the crew came two men almost as large as Jim Boone himself, on strong steady-striding horses. They came last in this crew, but among a thousand other long-riders they would have ridden first, either red-faced, good-humored, loud-voiced Garry Patterson, or Phil Branch, stout-handed, blunt of jaw, who handled men as he had once hammered red iron at the forge.

Each of them should have ridden alone in order to be properly appreciated. To see them together was like watching a flock of eagles every one of which should have been a solitary lord of the

air. But after scanning that lordly train which followed, the more terrible seemed the rider of the great black horse.

Yet the king was sad, and the reason for his sadness was the riderless horse which galloped so freely beside him. His son had ridden that horse when they set out, and all the way down to the railroad Handsome Hal Boone had kept his mount prancing and curveting and had ridden around and around tall Dick Wilbur, playing pranks, and had teased his father's black until the big stallion lashed out wildly with furious heels.

It was the memory of this that kept the grave shadow of a smile on the father's lips for all the sternness of his eyes. He never turned his head, for, looking straight forward, he could conjure up the laughing vision; but when he glanced to the empty saddle he heard once more the last unlucky shot fired from the train as they raced off with their booty, and saw Hal reel in his saddle and pitch forward; and how he had tried to check his horse and turn back; and how Dick Wilbur, and Patterson, and big Phil Branch had forced him to go on and leave that form lying motionless on the snow.

At that he groaned, and spurred the black, and so the cavalcade rushed faster and faster through the night.

They came over a sharp ridge and veered to the side just in time, for all the further slope was a mass of treacherous sand and rubble and raw rocks and mud, where a landslide had stripped the hill to the stone.

As they veered about the ruin and thundered on down to the

foot of the hill, Jim Boone threw up his hand for a signal and brought his stallion to a halt on back-braced, sliding legs.

For a metallic glitter had caught his eye, and then he saw, half covered by the pebbles and dirt, the figure of a man. He must have been struck by the landslide and not overwhelmed by it, but rather carried before it like a stick in a rush of water. At the outermost edge of the wave he lay with the rocks and dirt washed over him. Boone swung from the saddle and lifted Pierre le Rouge.

The gleam of metal was the cross which his fingers still gripped. Boone examined it with a somewhat superstitious caution, took it from the nerveless fingers, and slipped it into a pocket of Pierre's shirt. A small cut on the boy's forehead showed where the stone struck which knocked him senseless, but the cut still bled—a small trickle—Pierre lived. He even stirred and groaned and opened his eyes, large and deeply blue.

It was only an instant before they closed, but Boone had seen. He turned with the figure lifted easily in his arms as if Pierre had been a child fallen asleep by the hearth and now about to be carried off to bed.

And the outlaw said: "I've lost my boy tonight. This here one was given me by the will of—God."

Black Morgan Gandil reined his horse close by, leaned to peer down, and the shadow of his hat fell across the face of Pierre.

"There's no good comes of savin' shipwrecked men. Leave him where you found him, Jim. That's my advice. Sidestep a

redheaded man. That's what I say."

The quick-stepping horse of Bud Mansie came near, and the rider wiped his stiff lips, and spoke from the side of his mouth, a prison habit of the line that moves in the lockstep: "Take it from me, Jim, there ain't any place in our crew for a man you've picked up without knowing him beforehand. Let him lay, I say." But big Dick Wilbur was already leading up the horse of Hal Boone, and into the saddle Jim Boone swung the inert body of Pierre. The argument was settled, for every man of them knew that nothing could turn Boone back from a thing once begun. Yet there were muttered comments that drew Black Morgan Gandil and Bud Mansie together.

And Gandil, from the South Seas, growled with averted eyes: "This is the most fool stunt the chief has ever pulled."

"Right, pal," answered Mansie. "You take a snake in out of the cold, and it bites you when it comes to in the warmth; but the chief has started, and there ain't nothing that'll make him stop, except maybe God or McGurk."

And Black Gandil answered with his evil, sudden grin: "Maybe McGurk, but not God."

They started on again with Garry Patterson and Dick Wilbur riding close on either side of Pierre, supporting his limp body. It delayed the whole gang, for they could not go on faster than a jog-trot. The wind, however, was falling off in violence. Its shrill whistling ceased, at length, and they went on, accompanied only by the harsh crunching of the snow underfoot.

CHAPTER 10

Consciousness returned to Pierre slowly. Many a time his eyes opened, and he saw nothing, but when he did see and hear it was by vague glimpses.

He heard the crunch of the snow underfoot; he heard the panting and snorting of the horses; he felt the swing and jolt of the saddle beneath him; he saw the grim faces of the long-riders, and he said: "The law has taken me."

Thereafter he let his will lapse, and surrendered to the sleepy numbness which assailed his brain in waves. He was riding without support by this time, but it was an automatic effort. There was no more real life in him than in a dummy figure. It was not the effect of the blow. It was rather the long exposure and the overexertion of mind and body during the evening and night. He had simply collapsed beneath the strain.

But an old army man has said: "Give me a soldier of eighteen or twenty. In a single day he may not march quite so far as a more mature man or carry quite so much weight. He will go to sleep each night dead to the world. But in the morning he awakens a new man. He is like a slate from which all the writing has been erased. He is ready for a new day and a new world. Thirty days of campaigning leaves him as strong and fresh as ever.

"Thirty days of campaigning leaves the old soldier a wreck. Why? Because as a man grows older he loses the ability to sleep

soundly. He carries the nervous strain of one day over to the next. Life is a serious problem to a man over thirty. To a man under thirty it is simply a game. For my part, give me men who can play at war."

So it was with Pierre le Rouge. He woke with a faint heaviness of head, and stretched himself. There were many sore places, but nothing more. He looked up, and the slant winter sun cut across his face and made a patch of bright yellow on the wall beside him.

Next he heard a faint humming, and, turning his head, saw a boy of fourteen or perhaps a little more, busily cleaning a rifle in a way that betokened the most expert knowledge of the weapon. Pierre himself knew rifles as a preacher knows his Bible, and as he lay half awake and half asleep he smiled with enjoyment to see the deft fingers move here and there, wiping away the oil. A green hand will spend half a day cleaning a gun, and then do the work imperfectly; an expert does the job efficiently in ten minutes. This was an expert.

Undoubtedly this was a true son of the mountain-desert. He wore his old slouch hat even in the house, and his skin was that olive brown which comes from many years of exposure to the wind and sun. At the same time there was a peculiar fineness about the boy. His feet were astonishingly small and the hands thin and slender for all their supple strength. And his neck was not bony, as it is in most youths at this gawky age, but smoothly rounded.

Men grow big of bone and sparse of flesh in the mountain-

desert. It was the more surprising to Pierre to see this young fellow with the marvelously delicate-cut features. By some freak of nature here was a place where the breed ran to high blood.

The cleaning completed, the boy tossed the butt of the gun to his shoulder and squinted down the barrel. Then he loaded the magazine, weighted the gun deftly at the balance, and dropped the rifle across his knees.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.