

Seltzer Charles Alden

The Trail to Yesterday



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CHAPTER I

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL

Many disquieting thoughts oppressed Miss Sheila Langford as she halted her pony on the crest of a slight rise and swept the desolate and slumberous world with an anxious glance. Quite the most appalling of these thoughts developed from a realization of the fact that she had lost the trail. The whole categorical array of inconveniences incidental to traveling in a new, unsettled country paled into insignificance when she considered this horrifying and entirely unromantic fact. She was lost; she had strayed from the trail, she was alone and night was coming.

She would not have cared so much about the darkness, for she had never been a coward, and had conditions been normal she would have asked nothing better than a rapid gallop over the dim plains. But as she drew her pony up on the crest of the rise a rumble of thunder reached her ears. Of course it would rain, now that she had lost the trail, she decided, yielding to a sudden, bitter anger. It usually did rain when one was abroad without prospect of shelter; it always rained when one was lost.

Well, there was no help for it, of course, and she had only herself to blame for the blunder. For the other – not unusual – irritating details that had combined to place her in this awkward position she could blame, first Duncan, the manager of the Double R – who should have sent someone to meet her at the station; the station agent – who had allowed her to set forth in search of the Double R without a guide, – though even now, considering this phase of the situation, she remembered that the agent had told her there was no one to send – and certainly the desolate appearance of Lazette had borne out this statement; and last, she could blame the country itself for being an unfeatured wilderness.

Something might be said in extenuation of the station agent's and the Double R manager's sins of omission, but without doubt the country was what she had termed it – an unfeatured wilderness. Her first sensation upon getting a view of the country had been one of deep disappointment. There was plenty of it, she had decided, – enough to make one shrink from its very bigness; yet because it was different from the land she had been accustomed to she felt that somehow it was inferior. Her father had assured her of its beauty, and she had come prepared to fall in love with it, but within the last half hour – when she had begun to realize that she had lost the trail – she had grown to hate it.

She hated the desolation, the space, the silence, the arid stretches; she had made grimaces at the “cactuses” with their forbidding pricklers – though she could not help admiring them, they seemed to be the only growing thing in the country capable of defying the heat and the sun. Most of all she hated the alkali dust. All afternoon she had kept brushing it off her clothing and clearing it out of her throat, and only within the last half hour she had begun to realize that her efforts had been without result – it lay thick all over her; her throat was dry and parched with it, and her eyes burned.

She sat erect, flushed and indignant, to look around at the country. A premonitory calm had succeeded the warning rumble. Ominous black clouds were scurrying, wind-whipped, spreading fan-like through the sky, blotting out the colors of the sunset, darkening the plains, creating weird shadows. Objects that Sheila had been able to see quite distinctly when she had reined in her pony were no longer visible. She stirred uneasily.

“We'll go somewhere,” she said aloud to the pony, as she urged the animal down the slope. “If it rains we'll get just as wet here as we would anywhere else.” She was surprised at the queer quiver in her voice. She was going to be brave, of course, but somehow there seemed to be little consolation in the logic of her remark.

The pony shambled forward, carefully picking its way, and Sheila mentally thanked the station agent for providing her with so reliable a beast. There was one consoling fact at any rate, and she retracted many hard things she had said in the early part of her ride about the agent.

Shuffling down the slope the pony struck a level. After traveling over this for a quarter of an hour Sheila became aware of an odd silence; looking upward she saw that the clouds were no longer in motion; that they were hovering, low and black, directly overhead. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the sky, showing Sheila a great waste of world that stretched to four horizons. It revealed, in the distance, the naked peaks of some hills; a few frowning buttes that seemed to fringe a river; some gullies in which lurked forbidding shadows; clumps of desert growth – the cactus – now seeming grotesque and mocking; the snaky octilla; the filmy, rustling mesquite; the dust-laden sage-brush; the soap weed; the sentinel lance of the yucca. Then the light was gone and darkness came again.

Sheila shuddered and vainly tried to force down a queer lump that had risen in her throat over the desolation of it all. It was not anything like her father had pictured it! Men had the silly habit of exaggerating in these things, she decided – they were rough themselves and they made the mistake of thinking that great, grim things were attractive. What beauty was there, for instance, in a country where there was nothing but space and silence and grotesque weeds – and rain? Before she could answer this question a sudden breeze swept over her; a few large drops of rain dashed into her face, and her thoughts returned to herself.

The pony broke into a sharp lope and she allowed it to hold the pace, wisely concluding that the animal was probably more familiar with the country than she. She found herself wondering why she had not thought of that before – when, for example, a few miles back she had deliberately guided it out of a beaten trail toward a section of country where, she had imagined, the traveling would be better. No doubt she had strayed from the trail just there.

The drops of rain grew more frequent; they splashed into her face; she could feel them striking her arms and shoulders. The pony's neck and mane became moist under her hand, the darkness increased for a time and the continuing rumble in the heavens presaged a steady downpour.

The pony moved faster now; it needed no urging, and Sheila held her breath for fear that it might fall, straining her eyes to watch its limbs as they moved with the sure regularity of an automaton. After a time they reached the end of the level; Sheila could tell that the pony was negotiating another rise, for it slackened speed appreciably and she felt herself settling back against the cantle of the saddle. A little later she realized that they were going down the opposite side of the rise, and a moment later they were again on a level. A deeper blackness than they had yet encountered rose on their right, and Sheila correctly decided it to be caused by a stretch of wood that she had observed from the crest of the rise where she had halted her pony for a view of the country. After an interval, during which she debated the wisdom of directing her pony into the wood for protection from the rain which was now coming against her face in vicious slants, her pony nickered shrilly!

A thrill of fear assailed Sheila. She knew horses and was certain that some living thing was on the trail in front of her. Halting the pony, she held tightly to the reins through a short, tense silence. Then presently, from a point just ahead on the trail, came an answering nicker in the horse language. Sheila's pony cavorted nervously and broke into a lope, sharper this time in spite of the tight rein she kept on it. Her fear grew, though mingling with it was a devout hope. If only the animal which had answered her own pony belonged to the Double R! She would take back many of the unkind and uncharitable things she had said about the country since she had lost the trail.

The pony's gait had quickened into a gallop – which she could not check. In the past few minutes the darkness had lifted a little; she saw that the pony was making a gradual turn, following a bend in the river. Then came a flash of lightning and she saw, a short distance ahead, a pony and rider, stationary, watching. With an effort she succeeded in reining in her own animal, and while she sat in the saddle, trembling and anxious, there came another flash of lightning and she saw the rider's face.

The rider was a cowboy. She had distinctly seen the leathern chaps on his legs; the broad hat, the scarf at his throat. Doubt and fear assailed her. What if the man did not belong to the Double R? What if he were a road agent – an outlaw? Immediately she heard an exclamation from him in which she detected much surprise and not a little amusement.

“Shucks!” he said. “It’s a woman!”

There came a slow movement. In the lifting darkness Sheila saw the man return a pistol to the holster that swung at his right hip. He carelessly threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and looked at her. She sat very rigid, debating a sudden impulse to urge her pony past him and escape the danger that seemed to threaten. While she watched he shoved the broad brimmed hat back from his forehead. He was not over five feet distant from her; she could feel her pony nuzzling his with an inquisitive muzzle, and she could dimly see the rider’s face. It belonged to a man of probably twenty-eight or thirty; it had regular features, keen, level eyes and a firm mouth. There was a slight smile on his face and somehow the fear that had oppressed Sheila began to take flight. And while she sat awaiting the turn of events his voice again startled her:

“I reckon you’ve stampeded off your range, ma’am?”

A sigh of relief escaped Sheila. The voice was very gentle and friendly.

“I don’t think that I have stampeded – whatever that means,” she returned, reassured now that the stranger gave promise of being none of the dire figures of her imagination; “I am lost merely. You see, I am looking for the Double R ranch.”

“Oh,” he said inexpressively; “the Double R.”

There ensued a short silence and she could not see his face for he had bowed his head a little and the broad brimmed hat intervened.

“Do you know where the Double R ranch is?” There was a slight impatience in her voice.

“Sure,” came his voice. “It’s up the crick a ways.”

“How far?”

“Twenty miles.”

“Oh!” This information was disheartening. Twenty miles! And the rain was coming steadily down; she could feel it soaking through her clothing. A bitter, unreasoning anger against nature, against the circumstances which had conspired to place her in this position; against the man for his apparent lack of interest in her welfare, moved her, though she might have left the man out of it, for certainly he could not be held responsible. Yet his nonchalance, his serenity – something about him – irritated her. Didn’t he know she was getting wet? Why didn’t he offer her shelter? It did not occur to her that perhaps he knew of no shelter. But while her indignation over his inaction grew she saw that he was doing something – fumbling at a bundle that seemed to be strapped to the cantle of his saddle. And then he leaned forward – very close to her – and she saw that he was offering her a tarpaulin.

“Wrap yourself in this,” he directed. “It ain’t pretty, of course, but it’ll keep you from getting drenched. Rain ain’t no respecter of persons.”

She detected a compliment in this but ignored it and placed the tarpaulin around her shoulders. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he was without protection. She hesitated.

“Thank you,” she said, “but I can’t take this. You haven’t anything for yourself.”

A careless laugh reached her. “That’s all right; I don’t need anything.”

There was silence again. He broke it with a question.

“What are you figuring to do now?”

What was she going to do? The prospect of a twenty-mile ride through a strange country in a drenching rain was far from appealing to her. Her hesitation was eloquent.

“I do not know,” she answered, no way of escape from the dilemma presenting itself.

“You can go on, of course,” he said, “and get lost, or hurt – or killed. It’s a bad trail. Or” – he continued, hesitating a little and appearing to speak with an effort – “there’s my shack. You can have that.”

Then he did have a dwelling place. This voluntary information removed another of the fearsome doubts that had beset her. She had been afraid that he might prove to be an irresponsible wanderer, but when a man kept a house it gave to his character a certain recommendation, it suggested stability, more, it indicated honesty.

Of course she would have to accept the shelter of his “shack.” There was no help for it, for it was impossible for her to entertain the idea of riding twenty miles over an unknown trail, through the rain and darkness. Moreover, she was not afraid of the stranger now, for in spite of his easy, serene movements, his quiet composure, his suppressed amusement, Sheila detected a note in his voice which told her that he was deeply concerned over her welfare – even though he seemed to be enjoying her. In any event she could not go forward, for the unknown terrified her and she felt that in accepting the proffered shelter of his “shack” she was choosing the lesser of two dangers. She decided quickly.

“I shall accept – I think. Will you please hurry? I am getting wet in spite of this – this covering.”

Wheeling without a word he proceeded down the trail, following the river. The darkness had abated somewhat, the low-hanging clouds had taken on a grayish-white hue, and the rain was coming down in torrents. Sheila pulled the tarpaulin tighter about her shoulders and clung desperately to the saddle, listening to the whining of the wind through the trees that flanked her, keeping a watchful eye on the tall, swaying, indistinct figure of her guide.

After riding for a quarter of an hour they reached a little clearing near the river and Sheila saw her guide halt his pony and dismount. A squat, black shape loomed out of the darkness near her and, riding closer, she saw a small cabin, of the lean-to type, constructed of adobe bricks. A dog barked in front of her and she heard the stranger speak sharply to it. He silently approached and helped her down from the saddle. Then he led both horses away into the darkness on the other side of the cabin. During his absence she found time to glance about her. It was a desolate place. Did he live here alone?

The silence brought no answer to this question, and while she continued to search out objects in the darkness she saw the stranger reappear around the corner of the cabin and approach the door. He fumbled at it for a moment and threw it open. He disappeared within and an instant later Sheila heard the scratch of a match and saw a feeble glimmer of light shoot out through the doorway. Then the stranger’s voice:

“Come in.”

He had lighted a candle that stood on a table in the center of the room, and in its glaring flicker as she stepped inside Sheila caught her first good view of the stranger’s face. She felt reassured instantly, for it was a good face, with lines denoting strength of character. The drooping mustache did not quite conceal his lips, which were straight and firm. Sheila was a little disturbed over the hard expression in them, however, though she had heard that the men of the West lived rather hazardous lives and she supposed that in time their faces showed it. It was his eyes, though, that gave her a fleeting glimpse of his character. They were blue – a steely, fathomless blue; baffling, mocking; swimming – as she looked into them now – with an expression that she could not attempt to analyze. One thing she saw in them only, – recklessness – and she drew a slow, deep breath.

They were standing very close together. He caught the deep-drawn breath and looked quickly at her, his eyes alight and narrowed with an expression which was a curious mingling of quizzical humor and grim enjoyment. Her own eyes did not waver, though his were boring into hers steadily, as though he were trying to read her thoughts.

“Afraid?” he questioned, with a suggestion of sarcasm in the curl of his lips.

Sheila stiffened, her eyes flashing defiance. She studied him steadily, her spirit battling his over the few feet that separated them. Then she spoke deliberately, evenly: “I am not afraid of you!”

“That’s right.” A gratified smile broke on the straight, hard lips. A new expression came into his eyes – admiration. “You’ve got nerve, ma’am. I’m some pleased that you’ve got that much trust in me. You don’t need to be scared. You’re as safe here as you’d be out there.” He nodded toward the open door. “Safer,” he added with a grave smile; “you might get hurt out there.”

He turned abruptly and went to the door, where he stood for a long time looking out into the darkness. She watched him for a moment and then removed the tarpaulin and hung it from a nail in the wall of the cabin. Standing near the table she glanced about her. There was only one room in the cabin, but it was large – about twenty by twenty, she estimated. Beside an open fireplace in a corner were several pots and pans – his cooking utensils. On a shelf were some dishes. A guitar swung from a gaudy string suspended from the wall. A tin of tobacco and a pipe reposed on another shelf beside a box of matches. A bunk filled a corner and she went over to it, fearing. But it was clean and the bed clothing fresh and she smiled a little as she continued her examination.

The latter finished she went to a small window above the bunk, looking out into the night. The rain came against the glass in stinging slants, and watching it she found herself feeling very grateful to the man who stood in the doorway. Turning abruptly, she caught him watching her, an appraising smile on his face.

“You ought to be hungry by now,” he said. “There’s a fireplace and some wood. Do you want a fire?”

In response to her nod he kindled a fire, she standing beside the window watching him, noting his lithe, easy movements. She could not mistake the strength and virility of his figure, even with his back turned to her, but it seemed to her that there was a certain recklessness in his actions – as though his every movement advertised a careless regard for consequences. She held her breath when he split a short log into slender splinters, for he swung the short-handled axe with a loose grasp, as though he cared very little where its sharp blade landed. But she noted that he struck with precision despite his apparent carelessness, every blow falling true. His manner of handling the axe reflected the spirit that shone in his eyes when, after kindling the fire, he stood up and looked at her.

“There’s grub in the chuck box,” he stated shortly. “There’s some pans and things. It ain’t what you might call elegant – not what you’ve been used to, I expect. But it’s a heap better than nothing, and I reckon you’ll be able to get along.” He turned and walked to the doorway, standing in it for an instant, facing out. “Good-night,” he added. The tarpaulin dangled from his arm.

Evidently he intended going away. A sudden dread of being alone filled her. “Wait!” she cried involuntarily. “Where are you going?”

He halted and looked back at her, an odd smile on his face.

“To my bunk.”

“Oh!” She could not analyze the smile on his face, but in it she thought she detected something subtle – untruthfulness perhaps. She glanced at the tarpaulin and from it to his eyes, holding her gaze steadily.

“You are going to sleep in the open,” she said.

He caught the accusation in her eyes and his face reddened.

“Well,” he admitted, “I’ve done it before.”

“Perhaps,” she said, a little doubtfully. “But I do not care to feel that I am driving you out into the storm. You might catch cold and die. And I should not want to think that I was responsible for your death.”

“A little wetting wouldn’t hurt me.” He looked at her appraisingly, a glint of sympathy in his eyes. Standing there, framed in the darkness, the flickering light from the candle on his strong, grave face, he made a picture that, she felt, she would not soon forget.

“I reckon you ain’t afraid to stay here alone, ma’am,” he said.

“Yes,” she returned frankly, “I am afraid. I do not want to stay here alone.”

A pistol flashed in his hand, its butt toward her, and now for the first time she saw another at his hip. She repressed a desire to shudder and stared with dilated eyes at the extended weapon.

“Take this gun,” he offered. “It ain’t much for looks, but it’ll go right handy. You can bar the door, too, and the window.”

She refused to take the weapon. “I wouldn’t know how to use it if I had occasion to. I prefer to have you remain in the cabin – for protection.”

He bowed. “I thought you’d – ” he began, and then smiled wryly. “It certainly would be some wet outside,” he admitted. “It wouldn’t be pleasant sleeping. I’ll lay over here by the door when I get my blankets.”

He went outside and in a few minutes reappeared with his blankets and saddle. Without speaking a word to Sheila he laid the saddle down, spread the blanket over it, and stretched himself out on his back.

“I don’t know about the light,” he said after an interval of silence, during which Sheila sat on the edge of the bunk and regarded his profile appraisingly. “You can blow it out if you like.”

“I prefer to have it burning.”

“Suit yourself.”

Sheila got up and placed the candle in a tin dish as a precaution against fire. Then, when its position satisfied her she left the table and went to the bunk, stretching herself out on it, fully dressed.

For a long time she lay, listening to the soft patter of the rain on the roof, looking upward at the drops that splashed against the window, listening to the fitful whining of the wind through the trees near the cabin. Her eyes closed presently, sleep was fast claiming her. Then she heard her host’s voice:

“You’re from the East, I reckon.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“New York.”

“City?”

“Albany.”

There was a silence. Sheila was thoroughly awake again, and once more her gaze went to the window, where unceasing streams trickled down the glass. Whatever fear she had had of the owner of the cabin had long ago been dispelled by his manner which, though puzzling, hinted of the gentleman. She would have liked him better were it not for the reckless gleam in his eyes; that gleam, it seemed to her, indicated a trait of character which was not wholly admirable.

“What have you come out here for?”

Sheila smiled at the rain-spattered window, a flash of pleased vanity in her eyes. His voice had been low, but in it she detected much curiosity, even interest. It was not surprising, of course, that he should feel an interest in her; other men had been interested in her too, only they had not been men that lived in romantic wildernesses, – observe that she did not make use of the term “unfeatured,” which she had manufactured soon after realizing that she was lost – nor had they carried big revolvers, like this man, who seemed also to know very well how to use them.

Those other men who had been interested in her had had a way of looking at her; there had always been a significant boldness in their eyes which belied the gentleness of demeanor which, she had always been sure, merely masked their real characters. She had never been able to look squarely at any of those men, the men of her circle who had danced attendance upon her at the social functions that had formerly filled her existence – without a feeling of repugnance.

They had worn man-shapes, of course, but somehow they had seemed to lack something real and vital; seemed to have possessed nothing of that forceful, magnetic personality which was needed to arouse her sympathy and interest. Not that the man on the floor in front of the door interested her – she could not admit that! But she had felt a sympathy for him in his loneliness, and she had looked into his eyes – had been able to look steadily into them, and though she had seen expressions that had puzzled her, she had at least seen nothing to cause her to feel any uneasiness. She had seen manliness there, and indomitability, and force, and it had seemed to her to be sufficient. His would be an ideal face were it not for the expression that lingered about the lips, were it not for the reckless glint in his eyes – a glint that revealed an untamed spirit.

His question remained unanswered. He stirred impatiently, and glancing at him Sheila saw that he had raised himself so that his chin rested in his hand, his elbow supported by the saddle.

“You here for a visit?” he questioned.

“Perhaps,” she said. “I do not know how long I shall stay. My father has bought the Double R.”

For a long time it seemed that he would have no comment to make on this and Sheila’s lips took on a decidedly petulant expression. Apparently he was not interested in her after all.

“Then Duncan has sold out?” There was satisfaction in his voice.

“You are keen,” she mocked.

“And tickled,” he added.

His short laugh brought a sudden interest into her eyes. “Then you don’t like Duncan,” she said.

“I reckon you’re some keen too,” came the mocking response.

Sheila flushed, turned and looked defiantly at him. His hand still supported his head and there was an unmistakable interest in his eyes as he caught her glance at him and smiled.

“You got any objections to telling me your name? We ain’t been introduced, you know?” he said.

“It is Sheila Langford.”

She had turned her head and was giving her attention to the window above her. The fingers of the hand that had been supporting his head slowly clenched, he raised himself slightly, his body rigid, his chin thrusting, his face pale, his eyes burning with a sudden fierce fire. Once he opened his lips to speak, but instantly closed them again, and a smile wreathed them – a mirthless smile that had in it a certain cold caution and cunning. After a silence that lasted long his voice came again, drawling, well-controlled, revealing nothing of the emotion which had previously affected him.

“What is your father’s name?”

“David Dowd Langford. An uncommon middle name, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Uncommon,” came his reply. His face, with the light of the candle gleaming full upon it, bore a queer pallor – the white of cold ashes. His right hand, which had been resting carelessly on the blanket, was now gripping it, the muscles tense and knotted. Yet after another long silence his voice came again – drawling, well-controlled, as before:

“What is he coming out here for?”

“He has retired from business and is coming out here for his health.”

“What business was he in?”

“Wholesale hardware.”

He was silent again and presently, hearing him stir, Sheila looked covertly at him. He had turned, his back was toward her, and he was stretched out on the blanket as though, fully satisfied with the result of his questioning, he intended going to sleep. For several minutes Sheila watched him with a growing curiosity. It was like a man to ask all and give nothing. He had questioned her to his complete satisfaction but had told nothing of himself. She was determined to discover something about him.

“Who are you?” she questioned.

“Dakota,” he said shortly.

“Dakota?” she repeated, puzzled. “That isn’t a name; it’s a State – or a Territory.”

“I’m Dakota. Ask anybody.” There was a decided drawl in his voice.

This information was far from being satisfactory, but she supposed it must answer. Still, she persisted. “Where are you from?”

“Dakota.”

That seemed to end it. It had been a short quest and an unsatisfactory one. It was perfectly plain to her that he was some sort of a rancher – at the least a cowboy. It was also plain that he had been a cowboy before coming to this section of the country – probably in Dakota. She was perplexed and vexed and nibbled impatiently at her lips.

“Dakota isn’t your real name,” she declared sharply.

“Ain’t it?” There came the drawl again. It irritated her this time.

“No!” she snapped.

“Well, it’s as good as any other. Good-night.”

Sheila did not answer. Five minutes later she was asleep.

CHAPTER II

THE DIM TRAIL

Sheila had been dreaming of a world in which there was nothing but rain and mud and clouds and reckless-eyed individuals who conversed in irritating drawls when a sharp crash of thunder awakened her. During her sleep she had turned her face to the wall, and when her eyes opened the first thing that her gaze rested on was the small window above her head. She regarded it for some time, following with her eyes the erratic streams that trickled down the glass, stretching out wearily, listening to the wind. It was cold and bleak outside and she had much to be thankful for.

She was glad that she had not allowed the mysterious inhabitant of the cabin to sleep out in his tarpaulin, for the howling of the wind brought weird thoughts into her mind; she reflected upon her helplessness and it was extremely satisfying to know that within ten feet of her lay a man whose two big revolvers – even though she feared them – seemed to insure protection. It was odd, she told herself, that she should place so much confidence in Dakota, and her presence in the cabin with him was certainly a breach of propriety which – were her friends in the East to hear of it – would arouse much comment – entirely unfavorable to her. Yes, it was odd, yet considering Dakota, she was not in the least disturbed. So far his conduct toward her had been that of the perfect gentleman, and in spite of the recklessness that gleamed in his eyes whenever he looked at her she was certain that he would continue to be a gentleman.

It was restful to lie and listen to the rain splashing on the roof and against the window, but sleep, for some unaccountable reason, seemed to grow farther from her – the recollection of events during the past few hours left no room in her thoughts for sleep. Turning, after a while, to seek a more comfortable position, she saw Dakota sitting at the table, on the side opposite her, watching her intently.

“Can’t sleep, eh?” he said, when he saw her looking at him. “Storm bother you?”

“I think it was the thunder that awakened me,” she returned. “Thunder always does. Evidently it disturbs you too.”

“I haven’t been asleep,” he said in a curt tone.

He continued to watch her with a quiet, appraising gaze. It was evident that he had been thinking of her when she had turned to look at him. She flushed with embarrassment over the thought that while she had been asleep he must have been considering her, and yet, looking closely at him now, she decided that his expression was frankly impersonal.

He glanced at his watch. “You’ve been asleep two hours,” he said. “I’ve been watching you – and envying you.”

“Envy me? Why? Are you troubled with insomnia?”

He laughed. “Nothing so serious as that. It’s just thoughts.”

“Pleasant ones, of course.”

“You might call them pleasant. I’ve been thinking of you.”

Sheila found no reply to make to this, but blushed again.

“Thinking of you,” repeated Dakota. “Of the chance you took in coming out here alone – in coming into my shack. We’re twenty miles from town here – twenty miles from the Double R – the nearest ranch. It isn’t likely that a soul will pass here for a month. Suppose – ”

“We won’t ‘suppose,’ if you please,” said Sheila. Her face had grown slowly pale, but there was a confident smile on her lips as she looked at him.

“No?” he said, watching her steadily. “Why? Isn’t it quite possible that you could have fallen in with a sort of man – ”

“As it happens, I did not,” interrupted Sheila.

“How do you know?”

Sheila’s gaze met his unwaveringly. “Because you are the man,” she said slowly.

She thought she saw a glint of pleasure in his eyes, but was not quite certain, for his expression changed instantly.

“Fate, or Providence – or whatever you are pleased to call the power that shuffles us flesh and blood mannikins around – has a way of putting us all in the right places. I expect that’s one of the reasons why you didn’t fall in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about,” said Dakota.

“I don’t see what Fate has to do – ” began Sheila, wondering at his serious tone.

“Odd, isn’t it?” he drawled.

“What is odd?”

“That you don’t see. But lots of people don’t see. They’re chucked and shoved around like men on a chess board, and though they’re always interested they don’t usually know what it’s all about. Just as well too – usually.”

“I don’t see – ”

He smiled mysteriously. “Did I say that I expected you to see?” he said. “There isn’t anything personal in this, aside from the fact that I was trying to show you that some one was foolish in sending you out here alone. Some day you’ll look back on your visit here and then you’ll understand.”

He got up and walked to the door, opening it and standing there looking out into the darkness. Sheila watched him, puzzled by his mysterious manner, though not in the least afraid of him. Several times while he stood at the door he turned and looked at her and presently, when a gust of wind rushed in and Sheila shivered, he abruptly closed the door, barred it, and strode to the fireplace, throwing a fresh log into it. For a time he stood silently in front of the fire, his figure casting a long, gaunt shadow at Sheila’s feet, his gaze on her, grim, somber lines in his face. Presently he cleared his throat.

“How old are you?” he said shortly.

“Twenty-two.”

“And you’ve lived East all your life. Lived well, too, I suppose – plenty of money, luxuries, happiness?”

He caught her nod and continued, his lips curling a little. “Your father too, I reckon – has he been happy?”

“I think so.”

“That’s odd.” He had spoken more to himself than to Sheila and he looked at her with narrowed eyes when she answered.

“What is odd? That my father should be happy – that I should?”

“Odd that anyone who is happy in one place should want to leave that place and go to another. Maybe the place he went to wouldn’t be just right for him. What makes people want to move around like that?”

“Perhaps you could answer that yourself,” suggested Sheila. “I am sure that you haven’t lived here in this part of the country all your life.”

“How do you know that?” His gaze was quizzical and mocking.

“I don’t know. But you haven’t.”

“Well,” he said, “we’ll say I haven’t. But I wasn’t happy where I came from and I came here looking for happiness – and something else. That I didn’t find what I was looking for isn’t the question – mostly none of us find the things we’re looking for. But if I had been happy where I was I wouldn’t have come here. You say your father has been happy there; that he’s got plenty of money and all that. Then why should he want to live here?”

“I believe I told you that he is coming here for his health.”

His eyes lighted savagely. But Sheila did not catch their expression for at that moment she was looking at his shadow on the floor. How long, how grotesque, it seemed, and forbidding – like its owner.

“So he’s got everything he wants but his health. What made him lose that?”

“How should I know?”

“Just lost it, I reckon,” said Dakota subtly. “Cares and Worry?”

“I presume. His health has been failing for about ten years.”

Sheila was looking straight at Dakota now and she saw his face whiten, his lips harden. And when he spoke again there was a chill in his voice and a distinct pause between his words.

“Ten years,” he said. “That’s a long time, isn’t it? A long time for a man who has been losing his health. And yet – ” There was a mirthless smile on Dakota’s face – “ten years is a longer time for a man in good health who hasn’t been happy. Couldn’t your father have doctored – gone abroad – to recover his health? Or was his a mental sickness?”

“Mental, I think. He worried quite a little.”

Dakota turned from her, but not quickly enough to conceal the light of savage joy that flashed suddenly into his eyes.

“Why!” exclaimed Sheila, voicing her surprise at the startling change in his manner; “that seems to please you!”

“It does.” He laughed oddly. “It pleases me to find that I’m to have a neighbor who is afflicted with the sort of sickness that has been bothering me for – for a good many years.”

There was a silence, during which Sheila yawned and Dakota stood motionless, looking straight ahead.

“You like your father, I reckon?” came his voice presently, as his gaze went to her again.

“Of course.” She looked up at him in surprise. “Why shouldn’t I like him?”

“Of course you like him. Mostly children like their fathers.”

“Children!” She glared scornfully at him. “I am twenty-two! I told you that before!”

“So you did,” he returned, unruffled. “When is he coming out here?”

“In a month – a month from to-day.” She regarded him with a sudden, new interest. “You are betraying a great deal of curiosity,” she accused. “Why?”

“Why,” he answered slowly, “I reckon that isn’t odd, is it? He’s going to be my neighbor, isn’t he?”

“Oh!” she said with emphasis of mockery which equalled his. “And you are gossiping about your neighbor even before he comes.”

“Like a woman,” he said with a smile.

“An impertinent one,” she retorted.

“Your father,” he said in accents of sarcasm, ignoring the jibe, “seems to think a heap of you – sending you all the way out here alone.”

“I came against his wish; he wanted me to wait and come with him.”

Her defense of her parent seemed to amuse him. He smiled mysteriously. “Then he likes you?”

“Is that strange? He hasn’t any one else – no relative. I am the only one.”

“You’re the only one.” He repeated her words slowly, regarding her narrowly. “And he likes you. I reckon he’d be hurt quite a little if you had fallen in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about.”

“Naturally.” Sheila was tapping with her booted foot on his shadow on the floor and did not look at him.

“It’s a curious thing,” he said slowly, after an interval, “that a man who has got a treasure grows careless of it in time. It’s natural, too. But I reckon fate has something to do with it. Ten chances to one if nothing happens to you your father will consider himself lucky. But suppose you had happened to fall in with a different man than me – we’ll say, for instance, a man who had a grudge against your father – and that man didn’t have that uncommon quality called ‘mercy.’ What then? Ten chances to one your father would say it was fate that had led you to him.”

“I think,” she said scornfully, “that you are talking silly! In the first place, I don’t believe my father thinks that I am a treasure, though he likes me very much. In the second place, if he does think that I am a treasure, he is very much mistaken, for I am not – I am a woman and quite able to take care of myself. You have exhibited a wonderful curiosity over my father and me, and though it has all been mystifying and entertaining, I don’t purpose to talk to you all night.”

“I didn’t waken you,” he mocked.

Sheila swung around on the bunk, her back to him. “You are keeping me awake,” she retorted.

“Well, good night then,” he laughed, “Miss Sheila.”

“Good night, Mr. – Mr. Dakota,” she returned.

Sheila did not hear him again. Her thoughts dwelt for a little time on him and his mysterious manner, then they strayed. They returned presently and she concentrated her attention on the rain; she could hear the soft, steady patter of it on the roof; she listened to it trickling from the eaves and striking the glass in the window above her head. Gradually the soft patter seemed to draw farther away, became faint, and more faint, and finally she heard it no more.

CHAPTER III

CONVERGING TRAILS

It was the barking of a dog that brought Sheila out of a sleep – dreamless this time – into a state of semi-consciousness. It was Dakota's dog surely, she decided sleepily. She sighed and twisted to a more comfortable position. The effort awakened her and she opened her eyes, her gaze resting immediately on Dakota. He still sat at the table, silent, immovable, as before. But now he was sitting erect, his muscles tensed, his chin thrust out aggressively, his gaze on the door – listening. He seemed to be unaware of Sheila's presence; the sound that she had made in turning he apparently had not heard.

There was an interval of silence and then came a knocking on the door – loud, unmistakable. Some one desired admittance. After the knock came a voice:

“Hello inside!”

“Hello yourself!” Dakota's voice came with a truculent snap. “What's up?”

“Lookin' for a dry place,” came the voice from without. “Mebbe you don't know it's wet out here!”

Sheila's gaze was riveted on Dakota. He arose and noiselessly moved his chair back from the table and she saw a saturnine smile on his face, yet in his eyes there shone a glint of intolerance that mingled oddly with his gravity.

“You alone?” he questioned, his gaze on the door.

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Campbellite preacher.”

For the first time since she had been awake Dakota turned and looked at Sheila. The expression of his face puzzled her. “A parson!” he sneered in a low voice. “I reckon we'll have some praying now.” He took a step forward, hesitated, and looked back at Sheila. “Do you want him in here?”

Sheila's nod brought a whimsical, shallow smile to his face. “Of course you do – you're lonesome in here.” There was mockery in his voice. He deliberately drew out his two guns, examined them minutely, returned one to his holster, retaining the other in his right hand. With a cold grin at Sheila he snuffed out the candle between a finger and a thumb and strode to the door – Sheila could hear him fumbling at the fastenings. He spoke to the man outside sharply.

“Come in!”

There was a movement; a square of light appeared in the wall of darkness; there came a step on the threshold. Watching, Sheila saw, framed in the open doorway, the dim outlines of a figure – a man.

“Stand right there,” came Dakota's voice from somewhere in the impenetrable darkness of the interior, and Sheila wondered at the hospitality that greeted a stranger with total darkness and a revolver. “Light a match.”

After a short interval of silence there came the sound of a match scratching on the wall, and a light flared up, showing Sheila the face of a man of sixty, bronzed, bearded, with gentle, quizzical eyes.

The light died down, the man waited. Sheila had forgotten – in her desire to see the face of the visitor – to look for Dakota, but presently she heard his voice:

“I reckon you're a parson, all right. Close the door.”

The parson obeyed the command. “Light the candle on the table!” came the order from Dakota. “I'm not taking any chances until I get a better look at you.”

Another match flared up and the parson advanced to the table and lighted the candle. He smiled while applying the match to the wick. “Don't pay to take no chances – on anything,” he agreed. He

stood erect, a tall man, rugged and active for his sixty years, and threw off a rain-soaked tarpaulin. Some traces of dampness were visible on his clothing, but in the circumstances he had not fared so badly.

“It’s a new trail to me – I don’t know the country,” he went on. “If I hadn’t seen your light I reckon I’d have been goin’ yet. I was thinkin’ that it was mighty queer that you’d have a light goin’ so – ” He stopped short, seeing Sheila sitting on the bunk. “Shucks, ma’am,” he apologized, “I didn’t know you were there.” His hat came off and dangled in his left hand; with the other he brushed back the hair from his forehead, smiling meanwhile at Sheila.

“Why, ma’am,” he said apologetically, “if your husband had told me you was here I’d have gone right on an’ not bothered you.”

Sheila’s gaze went from the parson’s face and sought Dakota’s, a crimson flood spreading over her face and temples. A slow, amused gleam filled Dakota’s eyes. But plainly he did not intend to set the parson right – he was enjoying Sheila’s confusion. The color fled from her face as suddenly as it had come and was succeeded by the pallor of a cold indignation.

“I’m not married,” she said instantly to the parson; “this gentleman is not my husband.”

“Not?” questioned the parson. “Then how – ” He hesitated and looked quickly at Dakota, but the latter was watching Sheila with an odd smile and the parson looked puzzled.

“This is my first day in this country,” explained Sheila.

The parson did not reply to this, though he continued to watch her intently. She met his gaze steadily and he smiled. “I reckon you’ve been caught on the trail too,” he said, “by the storm.”

Sheila nodded.

“Well, it’s been right wet to-night, an’ it ain’t no night to be galivantin’ around the country. Where you goin’ to?”

“To the Double R ranch.”

“Where’s the Double R?” asked the parson.

“West,” Dakota answered for Sheila; “twenty miles.”

“Off my trail,” said the parson. “I’m travelin’ to Lazette.” He laughed, shortly. “I’m askin’ your pardon, ma’am, for takin’ you to be married; you don’t look like you belonged here – I ought to have knowed that right off.”

Sheila told him that he was forgiven and he had no comment to make on this, but looked at her appraisingly. He drew a bench up near the fire and sat looking at the licking flames, the heat drawing the steam from his clothing as the latter dried. Dakota supplied him with soda biscuit and cold bacon, and these he munched in contentment, talking meanwhile of his travels. Several times while he sat before the fire Dakota spoke to him, and finally he pulled his chair over near the wall opposite the bunk on which Sheila sat, tilted it back, and dropped into it, stretching out comfortably.

After seating himself, Dakota’s gaze sought Sheila. It was evident to Sheila that he was thinking pleasant thoughts, for several times she looked quickly at him to catch him smiling. Once she met his gaze fairly and was certain that she saw a crafty, calculating gleam in his eyes. She was puzzled, though there was nothing of fear from Dakota now; the presence of the parson in the cabin assured her of safety.

A half hour dragged by. The parson did not appear to be sleepy. Sheila glanced at her watch and saw that it was midnight. She wondered much at the parson’s wakefulness and her own weariness. But she could safely go to sleep now, she told herself, and she stretched noiselessly out on the bunk and with one arm bent under her head listened to the parson.

Evidently the parson was itinerant; he spoke of many places – Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, Texas; of towns in New Mexico. To Sheila, her senses dulled by the drowsiness that was stealing over her, it appeared that the parson was a foe to Science. His volubility filled the cabin; he contended sonorously that the earth was not round. The Scriptures, he maintained, held otherwise. He called Dakota’s attention to the seventh chapter of Revelation, verse one:

“And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.”

Several times Sheila heard Dakota laugh, mockingly; he was skeptical, caustic even, and he took issue with the parson. Between them they managed to prevent her falling asleep; kept her in a semidoze which was very near to complete wakefulness.

After a time, though, the argument grew monotonous; the droning of their voices seemed gradually to grow distant; Sheila lost interest in the conversation and sank deeper into her doze. How long she had been unconscious of them she did not know, but presently she was awake again and listening. Dakota's laugh had awakened her. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw that he was still seated in the chair beside the wall and that his eyes were alight with interest as he watched the parson.

“So you're going to Lazette, taking it on to him?”

The parson nodded, smiling. “When a man wants to get married he'll not care much about the arrangements – how it gets done. What he wants to do is to get married.”

“That's a queer angle,” Dakota observed. He laughed immoderately.

The parson laughed with him. It *was* an odd situation, he agreed. Never, in all his experience, had he heard of anything like it.

He had stopped for a few hours at Dry Bottom. While there a rider had passed through, carrying word that a certain man in Lazette, called “Baldy,” desired to get married. There was no minister in Lazette, not even a justice of the peace. But Baldy wanted to be married, and his bride-to-be objected to making the trip to Dry Bottom, where there were both a parson and a justice of the peace. Therefore, failing to induce the lady to go to the parson, it followed that Baldy must contrive to have the parson come to the lady. He dispatched the rider to Dry Bottom on this quest.

The rider had found that there was no regular parson in Dry Bottom and that the justice of the peace had departed the day before to some distant town for a visit. Luckily for Baldy's matrimonial plans, the parson had been in Dry Bottom when the rider arrived, and he readily consented – as he intended to pass through Lazette anyway – to carry Baldy's license to him and perform the ceremony.

“Odd, ain't it?” remarked the parson, after he had concluded.

“That's a queer angle,” repeated Dakota. “You got the license?” he inquired softly. “Mebbe you've lost it.”

“I reckon not.” The parson fumbled in a pocket, drawing out a folded paper. “I've got it, right enough.”

“You've got no objections to me looking at it?” came Dakota's voice. Sheila saw him rise. There was a strange smile on his face.

“No objections. I reckon you'll be usin' one yourself one of these days.”

“One of these days,” echoed Dakota with a laugh as strange as his smile a moment before. “Yes – I'm thinking of using one one of these days.”

The parson spread the paper out on the table. Together he and Dakota bent their heads over it. After reading the license Dakota stood erect. He laughed, looking at the parson.

“There ain't a name on it,” he said, “not a name.”

“They're reckonin' to fill in the names when they're married,” explained the parson. “That there rider ought to have knowed the names, but he didn't. Only knowed that the man was called ‘Baldy.’ Didn't know the bride's name at all. But it don't make any difference; they wouldn't have had to have a license at all in this Territory. But it makes it look more regular when they've got one. All that's got to be done is for Baldy to go over to Dry Bottom an' have the names recorded. Bein' as I can't go, I'm to certify in the license.”

“Sure,” said Dakota slowly. “It makes things more regular to have a license – more regular to have you certify.”

Looking at Dakota, Sheila thought she saw in his face a certain preoccupation; he was evidently not thinking of what he was saying at all; the words had come involuntarily, automatically almost, it seemed, so inexpressive were they. “Sure,” he repeated, “you’re to certify, in the license.”

It was as though he were reading aloud from a printed page, his thoughts elsewhere, and seeing only the words and uttering them unconsciously. Some idea had formed in his brain, he meditated some surprising action. That she was concerned in his thoughts Sheila did not doubt, for he presently turned and looked straight at her and in his eyes she saw a new expression – a cold, designing gleam that frightened her.

Five minutes later, when the parson announced his intention to care for his horse before retiring and stood in the doorway preparatory to going out, Sheila restrained an impulse to call to him to remain. She succeeded in quieting her fears, however, by assuring herself that nothing could happen now, with the parson so near. Thus fortified, she smiled at Dakota as the parson stepped down and closed the door.

She drew a startled breath in the next instant, though, for without noticing her smile Dakota stepped to the door and barred it. Turning, he stood with his back against it, his lips in straight, hard lines, his eyes steady and gleaming brightly.

He caught Sheila’s gaze and held it; she trembled and sat erect.

“It’s odd, ain’t it?” he said, in the mocking voice that he had used when using the same words earlier in the evening.

“What is odd?” Hers was the same answer that she had used before, too – she could think of nothing else to say.

“Odd that he should come along just at this time.” He indicated the door through which the parson had disappeared. “You and me are here, and he comes. Who sent him?”

“Chance, I suppose,” Sheila answered, though she could feel that there was a subtle undercurrent in his speech, and she felt again the strange unrest that had affected her several times before.

“You think it was chance,” he said, drawling his words. “Well, maybe that’s just as good a name for it as any other. But we don’t all see things the same way, do we? We couldn’t, of course, because we’ve all got different things to do. We think this is a big world and that we play a big game. But it’s a little world and a little game when Fate takes a hand in it. I told you a while ago that Fate had a queer way of shuffling us around. That’s a fact. And Fate is running this game.” His mocking laugh had a note of grimness in it, which brought a chill over Sheila. “Just now, Miss Sheila, Fate is playing with brides and bridegrooms and marriages and parsons. That’s what is so odd. Fate has supplied the parson and the license; we’ll supply the names. Look at the bridegroom, Sheila,” he directed, tapping his breast with a finger; “this is your wedding day!”

“What do you mean?” Sheila was on her feet, trembling, her face white with fear and dread.

“That we’re to be married,” he said, smiling at her, and she noted with a qualm that there was no mirth in the smile, “you and me. The parson will tie the knot.”

“This is a joke, I suppose?” she said scornfully, attempting a lightness that she did not feel; “a crude one, to be sure, for you certainly cannot be serious.”

“I was never more serious in my life,” he said slowly. “We are to be married when the parson comes in.”

“How do you purpose to accomplish this?” she jeered. “The parson certainly will not perform a marriage ceremony without the consent of – without my consent.”

“I think,” he said coldly, “that you will consent. I am not in a trifling mood. Just now it pleases me to imagine that I am an instrument of Fate. Maybe that sounds mysterious to you, but some day you will be able to see just how logical it all seems to me now, that Fate has sent me a pawn – a subject, if you please – to sacrifice, that the game which I have been playing may be carried to its conclusion.”

Outside they heard the dog bark, heard the parson speak to it.

“The parson is coming,” said Sheila, her joy over the impending interruption showing in her eyes.

“Yes, he is coming.” Still with his back to the door, Dakota deliberately drew out one of his heavy pistols and examined it minutely, paying no attention to Sheila. Her eyes widened with fear as the hand holding the weapon dropped to his side and he looked at her again.

“What are you doing to do?” she demanded, watching these forbidding preparations with dilated eyes.

“That depends,” he returned with a chilling laugh. “Have you ever seen a man die? No?” he continued as she shuddered. “Well, if you don’t consent to marry me you will see the parson die. I have decided to give you the choice, ma’am,” he went on in a quiet, determined voice, entirely free from emotion. “Sacrifice yourself and the parson lives; refuse and I shoot the parson down the instant he steps inside the door.”

“Oh!” she cried in horror, taking a step toward him and looking into his eyes for evidence of insincerity – for the slightest sign that would tell her that he was merely trying to scare her. “Oh! you – you coward!” she cried, for she saw nothing in his eyes but cold resolution.

He smiled with straight lips. “You see,” he mocked, “how odd it is? Fate is shuffling us three in this game. You have your choice. Do you care to be responsible for the death of a fellow being?”

For a tense instant she looked at him, and seeing the hard, inexorable glitter in his eyes she cringed away from him and sank to the edge of the bunk, covering her face with her hands.

During the silence that followed she could hear the parson outside – his voice, and the yelping of the dog – evidently they had formed a friendship. The sounds came nearer; Sheila heard the parson try the door. She became aware that Dakota was standing over her and she looked up, shivering, to see his face, still hard and unyielding.

“I am going to open the door,” he said. “Is it you or the parson?”

At that word she was on her feet, standing before him, rigid with anger, her eyes flaming with scorn and hatred.

“You wouldn’t dare to do it!” she said hoarsely; “you – you – ” She snatched suddenly for the butt of the weapon that swung at his left hip, but with a quick motion he evaded the hand and stepped back a pace, smiling coldly.

“I reckon it’s the parson,” he said in a low voice, which carried an air of finality. He started for the door, hesitated, and came back to the bunk, standing in front of Sheila, looking down into her eyes.

“I am giving you one last chance,” he told her. “I am going to open the door. If you want the parson to die, don’t look at me when he steps in. If you want him to live, turn your back to him and walk to the fireplace.”

He walked to the door, unlocked it, and stepped back, his gaze on Sheila. Then the door opened slowly and the parson stood on the threshold, smiling.

“It’s sure some wet outside,” he said.

Dakota was fingering the cylinder of his revolver, his gaze now riveted on the parson.

“Why,” said the latter, in surprise, seeing the attitudes of Dakota and his guest, “what in the name of – ”

There came a movement, and Sheila stood in front of Dakota, between him and the parson. For an instant she stood, looking at Dakota with a scornful, loathing gaze. Then with a dry sob, which caught in her throat, she moved past him and went to the fireplace, where she stood looking down at the flames.

CHAPTER IV

THIS PICTURE AND THAT

It was a scene of wild, virgin beauty upon which Sheila Langford looked as she sat on the edge of a grassy butte overlooking the Ute River, with Duncan, the Double R manager stretched out, full length beside her, a gigantic picture on Nature's canvas, glowing with colors which the gods had spread with a generous touch.

A hundred feet below Sheila and Duncan the waters of the river swept around the base of the butte, racing over a rocky bed toward a deep, narrow canyon farther down. Directly opposite the butte rose a short slope, forming the other bank of the river. From the crest of the slope began a plain that stretched for many miles, merging at the horizon into some pine-clad foothills. Behind the foothills were the mountains, their snow peaks shimmering in a white sky – remote, mysterious, seeming like guardians of another world. The chill of the mountains contrasted sharply with the slumberous luxuriance and color of the plains.

Miles of grass, its green but slightly dulled with a thin covering of alkali dust, spread over the plain; here and there a grove of trees rose, it seemed, to break the monotony of space. To the right the river doubled sharply, the farther bank fringed with alder and aspen, their tall stalks nodding above the nondescript river weeds; the near bank a continuing wall of painted buttes – red, picturesque, ragged, thrusting upward and outward over the waters of the river. On the left was a stretch of broken country. Mammoth boulders were strewn here; weird rocks arose in inconceivably grotesque formations; lava beds, dull and gray, circled the bald knobs of some low hills. Above it all swam the sun, filling the world with a clear, white light. It made a picture whose beauty might have impressed the most unresponsive. Yet, though Sheila was looking upon the picture, her thoughts were dwelling upon another.

This other picture was not so beautiful, and a vague unrest gripped Sheila's heart as she reviewed it, carefully going over each gloomy detail. It was framed in the rain and the darkness of a yesterday. There was a small clearing there – a clearing in a dense wood beside a river – the same river which she could have seen below her now, had she looked. In the foreground was a cabin. She entered the cabin and stood beside a table upon which burned a candle. A man stood beside the table also – a reckless-eyed man, holding a heavy revolver. Another man stood there, too – a man of God. While Sheila watched the man's lips opened; she could hear the words that came through them – she would never forget them:

“To have and to hold from this day forth ... till death do you part...”

It was not a dream, it was the picture of an actual occurrence. She saw every detail of it. She could hear her own protests, her threats, her pleadings; she lived over again her terror as she had crouched in the bunk until the dawn.

The man had not molested her, had not even spoken to her after the ceremony; had ignored her entirely. When the dawn came she had heard him talking to the parson, but could not catch their words. Later she had mounted her pony and had ridden away through the sunshine of the morning. She had been married – it was her wedding day.

When she had reached the crest of a long rise after her departure from the cabin she had halted her pony to look back, hoping that it all might have been a dream. But it had not been a dream. There was the dense wood, the clearing, and the cabin. Beside them was the river. And there, riding slowly away over the narrow trail which she had traveled the night before, was the parson – she could see his gray beard in the white sunlight. Dry eyed, she had turned from the scene. A little later, turning again, she saw the parson fade into the horizon. That, she knew, was the last she would ever see of him. He had gone out of her life forever – the desert had swallowed him up.

But the picture was still vivid; she had seen it during every waking moment of the month that she had been at the Double R ranch; it was before her every night in her dreams. It would not fade.

She knew that the other picture was beautiful – the picture of this world into which she had ridden so confidently, yet she was afraid to dwell upon it for fear that its beauty would seem to mock her. For had not nature conspired against her? Yet she knew that she alone was to blame – she, obstinate, willful, heedless. Had not her father warned her? “Wait,” he had said, and the words flamed before her eyes – “wait until I go. Wait a month. The West is a new country; anything, everything, can happen to you out there – alone.”

“Nothing can happen,” had been her reply. “I will go straight from Lazette to the Double R. See that you telegraph instructions to Duncan to meet me. It will be a change; I am tired of the East and impatient to be away from it.”

Well, she had found a change. What would her father say when he heard of it – of her marriage to a cowboy, an unprincipled scoundrel? What could he say? The marriage could be annulled, of course! it was not legal, could not be legal. No law could be drawn which would recognize a marriage of that character, and she knew that she had only to tell her father to have the machinery of the law set in motion. Could she tell him? Could she bear his reproaches, his pity, after her heedlessness?

What would her friends say when they heard of it – as they must hear if she went to the law for redress? Her friends in the East whose good wishes, whose respect, she desired? Mockers there would be among them, she was certain; there were mockers everywhere, and she feared their taunts, the shafts of sarcasm that would be launched at her – aye, that would strike her – when they heard that she had passed a night in a lone cabin with a strange cowboy – had been married to him!

A month had passed since the afternoon on which she had ridden up to the porch of the Double R ranchhouse to be greeted by Duncan with the information that he had that morning received a telegram from her father announcing her coming. It had been brought from Lazette by a puncher who had gone there for the mail, and Duncan was at that moment preparing to drive to Lazette to meet her, under the impression that she would arrive that day. There had been a mistake, of course, but what did it matter now? The damage had been wrought and she closed her lips. A month had passed and she had not told – she would never tell.

Conversations she had had with Duncan; he seemed a gentleman, living at the Double R ranchhouse with his sister, but in no conversation with anyone had Sheila even mentioned Dakota’s name, fearing that something in her manner might betray her secret. To everyone but herself the picture of her adventure that night on the trail must remain invisible.

She looked furtively at Duncan, stretched out beside her on the grass. What would he say if he knew? He would not be pleased, she was certain, for during the month that she had been at the Double R – riding out almost daily with him – he had forced her to see that he had taken a liking to her – more, she herself had observed the telltale signs of something deeper than mere liking.

She had not encouraged this, of course, for she was not certain that she liked Duncan, though he had treated her well – almost too well, in fact, for she had at times felt a certain reluctance in accepting his little attentions – such personal service as kept him almost constantly at her side. His manner, too, was ingratiating; he smiled too much to suit her; his presumption of proprietorship over her irritated her not a little.

As she sat beside him on the grass she found herself studying him, as she had done many times when he had not been conscious of her gaze.

He was thirty-two, – he had told her so himself in a burst of confidence – though she believed him to be much older. The sprinkling of gray hair at his temples had caused her to place his age at thirty-seven or eight. Besides, there were the lines of his face – the set lines of character – indicating established habits of thought which would not show so deeply in a younger face. His mouth, she thought, was a trifle weak, yet not exactly weak either, but full-lipped and sensual, with little curves at the corners which, she was sure, indicated either vindictiveness or cruelty, perhaps both.

Taken altogether his was not a face to trust fully; its owner might be too easily guided by selfish considerations. Duncan liked to talk about himself; he had been talking about himself all the time that Sheila had sat beside him reviewing the mental picture. But apparently he had about exhausted that subject now, and presently he looked up at her, his eyes narrowing quizzically.

“You have been here a month now,” he said. “How do you like the country?”

“I like it,” she returned.

She was looking now at the other picture, watching the shimmer of the sun on the distant mountain peaks.

“It improves,” he said, “on acquaintance – like the people.” He flashed a smile at her, showing his teeth.

“I haven’t seen very many people,” she returned, not looking at him, but determined to ignore the personal allusion, to which, plainly, he had meant to guide her.

“But those that you have seen?” he persisted.

“I have formed no opinions.”

She *had* formed an opinion, though, a conclusive one – concerning Dakota. But she had no idea of communicating it to Duncan. Until now, strangely enough, she had had no curiosity concerning him. Bitter hatred and resentment had been so active in her brain that the latter had held no place for curiosity. Or at least, if it had been there, it had been a subconscious emotion, entirely overshadowed by bitterness. Of late, though her resentment toward Dakota had not abated, she had been able to review the incident of her marriage to him with more composure, and therefore a growing curiosity toward the man seemed perfectly justifiable. Curiosity moved her now as she smiled deliberately at Duncan.

“I have seen no one except your sister, a few cowboys, and yourself. I haven’t paid much attention to the cowboys, I like your sister, and I am not in the habit of telling people to their faces what I think of them. The country does not appear to be densely populated. Are there no other ranches around here – no other cattlemen?”

“The Double R ranch covers an area of one hundred and sixty square miles,” said Duncan. “The ranchhouse is right near the center of it. For about twenty miles in every direction you won’t find anybody but Double R men. There are line-camps, of course – dugouts where the men hang out over night sometimes – but that’s all. To my knowledge there are only two men with shacks around here, and they’re mostly of no account. One of them is Doubler – Ben Doubler – who hangs out near Two Forks, and the other is a fellow who calls himself Dakota, who’s got a shack about twenty miles down the Ute, a little off the Lazette trail.”

“They are ranchers, I suppose?”

Sheila’s face was averted so that Duncan might not see the interest in her eyes, or the red which had suddenly come into her cheeks.

“Ranchers?” There was a sneer in Duncan’s laugh. “Well, you might call them that. But they’re only nesters. They’ve got a few head of cattle and a brand. It’s likely they’ve put their brands on quite a few of the Double R cattle.”

“You mean – ” began Sheila in a low voice.

“I mean that I think they’re rustlers – cattle thieves!” said Duncan venomously.

The flush had gone from Sheila’s cheeks; she turned a pale face to the Double R manager.

“How long have these men lived in the vicinity of the Double R?”

“Doubler has been hanging around here for seven or eight years. He was here when I came and mebbe he’s been here longer. Dakota’s been here about five years. He bought his brand – the Star – from another nester – Texas Blanca.”

“They’ve been stealing the Double R cattle, you say?” questioned Sheila.

“That’s what I think.”

“Why don’t you have them arrested?”

Duncan laughed mockingly. “Arrested! That’s good. You’ve been living where there’s law. But there’s no law out here; no law to cover cattle stealing, except our own. And then we’ve got to have the goods. The sheriff won’t do anything when cattle are stolen, but he acts mighty sudden when a man’s hung for stealing cattle, if the man ain’t caught with the goods.”

“Caught with the goods?”

“Caught in the act of stealing. If we catch a man with the goods and hang him there ain’t usually anything said.”

“And you haven’t been able to catch these men, Dakota and Doubler, in the act of stealing.”

“They’re too foxy.”

“If I were manager of this ranch and suspected anyone of stealing any of its cattle, I would catch them!” There was a note of angry impatience in Sheila’s voice which caused Duncan to look sharply at her. He reddened, suspecting disparagement of his managerial ability in the speech.

“Mebbe,” he said, with an attempt at lightness. “But as a general thing nosing out a rustler is a pretty ticklish proposition. Nobody goes about that work with a whole lot of enthusiasm.”

“Why?” There was scorn in Sheila’s voice, scorn in her uplifted chin. But she did not look at Duncan.

“Why?” he repeated. “Well, because it’s perfectly natural for a man to want to live as long as he can. I don’t like them nesters – Dakota especially – and I’d like mighty well to get something on them. But I ain’t taking any chances on Dakota.”

“Why?” Again the monosyllable was pregnant with scorn.

“I forgot that you ain’t acquainted out here,” laughed the manager. “No one is taking any chances with Dakota – not even the sheriff. There’s something about the cuss which seems to discourage a man when he’s close to him – close enough to do any shooting. I’ve seen Dakota throw down on a man so quick that it would make you dizzy.”

“Throw down?”

“Shoot at a man. There was a gambler over in Lazette thought to euchre Dakota. A gunman he was, from Texas, and – well, they carried the gambler out. It was done so sudden that nobody saw it.”

“Killed him?” There was repressed horror in Sheila’s voice.

“No, he wasn’t entirely put out of business. Dakota only made him feel cheap. Creased him.”

“Creased him?”

“Grazed his head with the bullet. Done it intentionally, they say. Told folks he didn’t have any desire to send the gambler over the divide; just wanted to show him that when he was playin’ with fire he ought to be careful. There ain’t no telling what Dakota’d do if he got riled, though.”

Sheila’s gaze was on Duncan fairly, her eyes alight with contempt. “So you are all afraid of him?” she said, with a bitterness that surprised the manager.

“Well, I reckon it would amount to about that, if you come right down to the truth,” he confessed, reddening a little.

“You are afraid of him, too I suppose?”

“I reckon it ain’t just that,” he parried, “but I ain’t taking any foolish risks.”

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, which was browsing the tops of some mesquite near by. She reached the animal, mounted, and then turned and looked at Duncan scornfully.

“A while ago you asked for my opinion of the people of this country,” she said. “I am going to express that opinion now. It is that, in spite of his unsavory reputation, Dakota appears to be the only *man* here!”

She took up the reins and urged her pony away from the butte and toward the level that stretched away to the Double R buildings in the distance. For an instant Duncan stood looking after her, his face red with embarrassment, and then with a puzzled frown he mounted and followed her.

Later he came up with her at the Double R corral gate and resumed the conversation.

“Then I reckon you ain’t got no use for rustlers?” he said.

“Meaning Dakota?” she questioned, a smoldering fire in her eyes.

“I reckon.”

“I wish,” she said, facing Duncan, her eyes flashing, “that you would kill him!”

“Why – ” said Duncan, changing color.

But Sheila had dismounted and was walking rapidly toward the ranchhouse, leaving Duncan alone with his unfinished speech and his wonder.

CHAPTER V

DAKOTA EVENS A SCORE

With the thermometer at one hundred and five it was not to be expected that there would be much movement in Lazette. As a matter of fact, there was little movement anywhere. On the plains, which began at the edge of town, there was no movement, no life except when a lizard, seeking a retreat from the blistering sun, removed itself to a deeper shade under the leaves of the sage-brush, or a prairie-dog, popping its head above the surface of the sand, took a lightning survey of its surroundings, and apparently dissatisfied with the outlook whisked back into the bowels of the earth.

There was no wind, no motion; the little whirlwinds of dust that arose settled quickly down, the desultory breezes which had caused them departing as mysteriously as they had come. In the blighting heat the country lay, dead, spreading to the infinite horizons; in the sky no speck floated against the dome of blue. More desolate than a derelict on the calm surface of the trackless ocean Lazette lay, its huddled buildings dingy with the dust of a continuing dry season, squatting in their dismal lonesomeness in the shimmering, blinding sun.

In a strip of shade under the eaves of the station sat the station agent, gazing drowsily from under the wide brim of his hat at the two glistening lines of steel that stretched into the interminable distance. Some cowponies, hitched to rails in front of the saloons and the stores, stood with drooping heads, tormented by myriad flies; a wagon or two, minus horses, occupied a space in front of a blacksmith shop.

In the Red Dog saloon some punchers on a holiday played cards at various tables, quietly drinking. Behind the rough bar Pete Moulin, the proprietor stood, talking to his bartender, Blacky.

“So that Jasper’s back again,” commented the proprietor.

“Which?” The bartender followed the proprietor’s gaze, which was on a man seated at a card table, his profile toward them, playing cards with several other men. The bartender’s face showed perplexity.

Moulin laughed. “I forgot you ain’t been here that long,” he said. “That was before your time. That fellow settin’ sideways to us is Texas Blanca.”

“What’s he callin’ himself ‘Texas’ for?” queried the bartender. “He looks more like a greaser.”

“Breed, I reckon,” offered the proprietor. “Claims to have punched cows in Texas before he come here.”

“What’s he allowin’ to be now?”

“Nobody knows. Used to own the Star – Dakota’s brand. Sold out to Dakota five years ago. Country got too hot for him an’ he had to pull his freight.”

“Rustler?”

“You’ve said something. He’s been suspected of it. But nobody’s talkin’ very loud about it.”

“Not safe?”

“Not safe. He’s lightning with a six. Got his nerve to come back here, though.”

“How’s that?”

“Ain’t you heard about it? I thought everybody’d heard about that deal. Blanca sold Dakota the Star. Then he pulled his freight immediate. A week or so later Duncan, of the Double R, rides up to Dakota’s shack with a bunch of Double R boys an’ accuses Dakota of rustlin’ Double R cattle. Duncan had found twenty Double R calves runnin’ with the Star cattle which had been marked secret. Blanca had run his iron on them an’ sold them to Dakota for Star stock. Dakota showed Duncan his bill of sale, all regular, an’ of course Duncan couldn’t blame him. But there was some hard words passed between Duncan an’ Dakota, an’ Dakota ain’t allowin’ they’re particular friends since.

“Dakota had to give up the calves, sure enough, an’ he did. But sore! Dakota was sure some disturbed in his mind. He didn’t show it much, bein’ one of them quiet kind, but he says to me one day not long after Duncan had got the calves back: ‘I’ve been stung, Pete,’ he says, soft an’ even like; ‘I’ve been stung proper, by that damned oiler. Not that I’m carin’ for the money end of it; Duncan findin’ them calves with my stock has damaged my reputation.’ Then he luffed – one of them little short luffs which he gets off sometimes when things don’t just suit him – the way he’s luffed a couple of times when someone’s tried to run a cold lead proposition in on him. He fair freezes my blood when he gets it off.

“Well, he says to me: ‘Mebbe I’ll be runnin’ in with Blanca one of these days.’ An’ that’s all he ever says about it. Likely he expected Blanca to come back. An’ sure enough he has. Reckon he thinks that mebbe Dakota didn’t get wise to the calf deal.”

“In his place,” said Blacky, eyeing Blanca furtively, “I’d be makin’ some inquiries. Dakota ain’t no man to trifle with.”

“Trifle!” Moulin’s voice was pregnant with awed admiration. “I reckon there ain’t no one who knows Dakota’s goin’ to trifle with him – he’s discouraged that long ago. Square, too, square as they make ’em.”

“The Lord knows the country needs square men,” observed Blacky.

He caught a sign from a man seated at a table and went over to him with a bottle and a glass. While Blacky was engaged in this task the door opened and Dakota came in.

Moulin’s admiration and friendship for Dakota might have impelled him to warn Dakota of the presence of Blanca, and he did hold up a covert finger, but Dakota at that moment was looking in another direction and did not observe the signal.

He continued to approach the bar and Blacky, having a leisure moment, came forward and stood ready to serve him. A short nod of greeting passed between the three, and Blacky placed a bottle on the bar and reached for a glass. Dakota made a negative sign with his head – short and resolute.

“I’m in for supplies,” he laughed, “but not that.”

“Not drinkin’?” queried Moulin.

“I’m pure as the driven snow,” drawled Dakota.

“How long has that been goin’ on?” Moulin’s grin was skeptical.

“A month.”

Moulin looked searchingly at Dakota, saw that he was in earnest, and suddenly reached a hand over the bar.

“Shake!” he said. “I hate to knock my own business, an’ you’ve been a pretty good customer, but if you mean it, it’s the most sensible thing you ever done. Of course you didn’t hit it regular, but there’s been times when I’ve thought that if I could have three or four customers like you I’d retire in a year an’ spend the rest of my life countin’ my dust!” He was suddenly serious, catching Dakota’s gaze and winking expressively.

“Friend of yourn here,” he said.

Dakota took a flashing glance at the men at the card tables and Moulin saw his lips straighten and harden. But in the next instant he was smiling gravely at the proprietor.

“Thanks, Pete,” he said quietly. “But you’re some reckless with the English language when you’re calling him my friend. Maybe he’ll be proving that he didn’t mean to skin me on that deal.”

He smiled again and then left the bar and strode toward Blanca. The latter continued his card playing, apparently unaware of Dakota’s approach, but at the sound of his former victim’s voice he turned and looked up slowly, his face wearing a bland smile.

It was plain to Moulin that Blanca had known all along of Dakota’s presence in the saloon – perhaps he had seen him enter. The other card players ceased playing and leaned back in their chairs, watching, for some of them knew something of the calf deal, and there was that in Dakota’s greeting to Blanca which warned them of impending trouble.

“Blanca,” said Dakota quietly, “you can pay for those calves now.”

It pleased Blanca to dissemble. But it was plain to Moulin – as it must have been plain to everybody who watched Blanca – that a shadow crossed his face at Dakota’s words. Evidently he had entertained a hope that his duplicity had not been discovered.

“Calves?” he said. “What calves, my frien’?” He dropped his cards to the table and turned his chair around, leaning far back in it and hooking his right thumb in his cartridge belt, just above the holster of his pistol. “I theenk it mus’ be mistak’.”

“Yes,” returned Dakota, a slow, grimly humorous smile reaching his face, “it was a mistake. You made it, Blanca. Duncan found it out. Duncan took the calves – they belonged to him. You’re going to pay for them.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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