Sullivan Francis William

# The Free Range

**Francis Sullivan**

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# Содержание

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## CHAPTER I
## FLINGING THE GAUNTLET

"Then you insist on ruining me, Mr. Bissell?"

Bud Larkin, his hat pushed back on his head, looked unabashed at the scowling heavy features of the man opposite in the long, low room, and awaited a reply.

"I don't want to ruin anybody," puffed old "Beef" Bissell, whose cattle overran most of the range between the Gray Bull and the Big Horn. "But I allow as how them sheep of yours had better stay down Nebrasky way where they come from."

"In other words," snapped Larkin, "I had better give up the idea of bringing them north altogether. Is that it?"

"Just about."

"Well, now, see here, Mr. Bissell, you forget one or two things. The first is, that my sheep ranch is in Montana and not Wyoming, and that I want to run my southern herds onto the northern range before fall sets in. The second is, that, while your homestead may be three hundred and twenty acres, the range that has made you rich is free. My sheep have as much right there as your cattle. It

is all government land and open to everybody."

"Possession is eleven points out here where there isn't any law," replied Bissell imperturbably. "It's a case of your sheep against my cattle, and, you see, I stand up reg'lar for my cows."

Bud rolled a cigarette and pondered.

He was in the rather bare and unornamental living-room of the Bar T ranch. In the center was a rough-hewn table supporting an oil-lamp and an Omaha newspaper fully six months old. The chairs, except one, were rough and heavy and without rockers. This one was a gorgeous plush patent-rocker so valued a generation ago, and evidently imported at great expense.

A square of carpet that had lost all claims to pattern had become a soft blur, the result of age and alkali. However, it was one of the proudest possessions of the Bar T outfit and showed that old Beef Bissell knew what the right thing was. A calico shroud hid a large, erect object against the wall farthest away from the windows; an object that was the last word in luxury and reckless expense – a piano. The walls were of boards whitewashed, and the ceiling was just plain boards.

It had not taken Bud Larkin long to discern that there was a feminine cause for these numerous unusual effects; but he did not for a minute suppose it to be the thin, sharp-tongued woman who had been washing behind the cook-house as he rode up to the corral. Now, as he pondered, he thought again about it. But only for a minute; other things of vaster importance held him.

Although but two men had spoken during the conversation,

three were in the room. The third was a man of medium height, lowering looks, and slow tongue. His hair was black, and he had the appearance of always needing a shave. He was trained down to perfect condition by his years on the plains, and was as wiry and tough as the cow pony he rode. He was Black Mike Stelton, foreman of the Bar T.

"What do you think, Mike?" asked Bissell, when Larkin made no attempt to continue the argument.

"Same's you, boss," was the reply in a heavy voice. "I wouldn't let them sheep on the range, not noways. Sheep is the ruination of any grass country."

"There you see, Mr. Larkin," said Bissell with an expressive motion of his hand. "Stelton's been out here in the business fifteen years and says the same as I do. How long did you say you had been in the West?"

"One year," replied Larkin, flushing to the roots of his hair beneath his tanned but not weather-beaten skin. "Came from Chicago."

"From down East, eh? Well, my woman was to St. Paul once, and she's never got over it; but it don't seem to have spoiled you none."

Larkin grinned and replied in kind, but all the time he was trying to determine what stand to take. He had expected to meet opposition to "walking" his sheep north – in fact, had met it steadily – but up to this point had managed to get his animals through. Now he was fifty miles ahead of the first flock and had

reached the Bar T ranch an hour before dinner.

Had he been a suspected horse-thief, the unwritten social etiquette of the plains would have provided him with food and lodging as long as he cared to stay. Consequently when he had caught the reflection of the setting sun against the walls of the ranch house, he had turned Pinte's head in the direction of the corral.

Then, in the living-room, though no questions had been asked, Larkin had brought up the much-dreaded subject himself, as his visit was partly for that purpose.

He had much to contend with. In the first place, being a sheepman, he was absolutely without caste in the cattle country, where men who went in for the "woolly idiots," as someone has aptly called them, was considered for the most part as a degenerate, and only fit for target practice. This side of the matter troubled him not at all, however.

What did worry him was the element of right in the cattlemen's attitude! a right that was still a wrong. For he had to acknowledge that when sheep had once fed across a range, that range was ruined for cattle for the period of at least a year.

This was due to the fact that the sheep, cropping into the very roots of the gray grass itself, destroyed it. Moreover, the animals on their slow marches, herded so close together that they left an offensive trail rather than follow which the cattle would stand and starve.

On the other hand, the range was free and the sheep had as

much right to graze there as the cattle, a fact that the cattlemen, with all their strict code of justice, refused to recognize.

Larkin knew that he had come to the parting of the ways at the Bar T ranch.

Old Beef Bissell was what was known at that time as a cattle king. His thousands of steers, wealth on the hoof, grazed far and wide over the fenceless prairies. His range riders rarely saw the ranch house for a month at a time, so great was his assumed territory; his cowboys outnumbered those of any owner within three hundred miles. Aside from this, he was the head of a cattlemen's association that had banded together against rustlers and other invaders of the range.

Larkin returned to the conversation.

"Try to see it from my standpoint," he said to Bissell. "If you had gone in for sheep as I have – "

"I wouldn't go in for 'em," interrupted the other contemptuously, and Stelton grunted.

"As you like about that. Every gopher to his own hole," remarked Bud. "But if you had, and I guess you would if you thought there was more money in it, you would certainly insist on your rights on the range, wouldn't you?"

"I might try."

"And if you tried you'd be pretty sure to succeed, I imagine."

"It's likely; I allow as how I'm a pretty good hand at succeedin'."

"Well, so am I. I haven't got very far yet, but I am on my way.

I didn't come out here to make a failure of things, and I don't intend to. Now, all I want is to run my sheep north on to the Montana range where my ranch is."

"How many are there?" This from Stelton.

"Five flocks of about two thousand each."

Bissell snorted and turned in his chair.

"I won't allow it, young man, an' that's all I've got to say. D'ye think I'm a fool?"

"No, but neither am I. And I might as well tell you first and last that those sheep are coming north. Now, if you do the fair thing you will tell your cowboys the fact so they won't make any mistakes. I have given you fair warning, and if anything happens to those sheep you will be held responsible."

"Is that all you got to say?" asked Bissell, sarcastically.

"Yes."

"Well, then, I'll do the talkin'. I'd as leave see Indians stampedin' my cows into the river as have your sheep come over the range. Since you've given me what you call a fair warning, I'll give you one. Leave your critters where they are. If you don't do it you'll be a sight wiser and also a mighty sight poorer before I get through with 'em."

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked Larkin.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' more than that now, because I'm a slow hand at makin' ornery promises, seein' I always keep 'em. But I'm just tellin' you, that's all."

"Is that your last word on the subject?" asked Larkin.

"It is, an' I want Stelton here to remember I said it."

"Then we won't say anything more about the matter," replied Bud calmly, as he rose. "I'll go outside and look to my horse."

"You'll stay the night with us, won't you?" asked Bissell anxiously.

"Yes, thanks. I've heard so much about the Bar T I should like to see a little more of it."

When Larkin had left the room, Bissell, with a frown on his face, turned to Stelton.

"Tell all the boys what's happened to-day," he said, "and tell 'em to be on the watch for this young feller's first herd. He'll plenty soon find out he can't run riot on my range."

# CHAPTER II
# A LATE ARRIVAL

After visiting the corral, Larkin paid his respects to the pump and refreshed himself for supper. Then he strolled around the long, rambling ranch house. Across the front, which faced southwest, had been built a low apology for a veranda on which a couple of uninviting chairs stood. He appropriated one of these and settled back to think.

The late sun, a red-bronze color, hung just above the horizon and softened the unlovely stretches of prairie into something brooding and beautiful. Thirty miles away the Rockies had become a mass of gray-blue fleeced across the top with lines of late snow – for it was early June.

The Bar T ranch house itself stood on a rise of ground back from a cold, greenish-blue river that made a bend at this point, and that rose and had its being in the melting whiteness of those distant peaks. Between the willows of the river bottoms, Larkin could see the red reflection of the sun on the water, and could follow the stream's course across the prairie by the snake-like procession of cottonwoods that lined its banks.

On the plains themselves there was still a fading hue of green. The buffalo grass had already begun to wither under the increasing heat, and in a month would have become the same

gray, cured fodder that supported millions of buffalo centuries before a steer was on the range.

For Bud Larkin, only a year in the West, this evening scene had not lost its charm. He loved this hour when the men washed up at the pump. There were enticing sounds from the cook house and enticing odors in the air. Sometimes it seemed as though it almost made up for a day's failure and discouragement.

His quick eye suddenly noted a dark speck moving rapidly across the prairie toward the ranch house. It seemed to skim the ground and in five minutes had developed into a cow pony and its rider. A quarter of an hour later and the pony proved himself of "calico" variety, while the rider developed into a girl who bestrode her mount as though she were a part of the animal itself.

The front rim of her broad felt hat was fastened upward with a thong and exposed her face. Bud watched her idly until she dashed up to the front of the house, fetched her horse back on its haunches with a jerk on the cruel Spanish bridle, and leaped to the ground before he had fairly lost headway. Then with a slap on the rump she sent him trotting to Stelton, who had appeared around the end of the veranda as though expecting her.

Occupied with pulling off her soft white buckskin gauntlets, she did not notice the young man on the low porch until, with an exclamation, he had sprung to his feet and hurried toward her.

"Juliet Bissell!" gasped Larkin, holding out a hand to her. "What are you doing here?"

"Of all people, Bud Larkin!" cried the girl, flushing with

pleasure. “Why, I can’t believe it! Did you drop out of the sky somewhere?”

“If the sky is heaven, I’ve just dropped into it,” he returned, trying to confine his joy to intelligible speech, and barely succeeding.

“That sounds like the same old Bud,” she laughed, “and it’s a pleasure to hear it. For if there is one thing a cowboy can’t do, and it’s the only one, it is to pay a woman a compliment. That speech brands you a tenderfoot.”

“Never! I’ve been out a year and can nearly ride a cow pony, providing it is lame and blind.”

So, bantering each other unmercifully, they reached the front door.

“Wait a few minutes, Bud, and I will be out again. I must dress for dinner.”

When she had gone Larkin understood at once the presence of the carpet, the patent rocker, and the piano.

“What a double-barreled idiot I am,” he swore, “to talk turkey to old Bissell and never connect him with Juliet. All the sheep in the world couldn’t get me away from here to-night.” And he ejaculated the time-worn but true old phrase that the world is a mighty small place.

Juliet Bissell had been a very definite personage in Bud Larkin’s other life – the life that he tried to forget. The eldest son of a rich Chicago banker, his first twenty-five years had been such years as a man always looks back upon with a vast regret.

From the mansion on Sheridan Drive he had varied his time among his clubs, his sports, and his social duties, and generally made himself one of many in this world that humanity can do without. In other words, he added nothing to himself, others, or life in general, and was, therefore, without a real excuse for existing.

Of one thing he was ever zealous, now that he had left it behind, and this was that his past should not pursue him into the new life he had chosen. He wished to start his career without stigma, and end it without blame.

Strangely enough, the person who had implanted this ambition and determination in him was Juliet Bissell. Three winters before, he had met her at the charity ball, and at the time she was something of a social sensation, being described as "that cowgirl from Wyoming." However, that "cowgirl" left her mark on many a gilded youth, and Bud Larkin was one.

He had fallen in love with her, as much as one in his position is capable of falling in love, had proposed to her, and been rejected with a grace and gentleness that had robbed the blow of all hurt – with one exception. Bud's pride, since his wealth and position had meant nothing in the girl's eyes, had been sorely wounded, and it had taken six months of the vast mystery of the plains to reduce this pettiness to the status of a secret shame.

When Juliet refused him she had told him with infinite tact that her husband would be a man more after the pattern of her father, whom she adored, and who, in turn, worshiped the very

air that surrounded her; and it was this fact that had turned Bud's attention to the West and its opportunities.

When she returned to the porch Juliet had on a plain white dress with pink ribbons at elbows, neck, and waist. Larkin, who had always thrilled at her splendid physical vigor, found himself more than ever under the spell of her luxuriant vitality.

Her great dark eyes were remarkably lustrous and expressive, her black hair waved back from her brown face into a great braided coil, her features were not pretty so much as noble. Her figure, with its limber curves, was pliant and graceful in any position or emergency – the result of years in the saddle. Her feet and hands were small, the latter being firm but infinitely gentle in their touch.

"Well, have you forgotten all your Eastern education?" Larkin asked, smiling, as she sat down. "Have you reverted to your original untamed condition?"

"No, indeed, Bud. I have a reputation to keep up in that respect. The fact that I have had an Eastern education has made our punchers so proud that they can't be lived with when they go to town, and lord it over everybody."

"I suppose they all want to marry you?"

"Yes, singly or in lots, and sometimes I'm sorry it can't be done, I love them all so much. But tell me, Bud, what brings you out West in general and here in particular?"

"Probably you don't know that a year and a half ago my father died," and Larkin's face shadowed for a moment with

retrospection. “Well, he did, and left me most of his estate. I was sick of it there, and I vowed I would pull up stakes and start somewhere by myself. So I went up to Montana in the vicinity of the Musselshell Forks and bought a ranch and some stock.”

“Cattle?”

“No, sheep. The best merino I ever saw – ”

“Bud Larkin! You’re not a sheepman?”

“Yes, ma’am, and a menace to a large number of cowmen, your father among them.”

The girl sank back and allowed him to relate the story of his adventures up to the present time, including the interview with Beef. At the description of that she smiled grimly; and he, noting the fact, told himself that it would take a masterly character to subdue that free, wild pride.

“Now, Julie,” he concluded, “do me the favor of instilling reason into your father. I’ve done my best and we have parted without murder, but that’s all. I’ve got to have a friend at court or I will be ruined before I commence.”

The girl was silent for a few minutes and sat looking down at her slippered feet.

“Bud,” she said at last, “you’ve never known me to tell anything but the truth, and I’m going to tell it to you now. I will be your friend in everything except where you ask me to yield my loyalty to my father and his interests. He is the most wonderful father a girl ever had, and if he were to say that black was white, I should probably swear to it if he asked me to.”

"I admire you for that," said Bud genuinely, although all his hopes in this powerful ally went glimmering. "Let's not talk shop any longer. It's too good just to see you to think about anything but that."

So, for a while, they reminisced of the days of their former friendship, by tacit agreement avoiding any reference to intimate things. And Larkin felt spring up in him the old love that he had convinced himself was dead; so that he added to his first resolution to succeed on the range, a second, that he would, in the end, conquer Juliet Bissell.

The thought was pleasing, for it meant another struggle, another outlet for the energies and activities that had so long lain dormant in him. And with the undaunted courage of youth he looked eagerly toward the battle that should win this radiant girl.

But for the present he knew he must not betray himself by word, look or action; other things of greater moment must be settled.

At last, as they talked, the cook, a long-suffering Chinaman, seized a huge brass bell and rang it with all his might, standing in the door of the cook house.

There was an instant response in the wild whoop of the cowboys who had been suffering the pangs of starvation for the past half-hour.

"Of course you must come to our private table, Bud," said Juliet. "I want you to see father's other side." So they rose and went in the front way.

The ranch house had been planned so that to the right of the entrance was the living-room, and back of that the dining-room. To the left three smaller rooms had been made into sleeping apartments. At the back of the structure and extending across the width of it was a large room that, in the early days of the Bar T, had served as the bunk-house for the cow punchers.

This had now been changed to the mess-room for them, while the family, with the addition of Stelton, the foreman, used the smaller private room. Owing to the large increase in the number of Bar T punchers a special bunk-house had been built in the rear of the main structure.

At table Larkin for the first time met Mrs. Bissell, who proved to be a typical early cowman's wife, thin, overworked, and slightly vinegary of disposition, despite the fact that she had at one time in her life been the belle of a cowtown, and had been won from beneath the ready .45's of a number of rivals.

At Bud's entrance Stelton grunted and scowled, and generally showed himself ill-pleased that Juliet should have known the visitor. On the other hand, as the girl had promised, Beef Bissell, for years the terror of the range, displayed a side that the sheepman would never have suspected. His voice became gentle, his laugh softened, his language purified, and he showed, by many little attentions, the unconscious chivalry that worship of a good woman brings to the surface.

For her part, the girl appraised this devotion at its true value and never failed in the little feminine thoughtfulnesses that appeal

so strongly to a worried and busy man.

That Stelton should be at the table at all surprised Bud, for it was not the habit of foremen to eat away from the punchers. But here the fact was the result of a former necessity when Bissell, hard-pressed, had called his foreman into consultation at meal times.

Old Bissell proved himself a more genial host than business rival, and when he had learned of Larkin and his daughter's former friendship, he forgot sheep for the moment and took an interest in the man. Mrs. Bissell sat open-mouthed while Bud told of the glories of Chicago in the early eighties, and never once mentioned her famous visit to St. Paul, so overcome was she with the tales this young man related.

Everyone was at his or her ease when the rapid tattoo of hoofs was heard, and a horse and rider drew up abruptly at the corral. One of the punchers from the rear dining-room went out to meet him and presently appeared sheepishly in the doorway where Bissell could see him.

"Is there a Mr. Larkin here?" asked the puncher.

"Yes," said Bud, pushing back his chair.

"There's a stranger out here that 'lows he wants to see you."

"Send him in here and give him something to eat, Shorty," sang out Bissell. "If he's a friend of Larkin's, he'd better have dinner with him. And, Shorty, tell that Chinaman to rustle another place here *pronto!*"

As for Bud Larkin, he was at a total loss to know who

his visitor might be. With a sudden twinge of fear he thought that perhaps Hard-winter Sims, his chief herder, had pursued him with disastrous information from the flocks. Wondering, he awaited the visitor's appearance.

The stranger presently made a bold and noisy entrance, and, when his face came into view, Bud sank back in his chair weakly, his own paling a trifle beneath the tan. For the man was Smithy Caldwell, a shifty-eyed crook from Chicago, one who had dogged him before, and whom he had never expected to see again. How the villain had tracked him to the Bar T outfit Bud could not imagine.

Seeing the eyes of the others upon him, Larkin recovered himself with an effort and introduced Caldwell; but to the eyes of even the most unobservant it was plain that a foreign element of disturbing nature had suddenly been projected into the genial atmosphere. The man was coarse in manner and speech and often addressed leering remarks to Juliet, who disregarded them utterly and confined her attention to Bud.

"Who is this creature?" she asked *sotto voce*. "What does he want with you?"

Bud hesitated, made two or three false starts, and finally said:

"I am sure his business with me would not interest you."

"I beg your pardon," said the girl, rebuffed. "I seem to have forgotten myself."

"I wish I could," ejaculated Bud bitterly, and refused to explain further.

# CHAPTER III
# AN UNSETTLED SCORE

As soon after dinner as possible Larkin disengaged himself from the rest of the party and motioned Caldwell to follow him. He led the way around the house and back toward the fence of the corral. It was already dark, and the only sounds were those of the horses stirring restlessly, or the low bellow of one of the ranch milch cows.

"What are you doing out here?" demanded Bud.

"I came to see you." The other emitted an exasperating chuckle at his own cheap wit.

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want." This time there was no chuckle, and Bud could imagine the close-set, greedy eyes of the other, one of them slightly crossed, boring into him in the dark.

"Money, I suppose, you whining blood-sucker," suggested Bud, his voice quiet, but holding a cold, unpleasant sort of ring that was new to Caldwell.

"'The boy guessed right the very first time,'" quoted Smithy, unabashed.

"What became of that two thousand I gave you before I left Chicago?"

"I got little enough of that," cried Caldwell. "You know how

many people there were to be hushed up."

"Many!" snapped Larkin. "You can't come any of that on me. There were just three; yourself, your wife, and that red-headed fellow, – I forget his name."

"Well, my wife doesn't live with me any more," whined Smithy, "but she makes me support her just the same, and threatens to squeal on you if I don't produce regularly; she knows where the money comes from."

Suddenly Larkin stepped close to the other and thrust something long and hard against his ribs.

"I'm going to do for you now, Smithy," he said in a cold, even voice. Caldwell did not even move from his position.

"If you do," was his reply, "the woman will give the whole thing to the newspapers. They have smelled a rat so long they would pay well for a tip. She has all the documents. So if you want to swing and ruin everybody concerned, just pull that trigger."

"I knew you were lying." Bud stepped back and thrust his revolver into the holster. "You are still living with your wife, for she wouldn't have the documents if you weren't. A man rarely lies when he is within two seconds of death. You are up to your old tricks, Smithy, and they have never fooled me yet. Now, let's get down to business. How much do you want?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"I haven't got it. You don't know it, perhaps, but my money is on the hoof out in this country, and cash is very little used. Look here. You bring your wife and that red-headed chap out to

Arizona or California and I will set you up in the sheep business. I've got herds coming north now, but I'll turn a thousand back in your name, and by the time you arrive they will be on the southern range. What do you say?"

"I say no," replied the other in an ugly voice. "I want money, and I'm going to have it. Good old Chi is range enough for me."

"Well, I can't give you two thousand because I haven't got it."

"What have you got?"

"Five hundred dollars, the pay of my herders."

"I'll take that on account, then," said Caldwell insolently. "When will you have some more?"

"Not until the end of July, when the wool has been shipped East."

"All right. I'll wait till then. Come on, hand over the five hundred."

Larkin reached inside his heavy woolen shirt, opened a chamois bag that hung by a string around his neck, and emptied it of bills. These he passed to Caldwell without a word.

"If you are wise, Smithy," he said in an even voice, "you won't ask me for any more. I've about reached the end of my rope in this business. And let me tell you that this account between you and me is going to be settled in full to my credit before very long."

"Maybe and maybe not," said the other insolently, and walked off.

Five minutes later Bud Larkin, sick at heart that this skeleton of the past had risen up to confront him in his new life, made his

way around the ranch house to the front entrance. Just as he was going in at the door a man appeared from the opposite side so that the two met. The other skulked back and disappeared, but in that moment Bud recognized the figure of Stelton, and a sudden chill clutched his heart.

Had the foreman of the Bar T been listening and heard all?

Entering the living-room, where the Bissells were already gathered, Larkin expected to find Caldwell, but inquiry elicited the fact that he had not been seen. Five minutes later the drumming of a pony's feet on the hard ground supplied the solution of his non-appearance. Having satisfactorily interviewed Larkin, he had mounted his horse, which all this time had been tethered to the corral, and ridden away.

Half an hour later Stelton came in, his brow dark, and seated himself in a far corner of the room. From his manner it was evident that he had something to say, and Bissell drew him out.

"Red came in from over by Sioux Creek to-night," admitted the foreman, "and he says as how the rustlers have been busy that-a-way ag'in. First thing he saw was the tracks of their hosses, and then, when he counted the herd, found it was twenty head short. I'm shore put out about them rustlers, chief, and if something ain't done about it pretty soon you won't have enough prime beef to make a decent drive."

Instantly the face of Bissell lost all its kindliness and grew as dark and forbidding as Stelton's. Springing out of his chair, he paced up and down the room.

"That has got to stop!" he said determinedly. Then, in answer to a question of Larkin's: "Yes, rustlers were never so bad as they are now. It's got so in this State that the thieves have got more cows among 'em than the regular cowmen. An' that ain't all. They've got an organization that we can't touch. We're plumb locoed with their devilment. That's the second bunch cut out of that herd, ain't it, Mike?"

"Yes."

Beef Bissell, his eyes flashing the fire that had made him feared in the earlier, rougher days of the range, finally stopped at the door.

"Come on out with me and talk to Red," he ordered his foreman, and the latter, whose eyes had never left Juliet since he entered the room, reluctantly obeyed.

Presently Mrs. Bissell took herself off, and Bud and the girl were left alone.

"I suppose you'll marry some time," said Larkin, after a long pause.

"I sincerely hope so," was her laughing rejoinder.

"Any candidates at present?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, I know of a very active one – he just left the room."

"Who, Mike? Bud, that's preposterous! I've known him ever since I was a little girl, and would no more think of marriage with him than of keeping pet rattlesnakes."

"Perhaps not, Julie, but Mike would. Will you take the word of

an absolutely disinterested observer that the man is almost mad about you, and would sell his soul for one of your smiles?"

The girl was evidently impressed by the seriousness of his tone, for she pondered a minute in silence.

"Perhaps you are right, Bud," she said at last. "I had never thought of it that way. But you needn't worry; I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure of it, but that doesn't make him any the less dangerous. Keep your eye on him, and if you ever find yourself in a place where you need somebody bad and quick, send for me. He hates me already, and I can't say I love him any too well; I have an idea that he and I will come to closer quarters than will be good for the health of one of us."

"Nonsense, Bud; your imagination seems rather lively to-night. Now, just because I am curious, will you tell me why you went into the sheep business?"

"Certainly. Because it is the future business of Wyoming and Montana. Sheep can live on less and under conditions that would kill cows. Moreover, they are a source of double profit, both for their wool and their mutton. The final struggle of the range will be between sheep and cattle and irrigation, and irrigation will win.

"But the sheep will drive the cattle off the range, and, when they, in turn, are driven off, will continue to thrive in the foothills and lower mountains, where there is no irrigation. I went into the sheep business to make money, but I won't see much of that

money for several years. When I am getting rich, cowmen like your father will be fighting for the maintenance of a few little herds that have not been pushed off the range by the sheep. Cattle offer more immediate profit, but, according to my view, they are doomed."

"Bud, that's the best defense of wool-growing I ever heard," cried the girl. "Up to this I've held it against you that you were a sheepman – a silly prejudice, of course, that I have grown up with – but now you can consider yourself free of that. I believe you have hit the nail on the head."

"Thanks, I believe I have," said Bud dryly, and a little while later they separated for the night, but not before he had remarked:

"I think it would benefit all of us if you drilled some of that common-sense into your father."

# CHAPTER IV
# THE SIX PISTOL SHOTS

The next morning, after breakfast, which shortly followed the rising of the sun, Bissell called Bud Larkin aside just as that young man had headed for the corral to rope and saddle Pinte.

Gone was any hint of the man of the night before. His red face was sober, and his brown eyes looked into Bud's steel-gray ones with a piercing, almost menacing, intensity.

"I hope any friend of Julie's will continue to be my friend," was all he said, but the glance and manner attending this delicate hint left no doubt as to his meaning. His whole attitude spelled "sheep!"

"That depends entirely upon you, Mr. Bissell," was Larkin's rejoinder.

The cowman turned away without any further words, and Bud continued on to the corral. At the enclosure he found Stelton roping a wiry and vicious calico pony, and when he had finally cinched the saddle on Pinte, he turned to see Julie at his side.

"You had better invite me to ride a little way with you," she said, laughing, "because I am coming anyhow."

"Bless you! What a treat!" cried Bud happily, and helped to cinch up the calico, who squealed at every tug.

Stelton, his dark face flushed to the color of mahogany,

sullenly left him the privilege and walked away.

Presently they mounted, and Bud, with a loud "So-long" and a wave of the hand to some of the punchers, turned south. Julie, loping beside him, looked up curiously at this.

"I thought you were going north, Bud," she cried.

"Changed my plans overnight," he replied non-committally, and she did not press the subject further, feeling, with a woman's intuition, that war was in the air.

Ten miles south, at the ford of the southern branch of Grass Creek, she drew up her horse as the signal for their separation, and faced north. Bud, still headed southward, put Pinte alongside of her and took her hand.

"It's been a blessing to see you, you're so civilized," she said, half-seriously. "Do come again."

"Then you do sometimes miss the things you have been educated to?"

"Yes, Bud, I do, but not often. Seeing you has brought back a flood of memories that I am happier without."

"And that is what you have done for me, dear girl," he said in a low tone as he pressed her hand. The next moment, with a nonchalant "So-long," the parting of the plains, he had dug the spurs into his horse and ridden away.

For a minute the girl sat looking after this one link between her desolate existence and the luxury and society he still represented in her eyes.

"His manners have changed for the worse," she thought,

recalling his abrupt departure, "but I think he has changed for the better."

Which remark proves that her sense of relative masculine values was still sound.

Larkin continued on directly south-east for twenty miles, until he crossed the Big Horn at what is now the town of Kirby. Thence his course lay south rather than east until he should raise the white dust of his first flock.

With regard to his sheep, Larkin, in all disputed cases, took the advice of his chief herder, Hard-winter Sims, the laziest man on the range, and yet one who seemed to divine the numbed sheep intelligence in a manner little short of marvelous.

Sims he had picked up in Montana, when that individual, unable to perform the arduous duties of a cowboy, had applied for a job as a sheep-herder – not so much because he liked the sheep, but because he had to eat and clothe himself. By one of those rare accidents of luck Sims at last found his *métier*, and Larkin the prince of sheepmen.

When Bud had determined to "walk" ten thousand animals north, Sims had accompanied him to help in the buying, and was now superintending the long drive.

On his advice the drive had been divided into five herds of two thousand, he contending that it was dangerous, as well as injurious to the sheep, to keep more than that number together. The others were following at intervals of a few days. Larkin had left the leaders just north of the hills that formed the hooked

southern end of the Big Horn Mountains, and expected that in two days' time they would have come north almost to the junction of Kirby Creek and the Big Horn, near where it was calculated to cross them.

After grazing his horse for an hour at noon, and taking a bite to eat himself, Larkin pushed on, and, in a short time, made out a faint, whitish mist rising against the horizon of hills. It was the dust of his leaders. Presently, in the far distance, a man appeared on horseback making toward him, and Bud wondered if anything had happened.

His fears were partially justified when he discovered the horseman to be Sims, and were entirely confirmed when he had conversed with the herder.

"We've sure got to get them sheep to water, and that mighty quick," was the latter's laconic announcement.

"Nonsense! There's plenty of water. What's the matter with 'em?"

"Ten miles out of the hills we found a water-hole, but the cattle had been there first, and the sheep wouldn't look at it. At the camp last night there was another hole, but some imp had deviled the herd an' they lay alongside the water, dyin' of thirst, but they wouldn't drink. We pushed 'em in an' they swam around; we half-drowned some of 'em, but still they wouldn't drink.

"So we made a night march without finding water, and we haven't found any to-day. They're gettin' frantic now."

Bud quirted the tired Pinte into a gallop, and they approached

the herd, about which the dark, slim figures of the dogs were running. From the distance the first sound was the ceaseless blethering of the flock that proclaimed its misery. The next was the musical tinkling of the bells the leaders wore.

"Reckon they've found another hole," said Sims. "Thought I seen one when I was ridin' out."

On nearer approach it was seen that the herd was "milling," that is, revolving in a great circle, with a number of inner circles, half smothered in the dust they raised, without aim or knowledge of what they did, or why. About the herd at various points stood the half-dozen shepherds, their long crooks in their hands. Whenever a blatting animal made a dash for liberty the dogs drove it into the press, barking and nipping.

Larkin rode to a tall, dark-skinned shepherd, a Basque from the California herding.

"What is it, Pedro?" he asked. "What is the matter with them?"

"Only the good God can tell. The leaders they take fright at something, I do not know, and we 'mill' them before any damage is done."

Larkin rode around the trampling, bawling mass to the rear, where were the cook wagon and a couple of spare horses. He at once dismounted and changed his uncomfortable riding-boots for the brogans of the herder. Pinte he relegated to the string, for the use of a horse with sheep is ludicrous, since the dogs are the real herders, and obey the orders given by the uplifted arms

of the men.

When he rejoined Sims, the sheep had become calmer. The flock-mind, localized in the leaders, had come to the conclusion that, after all, there was nothing to fear, and the circling motion was gradually becoming slower and slower. In a quarter of an hour comparative quiet had been restored, and Sims gave the order to get the flock under way. Since they had not come upon water at this place, as the herder had hoped, it was necessary to continue the merciless drive until they found it.

Immediately the dogs cut into the dirty-white revolving mass (the smell of which is like no other in the world), and headed the leaders north. But the leaders and tail-enders were inextricably mixed, and for a long time there was great confusion.

Sheep on the march have one invariable position, either among the leaders, middlers or tailers, and until each animal has found his exact post, nothing whatever can be done with him.

Until night fell the animals fed on the dry bunch-grass, and then, under the trotting of the dogs, took position on the brow of a rising hill, as though bedding down for the night. But all did not rest, for perhaps fifty remained standing in the perpetual flock-watch.

In an hour these would lie down and others take their places, but all through the night, and at any time when the flock rested, this hereditary protection would become operative – seemingly a survival of a day when neither man nor dog had assumed this duty.

The cook dug his trench, built his fire and set his folding table out under the pale sky that was just commencing to show brilliant stars. After the last cup of steaming coffee had been downed and pipes lighted, Sims gave the order to march. The herd was nearly still now, and roused with much complaining, but the dogs were inexorable, and presently the two thousand were shuffling on, feeding now and then, but making good progress.

There was but one thing left to do in the present instance – find running water, for it was certain that all the springs on the plain would have been visited by cattle, and that, therefore, the sheep would stand by and idly perish of thirst.

Sims knew his country, and directed the flock toward a shallow, rocky ford of the Big Horn, some five miles distant. In the meantime Bud Larkin was facing two alternatives, either one disastrous. The crossing of the Big Horn meant a declaration of war to the Bar T ranch, for in the loose division of the free country, the Bar T range extended south to the river.

On the other hand, should he turn the herds east along the bank of the Big Horn, it would be impossible to continue the march long in that direction, since the higher mountains were directly ahead, and the way through them was devious, and attended with many difficulties and dangers. On such a drive the losses to him in time and strayed sheep would be disastrous.

Larkin had no desire to clash with the cattlemen unless it were absolutely necessary, but he decided that his sheep should go through, since the free range was his as well as another's. On that

long night march, when the men were behind the sheep, driving them, contrary to the usual custom, he told Sims of his interview with Beef Bissell, and the herder cracked his knuckles with rage at the position taken by the cowman.

"Send 'em through, Mr. Larkin," he advised, "and if the Bar T outfit start anything I allow we'll return 'em as good as they give."

It was within an hour of dawn when the leaders of the flock lifted their heads and gazed curiously at the line of trees that loomed before them along the banks of the river. The next instant they had started forward on a run, blethering the news of water back along the dim, heaving line. The dust beneath their sharp feet rose up into a pall that hid the sky as the whole flock got into motion.

Then dogs and men leaped forward, for now the blind singleness of purpose that pervaded the animals was more disastrous than when they refused to drink. Working madly, the dogs spread out the following herd so that all should not crowd upon the same point of the river and drown the leaders.

It was unavoidable that some should be lost by being pushed into the deeper waters north or south of the ford, but for the most part the watering was successfully accomplished, and at the first glow of dawn the animals were contentedly cropping the rich grasses in the low bottoms near the river.

But the work was not yet finished.

When it had become light enough to see, the leaders were rounded up at the ford, and, nipped into frenzy by the dogs, began

the passage across the shallow bar. With the leaders safely over it was only a matter of time until the rest had followed, and by the time it was full day the last of the tailers were feeding in the opposite bottoms.

For Bud Larkin this was a very serious dawn. He had cast the die for war and led the invasion into the enemy's country. Any hope that the act might remain unknown was shattered before the sheep had fairly forded the stream. Against the brightening sky, on a distant rise of ground, had appeared the silent figure of a horse and man, one of the Bar T range riders.

Six distant, warning pistol shots had rung out, and then the horse and rider had disappeared across the plain at a headlong gallop.

# CHAPTER V
# STRATEGY AND A SURPRISE

"Gub pi-i-i-le!" yelled the cook at the top of his voice.

The weary herders with Sims and Larkin answered the cry as one man, for they were spent with the exertions of the night, and heavy-eyed from want of sleep. The meal of mutton, camp-bread, beans, and Spanish onions was dispatched with the speed that usually accompanied such ceremonies, and Sims told off the herders to watch the flock while the others slept.

A general commanding soldiers would have pressed forward, thus increasing the advantage gained in the enemy's country, but when sheep compose the marching column, human desires are the last thing consulted. After their long thirst and forced drive it was necessary that the animals recover their strength for a day amid abundant feed and water.

Immediately after breakfast Larkin called a small, close-knit herder to him.

"Can you ride a horse?" he asked.

"*Si, señor*," replied the man, who came originally from the southern range.

"Then saddle that piebald mare and take provisions for four days. Travel day and night until you reach the Larkin ranch in Montana, and give this letter to the man who is in charge there."

Bud drew a penciled note from the pocket of his shirt and handed it to the other. Then he produced a rough map of the country he had drawn and added it to the letter, explaining a number of times the distances from point to point, and tracing the route with his pencil. At last the herder understood.

"Tell them to hurry," was Larkin's parting injunction, as the other turned away to saddle the mare.

"*Si, señor*. Hurry like blazes, eh?" said Miguel, comprehending, with a flash of white teeth.

"Exactly."

Hardly had the man galloped away north, following the bank of the river for the better concealment past the Bar T range, when Sims languidly approached.

"I reckon we're in for trouble, boss," he remarked, yawning sleepily, "an' I'm plumb dyin' for rest, but I s'pose I better look over the country ahead if we're goin' to get these muttons out o' here."

"I was just going to suggest it," said Larkin. "I am going to stay by the camp and meet some friends of mine that I expect very shortly. Come back *pronto*, Hardy, for there's no telling what we may have to do before night."

Larkin's predictions of a visit were soon enough fulfilled. It was barely ten o'clock when several horsemen were seen riding toward the banks of the Big Horn. Bud mounted Pinte and advanced to meet them.

First came Beef Bissell, closely attended by Stelton, and after

them, four or five of the Bar T punchers. The actual encounter took place half a mile from the camp. Looking back, Larkin could see his sheep feeding in plain sight amid the green of the river bottoms.

"Howdy," snapped Bissell, by way of greeting. And then, without waiting for a reply: "What does this mean?" He indicated the placid sheep.

"My flock was dying of thirst, and I brought them up last night," said Bud. "They crossed the river early this morning."

"Why didn't you keep them on the other side? I warned you about this."

"I warned you first, Mr. Bissell. My sheep have got to go north, and the range west of the Big Horn is the only practicable way to drive them. They would never come through if I started them through the mountains. You ought to know that."

"Never mind what I ought to know," cried Bissell angrily, his red face flaming with fury. "There's one thing I do know, and that is, that those range-killers don't go a step farther north on my side of the river."

"If you can show me clear title to ownership of this part of the range I will risk them in the mountains; otherwise not," replied Bud, imperturbably. "This range is free, and as much mine as yours. There's no use going into this question again."

"That's the first true thing you've said," snarled the cowman. "Now, you listen here. I don't go hunting trouble nowhere, but there ain't a man between the Rio Grande and the Columbia

that can say I don't meet it half-way when I see it headed in my direction. Now, I've given you fair warnin' before. I'll give it to you again, but this is the last time. Either you have them sheep t'other side of the river by this time to-morrow, or you take the consequences."

"Is that your final word on the matter?"

"Yes. An' I've got witnesses to prove that you were given a chance to clear out."

"Then you give me only twenty-four hours?"

"Yes."

Bud's face took on a look of discouragement and failure, and he sat for a time as though seeking a loophole of escape from his ultimatum. At last he lifted his head and looked at the cowman with a listless eye.

"All right," he said, hopelessly; "I'll be gone by that time."

And, without further words, he wheeled his horse slowly and rode back to the camp. As he rode he maintained his dejected attitude, but his mind was actively laying plans for the overthrow of Bissell. Under the mask of seeming defeat he sought to find means for an unexpected victory.

Though his whole being rose in revolt against the arbitrary claims of the cattle king, he had become so hardened to this injustice everywhere that he no longer wasted his time or strength in vain railings against it. Instinctively he felt that this was to be a struggle of strength against cunning, for the very thought of physical resistance to thirty fighting cowboys by half a dozen

herders was ridiculous.

Many similar skirmishes, both on his home ranch and on the trail, had sharpened Larkin's wits for emergencies, and it was with really no spirit of humble complaisance that he faced the future. Much, however, depended on the result of Sim's explorations.

By the time Larkin arrived at the camp the visiting cowmen had disappeared. But this did not mean for a moment that they had all returned to the Bar T ranch house. Merely to top the first hill would have been to see a horse with hanging bridle, and a cow-puncher near by camped on the trail that led to the north.

As fortune would have it, Sims slunk into camp just at the dinner hour.

"What'd they say to yuh?" he asked abruptly. "I seen the confab from over on that hogback yonder."

The herder's respect for his employer sometimes diminished to the vanishing point.

"Got to clear out in twenty-four hours or take what's comin'."

"What'd'ye tell 'em?"

"I said we would."

The lank herder started back in amazement.

"Oh, blazes!" he grieved. "That I should've ever took on with a milksop boss. I'm plumb disgraced – " His voice trailed off into silence as he recognized the twinkle in Larkin's eye. "Oh, I see what yuh mean," he apologized, with a wide grin. "We'll clear out all right. Oh, yes! Sure!"

He sat down.

"Depends on you a good deal," remarked Bud, shoving the beans toward him. "What did you find this morning?"

"Found a new way north," was the muffled and laconic reply. "Yaas," he continued presently, after regarding his reflection in the bottom of a tin cup that had been full of coffee the moment before, "an' it's over on that hogback."

A "hogback," be it understood, is a rugged rocky mound, carved by weather erosion. It is the result of the level rock strata of the plains suddenly bending upward and protruding out of the earth.

"That ridge runs north for about two mile, and at the end seems to turn east into the Big Horn foothills. So far as I can see, no man or critter has ever been there, for there ain't any water in that crotch, and nothin' else but heat and rattlers. The point of the thing is this: Spring rains for a couple of million years have wore a regular watercourse down that crotch, and I think we can run the sheep over it, single file."

"Yes, but won't they be out on the open Bar T range when we get them over?"

"No, boss. D'ye think I'd do a thing like that? Honest, the way you misjudge a man! Well, across that hogback, where it turns to the east, there is a string of range hills covered with good feed, and leadin' north, for twenty miles. My idea's this:

"I'll send Pedro with about a hundred rams and wethers directly north from here, as they're expecting we will. All of them

will have bells on, and Pedro'll have to prod 'em some to make 'em bawl. While he is drawing all the trouble, we'll hustle the rest of the flock along behind the hogback, over the pass, and north behind the shelter of the hills."

"Fine, Sims; just the thing!" exclaimed Larkin, taking up with the idea enthusiastically. "It will be a thundering brute of a man who won't let the flock north once it has gone twenty miles."

"I allow that perhaps the Bar T punchers will be watchin' that hogback, although I couldn't find tracks there, new or old. If they ever catch the sheep in that gully, you're due to wish you'd stayed East."

"Well, that's our risk, and we've got to take it. Now, I think we'd better roll up for a few hours this afternoon, for we didn't sleep last night, and I don't believe we will to-night. Have Pedro call us at half-past four, and have him round up the sheep about five."

Sheep, because of some perverse twist in their natures, cannot graze standing still. They must walk slowly forward a few steps every few moments. To-day, however, because of the luxuriant grass along the river, the progress of the flock had been comparatively slow. Their day's "walk" would bring them, Larkin figured, to a point less than a mile distant from the hogback, and an ideal spot from which to start the march.

Pedro called the two men at the appointed hour, and they reached the flock just in time for the bedding down. Immediately all hands went through the sheep, removing bells from the

animals that usually wore them, and fastening them about the necks of those delegated to act as a blind and cover the advance of the main body.

To a Bar T cow-puncher who knew anything about sheep, the evening scene would have exhibited nothing out of the ordinary. From the reclining hundreds came the soft bleating of ewes calling their young, which is only heard at the daily bedding, the low-toned blethering of the others of the flock, and the tinkle of bells.

Beside the cook wagon the fire glowed in the trench, and everything seemed to be progressing normally.

Twilight came early among the trees and brush near the river, but it was not until absolute darkness had descended over the vast expanse of prairie that Larkin gave the order to march. Then the main body of the herd, with Sims at its head, the dogs flanking and Bud bringing up the rear on horseback, moved silently out toward the unknown hazards of the hogback pass.

Pedro and his hundred had been ordered to wait fifteen minutes, until the head of the column should have almost reached the shelter of the hogback. This he did, and then headed his small flock straight up the open prairie of the range, amid a chorus of bells and loud-voiced protest. Larkin, half a mile away, heard these sounds and smiled grimly, for the flocks before him made scarcely any sound at all.

In the darkness ahead he could hear the low voices of the men talking to the dogs and encouraging the unresponsive sheep.

Overhead were the brilliant, low-swinging stars that gave just enough light to show him the trend of the long, heaving line.

For another half-hour there was silence. The sounds of Pedro and his flock became fainter as the two bodies diverged from each other. Now the dark wall of the hogback rose up on Larkin's left; the last of the flock was behind shelter. The going was rough and Pinte chose each step carefully, but the sheep made good progress, because there was no grass to tempt them.

After another long space, broken only by the clatter of hard little feet on stone, distant shots rang out, accompanied by faint yells, and Larkin knew that Pedro had met with the first of the Bar T outfit.

The sheepman was resigned to losing the hundred, just as cattlemen do not hesitate to cut out and abandon all weak animals on a long drive. It is a loss credited to the ultimate good of the business, but Bud had not consented to this sacrifice if it meant also the sacrifice of the herder.

Pedro had, however, with many winks and glintings of teeth, made it clear that he did not expect to depart this life yet a while, hinting mysteriously at certain charms, amulets and saints that made it a business to keep him among the living.

Pedro, to Bud's knowledge, had been in numerous seamy affairs before, and had always reappeared, rather the worse for wear, but perfectly sound in all respects. He did not doubt but what the Spaniard would turn up at the cook wagon for breakfast.

The sounds of distant conflict continued for perhaps five or

ten minutes, at the end of which time perfect silence reigned again. Larkin wondered how many of the animals had been killed, or whether they had been merely scattered – the equivalent of death, for a sheep is unable to find water, and if frightened, will back against a face of rock and starve to death.

Another half-hour passed, and now Larkin could see the dim white backs of the herd rising before him as they climbed the steep watercourse. He judged that more than half the flock must be down the precipitous other side, and his heart beat with exultation at the success of Sim's strategy. The plan was to hide the sheep in some little green valley during the day and march them at night until discovered or until the upper range was reached.

Suddenly, just as the last of the flock was mounting the ascent, Larkin drew Pinte up short and listened intently. Then he quickly dismounted and placed his ear to the ground only to leap into the saddle again, swing his horse quickly and ride back along the trail.

He had heard the unmistakable pounding of feet, and an instant's sickening fear flashed before him the possibility that the Bar T cowboys had discovered the ruse after all; either that or they had extorted the secret of it from Pedro.

Larkin loosened the pistol in his holster, one of those big, single-action wooden-handled forty-fives that have settled so many unrecorded disputes, and prepared to cover the rear of the herd until it had safely crossed the hogback.

Pinte's ears twitched forward. The sound of galloping feet was nearer now. Larkin clapped on spurs and trotted to meet it.

Closer and closer it came, a mingled clatter of hoofs. Then suddenly there rang out the frightened bawl of a bewildered calf.

The aspects of the situation took on another hue. If these had been cattle stampeded by the shots and shouting on the plain, they would have made a vastly different thundering along the earth. Cattle never ran this way by themselves; therefore the obvious inference was that they were driven.

Again, the Bar T punchers had no call to drive cattle at night, particularly this night. Who, then, was driving them? In an instant Larkin's mind had leaped these various steps of reasoning and recalled old Beef Bissell's vehement arraignment of rustlers in the State. The answer was plain. The calves were being driven off the range into concealment by cattle-thieves.

Larkin knew that all the sheep had not yet passed the top of the hogback. It was absolutely necessary that their passage be unknown and unobserved. There was but one thing to do.

Spurring his horse, he charged toward the oncoming animals, whose dark forms he could now discern a hundred yards away. As he rode, he shouted and drew his revolver, firing into their faces. When at last it seemed that he must come into violent collision with them, they turned, snorting, to the east and made off in the direction of the river.

His purpose accomplished, Larkin wheeled Pinte sharply and dug in his spurs, but at that instant two dark forms loomed close,

one on each side, and seized the bridle.

"Hands up!" said a gruff voice. "You're covered."

# CHAPTER VI
# UGLY COMPANY

Larkin's revolver was empty, and his hands mechanically went up.

The captor on his right relieved him of the useless weapon, and, in a trice, produced a rope, with which he bound the sheepman's arms tightly behind him. With the other end of the rope turned about the pommel of his saddle, he dropped back into the darkness, while his companion rode to a position ahead of Larkin.

At a growled word from behind, the little cavalcade advanced, Larkin mystified, uncertain and fuming with impotent rage. Never in his life had he been so needed as he was at that time by Sims and the herdsmen; never in his life had he so ardently desired liberty and freedom of action.

Why these men had captured him he did not know; what they intended doing with him he had no idea – although his knowledge of plainsmen's character supplied him with two or three solutions hardly calculated to exhilarate the victim. Where they were taking him was almost as much of a puzzle, for Bud, after the first few turns of his captors, completely lost his sense of direction, except for the general compass of the stars.

No longer the friendly loom of the hogback was on his left.

He felt the free wind of the plains on his face, and calculated that they must have returned to the open range.

Who his captors were was another puzzle. If these men had been driving the cattle why did they not continue to drive them instead of turning aside to make prisoner a harmless sheepman? If they were not driving the cattle —

A horrible suspicion crossed Bud's mind. If these were punchers from the Bar T outfit he was indeed in a bad way, for no one knew better than Larkin (by hearsay) the wild stories told of Beef Bissell's methods in a cattle war.

The young man told himself calmly that if he got away with a few head of sheep and an entire body he would consider himself fortunate in the extreme.

For seemingly endless ages the leader trotted on ahead – so far, in fact, did he ride that Larkin's arms and elbow joints were racked with pain from being held so long in an unnatural position. At the end of what was probably three hours, a small fiery glow made itself evident at some distance across the plain, and the sheepman knew by this camp-fire that the goal of his ride was in sight.

A solitary man sat by the fire, rolling and smoking a continuous stream of cigarettes. Dimly seen in the near-by shadows were the long figures of other men rolled in their blankets. Bud knew that not far off the hobbled horses grazed, or had lain down to rest.

"Kick up the boys, Bill," said the man who held the rope. "Got

somethin' queer to look into this time."

"Aw, let 'em sleep, chief," drawled Bill without moving. "Some of 'em ain't closed their eyes in nigh on three days. What's the matter?"

"Got a young captain here who 'lows he's some brave man, I reckon. Leastways he come drivin' at us with fire a-poppin' out of his gun, an' Shorty and me thinks we better investigate. So we nabs him when his gun's empty and brings him in. A man that'll shoot around reckless the way this feller did is plumb dangerous to have runnin' loose.

"But I guess you're right about the boys, Bill. I'll let 'em sleep an' we'll talk to this maverick in the mornin'. Keep him under your eye."

Things were clearing up for Larkin. These men evidently thought that he was some ambitious puncher on the lookout for rustlers. Up to this time he had kept silent, borrowing no trouble and trusting to his ability to identify himself. But now at the prospect of idling here all night and part of the day he protested.

"Turn my arms loose, will you?" he demanded. "They're about broke off."

Joe, the chief, after carefully searching him for additional weapons, complied with his request, in so far that he bound his wrists together in front.

"Now, boys," said Bud, crisply, "I wish you'd tell me what this all means. If you want to question me, do it now and let me go, for I've got mighty important business up the line a way."

"I allow yuh have," remarked Joe, dryly. "Yuh also got some mighty important business right here, if yuh only knowed it."

"What business."

"Fannin' yore gun at us that-a-way. Yore plumb careless, young feller. But look here, I'm not a-goin' to stay up all night talkin' to yuh. You'll have to talk to all the boys in the mornin'."

"But I can't wait till morning, I tell you," cried Bud, exasperated. "Every minute I sit here I may be losing thousands of dollars. For Heaven's sake let me go to-night, and I'll come back any other time you say. I give you my word for it."

"Can't wait till to-morrer! Stranger, you may wait till the crack o' doom before you ever get back to that business o' yourn."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Larkin, made strangely ill at ease by some veiled meaning in the other's tone.

"Got to leave it to the boys," was Joe's evasive reply. "Better lay down and git some sleep; likely to be busy all day to-morrer."

And Larkin, finding that all argument was as futile as trying to crack Gibraltar with a cold chisel, relapsed into silence, and prepared to get what rest he could until daylight.

Morning disclosed the fact that the group of men numbered about ten, each with a horse near by, and all fully supplied with arms. In fact, there was not a man among them who could not have "rolled a gun" with both hands if necessary, and at the same time carried a knife between his teeth. This matter of complete armament, together with Joe's ambiguous speeches of the night before, wholly convinced Larkin that he had fallen in with a band

of rustlers.

Breakfast was prepared for himself by each man, Joe attending to the wants of the prisoner, but no attempt was made to rope or saddle the horses. They were evidently waiting for something. What this was became evident shortly when another group of five men appeared around a distant rise and loped to the rendezvous. Larkin reasoned that these must be the men who continued the cattle drive after Joe and Pike had captured him.

The sheepman could not but admire the natural advantages of the place chosen by his captors for the meeting. Rolling hills surrounded the little pocket on all sides, and here and there a red scoria butte thrust its ugly height out of the plain. The chances of discovery were infinitesimal.

The evolution of the rustler was logical but rapid, and started with the general law that any ranch-owner was at liberty to brand with his mark any maverick found on his range. As it was the cowboy who discovered these strays, he was usually provided with a branding-iron and put the seal of his employer on the animal wherever found.

From this it was but a step for unscrupulous punchers, or those with a shrewd eye for business, to drive off unbranded cattle and ship them independently to market, or to mark them with a private brand of their own. All this was before the introduction of brand inspectors at the stockyards of Omaha, Kansas City, or Chicago.

Therefore, among the men at this rendezvous Larkin noted

types of cowmen equal to any on the range for horsemanship and ability to handle cattle. With his naturally quick eye, the sheepman observed them closely, but failed to recognize any of them.

His case came up quickly.

By various papers in his possession he proved his identity.

"What were you doing out on the range last night?" asked Joe.

Bud hesitated for a minute and then, deciding that his safest and quickest course would be to make a clean breast of things, replied:

"I was driving two thousand head of sheep north on the Bar T."

"Then you're not a cattleman?"

"No." Larkin produced his bills of sale for the sheep and these were handed gravely about from one to another, although it was certain that some of the men could not read them.

"How long are you going to stay in this country?"

"Just as long as it takes to get my sheep north. I come from Montana."

Joe beckoned a number of the men aside out of Larkin's hearing.

"We're plumb lucky," he announced. "If I know my book, old Bissell will forget all about a few missin' calves when he knows this feller has sent sheep up his range. Now we've got to run off about a hundred more head to that railroad camp north of here, and I think we can use this Larkin."

A dark, sullen-looking puncher shook his head slowly.

"It's takin' chances," he growled. "String him up, I say. He knows us all now, and I'd sooner he'd look through a rope than me."

"You shore are ornery, Pete," said a third, "an' plumb set on stretchin' yore neck. Cain't yuh see that if yuh hang this feller we'll have both the sheep and cattlemen ag'in us?"

"Shore, that's sense," broke in another. "Less hear Joe's scheme."

"'Tain't so blame much, boys," countered the chief modestly. "We'll make this Larkin swear never to give word agin us if we don't kill him. Then we'll run him off into the hills for four or five days with a guard, finish our own drive, and clear out, lettin' him go. What d'ye think of that?"

"It's a reg'lar hum-dinger, Joe," said one man, and the others concurred in the laudatory opinion.

But at the first sentence to Larkin, that young man upset their well-laid plans.

"Larkin," said Joe, "we allow as how we'd like to make a bargain with yuh?"

"If you are going to bargain with me to break the law, you had better not say anything about it," was the reply.

"I was jest about startin' one of them mutual protective, benefit and literary sassieties," suggested Joe tactfully as a feeler, while his comrades grinned.

"Don't want to hear about it," retorted Bud, divining the

intention. “You can do anything you like with me, but don’t tell me your bargains. I’ve got troubles enough with my sheep without signing on any more. Now, look here, men, I don’t want to interfere with you, and it only wastes your time to bother with me. Suppose you let me go about my business and you go about yours.”

“Swear on oath never to recognize or bear witness against us?”

“No. What kind of a crook do you think I am? If I were put under oath by a sheriff, I would have to accuse you, and I’d do it.”

Joe Parker’s face lost its expression of genial amiability and he looked about on a circle of dark countenances.

“I’m plumb sorry you act this-a-way,” he said aggrievedly. “Boys, where’s the nearest tree?”

“Ten miles.”

“After dinner everybody saddle up,” came the order.

# CHAPTER VII
# PRAIRIE BELL

When Juliet Bissell rode back to the Bar T ranch after her parting with Larkin at the fork of Grass Creek, she was a decidedly more thoughtful and sober young woman than she had been at the same hour the day previous.

Although blessed with an adoring father and a rather eccentric mother, she had, for the last year, begun to feel the stirrings of a tiny discontent.

Her life was a good example of the familiar mistake made by many a wealthy cattle-owner. Her parents, realizing their crudity and lack of education, had seen to it that she should be given all the advantages denied them, and had sent her East to Chicago for eight consecutive years.

During this time, while hating the noise and confinement of the city, she had absorbed much of its glamour, and enjoyed its alluring pleasures with a keen appreciation. Music had been her chief study, and her very decided talent had opened a busy career for her had she chosen to follow it.

But Julie was true to her best instincts, and refused to consider such a thing. Her father and mother had done all in their power for her, she reasoned, and therefore it was but fair that she should return to them and make the closing years of their lives happy.

Though nothing had ever been said, the girl knew that when she had left the ranch house, even for a week's visit with a girl friend two hundred miles away, the sun might as well have fallen from the heavens, considering the gloom that descended upon the Bar T.

It was this knowledge of their need for her that had brought her back to fulfill what she considered her greatest happiness and duty in life.

Now, a monkey cannot wear clothes, smoke cigarettes, perform before applauding audiences and return to the jungle without a certain feeling of hateful unfitness among his gibbering brethren.

No more could this wild, lovely creature of the plains become one of the most sought-after girls of Chicago's North Shore set, and return to the painful prose of the Bar T ranch without paying the penalty.

With the glory of health and outdoor life, she had failed to realize this, but since the sudden appearance of Bud Larkin she had done little else.

He had brought back to her a sudden powerful nostalgia for the life she had once known. And had old Beef Bissell been aware of this nostalgia, he would have realized for the first time that in his desire to give his daughter everything he had created a situation that was already unfortunate and might, with very little prompting, be unhappy.

But this knowledge was not vouchsafed to him, and Julie

certainly would never make it plain.

The evening after Bud's departure, that same evening, in fact, when he was fighting toward water with his flocks, the cattleman and his daughter sat outside on the little veranda that ran across the front of the ranch house.

"That feller Larkin," remarked Bissell, terminating a long pause. "Kind of a dude or something back East, wasn't he?"

"That's what the punchers would call him, father," returned the girl gravely. "But he was never anything but a gentleman in his treatment of me."

"I don't know what you mean exactly by that word 'gentleman,' Julie, but I allow that no real man ever went into raisin' sheep."

"Perhaps not, dear," she said, taking his rough, ungainly hand in both of hers, "but I think there is bound to be money in it. Mr. Larkin himself says that in the end the cattle will have to give way before the sheep."

"An' he thought he was tellin' you something new when he said it, too, didn't he? Well, I've knowed that fact for the last five years. That's the main reason I won't let his animals through my range. Once they get a foothold, there's no stoppin' 'em. Judas! I'm tired of fightin' for things!"

"Poor father," and the girl's voice was full of tenderness. "You're not discouraged, are you, dear?"

"No, Prairie Bell, but I reckon I'm gettin' old, an' I can't get up the fight I used to. I thought I had my hands full with the rustlers, but now with the sheep comin' – well, between you and me, little

girl, I wish I had somebody to stand up and take the licks."

"There's Mike; he certainly can give and take a few."

"Yes, of course I've got Mike, but, when you're all done, he's only a foreman, an' his interest don't go much beyond his seventy-five a month an' grub. Yet – by George!" He sat suddenly erect and slapped his thigh with his disengaged hand.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothin'." They talked on in the affectionate, intimate way that had always characterized their relations since Julie had been a girl just big enough to listen to involved harangues about cattle without actually going to sleep. In the course of an hour Bissell suddenly asked:

"Did you ever think of marryin', Prairie Bell?"

"If thinking ever helped any, I would have been a Mormon by this time."

"Well, you are growed up, ain't you?" and Bissell spoke in the wondering tone of a man who has just realized a self-evident fact "Fancy my little girl old enough to marry! How old are you, anyhow? 'Bout eighteen?"

"Twenty-five, you dear, old goose. Eighteen! The idea."

"Well, twenty-five, then. Of course, Julie, when I die I will leave this place to you, and that's what made me think about your marryin'. I want a good, sharp man to fight fer my cows an' my range, a man that knows it and could make a success of it, an' yet wouldn't care because it was in your name."

"Would you mind if I loved him a little bit, too?" asked the

girl, with elaborately playful sarcasm.

"Bless you, no. Love him all you want to, but I 'low you couldn't love a man very long who didn't have all them qualifications I mentioned. I figger love out somethin' like this. First there's a rockbed of ability, then a top soil of decency, an' out o' these two, admiration kind o' grows like corn. Of course you always grind up the corn and soak it with sentiment; then you've got mush. An' the trouble with most people is they only think of the mush an' forget the rock an' the top soil."

"Why, you old philosopher!" cried the girl, laughing and squeezing his big shoulders. "You're awfully clever, really." Which remark brought a confused but pleased blush to Bissell's hard face that had become wonderfully soft and tender during this hour with his daughter.

"Now, see here," went on the girl severely, "I think there's something back of all this talk about marriage. What is it?"

Bissell looked at her, startled, not having expected to encounter feminine intuition.

"Nothin', only I wish you could marry somebody that'd look out fer you the way I mentioned. Then I could die happy, though I don't expect to be on that list fer a long while."

"Anybody in mind?" asked Julie banteringly.

"Well, not exactly," hesitated her father, with another sharp glance. "But I allow I could dig up one if I tried very hard."

"Go ahead and try."

"Well, now there's Billy Speaker over on the Circle Arrow, as

gentle a man for a blond as I ever see."

"I've only met him twice in my life," remarked the girl. "Try again."

"There's Red Tarken, foreman on the M Square. He'd be good to yuh, I know, and he's a hum-dinger about cows."

"I am glad he has one qualification aside from his red hair," put in Julie seriously. "However, I am afraid that as a husband Red would be about as steady as a bronco saddled for the first time after the winter feeding. He'd better have free range as long as he lives. Once more, father."

"Well, see here, Julie, it seems to me you could do a lot worse than take our own Mike Stelton. I've never thought of it much before, but to-night it sort of occurred to me an' – "

Juliet Bissell broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, at which her father fixed her with a regard as wondering as it was hurt. His cherished inspiration so tactfully approached had burst like a soap-bubble under the gale of Juliet's merriment.

"Bud was right, after all," said the girl, after her nervous outbreak. "He told me Mike had some silly hope or other, and I believe Stelton has given you absent treatment until you have made this suggestion. Father, he's just as preposterous as the others."

"I don't agree with you," contended Bissell stubbornly. "Mike is faithful, and has been for years. He knows the ins and outs of the business, and is willing to take the hard knocks that I'm getting tired of. Then there's another thing. I could be half-blind

an' still see what Mike has been wanting these last five years."

Juliet suddenly rose to her feet, all the laughter gone from her eyes and her heart. With a feeling of frightened helplessness she realized that her father was serious.

"Are you taking Mike's part against me?" she asked calmly.

"Well, I still don't see why you couldn't marry him."

"You've forgotten the mush, father, but that isn't all. There's something different about Mike lately, something I have never noticed before. His eye seems shifty; he avoids all the family. If I didn't know him so well, I should think he was a criminal. Leaving out the fact that I don't love him, and that the very thought of his ever touching me makes me shudder, this distrust of him would be enough to block any such arrangements. Why" – and her lip curled scornfully – "I would marry Bud Larkin a hundred times rather than Mike Stelton once."

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.