MAX BRAND

TRAILIN'!

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Brand M.

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Содержание

Max Brand
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To
ROBERT HOBART DAVIS
Maker of Books and Men

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

CHAPTER I
"LA-A-A-DIES AN' GEN'L'MUN"

All through the exhibition the two sat unmoved; yet on the whole it was the best Wild West show that ever stirred sawdust in Madison Square Garden and it brought thunders of applause from the crowded house. Even if the performance could not stir these two, at least the throng of spectators should have drawn them, for all New York was there, from the richest to the poorest; neither the combined audiences of a seven-day race, a prize-fight, or a community singing festival would make such a cosmopolitan assembly.

All Manhattan came to look at the men who had lived and fought and conquered under the limitless skies of the Far West, free men, wild men—one of their shrill whoops banished distance and brought the mountain desert into the very heart of the unromantic East. Nevertheless from all these thrills these two men remained immune.

To be sure the smaller tilted his head back when the horses first swept in, and the larger leaned to watch when Diaz, the wizard with the lariat, commenced to whirl his rope; but in both cases their interest held no longer than if they had been old vaudevillians watching a series of familiar acts dressed up with new names.

The smaller, brown as if a thousand fierce suns and winds had tanned and withered him, looked up at last to his burly companion with a faint smile.

"They're bringing on the cream now, Drew, but I'm going to spoil the dessert."

The other was a great, grey man whom age apparently had not weakened but rather settled and hardened into an ironlike durability; the winds of time or misfortune would have to break that stanch oak before it would bend.

He said: "We've half an hour before our train leaves. Can you play your hand in that time?"

"Easy. Look at 'em now—the greatest gang of liars that never threw a diamond hitch! Ride? I've got a ten-year kid home that would laugh at 'em all. But I'll show 'em up. Want to know my little stunt?"

"I'll wait and enjoy the surprise."

The wild riders who provoked the scorn of the smaller man were now gathering in the central space; a formidable crew, long of hair and brilliant as to bandannas, while the announcer thundered through his megaphone:

"La-a-a-dies and gen'l'mun! You see before you the greatest band of subduers and breakers of wild horses that ever rode the cattle ranges. Death defying, reckless, and laughing at peril, they have never failed; they have never pulled leather. I present 'Happy' Morgan!"

Happy Morgan, yelling like one possessed of ten shrill-tongued demons, burst on the gallop away from the others, and spurring his horse cruelly, forced the animal to race, bucking and plunging, half way around the arena and back to the group. This, then, was a type of the dare-devil horse breaker of the Wild West? The cheers travelled in waves around and around the house and rocked back and forth like water pitched from side to side in a monstrous bowl.

When the noise abated somewhat, "And this, la-a-a-dies and gen'l'mun, is the peerless, cowpuncher, 'Bud Reeves.'"

Bud at once imitated the example of Happy Morgan, and one after another the five remaining riders followed suit. In the meantime a number of prancing, kicking, savage-eyed horses were brought into the arena and to these the master of ceremonies now turned his attention.

"From the wildest regions of the range we have brought mustangs that never have borne the weight of man. They fight for pleasure; they buck by instinct. If you doubt it, step down and try

'em. One hundred dollars to the man who sticks on the back of one of 'em—but we won't pay the hospital bill!"

He lowered his megaphone to enjoy the laughter, and the small man took this opportunity to say: "Never borne the weight of a man! That chap in the dress-suit, he tells one lie for pleasure and ten more from instinct. Yep, he has his hosses beat. Never borne the weight of man! Why, Drew, I can see the saddle-marks clear from here; I got a mind to slip down there and pick up the easiest hundred bones that ever rolled my way."

He rose to make good his threat, but Drew cut in with: "Don't be a damn fool, Werther. You aren't part of this show."

"Well, I will be soon. Watch me! There goes Ananias on his second wind."

The announcer was bellowing: "These man-killing mustangs will be ridden, broken, beaten into submission in fair fight by the greatest set of horse-breakers that ever wore spurs. They can ride anything that walks on four feet and wears a skin; they can—"

Werther sprang to his feet, made a funnel of his hand, and shouted:

"Yi-i-i-ip!"

If he had set off a great quantity of red fire he could not more effectively have drawn all eyes upon him. The weird, shrill yell cut the ringmaster short, and a pleased murmur ran through the crowd. Of course, this must be part of the show, but it was a pleasing variation.

"Partner," continued Werther, brushing away the big hand of Drew which would have pulled him down into his seat; "I've seen you bluff for two nights hand running. There ain't no man can bluff all the world three times straight."

The ringmaster retorted in his great voice: "That sounds like good poker. What's your game?"

"Five hundred dollars on one card!" cried Werther, and he waved a fluttering handful of greenbacks. "Five hundred dollars to any man of your lot—or to any man in this house that can ride a real wild horse."

"Where's your horse?"

"Around the corner in a Twenty-sixth Street stable. I'll have him here in five minutes."

"Lead him on," cried the ringmaster, but his voice was not quite so loud.

Werther muttered to Drew:

"Here's where I hand him the lemon that'll curdle his cream," and ran out of the box and straight around the edge of the arena. New York, murmuring and chuckling through the vast galleries of the Garden, applauded the little man's flying coat-tails.

He had not underestimated the time; in a little less than his five minutes the doors at the end of the arena were thrown wide and Werther reappeared. Behind him came two stalwarts leading between them a rangy monster. Before the blast of lights and the murmurs of the throng the big stallion reared and flung himself back, and the two who lead him bore down with all their weight on the halter ropes. He literally walked down the planks into the arena, a strange, half-comical, half-terrible spectacle. New York burst into applause. It was a trained horse, of course, but a horse capable of such training was worth applause.

At that roar of sound, vague as the beat of waves along the shore, the stallion lurched down on all fours and leaped ahead, but the two on the halter ropes drove all their weight backward and checked the first plunge. A bright-coloured scarf waved from a nearby box, and the monster swerved away. So, twisting, plunging, rearing, he was worked down the arena. As he came opposite a box in which sat a tall young man in evening clothes the latter rose and shouted: "Bravo!"

The fury of the stallion, searching on all sides for a vent but distracted from one torment to another, centred suddenly on this slender figure. He swerved and rushed for the barrier with ears flat back and bloodshot eyes. There he reared and struck at the wood with his great front hoofs; the boards splintered and shivered under the blows.

As for the youth in the box, he remained quietly erect before this brute rage. A fleck of red foam fell on the white front of his shirt. He drew his handkerchief and wiped it calmly away, but a red stain remained. At the same time the two who led the stallion pulled him back from the barrier and he stood with head high, searching for a more convenient victim.

Deep silence spread over the arena; more hushed and more hushed it grew, as if invisible blankets of soundlessness were dropping down over the stirring masses; men glanced at each other with a vague surmise, knowing that this was no part of the performance. The whole audience drew forward to the edge of the seats and stared, first at the monstrous horse, and next at the group of men who could "ride anything that walks on four feet and wears a skin."

Some of the women were already turning away their heads, for this was to be a battle, not a game; but the vast majority of New York merely watched and waited and smiled a slow, stiff-lipped smile. All the surroundings were changed, the flaring electric lights, the vast roof, the clothes of the multitude, but the throng of white faces was the same as that pale host which looked down from the sides of the Coliseum when the lions were loosed upon their victims.

As for the wild riders from the cattle ranges, they drew into a close group with the ringmaster between them and the gaunt stallion, almost as if the fearless ones were seeking for protection. But the announcer himself lost his almost invincible *sang-froid*; in all his matchless vocabulary there were no sounding phrases ready for this occasion, and little Werther strutted in the centre of the great arena, rising to his opportunity.

He imitated the ringmaster's phraseology. "La-a-a-dies and gen'l'mun, the price has gone up. The 'death-defyin', dare-devils that laugh at danger' ain't none too ready to ride my hoss. Maybe the price is too low for 'em. It's raised. One thousand dollars—cash—for any man in hearin' of me that'll ride my pet."

There was a stir among the cattlemen, but still none of them moved forward toward the great horse; and as if he sensed his victory he raised and shook his ugly head and neighed. A mighty laugh answered that challenge; this was a sort of "horse-humour" that great New York could not overlook, and in that mirth even the big grey man, Drew, joined. The laughter stopped with an amazing suddenness making the following silence impressive as when a storm that has roared and howled about a house falls mute, then all the dwellers in the house look to one another and wait for the voice of the thunder. So all of New York that sat in the long galleries of the Garden hushed its laughter and looked askance at one another and waited. The big grey man rose and cursed softly.

For the slender young fellow in evening dress at whom the stallion had rushed a moment before was stripping off his coat, his vest, and rolling up the stiff cuffs of his sleeves. Then he dropped a hand on the edge of the box, vaulted lightly into the arena, and walked straight toward the horse.

CHAPTER II
SPORTING CHANCE

It might easily have been made melodramatic by any hesitation as he approached, but, with a businesslike directness, he went right up to the men who held the fighting horse.

He said: "Put a saddle on him, boys, and I'll try my hand."

They could not answer at once, for Werther's "pet," as if he recognized the newcomer, made a sudden lunge and was brought to a stop only after he had dragged his sweating handlers around and around in a small circle. Here Werther himself came running up, puffing with surprise.

"Son," he said eagerly, "I'm not aiming to do you no harm. I was only calling the bluff of those four-flushers."

The slender youth finished rolling up his left sleeve and smiled down at the other.

"Put on the saddle," he said.

Werther looked at him anxiously; then his eyes brightened with a solution. He stepped closer and laid a hand on the other's arm.

"Son, if you're broke and want to get the price of a few squares just say the word and I'll fix you. I been busted myself in my own day, but don't try your hand with my hoss. He ain't just a buckin' hoss; he's a man-killer, lad. I'm tellin' you straight. And this floor ain't so soft as the sawdust makes it look," he ended with a grin.

The younger man considered the animal seriously.

"I'm not broke; I've simply taken a fancy to your horse. If you don't mind, I'd like to try him out. Seems too bad, in a way, for a brute like that to put it over on ten thousand people without getting a run for his money—a sporting chance, eh?"

And he laughed with great good nature.

"What's your name?" asked Werther, his small eyes growing round and wide.

"Anthony Woodbury."

"Mine's Werther."

They shook hands.

"City raised?"

"Yes."

"Didn't know they came in this style east of the Rockies, Woodbury. I hope I lose my thousand, but if there was any betting I'd stake ten to one against you."

In the meantime, some of the range-riders had thrown a coat over the head of the stallion, and while he stood quivering with helpless rage they flung a saddle on and drew the cinches taut.

Anthony Woodbury was saying with a smile: "Just for the sake of the game, I'll take you on for a few hundred, Mr. Werther, if you wish, but I can't accept odds."

Werther ran a finger under his collar apparently to facilitate breathing. His eyes, roving wildly, wandered over the white, silent mass of faces, and his glance picked out and lingered for a moment on the big-shouldered figure of Drew, erect in his box. At last his glance came back with an intent frown to Woodbury. Something in the keen eyes of the lad raised a responsive flicker in his own.

"Well, I'll be damned! Just a game, eh? Lad, no matter on what side of the Rockies you were born, I know your breed and I won't lay a penny against your money. There's the hoss saddled and there's the floor you'll land on. Go to it—and God help you!"

The other shook his shoulders back and stepped toward the horse with a peculiarly unpleasant smile, like a pugilist coming out of his corner toward an opponent of unknown prowess.

He said: "Take off the halter."

One of the men snapped viciously over his shoulder: "Climb on while the climbing's good. Cut out the bluff, partner."

The smile went out on the lips of Woodbury. He repeated: "Take off the halter."

They stared at him, but quickly began to fumble under the coat, unfastening the buckle. It required a moment to work off the heavy halter without giving the blinded animal a glimpse of the light; then Woodbury caught the bridle reins firmly just beneath the chin of the horse. With the other hand he took the stirrup strap and raised his foot, but he seemed to change his mind about this matter.

"Take off the blinder," he ordered.

It was Werther who interposed this time with: "Look here, lad, I know this hoss. The minute the blinder's off he'll up on his hind legs and bash you into the floor with his forefeet."

"Let him go," growled one of the cowboys. "He's goin' to hell making a gallery play."

But taking the matter into his own hands Woodbury snatched the coat from the head of the stallion, which snorted and reared up, mouth agape ears flattened back. There was a shout from the man, not a cry of dismay, but a ringing battle yell like some ancient berserker seeing the first flash of swords in the mêlée. He leaped forward, jerking down on the bridle reins with all the force of his weight and his spring. The horse, caught in mid-air, as it were, came floundering down on all fours again. Before he could make another move, Woodbury caught the high horn of the saddle and vaulted up to his seat. It was gallantly done and in response came a great rustling from the multitude; there was not a spoken word, but every man was on his feet.

Perhaps what followed took their breaths and kept them speechless. The first touch of his rider's weight sent the stallion mad, not blind with fear as most horses go, but raging with a devilish cunning like that of an insane man, a thing that made the blood run cold to watch. He stood a moment shuddering, as if the strange truth were slowly dawning on his brute mind; then he bolted straight for the barriers. Woodbury braced himself and lunged back on the reins, but he might as well have tugged at the mooring cable of a great ship; the bit was in the monster's teeth.

Then a whisper reached the rider, a universal hushing of drawn breath, for the thousands were tasting the first thrill and terror of the combat. They saw a picture of horse and man crushed against the barrier. But there was no such stupid rage in the mind of the stallion.

At the last moment he swerved and raced close beside the fence; some projecting edge caught the trousers of Woodbury and ripped away the stout cloth from hip to heel. He swung far to the other side and wrenched back the reins. With stiff-braced legs the stallion slid to a halt that flung his unbalanced rider forward along his neck. Before he could straighten himself in the saddle, the horse roared and came down on rigid forelegs, yet by a miracle Woodbury clung, sprawled down the side of the monster, to be sure, but was not quite dismounted.

Another pitch of the same nature would have freed the stallion from his rider beyond doubt, but he elected to gallop full speed ahead the length of the arena, and during that time, Woodbury, stunned though he was, managed to drag himself back into the saddle. The end of the race was a leap into the air that would have cleared a five-bar fence, and down pitched the fighting horse on braced legs again. Woodbury's chin snapped down against his breast as though he had been struck behind the head with a heavy bar, but though his brain was stunned, the fighting instinct remained strong in him and when the stallion reared and toppled back the rider slipped from the saddle in the nick of time.

Fourteen hundred pounds of raging horseflesh crashed into the sawdust; he rolled like a cat to his feet, but at the same instant a flying weight leaped through the air and landed in the saddle. The audience awoke to sound—to a dull roar of noise; a thin trickle of blood ran from Woodbury's mouth and it seemed that the mob knew it and was yelling for a death.

There followed a bewildering exhibition of such bucking that the disgruntled cowboys forgot their shame and shouted with joy. Upon his hind legs and then down on his forefeet with a sickening heartbreaking jar the stallion rocked; now he bucked from side to side; now rose and whirled about like a dancer; now toppled to the ground and twisted again to his feet.

Still the rider clung. His head rocked with the ceaseless jars; the red-stained lips writhed back and showed the locked teeth. Yet, as if he scorned the struggles of the stallion, he brought into play the heavy quirt which had been handed him as he mounted. Over neck and shoulders and tender flanks he whirled the lash; it was not intelligence fighting brute strength, but one animal conquering another and rejoicing in the battle.

The horse responded, furiously he responded, but still the lash fell, and the bucking grew more cunning, perhaps, but less violent. Yet to the wildly cheering audience the fight seemed more dubious than ever. Then, in the very centre of the arena, the stallion stopped in the midst of a twisting course of bucking and stood with widely braced legs and fallen head. Strength was left in him, but the cunning, savage mind knew defeat.

Once more the quirt whirled in the air and fell with a resounding crack, but the stallion merely switched his tail and started forward at a clumsy stumbling trot. The thunder of the host was too hoarse for applause; they saw a victory and a defeat but what they had wanted was blood, and a death. They had had a promise and a taste; now they hungered for the reality.

Woodbury slipped from the saddle and gave the reins to Werther. Already a crowd was growing about them of the curious who had sprung over the barriers and swarmed across the arena to see the conqueror, for had he not vindicated unanswerably the strength of the East as compared with that of the West? Boys shouted shrilly; men shouldered each other to slap him on the back; but Werther merely held forth the handful of greenbacks. The conqueror braced himself against the saddle with a trembling hand and shook his head.

"Not for me," he said, "I ought to pay you—ten times that much for the sport—compared to this polo is nothing."

"Ah," muttered those who overheard, "polo! That explains it!"

"Then take the horse," said Werther, "because no one else could ride him."

"And now any one can ride him, so I don't want him," answered Woodbury.

And Werther grinned. "You're right, boy. I'll give him to the iceman."

The big grey man, William Drew, loomed over the heads of the little crowd, and they gave way before him as water divides under the prow of a ship; it was as if he cast a shadow which they feared before him.

"Help me through this mob," said Woodbury to Werther, "and back to my box. Devil take it, my overcoat won't cover that leg."

Then on him also fell, as it seemed, the approaching shadow of the grey man and he looked up with something of a start into the keen eyes of Drew.

"Son," said the big man, "you look sort of familiar to me. I'm asking your pardon, but who was your mother?"

The eyes of young Woodbury narrowed and the two stood considering each other gravely for a long moment.

"I never saw her," he said at last, and then turned with a frown to work his way through the crowd and back to his box.

The tall man hesitated a moment and then started in pursuit, but the mob intervened. He turned back to Werther.

"Did you get his name?" he asked.

"Fine bit of riding he showed, eh?" cried the little man, "and turned down my thousand as cool as you please. I tell you, Drew, there's some flint in the Easterners after all!"

"Damn the Easterners. What's his name?"

"Woodbury. Anthony Woodbury."

"Woodbury?"

"What's wrong with that name?"

"Nothing. Only I'm a bit surprised."

And he frowned with a puzzled, wistful expression, staring straight ahead like a man striving to solve a great riddle.

CHAPTER III
SOCIAL SUICIDE

At his box, Woodbury stopped only to huddle into his coat and overcoat and pull his hat down over his eyes. Then he hurried on toward an exit, but even this slight delay brought the reporters up with him. They had scented news as the eagle sights prey far below, and then swooped down on him. He continued his flight shaking off their harrying questions, but they kept up the running fight and at the door one of them reached his side with: "It's Mr. Woodbury of the Westfall Polo Club, son of Mr. John Woodbury of Anson Place?"

Anthony Woodbury groaned with dismay and clutched the grinning reporter by the arm.

"Come with me!"

Prospects of a scoop of a sizable nature brightened the eyes of the reporter. He followed in all haste, and the other news-gatherers, in obedience to the exacting, unspoken laws of their craft, stood back and followed the flight with grumbling envy.

On Twenty-Sixth Street, a little from the corner of Madison Avenue, stood a big touring car with the chauffeur waiting in the front seat. There were still some followers from the Garden.

Woodbury jumped into the back seat, drew the reporter after him, and called: "Start ahead, Maclaren—drive anywhere, but get moving."

"Now, sir," turning to the reporter as the engine commenced to hum, "what's your name?"

"Bantry."

"Bantry? Glad to know you."

He shook hands.

"You know me?"

"Certainly. I cover sports all the way from polo to golf. Anthony Woodbury—Westfall Polo Club—then golf, tennis, trap shooting—"

"Enough!" groaned the victim. "Now look here, Bantry, you have me dead to rights—got me with the goods, so to speak, haven't you?"

"It was a great bit of work; ought to make a first-page story."

And the other groaned again. "I know—son of millionaire rides unbroken horse in Wild West show—and all that sort of thing. But, good Lord, man, think what it will mean to me?"

"Nothing to be ashamed of, is it? Your father'll be proud of you."

Woodbury looked at him sharply.

"How do you know that?"

"Any man would be."

"But the notoriety, man! It would kill me with a lot of people as thoroughly as if I'd put the muzzle of a gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger."

"H-m!" muttered the reporter, "sort of social suicide, all right. But it's news, Mr. Woodbury, and the editor—"

"Expects you to write as much as the rest of the papers print—and none of the other reporters know me."

"One or two of them might have."

"But my dear fellow—won't you take a chance?"

Bantry made a wry face.

"Madison Square Garden," went on Woodbury bitterly. "Ten thousand people looking on—gad, man, it's awful."

"Why'd you do it, then?"

"Couldn't help it, Bantry. By Jove, when that wicked devil of a horse came at my box and I caught a glimpse of the red demon in his eyes—why, man, I simply had to get down and try my luck. Ever play football?"

"Yes, quite a while ago."

"Then you know how it is when you're in the bleachers and the whistle blows for the game to begin. That's the way it was with me. I wanted to climb down into the field—and I did. Once started, I couldn't stop until I'd made a complete ass of myself in the most spectacular style. Now, Bantry, I appeal to you for the sake of your old football days, don't show me up—keep my name quiet."

"I'd like to—damned if I wouldn't—but—a scoop—"

Anthony Woodbury considered his companion with a strange yearning. It might have been to take him by the throat; it might have been some gentler motive, but his hand stole at last toward an inner coat pocket.

He said: "I know times are a bit lean now and then in your game, Bantry. I wonder if you could use a bit of the long green? Just now I'm very flush, and—"

He produced a thickly stuffed bill-fold, but Bantry smiled and touched Woodbury's arm.

"Couldn't possibly, you know."

He considered a moment and then, with a smile: "It's a bit awkward for both of us, isn't it? Suppose I keep your name under my hat and you give me a few little inside tips now and then on polo news, and that sort of thing?"

"Here's my hand on it. You've no idea what a load you take off my mind."

"We've circled about and are pretty close to the Garden again. Could you let me out here?"

The car rolled to an easy stop and the reporter stepped out.

"I'll forget everything you wish, Mr. Woodbury."

"It's an honour to have met you, sir. Use me whenever you can. Goodnight."

To the chauffeur he said: "Home, and make it fast."

They passed up Lexington with Maclaren "making it fast," so that the big car was continually nosing its way around the machines in front with much honking of the horn. At Fifty-Ninth Street they turned across to the bridge and hummed softly across the black, shimmering waters of the East River; by the time they reached Brooklyn a fine mist was beginning to fall, blurring the wind-shield, and Maclaren slowed up perceptibly, so that before they passed the heart of the city, Woodbury leaned forward and said: "What's the matter, Maclaren?"

"Wet streets—no chains—this wind-shield is pretty hard to see through."

"Stop her, then. I'll take the wheel the rest of the way. Want to travel a bit to-night."

The chauffeur, as if this exchange were something he had been expecting, made no demur, and a moment later, with Woodbury at the wheel, the motor began to hum again in a gradually increasing crescendo. Two or three motor-police glanced after the car as it snapped about corners with an ominous skid and straightened out, whining, on the new street; but in each case, having made a comfortable number of arrests that day, they had little heart for the pursuit of the grey monster through that chill mist.

Past Brooklyn, with a country road before them, Woodbury cut out the muffler and the car sprang forward with a roar. A gust of increasing wind whipped back to Maclaren, for the wind-shield had been opened so that the driver need not look through the dripping glass and mingling with the wet gale were snatches of singing.

The chauffeur, partly in understanding and partly from anxiety, apparently, caught the side of the seat in a firm grip and leaned forward to break the jar when they struck rough places. Around an elbow turn they went with one warning scream of the Klaxon, skidded horribly at the sharp angle of the curve, and missed by inches a car from the opposite direction.

They swept on with the startled yell of the other party ringing after them, drowned at once by the crackling of the exhaust. Maclaren raised a furtive hand to wipe from his forehead a moisture

which was not altogether rain, but immediately grasped the side of the seat again. Straight ahead the road swung up to meet a bridge and dropped sharply away from it on the further side. Maclaren groaned but the sound was lost in the increasing roar of the exhaust.

They barely touched that bridge and shot off into space on the other side like a hurdler clearing an obstacle. With a creak and a thud the big car landed, reeled drunkenly, and straightened out in earnest, Maclaren craned his head to see the speedometer, but had not the heart to look; he began to curse softly, steadily.

When the muffler went on again and the motor was reduced to a loud, angry humming, Woodbury caught a few phrases of those solemn imprecations. He grinned into the black heart of the night, streaked with lines of grey where therein entered the halo of the headlights, and then swung the car through an open, iron gate. The motor fell to a drowsily contented murmur that blended with the cool swishing of the tires on wet gravel.

"Maclaren," said the other, as he stopped in front of the garage, "if everyone was as good a passenger as you I'd enjoy motoring; but after all, a car can't act up like a horse." He concluded gloomily: "There's no fight in it."

And he started toward the house, but Maclaren, staring after the departing figure, muttered: "There's only one sort that's worse than a damn fool, and that's a young one."

It was through a door opening off the veranda that Anthony entered the house, stealthily as a burglar, and with the same nervous apprehension. Before him stretched a wide hall, dimly illumined by a single light which splashed on the Italian table and went glimmering across the floor. Across the hall was his destination—the broad balustraded staircase, which swept grandly up to the second floor. Toward this he tiptoed steadying himself with one hand against the wall. Almost to his goal, he heard a muffled footfall and shrank against the wall with a catlike agility, but, though the shadow fell steep and gloomy there, luck was against him.

A middle-aged servant of solemn port, serene with the twofold dignity of double chin and bald head, paused at the table in his progress across the room, and swept the apartment with the judicial eye of one who knows that everything is as it should be but will not trust even the silence of night. So that bland blue eye struck first on the faintly shining top hat of Anthony, ran down his overcoat, and lingered in gloomy dismay on the telltale streak of white where the trouser leg should have been.

What he thought not even another Oedipus could have conjectured. The young master very obviously did not wish to be observed, and in such times Peters at could be blinder than the bat noon-day and more secret than the River Styx. He turned away, unhurried, the fold of that double chin a little more pronounced over the severe correctness of his collar.

A very sibilant whisper pursued him. He stopped again, still without haste, and turned not directly toward Anthony, but at a discreet angle, with his eyes fixed firmly upon the ceiling.

CHAPTER IV
A SESSION OF CHAT

The whisper grew distinct in words.

"Peters, you old numskull, come here!"

The approach of Peters was something like the sidewise waddle of a very aged crab. He looked to the north, but his feet carried him to the east. That he was much moved was attested by the colour which had mounted even to the gleaming expanse of that nobly bald head.

"Yes, Master Anthony—I mean Mr. Anthony?"

He set his teeth at the *faux pas*.

"Peters, look at me. Confound it, I haven't murdered any one. Are you busy?"

It required whole seconds for the eyes to wheel round upon Anthony, and they were immediately debased from the telltale white of that leg to the floor.

"No, sir."

"Then come up with me and help me change. Quick!"

He turned and fled noiselessly up the great stairs, with Peters panting behind. Anthony's overcoat was off before he had fairly entered his room and his coat and vest flopped through the air as Peters shut the door. Whatever the old servant lacked in agility he made up in certain knowledge; as he laid out a fresh tuxedo, Anthony changed with the speed of one pursued. The conversation was spasmodic to a degree.

"Where's father? Waiting in the library?"

"Yes. Reading, sir."

"Had a mix-up—bully time, though—damn this collar! Peters, I wish you'd been there—where's those trousers? Rub some of the crease out of 'em—they must look a *little* worn."

He stood at last completely dressed while Peters looked on with a shining eye and a smile which in a younger man would have suggested many things.

"How is it? Will I pass father this way?"

"I hope so, sir."

"But you don't think so?"

"It's hard to deceive him."

"Confound it! Don't I know? Well, here's for a try. Soft-foot it down stairs. I'll go after you and bang the door. Then you say good-evening in a loud voice and I'll go into the library. How's that?"

"Very good—your coat over your arm—so! Just ruffle your hair a bit, sir—now you should do very nicely."

At the door: "Go first, Peters—first, man, and hurry, but watch those big feet of yours. If you make a noise on the stairs I'm done with you."

The noiselessness of the descending feet was safe enough, but not so safe was the chuckling of Peters for, though he fought against the threatening explosion, it rumbled like the roll of approaching thunder. In the hall below, Anthony opened and slammed the door.

"Good-evening, Mr. Anthony," said Peters loudly, too loudly.

"Evening, Peters. Where's father?"

"In the library, sir. Shall I take your coat?"

"I'll carry it up to my room when I go. That's all."

He opened the door to the library and entered with a hope that his father would not be facing him, but he found that John Woodbury was not even reading. He sat by the big fire-place smoking a pipe which he now removed slowly from his teeth.

"Hello, Anthony."

"Good-evening, sir."

He rose to shake hands with his son: they might have been friends meeting after a separation so long that they were compelled to be formal, and as Anthony turned to lay down his hat and coat he knew that the keen grey eyes studied him carefully from head to foot.

"Take this chair."

"Why, sir, wouldn't dream of disturbing you."

"Not a bit. I want you to try it; just a trifle too narrow for me."

John Woodbury rose and gestured his son to the chair he had been occupying. Anthony hesitated, but then, like one who obeys first and thinks afterward, seated himself as directed.

"Mighty comfortable, sir."

The big man stood with his hands clasped behind him, peering down under shaggy, iron-grey brows.

"I thought it would be. I designed it myself for you and I had a pretty bad time getting it made."

He stepped to one side.

"Hits you pretty well under the knees, doesn't it? Yes, it's deeper than most."

"A perfect fit, father, and mighty thoughtful of you."

"H-m," rumbled John Woodbury, and looked about like one who has forgotten something. "What about a glass of Scotch?"

"Nothing, thank you—I—in fact I'm not very strong for the stuff."

The rough brows rose a trifle and fell.

"No? But isn't it usual? Better have a go."

Once more there was that slight touch of hesitancy, as if the son were not quite sure of the father and wished to make every concession.

"Certainly, if it'll make you easier."

There was an instant softening of the hard lines of the elder Woodbury's face, as though some favour of import had been done him. He touched a bell-cord and lowered himself with a little grunt of relaxation into a chair. The chair was stoutly built, but it groaned a little under the weight of the mighty frame it received. He leaned back and in his face was a light which came not altogether from the comfortable glow of the fire.

And when the servant appeared the big man ordered: "Scotch and seltzer and one glass with a pitcher of ice."

"Aren't you taking anything, sir?" asked Anthony.

"Who, me? Yes, yes, of course. Why, let me see—bring me a pitcher of beer." He added as the servant disappeared: "Never could get a taste for Scotch, and rye doesn't seem to be—er—good form. Eh, Anthony?"

"Nonsense," frowned the son, "haven't you a right to be comfortable in your own house?"

"Come, come!" rumbled John Woodbury. "A young fellow in your position can't have a boor for a father, eh?"

It was apparently an old argument between them, for Anthony stared gloomily at the fire, making no attempt to reply; and he glanced up in relief when the servant entered with the liquor. John Woodbury, however, returned to the charge as soon as they were left alone again, saying: "As a matter of fact, I'm about to set you up in an establishment of your own in New York." He made a vastly inclusive gesture. "Everything done up brown—old house—high-class interior decorator, to get you started with a splash."

"Are you tired of Long Island?"

"*I'm* not going to the city, but you will."

"And my work?"

"A gentleman of the class you'll be in can't callous his hands with work. I spent my life making money; you can use your life throwing it away—like a gentleman. But"—he reached out at this point

and smashed a burly fist into a palm hardly less hard—"but I'll be damned, Anthony, if I'll let you stay here in Long Island wasting your time riding the wildest horses you can get and practising with an infernal revolver. What the devil do you mean by it?"

"I don't know," said the other, musing. "Of course the days of revolvers are past, but I love the feel of the butt against my palm—I love the kick of the barrel tossing up—I love the balance; and when I have a six-shooter in my hand, sir, I feel as if I had six lives. Odd, isn't it?" He grew excited as he talked, his eyes gleaming with dancing points of fire. "And I'll tell you this, sir: I'd rather be out in the country where men still wear guns, where the sky isn't stained with filthy coal smoke, where there's an horizon wide enough to breathe in, where there's man-talk instead of this damned chatter over tea-cups—"

"Stop!" cried John Woodbury, and leaned forward, "no matter what fool ideas you get into your head—you're going to be a *gentleman*!"

The swaying forward of that mighty body, the outward thrust of the jaws, the ring of the voice, was like the crashing of an ax when armoured men meet in battle. The flicker in the eyes of Anthony was the rapier which swerves from the ax and then leaps at the heart. For a critical second their glances crossed and then the habit of obedience conquered.

"I suppose you know, sir."

The father stared gloomily at the floor.

"You're sort of mad, Anthony?"

Perhaps there was nothing more typical of Anthony than that he never frowned, no matter how angered he might be. Now the cold light passed from his eyes. He rose and passed behind the chair of the elder man, dropping a hand upon those massive shoulders.

"Angry with myself, sir, that I should so nearly fall out with the finest father that walks the earth."

The eyes of the grey man half closed and a semblance of a smile touched those stiff, stern lips; one of the great work-broken hands went up and rested on the fingers of his son.

"And there'll be no more of this infernal Western nonsense that you're always reverting to? No more of this horse-and-gun-and-hell-bent-away stuff?"

"I suppose not," said Anthony heavily.

"Well, Anthony, sit down and tell me about tonight."

The son obeyed, and finally said, with difficulty: "I didn't go to the Morrison supper."

A sudden cloud of white rose from the bowl of Woodbury's pipe.

"But I thought—"

"That it was a big event? It was—a fine thing for me to get a bid to; but I went to the Wild West show instead. Sir, I know it was childish, but—I couldn't help it! I saw the posters; I thought of the horse-breaking, the guns, the swing and snap and dash of galloping men, the taint of sweating horses—and by God, sir, I *couldn't* stay away! Are you angry?"

It was more than anger; it was almost fear that widened the eye of Woodbury as he stared at his son. He said at last, controlling himself: "But I have your word; you've given up the thought of this Western life?"

"Yes," answered Anthony, with a touch of despair, "I have given it up, I suppose. But, oh, sir—" He stopped, hopeless.

"And what else happened?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"After you come home you don't usually change your clothes merely for the pleasure of sitting with me here."

"Nothing escapes you, does it?" muttered Anthony.

"In your set, Anthony, that's what they'd call an improper question."

"I could ask you any number of questions, sir, for that matter."

"Well?"

"That room over there, for instance, which you always keep locked. Am I never to have a look at it?"

He indicated a door which opened from the library.

"I hope not."

"You say that with a good deal of feeling. But there's one thing more that I have a right to hear about. My mother! Why do you never tell me of her?"

The big man stirred and the chair groaned beneath him.

"Because it tortures me to speak of her, Anthony," said the husky voice.

"Tortures me, lad!"

"I let the locked room go," said Anthony firmly, "but my mother—she is different. Why, sir, I don't even know how she looked! Dad, it's my right!"

"Is it? By God, you have a right to know exactly what I choose to tell you—no more!"

He rose, strode across the room with ponderous steps, drew aside the curtains which covered the view of the garden below, and stared for a time into the night. When he turned he found that Anthony had risen—a slender, erect figure. His voice was as quiet as his anger, but an inward quality made it as thrilling as the hoarse boom of his father.

"On that point I stick. I must know something about her."

"Must?"

"In spite of your anger. That locked room is yours; this house and everything in it is yours; but my mother—she was as much mine as yours, and I'll hear more about her—who she was, what she looked like, where she lived—"

The sharply indrawn breath of John Woodbury cut him short.

"She died in giving birth to you, Anthony."

"Dear God! She died for me?"

And in the silence which came over the two men it seemed as if another presence were in the room. John Woodbury stood at the fire-place with bowed head, and Anthony shaded his eyes and stared at the floor until he caught a glimpse of the other and went gently to him.

He said: "I'm sorrier than a lot of words could tell you. Will you sit down, sir, and let me tell you how I came to press home the question?"

"If you want to have it that way."

They resumed their chairs.

CHAPTER V
ANTHONY IS LEFT IN THE DARK

"It will explain why I changed my clothes after I came home. You see, toward the end of the show a lot of the cowboys rode in. The ringmaster was announcing that they could ride anything that walked on four feet and wore a skin, when up jumped an oldish fellow in a box opposite mine and shouted that he had a horse which none of them could mount. He offered five hundred dollars to the man who could back him; and made it good by going out of the building and coming back inside of five minutes with two men leading a great stallion, the ugliest piece of horseflesh I've ever seen.

"As they worked the brute down the arena, it caught sight of my white shirt, I suppose, for it made a dive at me, reared up, and smashed its forehoofs against the barrier. By Jove, a regular maneater! Brought my heart into my mouth to see the big devil raging, and I began to yearn to get astride him and to—well, just fight to see which of us would come out on top. You know?"

The big man moistened his lips; he was strangely excited.

"So you climbed into the arena and rode the horse?"

"Exactly! I knew you'd understand! After I'd ridden the horse to a standstill and climbed off, a good many people gathered around me. One of them was a big man, about your size. In fact, now that I look back at it, he was a good deal like you in more ways than one; looked as if time had hardened him without making him brittle. He came to me and said: 'Excuse me, son, but you look sort of familiar to me. Mind telling me who your mother was?' What could I answer to a—"

A shadow fell across Anthony from the rising height of his father. As he looked up he saw John Woodbury glance sharply, first toward the French windows and then at the door of the secret room.

"Was that all, Anthony?"

"Yes, about all."

"I want to be alone."

The habit of automatic obedience made Anthony rise in spite of the questions which were storming at his lips.

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, my boy."

At the door the harsh voice of his father overtook him.

"Before you leave the house again, see me, Anthony."

"Yes, sir."

He closed the door softly, as one deep in thought, and stood for a time without moving. Because a man had asked him who his mother was, he was under orders not to leave the house. While he stood, he heard a faint click of a snapping lock within the library and knew that John Woodbury had entered the secret room.

In his own bedroom he undressed slowly and afterward stood for a long time under the shower, rubbing himself down with the care of an athlete, thumbing the soreness of the wild ride out of the lean, sinewy muscles, for his was a made strength built up in the gymnasium and used on the wrestling mat, the cinder path, and the football field. Drying himself with a rough towel that whipped the pink into his skin, he looked down over his corded, slender limbs, remembered the thick arms and Herculean torso of John Woodbury, and wondered.

He sat on the edge of his bed, wrapped in a bathrobe, and pondered. Stroke by stroke he built the picture of that dead mother, like a painter who jots down the first sketch of a large composition. John Woodbury, vast, blond, grey-eyed, had given him few of his physical traits. But then he had often heard that the son usually resembled the mother. She must have been dark, slender, a frail wife for such a giant; but perhaps she had a strength of spirit which made her his mate.

As the picture drew out more clearly in the mind of Anthony, he turned from the lighted room, threw open a window, and leaned out to breathe the calm, damp air of night.

It was infinitely cool, infinitely fresh. To his left a row of young trees darted their slender tops at the sky like shadowy spearheads. The smell of wet leaves and the wet grass beneath rose up to him. To the right, for his own room stood in a wing of the mansion, the house shouldered its way into the gloom, a solemn, grey shadow, netted in a black tracery of climbing vine. In all the stretch of wall only two windows were lighted, and those yellow squares, he knew, belonged to his father. He had left the secret room, therefore.

As he watched, a shadow brushed slowly across one of the drawn shades, swept the second, and returned at once in the opposite direction. Back and forth, back and forth, that shadow moved, and as his eye grew accustomed to watching, he caught quite clearly the curve of the shoulders and the forward droop of the head.

It was not until then that the first alarm came to Anthony, for he knew that the footsteps of the big grey man were dogged by fear. He could no more conceive it than he could imagine noon and midnight in conjunction, and feeling as guilty as if he had played the part of an eavesdropper he turned away, snapped off the lights, and slipped into bed.

The pleasant warmth of sleep would not come. In its place the images of the day filed past him like the dance of figures on a motion picture screen, and always, like the repeated entrance of the hero, the other images grew small and dim. He saw again the burly stranger wading through the crowd in the arena, shaking off the packed mob as the prow of a stately ship shakes off the water, to either side.

At length he started out of bed and glanced through the window. The moving shadow still swept across the lighted shades of his father's room; so he donned bathrobe and slippers and went down the long hall. At the door he did not stop to knock, for he was too deeply concerned by this time to pay any heed to convention. He grasped the knob and threw the door wide open. What happened then was so sudden that he could not be sure afterward what he had seen. He was certain that the door opened on a lighted room, yet before he could step in the lights were snapped out.

He was staring into a deep void of night; and a silence came about him like a whisper. Out of that silence he thought after a second that he caught the sound of a hurried breathing, louder and louder, as though someone were creeping upon him. He glanced over his shoulder in a slight panic, but down the grey hall on either side there was nothing to be seen. Once more he looked back into the solemn room, opened his lips to speak, changed his mind, and closed the door again.

Yet when he looked down again from his own room the lights shone once more on the shades of his father's windows. Past them brushed the shadow of the pacing man, up and down, up and down. He turned his eyes away to the jagged tops of the young trees, to the glimpses of dark fields beyond them, and inhaled the scent of the wet, green things. It seemed to Anthony as if it all were hostile—as though the whole outdoors were besieging this house.

He caught the sway of the pacing figure whose shadow moved in regular rhythm across the yellow shades. It entered his mind, clung there, and finally he began to pace in the same cadence, up and down the room. With every step he felt that he was entering deeper into the danger which threatened John Woodbury. What danger? For answer to himself he stepped to the windows and pulled down the shades. At least he could be alone.

CHAPTER VI
JOHN BARD

There is no cleanser of the mind like a morning bath. The same cold, whipping spray which calls up the pink blood, glowing through the marble of the skin, drives the ache of sleep from the brain, and washes away at once all the recorded thoughts of yesterday. So in place of a crowded slate of wonders and doubts, Anthony bore down to the breakfast table a willingness to take what the morning might bring and forget the night before.

John Woodbury was already there, helping himself from the covered dishes, for the meal was served in the English style. There was the usual "Good-morning, sir," "Good-morning, Anthony," and then they took their places at the table. A cautious survey of the craglike face of his father showed no traces of a sleepless night; but then, what could a single night of unrest mean to that body of iron?

He ventured, remembering the implied command to remain within the house until further orders: "You asked me to speak to you, sir, before I left the house. I'd rather like to take a ride this morning."

And the imperturbable voice replied: "You've worn your horses out lately. Better give them a day of rest."

That was all, but it brought back to Anthony the thought of the shadow which had swept ceaselessly across the yellow shades of his father's room; and he settled down to a day of reading. The misty rain of the night before had cleared the sky of its vapours, so he chose a nook in the library where the bright spring sun shone full and the open fire supplied the warmth. At lunch his father did not appear, and Peters announced that the master was busy in his room with papers. The afternoon repeated the morning, but with less unrest on the part of Anthony. He was busy with *L'Assommoir*, and lost himself in the story of downfall, surrounding himself with each unbeautiful detail.

Lunch was repeated at dinner, for still John Woodbury seemed to be "busy with papers in his room." A fear came to Anthony that he was to be dodged indefinitely in this manner, deceived like a child, and kept in the house until the silent drama was played out. But when he sat in the library that evening his father came in and quietly drew up a chair by the fire. The stage was ideally set for a confidence, but none was forthcoming. The fire shook long, sleepy shadows through the room, the glow of the two floor-lamps picked out two circles of light, and still the elder man sat over his paper and would not speak.

L'Assommoir ended, and to rid himself of the grey tragedy, Anthony looked up and through the windows toward the bright night which lay over the gardens and terraces outside, for a full moon silvered all with a flood of light. It was a waiting time, and into it the old-fashioned Dutch clock in the corner sent its voice with a monotonous, softly clanging toll of seconds, until Anthony forgot the moonlight over the outside terraces to watch the gradual sway of the pendulum. A minute, spent in this manner, was equal to an hour of ordinary time. Fascinated by the sway of the pendulum he became conscious of the passage of existence like a river broad and wide and shining which flowed on into an eternity of chance and left him stationary on the banks.

The voice which sounded at length was as dim and visionary as a part of his waking dream. It was like one of those imagined calls from the world of action to him who stood there, watching reality run past and never stirring himself to take advantage of the thousand opportunities for action. He would have discarded it for a part of his dream, had not he seen John Woodbury raise his head sharply, heard the paper fall with a dry crackling to the floor, and watched the square jaw of his father jut out in that familiar way which meant danger.

Once more, and this time it was unmistakably clear: "John Bard,—John Bard, come out to me!"

The big, grey man rose with widely staring eyes as if the name belonged to him, and strode with a thumping step into the secret room. Hardly had the clang of the closing door died out when he reappeared, fumbling at his throat. Straight to Anthony he came and extended a key from which dangled a piece of thin silver chain. It was the key to the secret room.

He took it in both hands, like a young knight receiving the pommel of his sword from him who has just given the accolade, and stared down at it until the creaking of the opened French windows startled him to his feet.

"Wait!" he called, "I will go also!"

The big man at the open window turned.

"You will sit where you are now," said his harsh voice, "but if I don't return you have the key to the room."

His burly shoulders disappeared down the steps toward the garden, and Anthony slipped back into his chair; yet for the first time in his life he was dreaming of disobeying the command of John Woodbury. Woodbury—yet the big man had risen automatically in answer to the name of Bard. John Bard! It struck on his consciousness like two hammer blows wrecking some fragile fabric; it jarred home like the timed blow of a pugilist. Woodbury? There might be a thousand men capable of that name, but there could only be one John Bard, and that was he who had disappeared down the steps leading to the garden. Anthony swerved in his chair and fastened his eyes on the Dutch clock. He gave himself five minutes before he should move.

The watched pot will never boil, and the minute hand of the big clock dragged forward with deadly pauses from one black mark to the next. Whispers rose in the room. Something fluttered the fallen newspaper as if a ghost-hand grasped it but had not the strength to raise; and the window rattled, with a sharp gust of wind. The last minute Anthony spent at the open French window with a backward eye on the clock; then he raced down the steps as though in his turn he answered a call out of the night.

The placid coolness of the open and the touch of moist, fresh air against his forehead mocked him as he reached the garden, and there were reassuring whispers from the trees he passed; yet he went on with a long, easy stride like a runner starting a distance race. First he skirted the row of poplars on the drive; then doubled back across the meadow to his right and ran in a sharp-angling course across an orchard of apple trees. Diverging from this direction, he circled at a quicker pace toward the rear of the grounds and coursed like a wild deer over a stretch of terraced lawns. On one of these low crests he stopped short under the black shadow of an elm.

In the smooth-shaven centre of the hollow before him, the same ground over which he had run and played a thousand times in his childhood, he saw two tall men standing back to back, like fighters come to a last stand and facing a crowd of foes. They separated at once, striding out with a measured step, and it was not until they moved that he caught the glint of metal at the side of one of them and knew that one was the man who had answered to the name of John Bard and the other was the grey man who had spoken to him at the Garden the night before. He knew it not so much by the testimony of his eyes at that dim distance as by a queer, inner feeling that this must be so. There was also a sense of familiarity about the whole thing, as if he were looking on something which he had seen rehearsed a thousand times.

As if they reached the end of an agreed course, the two whirled at the same instant, the metal in their hands glinted in an upward semicircle, and two guns barked hoarsely across the lawns.

One of them stood with his gun still poised; the other leaned gradually forward and toppled at full length on the grass. The victor strode out toward the fallen, but hearing the wild yell of Anthony he stopped, turned his head, and then fled into the grove of trees which topped the next rise of ground. After him, running as he had never before raced, went Anthony; his hand, as he sprinted, already tensed for the coming battle; two hundred yards at the most and he would reach the lumbering figure

which had plunged into the night of the trees; but a call reached him as sharp as the crack of the guns a moment before: "Anthony!"

His head twitched to one side and he saw John Bard rising to his elbow. His racing stride shortened choppily.

"Anthony!"

He could not choose but halt, groaning to give up the chase, and then sped back to the fallen man. At his coming John Bard collapsed on the grass, and when Anthony knelt beside him a voice in rough dialect began, as if an enforced culture were brushed away and forgotten in the crisis: "Anthony, there ain't no use in followin' him!"

"Where did the bullet strike you? Quick!"

"A place where it ain't no use to look. I know!"

"Let me follow him; it's not too late—"

The dying man struggled to one elbow.

"Don't follow, lad, if you love me."

"Who is he? Give me his name and—"

"He's acted in the name of God. You have no right to hunt him down."

"Then the law will do that."

"Not the law. For God's sake swear—"

"I'll swear anything. But now lie quiet; let me—"

"Don't try. This couldn't end no other way for John Bard."

"Is that your real name?"

"Yes. Now listen, Anthony, for my time's short."

He closed his eyes as if fighting silently for strength.

Then: "When I was a lad like you, Anthony—" That was all. The massive body relaxed; the head fell back into the dewy grass. Anthony pressed his head against the breast of John Bard and it seemed to him that there was still a faint pulse. With his pocket knife he ripped away the coat from the great chest and then tore open the shirt. On the expanse of the hairy chest there was one spot from which the purple blood welled; a deadly place for a wound, and yet the bleeding showed that there must still be life.

He had no chance to bind the wound, for John Bard opened his eyes again and said, as if in his dream he had still continued his tale to Anthony.

"So that's all the story, lad. Do you forgive me?"

"For what, sir? In God's name, for what?"

"Damnation! Tell me; do you forgive John Bard?"

He did not hear the answer, for he murmured: "Even Joan would forgive," and died.

CHAPTER VII
BLUEBEARD'S ROOM

As Anthony Woodbury, he knelt beside the dying. As Anthony Bard he rose with the dead man in his arms a mighty burden even for his supple strength; yet he went staggering up the slope, across a level terrace, and back to the house. There it was Peters who answered his call, Peters with a flabby face grown grey, but still the perfect servant who asked no questions; together they bore the weight up the stairs and placed it on John Bard's bed. While Anthony kept his steady vigil by the dead man, it was Peters again who summoned the police and the useless doctor.

To the old, uniformed sergeant, Anthony told a simple lie. His father had gone for a walk through the grounds because the night was fine, and Anthony was to join him there later, but when he arrived he found a dying man who could not even explain the manner of his death.

"Nothin' surprises me about a rich man's death," said the sergeant, "not in these here days of anarchy. Got a place to write? I want to make out my report."

So Anthony led the grizzled fellow to the library and supplied him with what he wished. The sergeant, saying good-bye, shook hands with a lingering grip.

"I knew John Woodbury," he said, "just by sight, but I'm here to tell the world that you've lost a father who was just about all man. So long; I'll be seein' you again."

Left alone, Anthony Bard went to the secret room. The key fitted smoothly into the lock. What the door opened upon was a little grey apartment with an arched ceiling, a place devoid of a single article of furniture save a straight-backed chair in the centre. Otherwise Anthony saw three things-two pictures on the wall and a little box in the corner. He went about his work very calmly, for here, he knew, was the only light upon the past of John Bard, that past which had lain passive so long and overwhelmed him on this night.

First he took up the box, as being by far the most promising of the three to give him what he wished to know; the name of the slayer, the place where he could be found, and the cause of the slaying. It held only two things; a piece of dirty silk and a small oil can; but the oil can and the black smears on the silk made him look closer, closer until the meaning struck him in a flare, as the glow of a lighted match suddenly illumines, even if faintly, an entire room.

In that box the revolver had lain, and here every day through all the year, John Bard retired to clean and oil his gun, oil and reclean it, keeping it ready for the crisis. That was why he went to the secret room as soon as he heard the call from the garden, and carrying that gun with him he had walked out, prepared. The time had come for which he had waited a quarter of a century, knowing all that time that the day must arrive. It was easy to understand now many an act of the big grim man; but still there was no light upon the slayer.

As he sat pondering he began to feel as if eyes were fastened upon him, watching, waiting, mocking him, eyes from behind which stared until a chill ran up his back. He jerked his head up, at last, and flashed a glance over his shoulder.

Indeed there was mockery in the smile with which she stared down to him from her frame, down to him and past him as if she scorned in him all men forever. It was not that which made Anthony close his eyes. He was trying with all his might to conjure up his own image vividly. He looked again, comparing his picture with this portrait on the wall, and then he knew why the grey man at the Garden had said: "Son, who's your mother?" For this was she into whose eyes he now stared.

She had the same deep, dark eyes, the same black hair, the same rather aquiline, thin face which her woman's eyes and lovely mouth made beautiful, but otherwise the same. He was simply a copy of that head hewn with a rough chisel—a sculptor's clay model rather than a smoothly finished re-production.

Ah, and the fine spirit of her, the buoyant, proud, scornful spirit! He stretched out his arms to her, drew closer, smiling as if she could meet and welcome his caress, and then remembered that this was a thing of canvas and paint—a bright shadow; no more.

To the second picture he turned with a deeper hope, but his heart fell at once, for all he saw was an enlarged photograph, two mountains, snow-topped in the distance, and in the foreground, first a mighty pine with the branches lopped smoothly from the side as though some tremendous ax had trimmed it, behind this a ranch-house, and farther back the smooth waters of a lake.

He turned away sadly and had reached the door when something made him turn back and stand once more before the photograph. It was quite the same, but it took on a different significance as he linked it with the two other objects in the room, the picture of his mother and the revolver box. He found himself searching among the forest for the figures of two great grey men, equal in bulk, such Titans as that wild country needed.

West it must be, but where? North or South? West, and from the West surely that grey man at the Garden had come, and from the West John Bard himself. Those two mountains, spearing the sky with their sharp horns—they would be the pole by which he steered his course.

A strong purpose is to a man what an engine is to a ship. Suppose a hull lies in the water, stanchly built, graceful in lines of strength and speed, nosing at the wharf or tugging back on the mooring line, it may be a fine piece of building but it cannot be much admired. But place an engine in the hull and add to those fine lines the purr of a motor—there is a sight which brings a smile to the lips and a light in the eyes. Anthony had been like the unengined hulk, moored in gentle waters with never the hope of a voyage to rough seas. Now that his purpose came to him he was calmly eager, almost gay in the prospect of the battle.

On the highest hill of Anson Place in a tomb overlooking the waters of the sound, they lowered the body of John Bard.

Afterward Anthony Bard went back to the secret room of his father. The old name of Anthony Woodbury he had abandoned; in fact, he felt almost like dating a new existence from the moment when he heard the voice calling out of the garden: "John Bard, come out to me!" If life was a thread, that voice was the shears which snapped the trend of his life and gave him a new beginning. As Anthony Bard he opened once more the door of the chamber.

He had replaced the revolver of John Bard in the box with the oiled silk. Now he took it out again and shoved it into his back trouser pocket, and then stood a long moment under the picture of the woman he knew was his mother. As he stared he felt himself receding to youth, to boyhood, to child days, finally to a helpless infant which that woman, perhaps, had held and loved. In those dark, brooding eyes he strove to read the mystery of his existence, but they remained as unriddled as the free stars of heaven.

He repeated to himself his new name, his real name: "Anthony Bard." It seemed to make him a stranger in his own eyes. "Woodbury" had been a name of culture; it suggested the air of a long descent. "Bard" was terse, short, brutally abrupt, alive with possibilities of action. Those possibilities he would never learn from the dead lips of his father. He sought them from his mother, but only the painted mouth and the painted smile answered him.

He turned again to the picture of the house with the snow-topped mountains in the distance. There surely, was the solution; somewhere in the infinite reaches of the West.

Finally he cut the picture from its frame and rolled it up. He felt that in so doing he would carry with him an identification tag—a clue to himself. With that clue in his travelling bag, he started for the city, bought his ticket, and boarded a train for the West.

CHAPTER VIII
MARTY WILKES

The motion of the train, during those first two days gave Anthony Bard a strange feeling that he was travelling from the present into the past. He felt as if it was not miles that he placed behind him, but days, weeks, months, years, that unrolled and carried him nearer and nearer to the beginning of himself. He heard nothing about him; he saw nothing of the territory which whirled past the window. They were already far West before a man boarded the train and carried to Bard the whole atmosphere of the mountain desert.

He got on the train at a Nebraska station and Anthony sat up to watch, for a man of importance does not need size in order to have a mien. Napoleon struck awe through the most gallant of his hero marshals, and even the porter treated this little brown man with a respect that was ludicrous at first glimpse.

He was so ugly that one smiled on glancing at him. His face, built on the plan of a wedge, was extremely narrow in front, with a long, high-bridged nose, slanting forehead, thin-lipped mouth, and a chin that jutted out to a point, but going back all the lines flared out like a reversed vista. A ridge of muscle crested each side of the broad jaws and the ears flaunted out behind so that he seemed to have been built for travelling through the wind.

The same wind, perhaps, had blown the hair away from the upper part of his forehead, leaving him quite bald half way back on his head, where a veritable forest of hair began, and continued, growing thicker and longer, until it brushed the collar of his coat behind.

When he entered the car he stood eying his seat for a long moment like a dog choosing the softest place on the floor before it lies down. Then he took his place and sat with his hands folded in his lap, moveless, speechless, with the little keen eyes straight before him—three hours that state continued. Then he got up and Anthony followed him to the diner. They sat at the same table.

"The journey," said Anthony, "is pretty tiresome through monotonous scenery like this."

The little keen eyes surveyed him a moment before the man spoke.

"There was buffalo on them plains once."

If someone had said to an ignorant questioner, "This little knoll is called Bunker Hill," he could not have been more abashed than was Anthony, who glanced through the window at the dreary prospect, looked back again, and found that the sharp eyes once more looked straight ahead without the slightest light of triumph in his coup. Silence, apparently, did not in the least abash this man.

"Know a good deal about buffaloes?"

"Yes."

It was not the insulting curtness of one who wishes to be left in peace, but simply a statement of bald fact.

"Really?" queried Anthony. "I didn't think you were as old as that!"

It appeared that this remark was worthy of no answer whatever. The little man turned his attention to his order of ham and eggs, cut off the first egg, manoeuvred it carefully into position on his knife, and raised it toward a mouth that stretched to astonishing proportions; but at the critical moment the egg slipped and flopped back on the plate.

"Missed!" said Anthony.

He couldn't help it; the ejaculation popped out of its own accord. The other regarded him with grave displeasure.

"If you had your bead drawed an' somebody jogged your arm jest as you pulled the trigger, would you call it a miss?"

"Excuse me. I've no doubt you're extremely accurate."

"I ne'er miss," said the other, and proved it by disposing of the egg at the next imposing mouthful.

"I should like to know you. My name is Anthony Bard."

"I'm Marty Wilkes. H'ware ye?"

They shook hands.

"Westerner, Mr. Wilkes?"

"This is my furthest East."

"Have a pleasant time?"

A gesture indicated the barren, brown waste of prairie.

"Too much civilization."

"Really?"

"Even the cattle got no fight in 'em." He added, "That sounds like I'm a fighter. I ain't."

"Till you're stirred up, Mr. Wilkes?"

"Heat me up an' I'll burn. Soil wood."

"You're pretty familiar with the Western country?"

"I get around."

"Perhaps you'd recognize this."

He took a scroll from his breast pocket and unrolled the photograph of the forest and the ranchhouse with the two mountains in the distance. Wilkes considered it unperturbed.

"Them are the Little Brothers."

"Ah! Then all I have to do is to travel to the foot of the Little Brothers?"

"No, about sixty miles from 'em." "Impossible! Why, the mountains almost overhang that house."

Wilkes handed back the picture and resumed his eating without reply. It was not a sullen resentment; it was hunger and a lack of curiosity. He was not "heated up."

"Any one," said Anthony, to lure the other on, "could see that."

"Sure; any one with bad eyes."

"But how can you tell it's sixty miles?"

"I've been there."

"Well, at least the big tree there and the ranchhouse will not be very hard to find. But I suppose I'll have to travel in a circle around the Little Brothers, keeping a sixty-mile radius?"

"If you want to waste a pile of time. Yes."

"I suppose you could lead me right to the spot?"

"I could."

"How?"

"That's about fifty-five miles straight north-east of the Little Brothers."

"How the devil can you tell that, man?"

"That ain't hard. They's a pretty steady north wind that blows in them parts. It's cold and it's strong. Now when you been out there long enough and get the idea that the only things that live is because God loves 'em. Mostly it's jest plain sand and rock. The trees live because they got protection from that north wind. Nature puts moss on 'em on the north side to shelter 'em from that same wind. Look at that picture close. You see that rough place on the side of that tree—jest a shadow like the whiskers of a man that ain't shaved for a week? That's the moss. Now if that's north, the rest is easy. That place is north-east of the Little Brothers."

"By Jove! how did you get such eyes?"

"Used 'em."

"The reason I'd like to find the house is because—"

"Reasons ain't none too popular with me."

"Well, you're pretty sure that your suggestion will take me to the spot?"

"I'm sure of nothing except my gun when the weather's hot."

"Reasonably sure, however? The pine trees and the house—if I don't find one I'll find the other."

"The house'll be in ruins, probably."

"Why?"

"That picture was taken a long time ago."

"Do you read the mind of a picture, Mr. Wilkes?"

"No."

"The tree, however, will be there."

"No, that's chopped down."

"That's going a bit too far. Do you mean to say you know that this particular tree is down?"

"That's first growth. All that country's been cut over. D'you think they'd pass up a tree the size of that?"

"It's going to be hard," said Anthony with a frown, "for me to get used to the West."

"Maybe not."

"I can ride and shoot pretty well, but I don't know the people, I haven't worn their clothes, and I can't talk their lingo."

"The country's mostly rocks when it ain't ground; the people is pretty generally men and women; the clothes they wear is cotton and wool, the lingo they talk is English."

It was like a paragraph out of some book of ultimate knowledge. He was not entirely contented with his statement, however, for now he qualified it as follows: "Maybe some of 'em don't talk good book English. Quite a pile ain't had much eddication; in fact there ain't awful many like me. But they can tell you how much you owe 'em an' they'll understand you when you say you're hungry. What's your business? Excuse me; I don't generally ask questions."

"That's all right. You've probably caught the habit from me. I'm simply going out to look about for excitement."

"A feller gener'ly finds what he's lookin' for. Maybe you won't be disappointed. I've knowed places on the range where excitement growed like fruit on a tree. It was like that there manna in the Bible. You didn't have to work none for it. You jest laid still an' it sort of dropped in your mouth."

He added with a sigh: "But them times ain't no more."

"That's hard on me, eh?"

"Don't start complainin' till you miss your feed. Things are gettin' pretty crowded, but there's ways of gettin' elbow room—even at a bar."

"And you really think there's nothing which distinguishes the Westerner from the Easterner?"

"Just the Western feeling, partner. Get that an' you'll be at home."

"If you were a little further East and said that, people might be inclined to smile a bit."

"Partner, if they did, they wouldn't finish their smile. But I heard a feller say once that the funny thing about men east and west of the Rockies was that they was all—"

He paused as if trying to remember.

"Well?"

"Americans, Mr. Bard."

CHAPTER IX
"THIS PLACE FOR REST"

As the white heat of midday passed and the shadows lengthened more and more rapidly to the east, the sheep moved out from the shade and from the tangle of the brush to feed in the open, and the dogs, which had laid one on either side of the man, rose and trotted out to recommence their vigil; but the shepherd did not change his position where he sat cross-legged under the tree.

Alternately he stroked the drooping moustache to the right and then to the left, with a little twist each time, which turned the hair to a sharp point in its furthest downward reach near his chin. To the right, to the left, to the right, to the left, while his eyes, sad with a perpetual mist, looked over the lake and far away to the white tops of the Little Brothers, now growing blue with shadow.

Finally with a brown forefinger he lifted the brush of moustache on his upper lip, leaned a little, and spat. After that he leaned back with a sigh of content; the brown juice had struck fairly and squarely on the centre of the little stone which for the past two hours he had been endeavouring vainly to hit. The wind had been against him.

All was well. The spindling tops of the second-growth forest pointed against the pale blue of a stainless sky, and through that clear air the blatting of the most distant sheep sounded close, mingled with the light clangour of the bells. But the perfect peace was broken rudely now by the form of a horseman looming black and large against the eastern sky. He trotted his horse down the slope, scattered a group of noisy sheep from side to side before him, and drew rein before the shepherd.

"Evening."

"Evening, stranger."

"Own this land?"

"No; rent it."

"Could I camp here?"

The shepherd lifted his moustache again and spat; when he spoke his eyes held steadily and sadly on the little stone, which he had missed again.

"Can't think of nobody who'd stop you."

"That your house over there? You rent that?"

He pointed to a broken-backed ruin which stood on the point of land that jutted out onto the waters of the lake, a crumbling structure slowly blackening with time.

"Nope."

A shadow of a frown crossed the face of the stranger and was gone again more quickly than a cloud shadow brushed over the window on a windy city in March.

"Well," he said, "this place looks pretty good to me. Ever fish those streams?"

"Don't eat fish."

"I'll wager you're missing some first-class trout, though. By Jove, I'd like to cast a couple of times over some of the pools I've passed in the last hour! By the way, who owns that house over there?"

"Same feller that owns this land."

"That so? What's his name?"

The other lifted his shaggy eyebrows and stared at the stranger.

"Ain't been long around here, eh?"

"No."

"William Drew, he owns that house."

"William Drew?" repeated the rider, as though imprinting the word on his memory. "Is he home?"

"Maybe."

"I'll ride over and ask him if he can put me up."

"Wait a minute. He may be home, but he lives on the other side of the range."

"Very far from here?"

"Apiece."

"How'll I know him when I see him?"

"Big feller—grey—broad shoulders."

"Ah!" murmured the other, and smiled as though the picture pleased him. "I'll hunt him up and ask him if I can camp out in this house of his for a while."

"Well, that's your party."

"Don't you think he'd let me?"

"Maybe; but the house ain't lucky."

"That so?"

"Sure. There's a grave in front of it."

"A grave? Whose?"

"Dunno."

"Well, it doesn't worry me. I'll drop over the hill and see Drew."

"Maybe you'd better wait. You'll be passin' him on the road, like as not."

"How's that?"

"He comes over here on Tuesdays once a month; to-morrow he's about due."

"Good. In the meantime I can camp over there by that stream, eh?"

"Don't know of nobody who'd stop you."

"By the way, what brings Drew over here every month?"

"Never asked him. I was brung up not to ask questions."

The stranger accepted this subtle rebuke with such an open, infectious laugh that the shepherd smiled in the very act of spitting at the stone, with the result that he missed it by whole inches.

"I'll answer some of the questions you haven't asked, then. My name is Anthony Bard and I'm out here seeing the mountains and having a bully time in general with my rod and gun."

The sad eyes regarded him without interest, but Bard swung from his horse and advanced with outstretched hand.

"I may be about here for a few days and we might as well get acquainted, eh? I'll promise to lay off the questions."

"I'm Logan."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Logan."

"Same t'you. Don't happen to have no fine-cut about you?"

"No. Sorry."

"So'm I. Ran out an' now all I've got is plug. Kind of hard on the teeth an' full of molasses."

"I've some pipe tobacco, though, which might do."

He produced a pouch which Logan opened, taking from it a generous pinch.

"Looks kind of like fine-cut—smells kind of like the real thing"—here he removed the quid from his mouth and introduced the great pinch of tobacco—"an' I'll be damned if it don't taste a pile the same!"

The misty eyes centred upon Bard and a light grew up in them.

"Maybe you'd put a price on this tobacco, stranger?"

"It's yours," said Bard, "to help you forget all the questions I've asked."

The shepherd acted at once lest the other might change his mind, dumping the contents of the pouch into the breast pocket of his shirt. Afterward his gaze sought the dim summits of the Little Brothers, and a sad, great resolution grew up and hardened the lines of his sallow face.

"You can camp with me if you want—partner."

A cough, hastily summoned, covered Bard's smile.

"Thanks awfully, but I'm used to camping alone—and rather like it that way."

"Which I'd say, the same goes here," responded the shepherd with infinite relief, "I ain't got much use for company—away from a bar. But I could show you a pretty neat spot for a camp, over there by the river."

"Thanks, but I'll explore for myself."

He swung again into the saddle and trotted whistling down the slope toward the creek which Logan had pointed out. But once fairly out of sight in the second-growth forest, he veered sharply to the right, touched his tough cattle-pony with the spurs, and headed at a racing pace straight for the old ruined house.

Even from a distance the house appeared unmistakably done for, but not until he came close at hand could Bard appreciate the full extent of the ruin. Every individual board appeared to be rotting and crumbling toward the ground, awaiting the shake of one fierce gust of wind to disappear in a cloud of mouldy dust. He left his horse with the reins hanging over its head behind the house and entered by the back door. One step past the threshold brought him misadventure, for his foot drove straight through the rotten flooring and his leg disappeared up to the knee.

After that he proceeded more cautiously, following the lines of the beams on which the boards were nailed, but even these shook and groaned under his weight. A whimsical fancy made him think of the fabled boat of Charon which will float a thousand bodiless spirits over the Styx but which sinks to the water-line with the weight of a single human being.

So he passed forward like one in a fabric of spider-webs almost fearing to breathe lest the whole house should puff away to shreds before him. Half the boards, fallen from the ceiling, revealed the bare rafters above; below there were ragged holes in the flooring. In one place a limb, torn by lightning or wind from its overhanging tree, had crashed through the corner of the roof and dropped straight through to the ground.

At last he reached a habitable room in the front of the house. It was a new shell built inside the old wreck, with four stout corner-posts supporting cross-beams, which in turn held up the mouldering roof. In the centre was a rude table and on either side a bunk built against the wall. Perhaps this was where Drew lived on the occasions of his visits to the old ranchhouse.

Out of the gloom of the place, Bard stepped with a shrug of the shoulders, like one who shakes off the spell of a nightmare. He strode through the doorway and took the slant, warm sun of the afternoon full in his face.

He found himself in front of the only spot on the entire premises which showed the slightest care, the mound of a grave under the shelter of two trees whose branches were interwoven overhead in a sort of impromptu roof. From the surface of the mound all the weeds and grasses had been carefully cleared away, and around its edge ran a path covered with gravel and sand. It was a wellbeaten path with the mark of heels still comparatively fresh upon it.

The headstone itself bore not a vestige of moss, but time had cracked it diagonally and the chiselled letters were weathered away. He studied it with painful care, poring intently over each faint impression. He who cared for the grave had apparently been troubled only to keep the stone free from dirt—the lettering he must have known by heart. At length Bard made out this inscription:

HERE SLEEPS
JOAN
WIFE OF WILLIAM DREW
SHE CHOSE THIS PLACE FOR REST

CHAPTER X
A BIT OF STALKING

It seemed as if the peaceful afternoons of Logan were ended forever, for the next day the scene of interruption was repeated under almost identical circumstances, save that the tree under which the shepherd sat was a little larger. Larger also was the man who rode over the brow of the hill to the east. The most durable cattle-pony would have staggered under the bulk of that rider, and therefore he rode a great, patient-eyed bay, with shoulders worthy of shoving against a work-collar; but the neck tapered down small behind a short head, and the legs, for all their breadth at shoulder and hip, slipped away to small hoofs, and ankles which sloped sharply to the rear, the sure sign of the fine saddle-horse.

Yet the strong horse was winded by the burden he bore, a mighty figure, deep-chested, amply shouldered, an ideal cavalier for the days when youths rode out in armour-plate to seek adventures and when men of fifty still lifted the lance to run a "friendly" course or two in the lists.

At sight of him Logan so far bestirred himself as to uncoil his long legs, rise, and stand with one shoulder propped against the tree.

"Evening, Mr. Drew," he called.

"Hello, Logan. How's everything with you?"

He would have ridden on, but at Logan's reply he checked his horse to a slow walk.

"Busy. Lots of company lately, Mr. Drew."

"Company?"

"Yes, there's a young feller come along who says he wants to see you. He's over there by the creek now, fishin' I think. I told him I'd holler if I seen you, but I guess you wouldn't mind ridin' over that way yourself."

Drew brought his horse to a halt.

"What does he want of me?"

"Dunno. Something about wanting to hunt and fish on your streams here."

"Why didn't you tell him he was welcome to do what he liked? Must be an Easterner, Logan."

"Wants to bunk in the old house, too. Seems sort of interested in it."

"That so? What sort of a fellow is he?"

"All right. A bit talky. Green; but he rides damn well, an' he smokes good tobacco."

His hand automatically rose and touched his breast pocket.

"I'll go over to him," said Drew, and swung his horse to the left, but only to come again to a halt.

He called over his shoulder: "What sort of a looking fellow?"

"Pretty keen—dark," answered Logan, slipping down into his original position. "Thin face; black eyes."

"Ah, yes," murmured Drew, and started at a trot for the creek.

Once more he imitated the actions of Bard the day before, however, for no sooner had the trees screened him thoroughly from the eyes of Logan than he abandoned his direct course for the creek. He swung from the saddle with an ease surprising in a man of such age and bulk and tossed the reins over the head of the horse.

Then he commenced a cautious stalking through the woods, silent as an Indian, stealthy of foot, with eyes that glanced sharply in all directions. Once a twig snapped under foot, and after that he remained motionless through a long moment, shrinking against the trunk of a tree and scanning the forest anxiously in all directions. At length he ventured out again, grown doubly cautious. In this manner he worked his way up the course of the stream, always keeping the waters just within sight but never passing out on the banks, where the walking would have been tenfold easier. So he came in sight of a figure far off through the trees.

If he had been cautious before, he became now as still as night. Dropping to hands and knees, or crouching almost as prone, he moved from the shadow of one tree to the next, now and then venturing a glance to make sure that he was pursuing the right course, until he manoeuvred to a point of vantage which commanded a clear view of Bard.

The latter was fishing, with his back to Drew. Again and again he cast his fly out under an overhanging limb which shadowed a deep pool. The big grey man set his teeth and waited with the patience of a stalking beast of prey, or a cat which will sit half the day waiting for the mouse to show above the opening of its hole.

Apparently there was a bite at length. The pole bent almost double and the reel played back and forth rapidly as the fisher wore down his victim. Finally he came close to the edge of the stream, dipped his net into the water, and jerked it up at once bearing a twisting, shining trout enwrapped in the meshes. Swinging about as he did so, Drew caught his first full glimpse of Anthony's face, and knew him for the man who had ridden the wild horse at Madison Square Garden those weeks before.

Perhaps it was astonishment that moved the big man—surely it could not have been fear—yet he knelt there behind the sheltering tree grey-faced, wide, and blank of eye, as a man might look who dreamed and awoke to see his vision standing before him in full sunlit life. What his expression became then could not be said, for he buried his face in his hands and his great body shook with a tremor. If this was not fear it was something very like.

And very like a man in fear he stole back among the trees as cautiously as he had made his approach. Resuming his horse he rode straight for Logan.

"Couldn't find your young friend," he said, "along the creek."

"Why," said Logan, "I can reach him with a holler from here, I think."

"Never mind; just tell him that he's welcome to do what he pleases on the place; and he can bunk down at the house if he wants to. I'd like to know his name, though."

"That's easy. Anthony Bard."

"Ah," said Drew slowly, "Anthony Bard!"

"That's it," nodded Logan, and fixed a curious eye upon the big grey rider.

As if to escape from that inquiring scrutiny, Drew wheeled his horse and spurred at a sharp gallop up the hill, leaving Logan frowning behind.

"No stay over night," muttered the shepherd. "No fooling about that damned old shack of a house; what's wrong with Drew?"

He answered himself, for all shepherds are forced by the bitter loneliness of their work to talk with themselves. "The old boy's worried. Damned if he isn't! I'll keep an eye on this Bard feller."

And he loosened the revolver in its holster.

He might have been even more concerned had he seen the redoubled speed with which Drew galloped as soon as the hilltop was between him and Logan. Straight on he pushed his horse, not exactly like one who fled but rather more like one too busy with consuming thoughts to pay the slightest heed to the welfare of his mount. It was a spent horse on which he trotted late that night up to the big, yawning door of his barn.

"Where's Nash?" he asked of the man who took his horse.

"Playing a game with the boys in the bunk-house, sir."

So past the bunk-house Drew went on his way to his dwelling, knocked, and threw open the door. Inside, a dozen men, seated at or standing around a table, looked up.

"Nash!"

"Here."

"On the jump, Nash. I'm in a hurry."

There rose a man of a build much prized in pugilistic circles. In those same circles he would have been described as a fellow with a fighting face and a heavy-weight above the hips and a light-weight below—a handsome fellow, except that his eyes were a little too small and his lips a trifle too

thin. He rose now in the midst of a general groan of dismay, and scooped in a considerable stack of gold as well as several bright piles of silver; he was undoubtedly taking the glory of the game with him.

"Is this square?" growled one of the men clenching his fist on the edge of the table.

The sardonic smile hardened on the lips of Nash as he answered: "Before you've been here much longer, Pete, you'll find out that about everything I do is square. Sorry to leave you, boys, before you're broke, but orders is orders."

"But one more hand first," pleaded Pete.

"You poor fool," snarled Nash, "d'you think I'll take a chance on keepin' *him*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.