MAX BRAND

ALCATRAZ

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Содержание

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The characters, places, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary and have no relation to any person, place or actual happening.

CHAPTER I
CORDOVA

The west wind came over the Eagles, gathered purity from the evergreen slopes of the mountains, blew across the foothills and league wide fields, and came at length to the stallion with a touch of coolness and enchanting scents of far-off things. Just as his head went up, just as the breeze lifted mane and tail, Marianne Jordan halted her pony and drew in her breath with pleasure. For she had caught from the chestnut in the corral one flash of perfection and those far-seeing eyes called to mind the Arab belief.

Says the Sheik: "I have raised my mare from a foal, and out of love for me she will lay down her life; but when I come out to her in the morning, when I feed her and give her water, she still looks beyond me and across the desert. She is waiting for the coming of a real man, she is waiting for the coming of a true master out of the horizon!"

Marianne had known thoroughbreds since she was a child and after coming West she had become acquainted with mere "hoss-flesh," but today for the first time she felt that the horse is not meant by nature to be the servant of man but that its speed is meant to ensure it sacred freedom. A moment later she was wondering how the thought had come to her. That glimpse of equine perfection had been an illusion built of spirit and attitude; when the head of the stallion fell she saw the daylight truth: that this was either the wreck of a young horse or the sad ruin of a fine animal now grown old. He was a ragged creature with dull eyes and pendulous lip. No comb had been among the tangles of mane and tail for an unknown period; no brush had smoothed his coat. It was once a rich red-chestnut, no doubt, but now it was sun-faded to the color of sand. He was thin. The unfleshed backbone and withers stood up painfully and she counted the ribs one by one. Yet his body was not so broken as his spirit. His drooped head gave him the appearance of searching for a spot to lie down. He seemed to have been left here by the cruelty of his owner to starve and die in the white heat of this corral—a desertion which he accepted as justice because he was useless in the world.

It affected Marianne like the resignation of a man; indeed there was more personality in the chestnut than in many human beings. Once he had been a beauty, and the perfection which first startled her had been a ghost out of his past. His head, where age or famine showed least, was still unquestionably fine. The ears were short and delicately made, the eyes well-placed, the distance to the angle of the jaw long—in brief, it was that short head of small volume and large brain space which speaks most eloquently of hot blood. As her expert eye ran over the rest of the body she sighed to think that such a creature had come to such an end. There was about him no sign of life save the twitch of his skin to shake off flies.

Certainly this could not be the horse she had been advised to see and she was about to pass on when she felt eyes watching her from the steep shadow of the shed which bordered the corral. Then she made out a dapper olive-skinned fellow sitting with his back against the wall in such a position of complete relaxation as only a Mexican is capable of assuming. He wore a short tuft of black moustache cut well away from the edge of the red lip, a moustache which oddly accentuated his youth. In body and features he was of that feminine delicacy which your large-handed Saxon dislikes, and though Marianne was by no means a stalwart, she detested the man at once. For that reason, being a lady to the tips of her slim fingers, her smile was more cordial than necessary.

"I am looking for Manuel Cordova," she said.

"Me," replied the Mexican, and managed to speak without removing the cigarette.

"I'm glad to know you." she answered. "I am Marianne Jordan."

At this, Manuel Cordova removed his cigarette, regardless of the ashes which tumbled straightway down the bell-mouthed sleeve of his jacket; for a Mexican deems it highly indecorous to

pay the slightest heed to his tobacco ashes. Whether they land on chin or waistcoat they are allowed to remain until the wind carries them away.

"The pleasure is to me," said Cordova melodiously, and made painful preparations to rise.

She gathered at once that the effort would spoil his morning and urged him to remain where he was, at which he smiled with the care of a movie star, presenting an even, white line of teeth.

Marianne went on: "Let me explain. I've come to the Glosterville fair to buy some brood mares for my ranch and of course the ones I want are the Coles horses. You've seen them?"

He nodded.

"But those horses," she continued, checking off her points, "will not be offered for sale until after the race this afternoon. They're all entered and they are sure to win. There's nothing to touch them and when they breeze across the finish I imagine every ranch owner present will want to bid for them. That would put them above my reach and I can only pray that the miracle will happen—a horse may turn up to beat them. I made inquiries and I was told that the best prospect was Manuel Cordova's Alcatraz. So I've come with high hopes, Señor Cordova, and I'll appreciate it greatly if you'll let me see your champion."

"Look till the heart is content, señorita," replied the Mexican, and he extended a slim, lazy hand towards the drowsing stallion.

"But," cried the girl, "I was told of a real runner—"

She squinted critically at the faded chestnut. She had been told of a four-year-old while this gaunt animal looked fifteen at least. However, it is one thing to catch a general impression and another to read points. Marianne took heed, now, of the long slope of the shoulders, the short back, the well-let-down hocks. After all, underfeeding would dull the eye and give the ragged, lifeless coat.

"He is not much horse, eh?" purred Cordova.

But the longer she looked the more she saw. The very leanness of Alcatraz made it easier to trace his running-muscles; she estimated, too, the ample girth at the cinches where size means wind.

"And that's Alcatraz?" she murmured.

"That is all," said the pleasant Cordova.

"May I go into the corral and look him over at close range? I never feel that I know a horse till I get my hands on it."

She was about to dismount when she saw that the Mexican was hesitating and she settled back in the saddle, flushed with displeasure.

"No," said Cordova, "that would not be good. You will see!"

He smiled again and rising, he sauntered to the fence and turned about with his shoulders resting against the upper bar, his back to the stallion. As he did so, Alcatraz put forward his ears, which, in connection with the dullness of his eyes, gave him a peculiarly foolish look.

"You will see a thing, señorita!" the Mexican was chuckling.

It came without warning. Alcatraz turned with the speed of a whiplash curling and drove straight at the place where his master leaned. Marianne's cry of alarm was not needed. Cordova had already started, but even so he barely escaped. The chestnut on braced legs skidded to the fence, his teeth snapping short inches from the back of his master. His failure maddened Alcatraz. He reminded Marianne of the antics of a cat when in her play with the mouse she tosses her victim a little too far away and wheels to find her prospective meal disappearing down a hole. In exactly similar wise the stallion went around the corral in a whirl of dust, rearing, lashing out with hind legs and striking with fore, catching imaginary things in his teeth and shaking them to pieces. When the fury diminished he began to glide up and down the fence, and there was something so feline in the grace of those long steps and the intentness with which the brute watched Cordova that the girl remembered a new-brought tiger in the zoo. Also, rage had poured him full of such strength that through the dust cloud she caught again glimpses of that first perfection.

He came at last to a stop, but he faced his owner with a look of steady hate. The latter returned the gaze with interest, stroking his face and snarling: "Once more, red devil, eh? Once more you miss? Bah! But I, I shall not miss!"

It was not as one will talk to a dumb beast, for there was no mistaking the vicious earnestness of Cordova, and now the girl made out that he was caressing a long, white scar which ran from his temple across the cheekbone. Marianne glanced away, embarrassed, as people are when another reveals a dark and hidden portion of his character.

"You see?" said Cordova, "you would not be happy in the corral with him, eh?"

He rolled a cigarette with smiling lips as he spoke, but all the time his black eyes burned at the chestnut. He seemed to Marianne half child and half old man, and both parts of him were evil now that she could guess the whole story. Cordova campaigned through the country, racing his horse at fairs or for side bets. For two reasons he kept the animal systematically undernourished: one was that he was thereby able to get better odds; the other was that only on a weakened Alcatraz would he trust himself. At this she did not wonder for never had she seen such almost human viciousness of temper in a dumb beast.

"As for running, señorita," continued Cordova, "sometimes he does very well—yes, very well. But when he is dull the spurs are nothing to him."

He indicated a criss-crossing of scars on the flank of the stallion and Marianne, biting her lips, realized that she must leave at once if she wished to avoid showing her contempt, and her anger.

She was a mile down the road and entering the main street of Glosterville before her temper cooled. She decided that it was best to forget both Alcatraz and his master: they were equally matched in devilishness. Her last hope of seeing the mares beaten was gone, and with it all chance of buying them at a reasonable figure; for no matter what the potentialities of Alcatraz in his present starved condition he could not compare with the bays. She thought of Lady Mary with the sunlight rippling over her shoulder muscles. Certainly Alcatraz would never come within whisking distance of her tail!

CHAPTER II
THE COMING OF DAVID

Having reached this conclusion, the logical thing, of course, was for Marianne to pack and go without waiting to see the race or hear the bidding for the Coles horses; but she could not leave. Hope is as blind as love. She had left the ranch saying to her father and to the foreman, Lew Hervey: "The bank account is shrinking, but ideals are worth more than facts and I *shall* improve the horses on this place." It was a rather too philosophical speech for one of her years, but Oliver Jordan had merely shrugged his shoulders and rolled another cigarette; the crushed leg which, for the past three years, had made him a cripple, had taught him patience.

Only the foreman had ventured to smile openly. It was no secret that Lew Hervey disliked the girl heartily. The fall of the horse which made Jordan a semi-invalid, killed his ambition and self-reliance at the same instant. Not only was it impossible for him to ride since the accident, but the freeswinging self-confidence which had made him prosperous disappeared at the same time; his very thoughts walked slowly on foot since his fall. Hervey gathered the reins of the ranch affairs more and more into his own hands and had grown to an almost independent power when Marianne came home from school. Having studied music and modern languages, who could have suspected in Marianne either the desire or the will to manage a ranch, but to Marianne the necessity for following the course she took was as plain as the palm of an open hand. The big estate, once such a money-maker, was now losing. Her father had lost his grip and could not manage his own affairs, but who had ever heard of a hired man being called to run the Jordan business as long as there was a Jordan alive? She, Marianne, was very much alive. She came West and took the ranch in hand.

Her father smiled and gave her whatever authority she required; in a week the estate was hers to control. But for all her determination and confidence, she knew that she could not master cattle-raising in a few weeks. She was unfemininely willing to take advice. She even hunted for it, and though her father refused to enter into the thing even with suggestions, a little help from Hervey plus her indomitable energy might have made her attempt a success.

Hervey, however, was by no means willing to help. In fact, he was profoundly disgruntled. He had found himself, beyond all expectation, in a position almost as absolute and dignified as that of a real owner with not the slightest interference from Jordan, when on a sudden the arrival of this pretty little dark-eyed girl submerged him again in his old role of the hired man. He took what Marianne considered a sneaking revenge. He entered at once upon a career of the most perfect subordination. No fault could be found with his work. He executed every commission with scrupulous care. But when his advice was asked he became a sphinx. "Some folks say one way and some another. Speaking personal, I dunno, Miss Jordan. You just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

This attitude irritated her so that she was several times on the verge of discharging him, but how could she turn out so old an employee and one so painstaking in the duties assigned to him? Many a day she prayed for "a new foreman or night," but Hervey kept his job, and in spite of her best efforts, affairs went from bad to worse and the more desperately she struggled the more hopelessly she was lost. This affair of the horses was typical. No doubt the saddle stock were in sad need of improved blood but this was hardly the moment to undertake such an expenditure. Having once suggested the move, the quiet smiles of Hervey had spurred her on. She knew the meaning of those smiles. He was waiting till she should exhaust even the immense tolerance of her father; when she fell he would swing again into the saddle of control. Yet she would go on and buy the mares if she could. Hers was one of those militant spirits which, once committed, fights to the end along every line. And indeed, if she ever contemplated surrender, if she were more than once on the verge of giving way to the

tears of broken spirit, the vague, uninterested eyes of her father and the overwise smiles of Hervey were whips which sent her back into the battle.

But today, when she regained her room in the hotel, she walked up and down with the feeling that she was struggling against manifest destiny. And in a rare burst of self-pity, she paused in front of the window, gritting her teeth to restrain a flood of tears.

A cowpuncher rocked across the blur of her vision on his pony, halted, and swung down in front of the stable across the street. The horse staggered as the weight came out of the stirrup and that made Marianne watch with a keener interest, for she had seen a great deal of merciless riding since she came West and it always angered her. The cowpunchers used "hoss-flesh" rather than horses, a distinction that made her hot. If a horse were not good enough to be loved it was not good enough to be ridden. That was one of her maxims. She stepped closer to the window. Certainly that pony had been cruelly handled for the little grey gelding swayed in rhythm with his panting; from his belly sweat dripped steadily into the dust and the reins had chafed his neck to a lather. Marianne flashed into indignation and that, of course, made her scrutinize the rider more narrowly. He was perfect of that type of cowboy which she detested most: handsome, lithe, childishly vain in his dress. About his sombrero ran a heavy width of gold-braid; his shirt was blue silk; his bandana was red; his boots were shop-made beauties, soft and flexible; and on his heels glittered—*gilded spurs*!

"And I'll wager," thought the indignant Marianne, "that he hasn't ten dollars in the world!"

He unknotted the cinches and drew off the saddle, propping it against one hip while he surveyed his mount. In spite of all his vainglory he was human enough to show some concern, it appeared. He called for a bucket of water and offered it to the dripping pony. Marianne repressed a cry of warning: a drink might ruin a horse as hot as that. But the gay rider permitted only a swallow and then removed the bucket from the reaching nose.

The old man who apparently sat all day and every day beside the door of the stable, only shifting from time to time to keep in shadow, passed his beard through his fist and spoke. Every sound, even of the panting horse, came clearly to her through the open window.

"Kind of small but kind of trim, that hoss."

"Not so small," said the rider. "About fifteen two, I guess."

"Measured him?"

"Never."

"I'd say nigher onto fifteen one."

"Bet my spurs to ten dollars that he's fifteen two; and that's good odds for you."

The old man hesitated; but the stable boy was watching him with a grin.

"I'll take that bet if—" he began.

The rider snapped him up so quickly that Marianne was angered again. Of course he knew the height of his own horse and it would be criminal to take the old loafer's money, but that was his determination.

"Get a tape, son. We'll see."

The stable boy disappeared in the shadow of the door and came back at once with the measure. The grey gelding, in the meantime, had smelled the sweetness of hay and was growing restive but a sharp word from the rider jerked him up like a tug on his bit. He tossed his head and waited, his ears flat.

"Look out, Dad," called the rider, as he arranged the tape to fall from the withers of the horse, "this little devil'll kick your head off quicker than a wink if he gets a chance."

"He don't look mean," said the greybeard, stepping back in haste.

"I like 'em mean and I keep 'em mean," said the other. "A tame hoss is like a tame man and I don't give a damn for a gent who won't fight."

Marianne covertly stamped. It was so easy to convert her worries into anger at another that she was beginning to hate this brutal-minded Beau Brummel of the ranges. Besides, she had had bitter

experience with these noisy, careless fellows when they worked on her ranch. Her foreman was such a type grown to middle-age. Indeed her anger at the whole species called "cowpuncher" now focused to a burning-point on him of the gilded spurs.

The measuring was finished; he stepped back.

"Fifteen one and a quarter," he announced. "You win, Dad!"

Marianne wanted to cheer.

"You win, confound it! And where'll I get the mates of this pair? You win and I'm the underdog."

"A poor loser, too," thought Marianne. She was beginning to round her conception of the man; and everything she added to the picture made her dislike him the more cordially.

He had dropped on one knee in the dust and was busily loosening the spurs, paying no attention to the faint protests of the winner that he "didn't have no use for the darned things no ways." And finally he drowned the protests by breaking into song in a wide-ringing baritone and tossing the spurs at the feet of the others. He rose—laughing—and Marianne, with a mental wrest, rearranged one part of her preconception, yet this carelessness was only another form of the curse of the West and Westerners—extravagance.

He turned now to a tousle-headed three-year-old boy who was wandering near, drawn by the brilliance of the stranger.

"Keep away from those heels, kiddie. Look out, now!"

The yellow-haired boy, however, dazed by this sudden centering of attention on him, stared up at the speaker with his thumb in his mouth; and with great, frightened eyes—he headed straight for the heels of the grey!

"Take the hoss—" began the rider to the stable-boy. But the stable-boy's sudden reaching for the reins made the grey toss its head and lurch back towards the child. Marianne caught her breath as the stranger, with mouth drawn to a thin, grim line, leaped for the youngster. The grey lashed out with vicious haste, but that very haste spoiled his aim. His heels whipped over the shoulder of his master as the latter scooped up the child and sprang away. Marianne, grown sick, steadied herself against the side of the window; she had seen the brightness of steel on the driving hoofs.

A hasty group formed. The stable boy was guiltily leading the horse through the door and around the gaudy rider came the old man, and a woman who had run from a neighboring porch, and a long-moustached giant. But all that Marianne distinctly saw was the white, set face of the rescuer as he soothed the child in his arms; in a moment it had stopped crying and the woman received it. It was the old man who uttered the thought of Marianne.

"That was cool, young feller, and darned quick, and a nervy thing as I ever seen."

"Tut!" said the other, but the girl thought that his smile was a little forced. He must have heard those metal-armed hoofs as they whirred past his head.

"There is distinctly something worth while about these Westerners, after all," thought Marianne.

Something else was happening now. The big man with the sandy, long moustaches was lecturing him of the gay attire.

"Nervy enough," he began, "but you'd oughtn't to take a hoss around where kids are, a hoss that ain't learned to stop kicking. It's a fool thing to do, I say. I seen once where—"

He stopped, agape on his next word, for the lectured had turned on the lecturer, dropped his hands on his hips, and broke into loud laughter.

"Excuse me for laughing," he said when he could speak, "but I didn't see you before and—those whiskers, partner—those whiskers are—"

The laughter came again, a gale of it, and Marianne found herself smiling in sympathy. For they *were* odd whiskers, to be sure. They hung straight past the corners of the mouth and then curved sabre-like out from the chin. The sabre parts now wagged back and forth, as their owner moved his lips over words that would not come. When speech did break out it was a raging torrent that made Marianne stop her ears with a shiver.

Looking down the street away from the storming giant and the laughing cowpuncher, she saw that other folk had come out to watch, Westernlike. An Eastern crowd would swiftly hem the enemies in a close circle and cheer them on to battle; but these Westerners would as soon see far off as close at hand. The most violent expression she saw was the broad grin of the blacksmith. He was a fine specimen of laboring manhood, that blacksmith, with the sun glistening on his sweaty bald head and over his ample, soot-darkened arms. Beside his daily work of molding iron with heat and hammer-blows, a fight between men was play; and now, with his hands on his hips, his manner was that of one relaxed in mood and ready for entertainment.

Presently he cast up his right arm and swayed to the left; then back; then rocked forward on his toes presenting two huge fists red with iron-rust and oil. It seemed that he was engaging in battle with some airy figure before him.

That was enough of a hint to make Marianne look again towards the pair directly below her; the hat of the gaudy cowpuncher lay in the dust where it had evidently been knocked by the first poorly aimed blow of him of the moustaches, and the owner of the hat danced away at a little distance. Marianne saw what the hat had hitherto concealed, a shock of flame-red hair, and she removed her fingers from her ears in time to hear the big man roar: "This ain't a dance, damn you! Stand still and fight!"

"Nope," laughed the other. "It ain't a dance. It's a pile more fun. Come on you—"

The big man obscured the last of the insulting description of his ancestry with the rush of a bull, his head lowered and his fists doing duty as horns. Plainly the giant had only to get one blow home to end the conflict, but swift and graceful as a tongue of fire dancing along a log the red-headed man flashed to one side, and as he whirled Marianne saw that he was laughing still, drunk with the joy of battle. Goliath roared past, thrashing the air; David swayed in with darting fists. They closed. They became obscure forms whirling in a fog of dust until red-head leaped out of the mist.

Goliath followed with the cloud boiling away from him, a mountain of a man above his foeman.

"It's unfair!" shrilled Marianne. "That great brute and—"

Red-head darted forward, a blue clad arm flicked out. She almost heard and felt the jar of that astonishing shock which halted Goliath in his tracks with one foot raised. He wobbled an instant, then his great knees bent, and dropping inert on his face the dust spurted like steam under the impact.

The crowd now washed in from every side to lift him up and revive him with canteens of water, yet they were quite jovial in the midst of their work of mercy and Marianne gathered that the fall of Goliath was not altogether unwelcome to the townsmen. She saw the bulky figure raised to a sitting posture, saw a dull-eyed face, bloody about the mouth, and looked away hastily towards the red-headed victor.

He was in the act of picking the torn fragments of his sombrero from the dust. It had probably come in contact with the giant's spurs as they wrestled, for the crown was literally ripped to tatters. And when its owner beat out the dirt and placed the hat on his head, the fiery hair was still visible through the rents. Yet he was not downhearted, it seemed. He leaned jauntily against a hitching post under her window and rolled a cigarette, quite withdrawn from the crowd which was working over his victim.

Marianne began to feel that all she had seen was an ordinary chapter in his life; yet in the mere crossing of that street he had lost his spurs on a bet; saved a youngster from death at the risk of his own head, battled with a monster and now rolled a cigarette cheerily complacent. If fifty feet of his life made such a story what must a year of it be?

As though he felt her wonder above him, he raised his head in the act of lighting his cigarette and Marianne was looking down into bright, whimsical blue eyes. She was utterly unconscious of it at the moment but at the sight of that happy face and all the dust-dimmed finery of the cavalier, Marianne involuntarily smiled. She knew what she had done the moment he grinned in response and began to whistle, and whistle he did, keeping the rhythm with the sway of his head:

"At the end of the trail I'll be weary riding
But Mary will wait with a smile at the door;
The spurs and the bit had been chinking and chiding
But the end of the trail—"

Marianne stepped back from the window with the blood tingling in her face. She was terribly ashamed, for some reason, because she knew the words of that song.

"A cowpuncher—actually *whistling* at me!" she muttered, "I've never known a red-headed man who wasn't insolent!"

The whistling died out, a clear-ringing baritone began a new air:

"Oh, father, father William, I've seen your daughter dear.
Will you trade her for the brindled cow and the yellow steer?
And I'll throw in my riding boots and…."

Marianne slammed down the window. A moment later she was horrified to find herself smiling.

CHAPTER III
CONCERNING FIGHTERS

The race-track had come into existence by grace of accident for it happened that a lane ran a ragged course about a big field taking the corners without pretense of making true curves, with almost an elbow-turn into the straightaway; but since the total distance around was over a mile it was called the "track." The sprints were run on the straightaway which was more than the necessary quarter of a mile but occasionally there was a longer race and then the field had to take that dangerous circuit, sloppy and slippery with dust. The land enclosed was used for the bucking contest, for the two crowning events of the Glosterville fiesta, the race and the horse-breaking, had been saved for this last day. Marianne Jordan gladly would have missed the latter event. "Because it sickens me to see a man fight with a horse," she often explained. But she forced herself to go.

She was in the Rocky Mountains, now, not on the Blue Grass. Here riding bucking horses was the order of the day. It might be rough, but this was a rough country.

It was a day of undue humidity—and the Eagle Mountains were pyramids of blue smoke. Closer at hand the roofs of Glosterville shone in the fierce sun and between the village and the mountains the open fields shimmered with rising heat waves. A hardy landscape meant only for a hardy people.

"One can't adopt a country," thought Marianne, "it's the country that does the adopting. If I'm not pleased by what pleases other people in the West, I'd better leave the ranch to Lew Hervey and go back East."

This was extraordinarily straight-from-the-shoulder thinking but all the way out to the scene of the festivities she pondered quietly. The episode of the mares was growing in importance. So far she had been able to do nothing of importance on the ranch; if this scheme fell through also it would be the proverbial last straw.

In spite of her intentions, she had delayed so long that the riding was very nearly ended before she arrived. Buckboards and automobiles lined the edges of the field in ragged lines, but these did not supply enough seats and many were standing. They weaved with a continual life; now and again the rider of one of the pitching horses bobbed above the crowd, and the rattle of voices sharpened, with piercing single calls. Always the dust of battle rose in shining wisps against the sun and Marianne approached with a sinking heart, for as she crossed the track and climbed through the fence she heard the snort and squeal of an angry, fear-tormented horse. The crying of a child could not have affected her so deeply.

The circle was too thick to be penetrated, it seemed, but as she drew closer an opening appeared and she easily sifted through to the front line of the circle. It was not the first time she had found that the way of women is made easy in the West. Just as she reached her place a horse scudded away from the far end of the field with a rider yelling; the swaying head and shoulders back. He seemed to be shrinking from such speed, but as a matter of fact he was poised and balanced nicely for any chance whirl. When it had gained full speed the broncho pitched high in the air, snapped its head and heels close together, and came down stiff-legged. Marianne sympathetically felt that impact jar home in her brain but the rider kept his seat. Worse was coming. For sixty seconds the horse was in an ecstasy of furious and educated bucking, flinging itself into odd positions and hitting the earth. Each whip-snap of that stinging struggling body jarred the rider shrewdly. Yet he clung in his place until the fight ended with startling suddenness. The grey dropped out of the air in a last effort and then stood head-down, quivering, beaten.

The victor jogged placidly back to the high-fenced corrals, with shouts of applause going up about him.

"Hey, lady," called a voice behind and above Marianne. "Might be you would like to sit up here with us?"

It was a high-bodied buckboard with two improvised seats behind the driver's place and Marianne thanked him with a smile. A fourteen-year-old stripling sprang down to help her but she managed the step-up without his hand. She was taken at once, and almost literally, into the bosom of the family, three boys, a withered father, a work-faded mother, all with curious, kindly eyes. They felt she was not their order, perhaps. The sun had darkened her skin but would never spoil it; into their sweating noonday she carried a morning-freshness, so they propped her in the angle of the driver's seat beside the mother and made her at home. Their name was Corson; their family had been in the West "pretty nigh onto always"; they had a place down the Taliaferro River; and they had heard about the Jordan ranch. All of this was huddled into the first two minutes. They brushed through the necessaries and got at the excitement of the moment.

"I guess they ain't any doubt," said Corson. "Arizona Charley wins. He won two years back, too. Minds me of Pete Langley, the way he rests in a saddle. Now where's this Perris gent? D'you see him? My, ain't they shouting for Arizona! Well, he's pretty bad busted up, but I guess he's still good enough to hold this Perris they talk about. Where's Perris?"

The same name was being shouted here and there in the crowd. Corson stood up and peered about him.

"Who is Perris?" asked Marianne.

"A gent that come out of the north, up Montana way, I hear. He's been betting on himself to win this bucking contest, covering everybody's money. A crazy man, he sure is!"

The voice drifted dimly to Marianne for she was falling into a pleasant haze, comfortably aware of eyes of admiration lifted to her more and more frequently from the crowd. She envied the blue coolness of the mountains, or breathed gingerly because the sting of alkali-dust was in the air, or noted with impersonal attention the flash of sun on a horse struggling in the far off corrals. The growing excitement of the crowd, as though a crisis were approaching, merely lulled her more. So the voice of Corson was half heard; the words were unconnotative sounds.

"Let the winner pick the worst outlaw in the lot. Then Perris will ride that hoss first. If he gets throwed he loses. If he sticks, then the other gent has just got to sit the same hoss—one that's already had the edge took off his bucking. Well, ain't that a fool bet?"

"It sounds fair enough," said Marianne. "Perris, I suppose, hasn't ridden yet. And Arizona Charley is tired from his work."

"Arizona tired? He ain't warmed up. Besides, he's got a hoss here that Perris will break his heart trying to ride. You know what hoss they got here today? They got Rickety! Yep, they sure enough got old Rickety!"

He pointed.

"There he comes out!"

Marianne looked lazily in the indicated direction and then sat up, wide awake. She had never seen such cunning savagery as was in the head of this horse, its ears going back and forth as it tested the strength of the restraining ropes. Now and then it crouched and shuddered under the detested burden of the saddle. It was a stout-legged piebald with the tell-tale Roman nose obviously designed for hard and enduring battle. He was a fighting horse as plainly as a terrier is a fighting dog.

Arizona Charley, a tall man off a horse and walking with a limp, moved slowly about the captive, grinning at his companions. It was plain that he did not expect the stranger to survive the test.

A brief, deep-throated shout from the crowd.

"There's Perris!" cried Corson. "There's Red Perris, I guess!"

Marianne gasped.

It was the devil-may-care cavalier who had laughed and fought and whistled under the window of her room. He stepped from the thick of the circle near Rickety and responded to the voice of the crowd by waving his hat. It would have been a trifle too grandiloquent had he not been laughing.

"He's going through with it," said Corson, shivering and chuckling at the same time. "He's going to try Rickety. They look like one and the same kind to me—two reckless devils, that hoss and Red Jim Perris!"

"Is there real danger?" asked Marianne.

Corson regarded her with pity.

"Rickety *can* be rode, they say," he answered, "but I disremember anybody that's done it. Look! He's a man-killer that hoss!"

Perris had stepped a little too close and the piebald thrust out at him with reaching teeth and striking forefoot. The man leaped back, still laughing.

"Cool, all right," said Corson judicially. "And maybe he ain't just a blow-hard, after all. There they go!"

It happened very quickly. Perris had shaken hands with Arizona, then turned and leaped into the saddle. The ropes were loosed. Rickety crouched a moment to feel out the reality of his freedom, then burst away with head close to the ground and ragged mane fluttering. There was no leaning back in this rider. He sat arrowy-straight save that his left shoulder worked back in convulsive jerks as he strove to get the head of Rickety up. But the piebald had the bit. Once his chin was tucked back against his breast his bucking chances were gone and he kept his nose as low as possible, like the trained fighter that he was. There were no yells now. They received Rickety as the appreciative receive a great artist—in silence.

The straight line of his flight broke into a crazy tangle of criss-cross pitching. Out of this maze he appeared again in a flash of straight galloping, used the impetus for a dozen jarring bucks, then reared and toppled backward to crush the cowpuncher against the earth.

Marianne covered her eyes, but an invisible power dragged her hand down and made her watch. She was in time to see Perris whisk out of the saddle before Rickety struck the dirt. His hat had been snapped from his head. The sun and the wind were in his flaming hair. Blue eyes and white teeth flashed as he laughed again.

"I like 'em mean," he had said, "and I keep 'em mean. A tame horse is like a tame man, and I don't give a damn for a fellow who won't fight!"

Once that had irritated her but now, remembering, it rang in her ear to a different tune. As Rickety spun to his feet, Perris vaulted to the saddle and found both stirrups in mid-leap, so to speak. The gelding instantly tested the firmness of his rider's seat by vaulting high and landing on one stiffened foreleg. The resultant shock broke two ways, like a curved ball, snapping down and jerking to one side. But he survived the blow, giving gracefully to it.

It was fine riding, very fine; and the crowd hummed with appreciation.

"A handsome rascal, eh?" said Mr. Corson.

But she caught at his arm.

"Oh!" gasped Marianne. "Oh! Oh!"

Three flurries of wild pitching drew forth those horrified whispers. But still the flaming red head of the rider was as erect, as jaunty as ever. Then the quirt flashed above him and cut Rickety's flank; the crowd winced and gasped. He was not only riding straight up but he was putting the quirt to Rickety—to Rickety!

The piebald seemed to feel the sting of the insult more than the lash. He bolted across the field to gain impetus for some new and more terrible feat but as he ran a yell from Perris thrilled across the crowd.

"They do that, some men. Get plumb drunk with a fight!"

But Marianne did not hear Corson's remark. She watched Rickety slacken his run as that longdrawn yell began, so wild and high that it put a tingle in her nose. Now he was trotting, now he was walking, now he stood perfectly still, become of a sudden, an abject, cowering figure. The shout of the spectators was almost a groan, for Rickety had been beaten fairly and squarely at last and it was like the passing of some old master of the prize ring, the scarred veteran of a hundred battles.

"What happened?" breathed Marianne.

"Rickety's lost his spirit," said Corson. "That's all. I've seen it come to the bravest men in the world. A two-year-old boy could ride Rickety now. Even the whip doesn't get a single buck out of the poor rascal."

The quirt slashed the flank of the piebald but it drew forth only a meek trot. The terrible Rickety went back to the corrals like a lamb!

"Arizona's got a good man to beat," admitted Corson, "but he's got a chance yet. They won't get any more out of Rickety. He's not only been rode—he's been broke. I could ride him myself."

"Mr. Corson," said Marianne, full of an idea of her own, "I'll wager that Rickety is not broken in the least—except for Red Perris."

"Meaning Perris just sort of put a charm on him?" suggested Corson, smiling.

"Exactly that. You see?"

In fact, the moment Perris slipped from the saddle, Rickety rocked forward on his forelegs and drove both heels at one of the reckless who came too near. A second later he was fighting with the activity and venom of a cat to get away from the ropes. The crowd chattered its surprise. Plainly the fierce old outlaw had not fought his last.

"What *did* Perris do to the horse?" murmured Marianne.

"I don't know," said Corson. "But you seem to have guessed something. See the way he stands there with his chin on his fist and studies Rickety! Maybe Perris is one of these here geniuses and us ordinary folks can only understand a genius by using a book on him."

She nodded, very serious.

"There *is* a use for fighting men, isn't there?" she brooded.

"Use for 'em?" laughed Corson. "Why, lady, how come we to be sitting here? Because gents have fought to put us here! How come this is part of God's country? Because a lot of folks buckled on guns to make it that! Use for a fighter? Well, Miss Jordan, I've done a little fighting of one kind and another in my day and I don't blush to think about it. Look at my kid there. What do you think I'm proudest of: because he was head of his class at school last winter or because he could lick every other boy his own size? First time he come home with a black eye I gave him a dollar to go back and try to give the other fellow *two* black eyes. And he done it! All good fighters ain't good men; I sure know that. But they never was a man that was good to begin with and was turned bad by fighting. They's a pile of bad men around these parts that fight like lions; but that part of 'em is good. Yes sirree, they's plenty of use for a fighting man! Don't you never doubt that!"

She smiled at this vehemence, but it reinforced a growing respect for Perris.

Then, rather absurdly, it irritated her to find that she was taking him so seriously. She remembered the ridiculous song:

> "Oh, father, father William, I've seen your daughter dear.
> Will you trade her for the brindled cow and the yellow steer?"

Marianne frowned.

The shout of the crowd called her away from herself. Far from broken by the last ride, the outlaw horse now seemed all the stronger for the exercise. Discarding fanciful tricks, he at once set about sun-fishing, that most terrible of all forms of bucking.

The name in itself is a description. Literally Rickety hurled himself at the sun and landed alternately on one stiffened foreleg and then the other. At each shock the chin of Arizona Charley was flung down against his chest and at the same time his head snapped sideways with the uneven lurch of the horse. An ordinary pony would have broken his leg at the first or second of these jumps; but Rickety was untiring. He jarred to the earth; he vaulted up again as from springs—over and over the same thing.

It would eventually have become tiresome to watch had not both horse and rider soon showed effects of the work. Every leap of Rickety's was shorter. Sweat shone on his thick body. He was killing Arizona but he was also breaking his own heart. Arizona weakened fast under that continual battering at the base of his brain. His eyes rolled. He no longer pretended to ride straight up, but clung to pommel and cantle. A trickle of blood ran from his mouth. Marianne turned away only to find that mild old Corson was crying: "Watch his head! When it begins to roll then you know that he's stunned and the next jump or so will knock him out of the saddle as limp as a half filled sack."

"It's too horrible!" breathed the girl. "I can't watch!"

"Why not? You liked it when a man beat a hoss. Now the tables are turned and the hoss is beating the man. Ah, I thought so. There goes his head! Rolls as if his neck was broken. Now! Now!"

Arizona Charley toppled loose-limbed from the saddle and lay twisted where he fell, but it had taken the last of Rickety's power. His legs were now braced, his head untriumphantly low, and the sweat dripped steadily from him. He had not enough energy to flee from those who approached to lift Arizona from the ground. Corson was pounding his knee with a fat fist.

"Ever see a fight like that in your life? Nope, you never did! Me neither! But Lord, Lord, won't Red Jim Perris take a mule-load of coin out of Glosterville! They been giving five to one agin him. I was touched a bit myself."

For the moment, Marianne was more keenly interested in the welfare of Arizona Charley. Perris, with others following, reached him first and strong hands carried the unconscious champion towards that corner of the field where the Corson buckboard stood; for there were the water-buckets. They were close to the goal when Arizona recovered sufficiently to kick himself loose feebly from his supporters.

"What the hell's all this?" Marianne heard him say in a voice which he tried to make an angered roar but which was only a shrill quaver from his weakness. "Maybe I'm a lady? Maybe I've fainted or something? Not by a damned sight! Maybe I been licked by that boiled-down bit of hell, Rickety, but I ain't licked so bad I can't walk home. Hey, Perris, shake on it! You trimmed me, all right, and you collect off'n me and a pile more besides me. Here's my boodle."

At the mention of the betting a little circle cleared around Perris and from every side hands full of greenbacks were thrust forward. The latter pushed back his sombrero and scratched his head, apparently deep in thought.

"It's a speech, boys," cried Arizona Charley, supporting himself on the shoulder of a friend. "Give Red air; give him room; he's going to make a speech! And then we'll pay him for what he's got to say."

There was much laughter, much slapping of backs.

"That's Arizona," remarked Corson. "Ain't he a game loser?"

"He's a fine fellow," said the girl, with emotion. "My heart goes out to him!"

"Does it, now?" wondered Corson. "Well, I'd of figured more on Perris being the man for the ladies to look at. He's sure set up pretty! Now he makes his little talk."

"Ladies and gents," said Red Perris, turning the color of his sobriquet. "I ain't any electioneer when it comes to speech making."

"That's all right, boy," shouted encouraging partisans. "You'll get my vote if you don't say a word."

"But I'll make it short," said Perris. "It's about these bets. They're all off. It just come to my mind that two winters back me and this same Rickety had a run in up Montana-way and he come out second-best. Well, he must of remembered me the way I just now remembered him. That's why he plumb quit when I let out a whoop. If he'd turned loose all his tricks like he done with Arizona, why most like Charley would never of had to take his turn. I'd be where he is now and he'd be doing the laughing. Anyway, boys, the bets are off. I don't take money on a sure thing."

It brought a shout of protest which was immediately drowned in a hearty yell of applause.

"Now, don't that warm your heart, for you?" said Corson as the noise fell away a little. "I tell you what—" he broke off with a chuckle, seeing that she had taken a pencil and a piece of paper from her purse and was scribbling hastily: "Taking notes on the Wild West, Miss Jordan?"

"Mental notes," she said quietly, but smiling at him as she folded the slip. She turned to the stripling, who all this time had hardly taken his eyes from her even to watch the bucking and to hear the speech of Perris.

"Will you take this to Jim Perris for me?"

A gulp, a grin, a nod, he was down from the wagon in a flash and using his leanness to wriggle snakelike through the crowd.

"Well!" chuckled Corson, not unkindly, "I thought it would be more Perris than Arizona in the wind-up!"

She reddened, but not because of his words. She was thinking of the impulsive note in which she asked Red Perris to call at the hotel after the race and ask for Marianne Jordan. Remembering his song from the street, she wondered if he, also, would have the grace to blush when they met.

CHAPTER IV
THE STRENGTH OF THE WEAK

By simply turning about the crowd was in position to watch the race. Of course it packed dense around the finish on both sides of the lane but Corson had chosen his position well, the white posts were not more than a dozen yards above them and they would be able to see the rush of horses across the line. It was pleasant to Marianne to turn her back on the scene of the horse-breaking and face her own world which she knew and loved.

The ponies were coming out to be paraded for admiration and to loosen their muscles with a few stretching gallops. Each was ridden by his owner, each bore a range saddle. To one accustomed to jockeys and racing-pads, these full-grown riders and cumbrous trappings made the cowponies seem small but they were finely formed, the pick of the range. The days of mongrel breeds are long since over in the West. Smaller heads, longer necks, more sloping shoulders, told of good blood crossed on the range stock. Still, the base-stock showed clearly when the Coles mares came onto the track with mincing steps, turning their proud heads from side to side and every one coming hard on the bit. Coles had taken no chances, and though he had been forced by the rules of the race to put up the regulation range saddles he had found the lightest riders possible. Their small figures brought out the legginess of the mares; beside the compact range horses their gait was sprawling, but the wise eye of Marianne saw the springing fetlocks kiss the dust and the long, telltale muscles. She cried out softly in admiration and pleasure.

"You see the Coles mares?" she said. "There go the winners, Mr. Corson. The ponies won't be in it after two furlongs."

Corson regarded her with a touch of irritation: "Now, don't you be too sure, lady," he growled. "Lots of legs, I grant you. Too much for me. Are they pure bred?"

"No," she answered, "there's enough cold blood to bring the price down. But Coles is a wise business man. After they've won this race in a bunch they'll look, every one, like daughters of Salvator. See that! Oh, the beauties!"

One of the range horses was loosed for a fifty yard sprint and as he shot by, the mares swayed out in pursuit. There was a marked difference between the gaits. The range horse pounded heavily, his head bobbing; the mares stepped out with long, rocking gallop. They seemed to be going with half the effort and less than half the speed, and yet, strangely, they very nearly kept up with the sprinter until their riders took them back to the eager, prancing walk. Marianne's eyes sparkled but the little exhibition told a different story to old Corson. He snorted with pleasure.

"Maybe you seen that, Miss Jordan? You seen Jud Hopkin's roan go by them fancy Coles mares? Well, well, it done my heart good! This gent Coles comes out of the East to teach us poor ignorant ranchers what right hoss flesh should be. He's going to auction off them half dozen mares after the race. Well, sir, I wouldn't give fifty dollars a head for 'em. Nor neither will nobody else when they see them mares fade away in the home stretch; nope, neither will nobody else."

In this reference to over-wise Easterners there was a direct thrust at the girl, but she accepted it with a smile.

"Don't you think they'll last for the mile and a quarter, Mr. Corson?"

"Think? I don't think. I know! Picture hosses like them—well, they'd ought to be left in books. They run a little. Inside a half mile they bust down. Look how long they are!"

"But their backs are short," put in Marianne hastily.

"Backs short?" scoffed Corson, "Why, lady look for yourself!"

She choked back her answer. If the self-satisfied old fellow could not see how far back the withers reached and how far forward the quarters, so that the true back was very short, it was the

part of wisdom to let experience teach him. Yet she could not refrain from saying: "You'll see how they last in the race, Mr. Corson."

"We'll both see," he answered. "There goes a gent that's going to lose money today!"

A big red-faced man with his hat on the back of his head and sweat coursing down his cheeks, was pushing through the crowd calling with a great voice:

"Here's Lady Mary money. Evens or odds on Lady Mary!" "That's Colonel Dickinson," said Corson. "He comes around every year to play the races here and most generally he picks winners. But today he's gone wrong. His eye has been took by the legs of them Coles hosses and he's gone crazy betting on 'em. Well, he gets plenty of takers!"

Indeed, Colonel Dickinson was stopped right and left to record wagers.

"I got down a little bet myself, this morning, agin his Lady Mary." Corson chuckled at the thought of such easy money.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Marianne, for even if she were lucky enough to get the mares she felt that from Corson she could learn beforehand the criticisms of Lew Hervey.

"So sure? Why anybody with half an eye—" here he remembered that he was talking to a lady and continued more mildly. "Them bay mares ain't hosses—they're tricks. Look how skinny all that underpinning is, Miss Jordan."

"When they fill out—" she began.

"Tush! They won't never fill out proper. Too much leg to make a hoss. Too much daylight under 'em. Besides, what good would they be for cow-work? High headed fools, all of 'em, and a hoss that don't know enough to run with his head low can't turn on a forty acre lot. Don't tell me!"

He forbade contradiction by raising an imperious hand. Marianne was so exasperated that she looked to Mrs. Corson in the pinch, but that old lady was smiling dimly behind her glasses; she seemed to be studying the smoky gorges of the Eagles, so Marianne wisely deferred her answer and listened to that unique voice which rises from a crowd of men and women when horses are about to race. There is no fellow to the sound. The voice of the last-chance better is the deep and mournful burden; the steady rattle of comment is the body of it; and the edge of the noise is the calling of those who are confident with "inside dope." Marianne, listening, thought that the sound in Glosterville was very much like the sound in Belmont. The difference was in the volume alone. The hosses were now lining up for the start, it was with a touch of malice that Marianne said: "I suppose that's one of your range types? That faded old chestnut just walking up to get in line?"

Corson started to answer and then rubbed his eyes to look again.

It was Alcatraz plodding towards the line of starters, his languid hoofs rousing a wisp of dust at every step. He went with head depressed, his sullen; hopeless ears laid back. On his back sat Manuel Cordova, resplendent in sky-blue, tight-fitting jacket. Yet he rode the spiritless chestnut with both hands, his body canted forward a little, his whole attitude one of desperate alertness. There was something so ludicrous in the contrast between the hair-trigger nervousness of the Mexican and the drowsy unconcern of the stallion that a murmur of laughter rose from the crowd about the starting line and drifted across the field.

"I suppose you'll say that long hair is good to keep him warm in winter," went on the girl sarcastically. "As far as legs are concerned, he seems to have about as much as the longest of the mares."

Corson shook his head in depreciation.

"You never can tell what a fool Mexican will do. Most like he's riding in this race to show off his jacket, not because he has any hope of winning. That hoss ain't any type of range—"

"Perhaps you think it's a thoroughbred?" asked Marianne.

Corson sighed, feeling that he was cornered.

"Raised on the range, all right," he admitted. "But you'll find freak hosses anywhere. And that chestnut is just a plug."

"And yet," ventured Marianne, "it seems to me that the horse has some points."

This remark drew a glance of scorn from the whole Corson family. What would they think, she wondered, if they knew that her hopes centered on this very stallion? Silence had spread over the field. The whisper of Corson seemed loud. "Look how still the range hosses stand. They know what's ahead. And look at them fool bays prance!"

The Coles horses were dancing eagerly, twisting from side to side at the post.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Corson. "What a vicious brute!"

Alcatraz had wakened suddenly and driven both heels at his neighbor. Luckily he missed his mark, but the starter ran across the track and lessoned Cordova with a raised finger. Then he went back; there was a breath of waiting; the gun barked!

The answer to it was a spurt of low-running horses with a white cloud of dust behind, and Corson laughed aloud in his glee. Every one of the group in the lead was a range horse; the Coles mares were hanging in the rear and last of all, obscured by the dust-cloud, Alcatraz ran sulkily.

"But you wait!" said Marianne, sitting tensely erect. "Those ponies with their short legs can start fast, but that's all. When the mares begin to run—Now, now, now! Oh, you beauties! You dears!"

The field doubled the first jagged corner of the track and the bay mares, running compactly grouped, began to gain on the leaders hand over hand. Looking first at the range hosses and then at the mares, it seemed that the former were running with twice the speed of the latter, but the long, rolling gallop of the bays ate up the ground, and bore them down on the leaders in a bright hurricane. The cowpunchers, hearing that volleying of hoofbeats, went to spur and quirt to stave off the inevitable, but at five furlongs Lady Mary left her sisters and streaked around the tiring range horses into the lead. Marianne cried out in delight. She had forgotten her hope that the mares might not win. All she desired now was that blood might tell and her judgment be vindicated.

"They won't last," Corson was growling, his voice feeble in the roar of the excited crowd. "They can't last that pace. They'll come back after a while and the ponies will walk away to the finish."

"Have you noticed," broke in Mrs. Corson, "that the poor old faded chestnut seems to be keeping up fairly well?"

For as the bay mares cut around into the lead, Alcatraz was seen at the heels of the range horses, running easily. It seemed, with a great elastic stride.

"But—but—it's not the same horse!" Marianne gasped.

To be sure, Alcatraz in motion was transformed, the hollows among his ribs forgotten, and the broken spirit replaced by power, the electric power of the racer.

"It looks very much to me as if the Mexican is pulling that horse, too," said Marianne. For Cordova rode with legs braced, keeping a tight pull that bent the head of Alcatraz down. He might have served for a statue of fear. "And notice that he makes no effort to break around the range horses or through them. What's the matter with him?"

At seven furlongs the mares were in a group of themselves, lengths in front and drawing away; the heads of the cowponies were going up, sure sign that they were spent, and even Corson was gloomily silent. He was remembering his bet against Lady Mary, and lo, Lady Mary was breezing in front well within her strength. One glance at her pricking ears told an eloquent story. Near them Marianne saw big Colonel Dickinson capering. And the sight inspired a shrewd suspicion. What if he knew the reputation of Alcatraz and to secure his bets on Lady Mary, had bribed Cordova at the last moment to pull his horse. Certainly it seemed that was what the Mexican was doing.

"There's a lady," the colonel was shouting. "Go it, girl. Go it, beauty. Lady Mary! Lady Mary!"

Marianne raised her field glasses and studied the rush of horses through the fog of dust.

"It's just as I thought," she cried, without lowering the glasses. "The scoundrel is pulling Alcatraz! He rides as if he were afraid of something—afraid that the horse might break away. Look, Mr. Corson."

"I dunno," said Corson. "It sure does look sort of queer!"

"Why, he's purposely keeping that horse in a pocket. Has him on the rail. Oh, the villain!" It was a cry of shrill rage. "*He's sawing on the bit!* And the chestnut has his ears back. I can see the glint of his eyes. As if he wants to run simply because he is being held. But there— there—there! He's got the bit in his teeth. His head goes out. Mr. Corson, is it too late for Alcatraz to win the race?"

She dropped the glasses. There was no need of them now. Rounding into the long home stretch Cordova made a last frightened effort to regain control and then gave up, his eyes rolling with fear; Alcatraz had got his head.

He ran his own race from that point. He leaped away from the cowponies in the first three strides and set sail for the leaders. Because of his ragged appearance his name had been picked up by the crowd and sent drifting about the field; now they called on him loudly. For every rancher and every ranch-hand in Glosterville was summoning Alcatraz to vindicate the range-stock against the long-legged mares which had been imported from the East for the sole purpose of shaming the native products. The cry shook in a wailing chorus across the field: "Alcatraz!" and again: "Alcatraz!" With tingling cowboy yells in between. And mightily the chestnut answered those calls, bolting down the stretch.

The riders of the mares had sensed danger in the shouting of the crowd, and though their lead seemed safe they took no chances but sat down and began to ride out their mounts. Still Alcatraz gained. From the stretching head, across the withers, the straight-driving croup, the tail whipped out behind, was one even line. His ears were not flagging back like the ears of a horse merely giving his utmost of speed; they were dressed flat by a consuming fury, and the same uncanny rage gleamed in his eyes and trembled in his expanding nostrils. It was like a human effort and for that reason terrible in a brute beast. Marianne saw Colonel Dickinson with the fingers of one hand buried in his plump breast; the other had reared his hat aloft, frozen in place in the midst of the last flourish; and never in her life had she seen such mingled incredulity and terror.

She looked back again. There were three sections to the race now. The range ponies were hopelessly out of it. The Coles horses ran well in the lead. Between, coming with tremendous bounds, was Alcatraz. He got no help from his rider. The light jockey on Lady Mary was aiding his mount by throwing his weight with the swing of her gallop, but Manuel Cordova was a leaden burden. The most casual glance showed the man to be in a blue funk; he rode as one astride a thunderbolt and Alcatraz had both to plan his race and run it.

A furlong from the finish he caught the rearmost of the mares and cut around them, the dust spurting sidewise. The crowd gasped, for as he passed the bays it was impossible to judge his speed accurately; and after the breath of astonishment the cheers broke in a wave. There was a confusion of emotion in Marianne. A victory for the chestnut would be a coup for her pocketbook when it came to buying the Coles horses, but it would be a distinct blow to her pride as a horsewoman. Moreover, there was that in the stallion which roused instinctive aversion. Hatred for Cordova sustained him, for there was no muscle in the lean shoulders or the starved quarters to drive him on at this terrific pace.

In the corner of her vision she saw old Corson, agape, pale with excitement, swiftly beating out the rhythm of Alcatraz's swinging legs; and then she looked to Lady Mary. Every stride carried the bay back to the relentless stallion. Her head had not yet gone up; she was still stretched out in the true racing form; but there was a roll in her gallop. Plainly Lady Mary was a very, very tired horse.

She shot in to the final furlong with whip and spur lifting her on, every stroke brought a quivering response; all that was in her strong heart was going into this race. And still the chestnut gained. At the sixteenth her flying tail was reached by his nose And still he ate up the distance. Yet spent as the mare was, the chestnut was much farther gone. If there was a roll in her weary gallop, there was a stagger in his gait; still he was literally flinging himself towards the finish. No help from his rider certainly, but every rancher in the crowd was shouting hoarsely and swinging himself towards the finish as though that effort of will and body might, mysteriously, be transmitted to the struggling horse and give him new strength.

Fifty yards from the end his nose was at Lady Mary's shoulder and Marianne saw the head of the mare jerk up. She was through but the stallion was through also. He had staggered in his stride, drunkenly. She saw him shake his head, saw him fling forward again, and the snaky head crept once more to the neck of the mare, to her ears, and on and on.

Five hundred voices bellowed his name to lift him to the finish: "Alcatraz!" Then they were over the line and the riders were pulling up. It was not hard to stop Alcatraz. He went by Marianne at a reeling trot, his legs shambling weakly and his head drooping, a weary rag of horseflesh with his ears still gloomily flattened to his neck.

But who had won? The uproar was so terrific that Marianne could not distinguish the name of the victor as the judges called it, waving their arms to command silence. Then she saw Colonel Dickinson walking with fallen head. The fat man was sagging in his step. His face had grown pale and pouchy in the moment. And she knew that the ragged chestnut had indeed conquered. Courage is the strength of the weak but in Alcatraz hatred had occupied that place.

CHAPTER V
RETRIBUTION

Coles had advertised the auction sale of the mares to take place immediately after the race and though he would gladly have postponed it he had to live up to his advertisement. Naturally the result was disastrous. The ranchers had seen the ragged Alcatraz win against the imported horses and they felt they could only show their local patriotism by failing to bid. There were one or two mocking offers of a hundred dollars a head for the lot. "Something pretty for my girl to ride," as one of the ranchers phrased it, laughing. The result was that every one of the mares was knocked down to Marianne at a ludicrously low price; so low that when it was over and Coles strolled about with her to indicate the size of her bargain she felt that she was moving in a dream.

"It's easy to see that you're not Western," he said in the end, "but you have a Western horse to thank for putting this deal through—I mean Alcatraz."

"He's too ugly for that," said Marianne, and yet on her way back to the hotel she realized that the sun-faded chestnut had truly proved a gold mine to her. It had been, she felt, the luckiest day of her business life, for she knew that the price she had paid for the mares was less than half a reasonable valuation of them. Here was her ranch ready stocked, so to speak, with fine horses. It only needed, now, to end the tyrannical sway of Lew Hervey and in that fighting man of men, Red Perris, Marianne felt that the solution lay.

Once in her room at the hotel, she looked about her in some dismay. Of course she was merely an employer receiving a prospective employee to examine his qualifications, but she also remained, in spite of herself, a girl receiving a man. She was glad that no one was there to watch with quizzical eye as she rearranged the furniture; she was doubly glad that he could not watch her at the mirror. She gave herself the most critical examination since she left the East and on the whole she approved of the changes. The stirring life in the open had darkened the olive of her skin, she found, but also had made it more translucent; the curve of her cheek was pleasantly filled; her throat rounder; her head better poised. And above all excitement gave her the vital color.

She paused at this point to wonder why a stray cowpuncher should make her flush but immediately decided that he had nothing to do with it; it was the purchase of the mares that kept alive the little thrill of happiness. But Marianne was essentially honest and when her heart jumped as she heard a swift, light step come down the hall and pause at her door, she admitted at once that horses had nothing to do with the matter.

She wished ardently that she had made the discovery sooner. As it was, before she composed herself, he had knocked, been bidden in and stood before her. She knew, inwardly dismayed, that her eyes were wide, her color high, and her whole expression one of childish expectancy. It comforted her greatly to find that he was hardly more at ease than she. He made futile efforts to rub some dust from his shirt.

"I wanted to get fixed up," he said, "but the note said to come *right* after the race—Miss Jordan."

In fact he made a harum-scarum figure. The fight with him of the moustaches had produced rents invisible at a distance but distinct at close hand and the dust and the sweat had faded the blue of his shirt and the red of his bandana. But the red flame of that hair and the keen blue of that eye—they, to be sure, were not faded. She discovered other things as he crossed the room to her. That he was far shorter than he had seemed when he fought in the street. Indeed, he was middle height and slenderly made at that. She felt that looking at him from her window and watching him ride Rickety she had only seen the spirit of the man and not the physical fact at all.

He shook hands. She was glad to see that he neither peered at her slyly as a vain man is apt to do when he meets a girl who has sought him out nor met her sullenly as is the habit of the bashful Westerner. His head was high, his glance straight, and his smile appreciated her with frank enjoyment.

She tried to match her speech with his outright demeanor: "I have a business offer to make. I won't take a great deal of your time. Ten minutes will do. Won't you sit down, Mr. Perris?"

She took his tattered hat and pointed out a seat to him, noting, as she herself sat down, that he was as erect in his chair as he had been standing. There was something so adventurously restless about Red Perris that she thought of a thoroughbred fresh from the stable; just as a blooded hunter is apt to be "too much horse under the saddle," so she was inclined to feel that Perris was "too much man." Something about him was always moving. Either his lean fingers fretted on the arm of the chair, or his foot stirred, or his glance flickered, or his head turned proudly. Going back to the thoroughbred comparison she decided that Perris badly needed to have a race or two under his belt before he would be worked down to normal. She noted another thing: at close hand he was more handsome.

In the meantime, since she had to talk, it would be pleasanter to find some indirect approach. One was offered by the fob which hung outside the watchpocket of his trousers. It was a tarnished, misshapen lump of metal.

"I can't help asking about that fob," she said. "I've never seen one even remotely like it."

He fingered it with a singular smile.

"Tell you about it," he said amiably enough. "I was standing by looking at a large-sized fracas one day and me doing nothing—just as peaceful as an old plough-hoss—when a gent ups and drills me in the leg. His bullet had to cut through my holster and then it jammed into my thigh bone. Put me in bed for a couple of months and when I got out I had the slug fixed up for a fob. Just so's I could remember the man that shot me. That's about five years back. I ain't found him yet, but I'm still remembering, you see?"

He finished the anecdote with a chuckle which died out as he saw her eyes widen with horror. Five years ago? she was thinking, he must have been hardly more than a boy. How many other chapters as violent as this were in his story?

"And—he didn't even offer to pay your doctor bill, I'll wager?"

"Him?" Perris chuckled again. "He'll pay it, some day. It's just postponed—slow collection—that's all!" He shrugged the thought of it away, and straightened a little, plainly waiting to hear her business. But her mind was still only half on her own affairs as she began talking.

"I have to go into the affairs of our ranch a little," she said, "so that you can understand why I've asked you to come here. My father was hurt by a fall from a horse several years ago and the accident made him an invalid. He can't sit a saddle and because of that he has lost all touch with his business. Worst of all, he doesn't seem to care. The result was that everything went into the hands of the foreman, but the foreman was not very successful. As a matter of fact the ranch became a losing investment and I came out to try to run it. I suppose that sounds foolish?"

She looked sharply at him, but to her delight for the first time his eyes had lighted with a real enthusiasm.

"It sounds pretty fine to me," said Red Perris.

"The foreman doesn't think so," she answered. "He wants his old authority."

"So he makes your trail all uphill?"

"By simply refusing to advise me. My father won't talk business. Lew Hervey won't. I'm trying to run a dollar business with a cent's worth of knowledge and no experience. I can't discharge Hervey; his service has been too long and faithful. But I want to have someone up there who will go into training to take Hervey's place eventually. Someone who knows cattle and can tell me what to do now and then. Mr. Perris, do you know the cow business?"

Some of his interest faded.

"Most folks raised in these parts do," he answered obliquely. "I should think you could get a dozen anywhere."

She explained eagerly: "It's not so simple. You see, Lew Hervey is rather a rough character. In the old days I think he was quite a fighter. I guess he still is. And he's gathered a lot of fighting men for cowpunchers on the ranch. When he sees me bring in an understudy for his part, so to speak, I'm afraid he might make trouble unless he was convinced it would be safer to keep his hands off the new man."

The gloom of Perris returned. He was still politely attentive, but his head turned, and the eager eyes found something of interest across the street. She knew her grip on him was failing and she struggled to regain it. Here was her man, she knew. Here was one who would ride the fiercest outlaw horse on the ranch; wear out the toughest cowboy; play with them to weariness when they wanted to play, fight with them to exhaustion when they wanted to fight, and as her right-hand man, advise her for the best.

"As for terms, the right man can make them for himself," she concluded, hopelessly: "Mr. Perris, I think you could be the man for the place. What do you say to trying?"

He paused, diffidently, and she knew that in the pause he was hunting for polite terms of refusal.

"I'll tell you how it is. You're mighty kind to make the offer. You haven't seen much of me and that little bit has been—pretty rough." He laughed away his embarrassment. "So I appreciate your confidence—a lot. But I'm afraid that I'd be a tolerable lot like Hervey." He hurried on lest she should take offense. "You see, I don't like orders."

"Of course if it were a man who made the offer to you—" she began angrily.

He raised his hand. There were little touches of formal courtesy in him so contrasted with what she had seen of him in action, so at variance with the childishly gaudy clothes he wore, that it put Marianne completely at sea.

"It's just that I like my own way. I've been a rolling stone all my life. About the only moss I've gathered is what you see." He touched the dust-tarnished gold braid on his sombrero and his twinkling eyes invited her to mirth. But Marianne was sternly silent. She knew that her color was gone and that her beauty had in large part gone with it; a reflection that did not at all help her mood or her looks. "I get my fun out of playing a free hand," he was concluding. "I don't like partners. Not that I'm proud of it, but so you can see where I stand. If I don't like a bunkie you can figure why I don't want a boss."

She nodded stiffly, and at the unamiable gesture she saw him shrug his shoulders very slightly, his eyes wandered again as though he were seeking for a means to end the interview.

Marianne rose.

"I see your viewpoint, Mr. Perris," she said coldly. "And I'm sorry you can't accept my offer."

He came to his feet at the same moment, but still he lingered a moment, turning his hat thoughtfully so that she hoped, for an instant, that he was on the verge of reconsidering. After all, she should have used more persuasion; she was firmly convinced that at heart men are very close to children. Then his head went up and he shook away the mood which had come over him.

"Some time I'll come to it," he admitted. "But not yet a while. I take it mighty kind of you to have thought I could fill the bill and—I'm wishing you all sorts of luck, Miss Jordan."

"Thank you," said Marianne, and hated herself for her unbending stiffness.

At the door he turned again.

"I sure hope it's easy for you to forget songs," he said.

"Songs?" echoed Marianne, and then turned crimson with the memory.

"'You see," explained Red Jim Perris, "it's a bad habit I've picked up— of doing the first fool thing that comes into my head. Good-bye, Miss Jordan."

He was gone.

She felt, confusedly, that there were many thing? she should have said and at the same time there was a strange surety that sometime she would see him again and say them. She walked absently to the window which opened on the vacant lot to the rear of the hotel.

Red Perris vanished from her mind, for below her she saw Cordova in the act of tethering Alcatraz to the rack which stood in the middle of the lot; saddle and bridle had been removed—the stallion wore only a stout halter.

The Mexican kept on the far side of the rack and whipped his knot together hastily; it was not till he sprang back from his work that she saw the snaky length of an eight foot blacksnake uncoil from his hand. He passed the lash slowly through his fingers, while surveying the stallion with great complacence. The ears of Alcatraz flattened back, a sufficient proof that he knew what was coming; he maintained his weary attitude, but it now seemed one of despair. As for Marianne she refused to admit the ugly suspicion which began to occur to her. But Cordova left her only a moment for doubt.

The black streak curled around his head, and through the open window she heard the crack of the lash-end. Alcatraz did not stir under the blow. Once more the blacksnake whirled, and Cordova leaned back to give the stroke the full stretch of arm and body; yet Alcatraz did not so much as lift an ear. Only when the lash hung in mid-air did he stir. The rope which tethered him hung slack, and this enabled the stallion to give impetus to his backward leap. All the weight of his body, all the strain of his leg muscles snapped the rope taut. It vibrated to invisibility for an instant, then parted with a sound as loud as the fall of the whip. The straining body of Alcatraz, so released, toppled sidewise. He rolled like a dog in the dust, and when, with the agility of a dog, he gained his feet, Cordova was fleeing towards the hotel with a horror-stricken face.

Even then she could not understand his terror—not until she saw that Alcatraz had wheeled and was bolting in hot pursuit. He came like the "devil-horse" that the Mexican called him, with his ears flattened and his mouth gaping; he came with such velocity that Cordova, running as only consummate terror can make a man run, seemed to be racing on a treadmill—literally standing still.

The picket fence which set off the back yard of the hotel gave the man an instant of delay—a terribly vital instant, indeed, that seemed to Marianne to contain long, long minutes. But here he was over and running again. In her dread she wondered why he was not shrieking for aid, but the face of Cordova was rigid—a nightmare mask!

Twenty steps, now, to the hotel, and surely there was still hope. No, for Alcatraz sailed across the pickets with a bound that cut in two the distance still dividing him from his master. It had all happened, perhaps, within the space of three breaths. Now Marianne leaned out of the window and screamed her warning, for the faded chestnut was on the very heels of the Mexican. He raised his contorted face at her cry, then threw up both his arms to her in a gesture she could never forget.

"Shoot!" yelled Cordova. "Amigo, amigo, shoot! Quick—"

Then Alcatraz struck him!

Half the bones in his body must have been broken by the impact. It spun him over and over in the dust, yet as the impetus of the chestnut carried him far past, Cordova struggled to his feet and attempted to flee again. Alas, it was only a step! His left leg crumpled under him. He toppled sideways, still wriggling and twisting onwards through the dirt—and then Alcatraz struck him again.

This time is was no blind rush. Back and forth, up and down, he crossed and recrossed, wheeled and reared and stamped, until his one white stocking was crimsoned and spurts of red flew out and turned black in the dust.

The horror which had choked her relaxed and Marianne shrieked again. It was that second cry which saved a faint spark of life for Cordova for at the sound the stallion leaped sidewise from the body of his victim, lifted his head towards the half fainting girl in the window, and trumpeted a great neigh of defiance. Still neighing he swerved away into a gallop, cleared the fence a second time, and fled from view.

CHAPTER VI
FREEDOM

Towards the Eagles, rolling up like wind-blown smoke, Alcatraz fled, cleared one by one the fences about the small fields near Glosterville, and so came at last to the broader domains under the foothills. Here, on a rise of ground, he halted for the first time and looked back.

The heat waves, glimmering up endlessly, obscured Glosterville, but the wind, from some hidden house among the hills, bore to him wood-smoke scents with a mingling of the abhorrent odors of man. It made many an old scar of spur-gore and biting whiplash tingle; it was a background of pain which was like seasoning for the new delight of freedom.

As though there was a poundage of joy and additional muscle in self-mastery, the frame of the chestnut filled, his neck arched, and there came into his eyes that gleam which no man can describe and which for lack of words he calls the light of the wild.

Fear, to be sure, was still with him; would ever be with him, for the thought of man followed like galloping horses surrounding him, but what a small shadow was that in the sunshine of this new existence! His life had been the bitterness of captivity since Cordova took in part payment of a drunken gambling debt a sickly foal out of an old thoroughbred mare. The sire was unknown, and Cordova, disgusted at having to accept this wretched horseflesh in place of money, had beaten the six months' old colt soundly and turned it loose in the pasture. There followed a brief season of happiness in the open pasture but when the new grass came, short and thick and sweet and crisp under tooth, Cordova came by the pasture and saw his yearling flirting away from the fastest of the older horses with a stretch gallop that amazed the Mexican. He leaned a moment on the fence watching with glittering eyes and then he passed into a dream. At the end of the dream he took Alcatraz out of the pasture and into the stable. That had been to Alcatraz, like the first calamity falling on Job, the beginning of sorrow and for three years and more he had endured not in patience but with an abiding hatred. For a great hatred is a great strength, and the hatred for Cordova made the chestnut big of heart to wait. He had learned to season his days with the patience of the lynx waiting for the porcupine to uncurl or the patience of the cat amazingly still for hours by the rat-hole. In such a manner Alcatraz endured. Once a month, or once a year, he found an opening to let drive at the master with his heels, or to rear and strike, or to snap with his teeth wolfishly. If he missed it meant a beating; if he landed it meant a beating postponed; and so the dream had grown to have the man one day beneath his feet. Now, on the hilltop, every nerve in his forelegs quivered in memory of the feel of live flesh beneath his stamping hoofs.

It is said that sometimes one victory in the driving finish of a close race will give a horse a great heart for running and one defeat, similarly, may break him. But Alcatraz, who had endured so many defeats, was at last victorious and the triumph was doubly sweet. It was not the work of chance. More than once he had tested the strength of that old halter rope, covertly, with none to watch, and had felt it stretch and give a little under the strain of his weight; but he had long since learned the futility of breaking ropes so long as there were stable walls or lofty corral fences to contain him. A moment of local freedom meant nothing, and he had waited until he should find open sky and clear country; this was his reward of patience.

The short, frayed end of the rope dangled beneath his chin; his neck stung where the rope had galled him; but these were minor ills and freedom was a panacea. Later he would work off the halter as he alone knew how. The wind, swinging sharply to the north and the west, brought the fragrance of the forests on the slopes of the Eagles, and Alcatraz started on towards them. He would gladly have waited and rested where he was but he knew that men do not give up easily. What one fails to do a herd comes to perform. Moreover, men struck by surprise, men stalked with infinite cunning; the

moment when he felt most secure in his stall and ate with his head down, blinded by the manger, was the very moment which the Mexican had often chosen to play some cruel prank. The lip of Alcatraz twitched back from his teeth as he remembered. This lesson was written into his mind with the letters of pain: in the moment of greatest peace, beware of man!

That day he journeyed towards the mountains; that night he chose the tallest hill he could find and rested there, trusting to the wide prospect to give him warning; and no matter how soundly he slept the horrid odor of man approaching would bring him to his feet. No man came near but there were other smells in the night. Once the air near the ground was rank with fox. He knew that smell, but he did not know the fainter scent of wildcat. Neither could he tell that the dainty-footed killer had slipped up within half a dozen yards of his back and crouched a long moment yearning towards the mountain of warm meat but knowing that it was beyond its powers to make the kill.

A thousand futile alarms disturbed Alcatraz, for freedom gave the nights new meanings for him. Sometimes he wakened with a start and felt that the stars were the lighted lanterns of a million men searching for him; and sometimes he lay with his head strained high listening to the strange silence of the mountains and the night which has a pulse in it and something whispering, whispering forever in the distance. Hunted men have heard it and to Alcatraz it was equally filled with charm and terror. What made it he could not tell. Neither can men understand. Perhaps it is the calling of the wild animals just beyond ear shot. That overtone of the mountains troubled and frightened Alcatraz on his first night; eventually he was to come to love it.

He was up in the first grey of the dawn hunting for food and he found it in the form of bunchgrass. He had been so entirely a stable-raised horse that this fodder was new to him. His nose assured him over and over again that this was nourishment, but his eyes scorned the dusty patches eight or ten inches across and half of that in height, with a few taller spears headed out for seed. When he tried it he found it delicious, and as a matter of fact it is probably the finest grass in the world.

He ate slowly, for he punctuated his cropping of the grass with glances towards the mountains. The Eagles were growing out of the night, turning from purple-grey to purple-blue, to daintiest lavender mist in the hollows and rosy light on the peaks, and last the full morning came over the sky at a step and the day wind rose and fluffed his mane.

He regarded these changes with a kindly eye, much as one who has never seen a sunrise before; and just as he had always made the corral into which he was put his private possession, and dangerous ground for any other creature, so now he took in the down-sweep of the upper range and the big knees of the mountains pushing out above the foothills and the hills themselves modelled softly down towards the plain, and it seemed to Alcatraz that this was one great corral, his private property. The horizon was his fence, advancing and receding to attend him; all between was his proper range. He took his station on a taller hilltop and gave voice to his lordliness in a neigh that rang and re-rang down a hollow. Then he canted his head and listened. A bull bellowed an answer fainter than the whistle of a bird from the distance, and just on the verge of earshot trembled another sound. Alcatraz did not know it, but it made him shudder; before long he was to recognize the call of the lofer wolf, that grey ghost which runs murdering through the mountains.

Small though the sounds were, they convinced Alcatraz that his claim to dominion would be mightily disputed. But what is worth having at all if it is not worth fighting for? He journeyed down the hillside stepping from grass knot to grass knot. All the time he kept his sensitive nostrils alert for the ground-smell of water and raised his head from moment to moment to catch the upper-air scents in case there might be danger. At length, before prime, he came down-wind from a water-hole and galloped gladly to it. It was a muddy place with a slope of greenish sun-baked earth on all sides. Alcatraz stood on the verge, snuffed the stale odor in disgust and then flirted the surface water with his upper lip before he could make himself drink. Yet the taste was far from evil, and there was nothing of man about it. Yonder a deer had stepped, his tiny footprint sun-burned into the mud, and there was the sprawling, sliding track of a steer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.