

Cullum Ridgwell

The Night Riders: A Romance of Early Montana



Ridgwell Cullum

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CHAPTER I

IN THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES

Forks Settlement no longer occupies its place upon the ordnance map of the state of Montana. At least not *the* Forks Settlement – the one which nestled in a hollow on the plains, beneath the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. It is curious how these little places do contrive to slip off the map in the course of time. There is no doubt but that they do, and are wholly forgotten, except, perhaps, by those who actually lived or visited there. It is this way with all growing countries, and anywhere from twenty to thirty years ago Montana was distinctly a new country.

It was about '85 that Forks Settlement enjoyed the height of its prosperity – a prosperity based on the supply of dry-goods and machinery to a widely scattered and sparse population of small ranchers and farmers. These things brought it into existence and kept it afloat for some years. Then it gradually faded from existence – just as such places do.

When John Tresler rode into Forks he wondered what rural retreat he had chanced upon. He didn't wonder in those words, his language was much more derogatory to the place than that.

It was late one afternoon when his horse ambled gently on to the green patch which served Forks as a market-place. He drew up and looked around him for some one to give him information. The place was quite deserted. It was a roasting hot day, and the people of Forks were not given to moving about much on hot days, unless imperative business claimed them. As there were only two seasons in the year when such a thing was likely to happen, and this was not one of them, no one was stirring.

The sky was unshaded by a single cloud. Tresler was tired, stiff, and consumed by a sponge-like thirst, for he was unused to long hours in the saddle. And he had found a dreary monotony in riding over the endless prairie lands of the West.

Now he found himself surrounded by an uncertain circle of wooden houses. None of them suggested luxury, but after the heaving rollers of grass-land they suggested companionship and life. And just now that was all the horseman cared about.

He surveyed each house in turn, searching for a single human face. And at last he beheld a window full of faces staring curiously at him from the far side of the circle. It was enough. Touching his jaded horse's flanks he rode over toward it.

Further life appeared now in the form of a small man who edged shyly round the angle of the building and stood gazing at him. The stranger was a queer figure. His face was as brown as the surface of a prairie trail and just as scored with ruts. His long hair and flowing beard were the color of matured hay. His dress was simple and in keeping with his face; moleskin trousers, worn and soiled, a blue serge shirt, a shabby black jacket, and a fiery handkerchief about his neck, while a battered prairie hat adorned the back of his head.

Tresler pulled his horse up before this welcome vision and slid stiffly to the ground, while the little man slanted his eyes over his general outfit.

"Is this Forks Settlement?" the newcomer asked, with an ingratiating smile. He was a manly looking fellow with black hair and steel-blue eyes; he was dressed in a plain Norfolk jacket and riding kit. He was not particularly handsome, but possessed a strong, reliant face.

The stranger closed his eyes in token of acquiescence.

"Ur-hum," he murmured.

“Will you point me out the hotel?”

The other’s eyes had finally settled themselves on the magnificent pair of balloon-shaped corduroy riding-breeches Tresler was wearing, which had now resettled themselves into their natural voluminous folds.

He made no audible reply. He was engrossed with the novel vision before him. A backward jerk of the head was the only sign he permitted himself.

Tresler looked at the house indicated. He felt in some doubt, and not without reason. The place was a mere two-storied shanty, all askew and generally unpromising.

“Can I – that is, does the proprietor take – er – guests?” he asked.

“Guess Carney takes most anythin’,” came the easy reply.

The door of the hotel opened and two men came out, eyeing the newcomer and his horse critically. Then they propped themselves in leisurely fashion against the door-casing, and chewed silently, while they gazed abroad with marked unconcern.

Tresler hazarded another question. He felt strange in this company. It was his first real acquaintance with a prairie settlement, and he didn’t quite know what to expect.

“I wonder if there is any one to see to my horse,” he said with some hesitation.

“Hitch him to the tie-post an’ ast in ther’,” observed the uncommunicative man, pointing to a post a few yards from the door, but without losing interest in the other’s nether garments.

“That sounds reasonable.”

Tresler moved off and secured his horse and loosened the saddle-girths.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said, when he came back, his well-trimmed six feet towering over the other’s five feet four. “Might I ask whom I have the pleasure of addressing? My name is John Tresler; I am on my way to Mosquito Bend, Julian Marbolt’s ranch. A stranger, you see, in a strange land. No doubt you have observed that already,” he finished up good-naturedly.

But the other’s attention was not to be diverted from the interesting spectacle of the corduroys, and he answered without shifting his gaze.

“My name’s Ranks – gener’ly called ‘Slum.’ Howdy.”

“Well, Mr. Ranks – ”

“Gener’ly called ‘Slum,’” interrupted the other.

“Mr. Slum, then – ” Tresler smiled.

“Slum!”

The man’s emphasis was marked. There was no cheating him of his due. “Slum” was his sobriquet by the courtesy of prairie custom. “Ranks” was purely a paternal heirloom and of no consequence at all.

“Well, Slum,” Tresler laughed, “suppose we go and sample Carney’s refreshments. I’m tired, and possess a thirst.”

He stepped toward the doorway and looked back. Mr. Ranks had not moved. Only his wondering eyes had followed the other’s movements.

“Won’t you join me?” Tresler asked. Then, noting the fixed stare in the man’s eyes, he went on with some impatience, “What the dickens are you staring at?” And, in self-defense, he was forced into a survey of his own riding-breeches.

Slum looked up. A twinkle of amusement shone beneath his heavy brows, while a broad grin parted the hair on his face.

“Oh, jest nothin’,” he said amiably. “I wer’ kind o’ figgerin’ out what sort of a feller them pants o’ yours wus made for.” He doused the brown earth at his feet with tobacco juice. Then shaking his head thoughtfully, a look of solemn wonder replaced the grin. “Say,” he added, “but he must ’a’ bin a dandy chunk of a man.”

Tresler was about to reply. But a glance at Mr. Ranks, and an audible snigger coming from the doorway, suddenly changed his mind. He swung round to face a howl of laughter; and he understood.

“The drinks are on me,” he said with some chagrin. “Come on, all of you. Yes, I’m a ‘tenderfoot.’”

And it was the geniality of his reply that won him a place in the society of Forks Settlement at once. In five minutes his horse was stabled and cared for. In five minutes he was addressing the occupants of the saloon by their familiar nicknames. In five minutes he was paying for whisky at an exorbitant price. In five minutes – well, he sniffed his first breath of prairie habits and prairie ways.

It is not necessary to delve deeply into the characters of these citizens of Forks. It is not good to rake bad soil, the process is always offensive. A mere outline is alone necessary. Ike Carney purveyed liquor. A little man with quick, cunning eyes, and a mouth that shut tight under a close-cut fringe of gray moustache. “Shaky” Pindle, the carpenter, was a sad-eyed man who looked as gentle as a disguised wolf. His big, scarred face never smiled, because, his friends said, it was a physical impossibility for it to do so, and his huge, rough body was as uncouth as his manners, and as unwieldy as his slow-moving tongue. Taylor, otherwise “Twirly,” the butcher, was a man so genial and rubicund that in five minutes you began to wish that he was built like the lower animals that have no means of giving audible expression to their good humor, or, if they have, there is no necessity to notice it except by a well-directed kick. And Slum, quiet, unsophisticated Slum, shadier than the shadiest of them all, but a man who took the keenest delight in the humors of life, and who did wrong from an inordinate delight in besting his neighbors. A man to smile at, but to avoid.

These were the men John Tresler, fresh from Harvard and a generous home, found himself associated with while he rested on his way to Mosquito Bend.

Ike Carney laid himself out to be pleasant.

“Goin’ to Skitter Bend?” he observed, as he handed his new guest the change out of a one hundred dollar bill. “Wal, it’s a tidy layout; – ninety-five dollars, mister; a dollar a drink. You’ll find that c’rect – best ranch around these parts. Say,” he went on, “the ol’ blind hoss has hunched it together pretty neat. I’ll say that.”

“Blind mule,” put in Slum, vaulting to a seat on the bar.

“Mule?” questioned Shaky, with profound scorn. “Guess you ain’t worked around his layout, Slum. Skunk’s my notion of him. I ’lows his kickin’s most like a mule’s, but ther’ ain’t nothin’ more to the likeness. A mule’s a hard-workin’, decent cit’zen, which ain’t off’n said o’ Julian Marbolt.”

Shaky swung a leg over the back of a chair and sat down with his arms folded across it, and his heavy bearded chin resting upon them.

“But you can’t expect a blind man to be the essence of amiability,” said Tresler. “Think of his condition.”

“See here, young feller,” jerked in Shaky, thrusting his chin-beard forward aggressively. “Condition ain’t to be figgered on when a man keeps a great hulkin’, bulldozin’ swine of a foreman like Jake Harnach. Say, them two, the blind skunk an’ Jake, ken raise more hell in five minutes around that ranch than a tribe o’ neches on the war-path. I built a barn on that place last summer, an’ I guess I know.”

“Comforting for me,” observed Tresler, with a laugh.

“Oh, you ain’t like to git his rough edge,” put in Carney, easily.

“Guess you’re payin’ a premium?” asked Shaky.

“I’m going to have three years’ teaching.”

“Three years o’ Skitter Bend?” said Slum, quietly. “Guess you’ll learn a deal in three years o’ Skitter Bend.”

The little man chewed the end of a cigar Tresler had presented him with, while his twinkling eyes exchanged meaning glances with his comrades. Twirly laughed loudly and backed against the bar, stretching out his arms on either side of him, and gripping its moulded edge with his beefy hands.

“An’ you’re payin’ fer that teachin’?” the butcher asked incredulously, when his mirth had subsided.

“It seems the custom in this country to pay for everything you get,” Tresler answered, a little shortly.

He was being laughed at more than he cared about. Still he checked his annoyance. He wanted to know something about the local reputation of the rancher he had apprenticed himself to, so he fired a direct question in amongst his audience.

“Look here,” he said sharply. “What’s the game? What’s the matter with this Julian Marbolt?”

He looked round for an answer, which, for some minutes, did not seem to be forthcoming.

Slum broke the silence at last. “He’s blind,” he said quietly.

“I know that,” retorted Tresler, impatiently. “It’s something else I want to know.”

He looked at the butcher, who only laughed. He turned on the saloon-keeper, who shook his head. Finally he applied to Shaky.

“Wal,” the carpenter began, with a ponderous air of weighing his words. “I ain’t the man to judge a feller offhand like. I ’lows I know suthin’ o’ the blind man o’ Skitter Bend, seein’ I wus workin’ contract fer him all last summer. An’ wot I knows is – nasty. I’ve see’d things on that ranch as made me git a tight grip on my axe, an’ long a’mighty hard to bust a few heads in. I’ve see’d that all-fired Jake Harnach, the foreman, hammer hell out o’ some o’ the hands, wi’ tha’ blind man standin’ by jest as though his gummy eyes could see what was doin’, and I’ve watched his ugly face workin’ wi’ e’very blow as Jake pounded, ’cos o’ the pleasure it give him. I’ve see’d some o’ those fellers wilter right down an’ grovel like yaller dorgs at their master’s feet. I’ve see’d that butcher-lovin’ lot handle their hosses an’ steers like so much dead meat – an’ wuss’n. I’ve see’d hell around that ranch. ‘An’ why for,’ you asks, ‘do their punchers an’ hands stand it?’ ‘Cos,’ I answers quick, ‘ther’ ain’t a job on this countryside fer ’em after Julian Marbolt’s done with ’em.’ That’s why. ‘Wher’ wus you workin’ around before?’ asks a foreman. ‘Skitter Bend,’ says the puncher. ‘Ain’t got nothin’ fer you,’ says the foreman quick; ‘guess this ain’t no butcherin’ bizness!’ An’ that’s jest how it is right thro’ with Skitter Bend,” Shaky finished up, drenching the spittoon against the bar with consummate accuracy.

“Right – dead right,” said Twirly, with a laugh.

“Guess, mebbe, you’re prejudiced some,” suggested Carney, with an eye on his visitor.

“Shaky’s taken to book readin’,” said Slum, gently. “Guess dime fiction gits a powerful holt on some folk.”

“Dime fiction y’rself,” retorted Shaky, sullenly. “Mebbe young Dave Steele as come back from ther’ with a hole in his head that left him plumb crazy ever since till he died, ’cos o’ some racket he had wi’ Jake – mebbe that’s out of a dime fiction. Say, you git right to it, an’ kep on sousin’ whisky, Slum Ranks. You ken do that – you can’t tell me ’bout the blind man.”

A pause in the conversation followed while Ike dried some glasses. The room was getting dark. It was a cheerless den. Tresler was thoughtfully smoking. He was digesting and sifting what he had heard; trying to separate fact from fiction in Shaky’s story. He felt that there must be some exaggeration. At last he broke the silence, and all eyes were turned on him.

“And do you mean to say there is no law to protect people on these outlying stations? Do you mean to tell me that men sit down quietly under such dastardly tyranny?” His questions were more particularly directed toward Shaky.

“Law?” replied the carpenter. “Law? Say, we don’t rec’nize no law around these parts – not yet. Mebbe it’s comin’, but – I ’lows ther’s jest one law at present, an’ that we mostly carries on us. Oh, Jake Harnach’s met his match ’fore now. But ’tain’t frekent. Yes, Jake’s a big swine, wi’ the muscle o’ two men; but I’ve seen him git downed, and not a hund’ed mile from wher’ we’re settin’. Say, Ike,” he turned to the man behind the bar, “you ain’t like to fergit the night Black Anton called his ‘hand.’ Ther’ ain’t no bluff to Anton. When he gits to the bizness end of a gun it’s best to get your thumbs up sudden.”

The saloon-keeper nodded. “Guess there’s one man who’s got Jake’s measure, an’ that’s Black Anton.”

The butcher added a punctuating laugh, while Slum nodded.

“And who’s Black Anton?” asked Tresler of the saloon-keeper.

“Anton? Wal, I guess he’s Marbolt’s private hoss keeper. He’s a half-breed. French-Canadian; an’ tough. Say, he’s jest as quiet an’ easy you wouldn’t know he was around. Soft spoken as a woman, an’ jest about as vicious as a rattler. Guess you’ll meet him. An’ I ’lows he’s meetable – till he’s riled.”

“Pleasant sort of man if he can cow this wonderful Jake,” observed Tresler, quietly.

“Oh, yes, pleasant ’nough,” said Ike, mistaking his guest’s meaning.

“The only thing I can’t understand ’bout Anton,” said Slum, suddenly becoming interested, “is that he’s earnin’ his livin’ honest. He’s too quiet, an’ – an’ iley. He sort o’ slid into this territory wi’out a blamed cit’zen of us knowin’. We’ve heerd tell of him sence from ’crost the border, an’ the yarns ain’t nice. I don’t figger to argue wi’ strangers at no time, an’ when Anton’s around I don’t never git givin’ no opinion till he’s done talkin’, when I mostly find mine’s the same as his.”

“Some folks ain’t got no grit,” growled Shaky, contemptuously.

“An’ some folk ’a’ got so much grit they ain’t got no room fer savee,” rapped in Slum sharply.

“Meanin’ me,” said Shaky, sitting up angrily.

“I ’lows you’ve got grit,” replied the little man quietly, looking squarely into the big man’s eyes.

“Go to h – ”

“Guess I’d as lief be in Forks; it’s warmer,” replied Slum, imperturbably.

“Stow yer gas! You nag like a widder as can’t git a second man.”

“Which wouldn’t happen wi’ folk o’ your kidney around.”

Shaky was on his feet in an instant, and his anger was blazing in his fierce eyes.

“Say, you gorl – ”

“Set right ther’, Shaky,” broke in Slum, as the big man sprang toward him. “Set right ther’; ther’ ain’t goin’ to be no hoss-play.”

Slum Ranks had not shifted his position, but his right hand had dived into his jacket pocket and his eyes flashed ominously. And the carpenter dropped back into his seat without a word.

And Tresler looked on in amazement. It was all so quick, so sudden. There had hardly been a breathing space between the passing of their good-nature and their swift-rising anger. The strangeness of it all, the lawlessness, fascinated him. He knew he was on the fringe of civilization, but he had had no idea of how sparse and short that fringe was. He thought that civilization depended on the presence of white folk. That, of necessity, white folk must themselves have the instincts of civilization.

Here he saw men, apparently good comrades all, who were ready, on the smallest provocation, to turn and rend each other. It was certainly a new life to him, something that perhaps he had vaguely dreamt of, but the possibility of the existence of which he had never seriously considered.

But, curiously enough, as he beheld these things for himself for the first time, they produced no shock, they disturbed him in nowise. It all seemed so natural. More, it roused in him a feeling that such things should be. Possibly this feeling was due to his own upbringing, which had been that of an essentially athletic university. He even felt the warm blood surge through his veins at the prospect of a forcible termination to the two men’s swift passage of arms.

But the ebullition died out as quickly as it had risen. Slum slid from the bar to the ground, and his deep-set eyes were smiling again.

“Pshaw,” he said, with a careless shrug, “ther’ ain’t nothin’ to grit wi’out savee.”

Shaky rose and stretched himself as though nothing had happened to disturb the harmony of the meeting. The butcher relinquished his hold on the bar and moved across to the window.

“Guess the missis’ll be shoutin’ around fer you fellers to git your suppers,” Slum observed cheerfully. Then he turned to Tresler. “Ike, here, don’t run no boarders. Mebbe you’d best git around to my shack. Sally’ll fix you up with a blanket or two, an’ the grub ain’t bad. You see, I run a boardin’-house fer the boys – leastways, Sally does.”

And Tresler adopted the suggestion. He had no choice but to do so. Anyway, he was quite satisfied with the arrangement. He had entered the life of the prairie and was more than willing to adopt its ways and its people.

And the recollection of that first night in Forks remained with him when the memory of many subsequent nights had passed from him. It stuck to him as only the first strong impressions of a new life can.

He met Sally Ranks – she was two sizes too large for the dining-room of the boarding-house – who talked in a shrieking nasal manner that cut the air like a knife, and who heaped the plates with coarse food that it was well to have a good appetite to face. He dined for the first time in his life at a table that had no cloth, and devoured his food with the aid of a knife and fork that had never seen a burnish since they had first entered the establishment, and drank boiled tea out of a tin cup that had once been enameled. He was no longer John Tresler, fresh from the New England States, but one of fourteen boarders, the majority of whom doubled the necessary length of their sentences when they conversed by reason of an extensive vocabulary of blasphemy, and picked their teeth with their forks.

But it was pleasant to him. He was surrounded by something approaching the natural man. Maybe they were drawn from the dregs of society, but nevertheless they had forcibly established their right to live – a feature that had lifted them from the ruck of thousands of law-abiding citizens. He experienced a friendly feeling for these ruffians. More, he had a certain respect for them.

After supper many of them drifted back to their recreation-ground, the saloon. Tresler, although he had no inclination for drink, would have done the same. He wished to see more of the people, to study them as a man who wishes to prepare himself for a new part. But the quiet Slum drew him back and talked gently to him; and he listened.

“Say, Tresler,” the little man remarked offhandedly, “ther’s three fellers lookin’ fer a gamble. Two of ’em ain’t a deal at ‘draw,’ the other’s pretty neat. I tho’t, mebbe, you’d notion a hand up here wi’ us. It’s better’n loafin’ down ’t the saloon. We most gener’ly play a dollar limit.”

And so it was arranged. Tresler stayed. He was initiated. He learned the result of a game of “draw” in Forks, where the players made the whole game of life a gamble, and attained a marked proficiency in the art.

The result was inevitable. By midnight there were four richer citizens in Forks, and a newcomer who was poorer by his change out of a hundred-dollar bill. But Tresler lost quite cheerfully. He never really knew how it was he lost, whether it was his bad play or bad luck. He was too tired and sleepy long before the game ended. He realized next morning, when he came to reflect, that in some mysterious manner he had been done. However, he took his initiation philosophically, making only a mental reservation for future guidance.

That night he slept on a palliasse of straw, with a pillow consisting of a thin bolster propped on his outer clothes. Three very yellow blankets made up the tally of comfort. And the whole was spread out on the floor of a room in which four other men were sleeping noisily.

After breakfast he paid his bill, and, procuring his horse, prepared for departure. His first acquaintance in Forks stood his friend to the last. Slum it was who looked round his horse to see that the girths of the saddle were all right; Slum it was who praised the beast in quiet, critical tones; Slum it was who shook him by the hand and wished him luck; Slum it was who gave him a parting word of advice; just as it was Slum who had first met him with ridicule, cared for him – at a price – during his sojourn, and quietly robbed him at a game he knew little about. And Tresler, with the philosophy of a man who has that within him which must make for achievement, smiled, shook hands heartily and with good will, and quietly stored up the wisdom he had acquired in his first night in Forks Settlement.

“Say, Tresler,” exclaimed Slum, kindly, as he wrung his departing guest’s hand, “I’m real glad I’ve met you. I ’lows, comin’ as you did, you might ’a’ run dead into some durned skunk as hadn’t the manners for dealin’ with a hog. There’s a hatful of ’em in Forks. S’long. Say, ther’s a gal at Skitter

Bend. She's the ol' blind boss's daughter, an' she's a dandy. But don't git sparkin' her wi' the ol' man around."

Tresler laughed. Slum amused him.

"Good-bye," he said. "Your kindness has taken a load – off my mind. I know more than I did yesterday morning. No, I won't get sparking the girl with the old man around. See you again some time."

And he passed out of Forks.

"That feller's a decent – no, he's a gentleman," muttered Slum, staring after the receding horseman. "Guess Skitter Bend's jest about the place fer him. He'll bob out on top like a cork in a water bar'l. Say, Jake Harnach'll git his feathers trimmed or I don't know a 'deuce-spot' from a 'straight flush.'"

Which sentiment spoke volumes for his opinion of the man who had just left him.

CHAPTER II

MOSQUITO BEND

Forks died away in a shimmering haze of heat as Tresler rode out over the hard prairie trail. Ten miles they had told him it was to Mosquito Bend; a ten-mile continuation of the undulating plains he had now grown accustomed to. He allowed his horse to take it leisurely. There was no great hurry for an early arrival.

John Tresler had done what many an enterprising youngster from the New England States has done since. At the age of twenty-five, finding himself, after his university career at Harvard, with an excellent training in all athletics, particularly boxing and wrestling and all those games pertaining to the noble art of self-defense, but with only a limited proficiency in matters relating to the earning of an adequate living, he had decided to break new ground for himself on the prairie-lands of the West. Stock-raising was his object, and, to this end, he had sought out a ranch where he could thoroughly master the craft before embarking on his own enterprise.

It was through official channels that he had heard of Mosquito Bend as one of the largest ranches in the country at the time, and he had at once entered into negotiations with the owner, Julian Marbolt, for a period of instruction. His present journey was the result.

He thought a good deal as his horse ambled over that ten miles. He weighed the stories he had heard from Shaky, and picked them threadbare. He reduced his efforts to a few pointed conclusions. Things were decidedly rough at Mosquito Bend. Probably the brutality was a case of brute force pitted against brute force – he had taken into consideration the well-known disposition of the Western cowpuncher – and, as such, a matter of regrettable necessity for the governing of the place. Shaky had in some way fallen foul of the master and foreman and had allowed personal feelings to warp his judgment. And, lastly, taking his “greenness” into account, he had piled up the agony simply from the native love of the “old hand” for scaring a newcomer.

Tresler was no weakling or he would never have set out to shape his own course as he was now doing. He was a man of considerable purpose, self-reliant and reasonable, with sufficient easy good-nature to be compatible with strength. He liked his own experiences too, though he never scorned the experiences of another. Slum had sized him up pretty shrewdly when he said “he’ll bob out on top like a cork in a water bar’l,” but he had not altogether done him full justice.

The southwestern trail headed slantwise for the mountains, which snowy barrier bounded his vision to the west the whole of his journey. He had watched the distant white-capped ramparts until their novelty had worn off, and now he took their presence as a matter of course. His eyes came back to the wide, almost limitless plains about him, and he longed for the sight of a tree, a river, even a cultivated patch of nodding wheat. But there was just nothing but the lank, tawny grass for miles and miles, and the blazing sunlight that scorched him and baked gray streaks of dusty sweat on his horse’s shoulders and flanks.

He rode along dreaming, as no doubt hundreds of others have dreamt before and since. There was nothing new or original about his dreams, for he was not a man given to romance. He was too direct and practical for that. No, his were just the thoughts of a young man who has left his home, which thereby gains in beauty as distance lends enchantment to it, and kindly recollection crowns it with a glory that it could never in reality possess.

Without indication or warning, he came upon one of those strangely hidden valleys in which the prairie near the Rockies abounds. He found himself at the edge of it, gazing down upon a wide woodland-bound river, which wound away to the east and west like the trail of some prehistoric monster. The murmur of the flowing waters came to him with such a suggestion of coolness and

shade that, for the first time on his long journey from Whitewater, he was made to forget the park-like beauties of his own native land.

There was a delightful variation of color in the foliage down there. Such a density of shadow, such a brilliancy. And a refreshing breeze was rustling over the tree-tops, a breath he had longed for on the plains but had never felt. The opposite side was lower. He stood on a sort of giant step. A wall that divided the country beyond from the country he was leaving. A wall that seemed to isolate those who might live down there and shut them out as though theirs was another world.

He touched his horse's flanks, and, with careful, stilted steps, the animal began the descent. And now he speculated as to the whereabouts of the ranch, for he knew that this was the Mosquito River, and somewhere upon its banks stood his future home. As he thought of this he laughed. His future home; well, judging by what he had been told, it would certainly possess the charm of novelty.

He was forced to give up further speculation for a while. The trail descended so sharply that his horse had to sidle down it, and the loose shingle under its feet set it sliding and slipping dangerously.

In a quarter of an hour he drew up on the river bank and looked about him. Whither? That was the question. He was at four crossroads. East and west, along the river bank; and north and south, the way he had come and across the water.

Along the bank the woods were thick and dark, and the trail split them like the aisle of an aged Gothic church. The surface of red sand was hard, but there were marks of traffic upon it. Then he looked across the river at the distant rolling plains.

"Of course," he said aloud. "Who's going to build a ranch on this side? Where could the cattle run?"

And he put his horse at the water and waded across without further hesitation. Beyond the river the road bent away sharply to the right, and cut through a wide avenue of enormous pine trees, and along this he hustled his horse. Half a mile further on the avenue widened. The solemn depths about him lightened, and patches of sunlight shone down into them and lit up the matted underlay of rotting cones and pine-needles which covered the earth.

The road bent sharply away from the river, revealing a scrub of low bush decorated with a collection of white garments, evidently set out to dry. His horse shied at the unusual sight, and furthermore took exception to the raucous sound of a man's voice chanting a dismal melody, somewhere away down by the river on his right.

In this direction he observed a cattle-path. And the sight of it suggested ascertaining the identity of the doleful minstrel. No doubt this man could give him the information he needed. He turned off the road and plunged into scrub. And at the river bank he came upon a curious scene. There was a sandy break in the bush, and the bank sloped gradually to the water's edge. Three or four wash-tubs, grouped together in a semicircle, stood on wooden trestles, and a quaint-looking little man was bending over one of them washing clothes, rubbing and beating a handful of garments on a board like any washerwoman. His back was turned to the path, and he faced the river. On his right stood an iron furnace and boiler, with steam escaping from under the lid. And all around him the bushes were hung with drying clothes.

"Hello!" cried Tresler, as he slipped to the ground.

"Holy smoke!"

The scrubbing and banging had ceased, and the most curiously twisted face Tresler had ever seen glanced back over the man's bowed shoulder. A red, perspiring face, tufted at the point of the chin with a knot of gray whisker, a pair of keen gray eyes, and a mouth – yes, it was the mouth that held Tresler's attention. It went up on one side, and had somehow got mixed up with his cheek, while a suggestion of it was continued by means of a dark red scar right up to the left eye.

For a second or two Tresler could not speak, he was so astonished, so inclined to laugh. And all the while the gray eyes took him in from head to foot; then another exclamation, even more awestruck, broke from the stranger.

“Gee-whizz!”

And Tresler sobered at once.

“Where’s Mosquito Bend Ranch?” he asked.

The little man dropped his washing and turned round, propping himself against the edge of the tub.

“Skitter Bend Ranch?” he echoed slowly, as though the meaning of the question had not penetrated to his intellect. Then a subdued whisper followed. “Gee, but I – ” And he looked down at his own clothes as though to reassure himself.

Tresler broke in; he understood the trend of the other’s thoughts.

“Yes, Mosquito Bend,” he said sharply.

“Nigh to a mile on. Keep to the trail, an’ you’ll strike Blind Hell in a few minutes. Say – ” He broke off, and looked up into Tresler’s face.

“Yes, I’m going there. You don’t happen to belong to – to Blind Hell?”

“Happen I do,” assured the washerman. “I do the chores around the ranch. Joe Nelson, once a stock raiser m’self. Kerrville, Texas. Now – ” He broke off, and waved a hand in the direction of the drying clothes.

“Well, I’m John Tresler, and I’m on my way to Mosquito Bend.”

“So you’re the ‘tenderfoot,’” observed the choreman, musingly. “You’re the feller from Noo England as Jake’s goin’ to lick into shape.”

“Going to teach, you mean.”

“I s’pose I do,” murmured the other gently, but without conviction. The twisted side of his face wrinkled hideously, while the other side smiled.

“You mentioned Blind Hell just now?” questioned Tresler, as the other relapsed into a quiet survey of him.

“Blind Hell, did I?” said Nelson, repeating the name, a manner which seemed to be a habit of his.

“Yes. What is it? What did you mean?”

Tresler’s questions were a little peremptory. He felt that the riding-breeches that had caused such notice in Forks were likely to bring him further ridicule.

“Oh, it’s jest a name. ’Tain’t of no consequence. Say,” the choreman broke out suddenly, “you don’t figger to git boostin’ steers in that rig?” He stretched out an abnormally long arm, and pointed a rough but wonderfully clean finger at the flowing corduroys Tresler had now become so sensitive about.

“Great Scott, man!” he let out testily. “Have you never seen riding-breeches before? – you, a ranchman.”

The tufted beard shot sideways again as the face screwed up and half of it smiled.

“I do allow I’ve seen such things before. Oncet,” he drawled slowly, with a slight Southern accent, but in a manner that betokened a speech acquired by association rather than the natural tongue. “He was a feller that came out to shoot big game up in the hills. I ain’t seen him sence, sure. Guess nobody did.” He looked away sadly. “We heerd tell of him. Guess he got fossicking after b’ar. The wind was blowin’ ter’ble. He’d climbed a mount’n. It was pretty high. Ther’ wa’n’t no shelter. A gust o’ that wind come an’ – took him.”

Nelson had turned back to his tubs, and was again banging and rubbing.

“A mile down the trail, I think you said?” Tresler cried, springing hastily into the saddle.

“Sure.”

And for the first time Tresler’s horse felt the sharp prick of the spurs as he rode off.

Mosquito Bend Ranch stood in a wide clearing, with the house on a rising ground above it. It was lined at the back by a thick pinewood. For the rest the house faced out on to the prairie, and

the verandahed front overlooked the barns, corrals, and outhouses. It stood apart, fully one hundred yards from the nearest outbuildings.

This was the first impression Tresler obtained on arrival. The second was that it was a magnificent ranch and the proprietor must be a wealthy man. The third was one of disappointment; everything was so quiet, so still. There was no rush or bustle. No horsemen riding around with cracking whips; no shouting, no atmosphere of wildness. And, worst of all, there were no droves of cattle tearing around. Just a few old milch cows near by, peacefully grazing their day away, and philosophically awaiting milking time. These, and a few dogs, a horse or two loose in the corrals, and a group of men idling outside a low, thatched building, comprised the life he first beheld as he rode into the clearing.

"And this is Blind Hell," he said to himself as he came. "It belies its name. A more peaceful, beautiful picture, I've never clapped eyes on."

And then his thoughts went back to Forks. That too had looked so innocent. After all, he remembered, it was the people who made or marred a place.

So he rode straight to a small, empty corral, and, off-saddling, turned his horse loose, and deposited his saddle and bridle in the shadow of the walls. Then he moved up toward the buildings where the men were grouped.

They eyed him steadily as he came, much as they might eye a strange animal, and he felt a little uncomfortable as he recollected his encounter first with Slum and more recently with Joe Nelson. He had grown sensitive about his appearance, and a spirit of defiance and retaliation awoke within him.

But for some reason the men paid little attention to him just then. One man was talking, and the rest were listening with rapt interest. They were cowpunchers, every one. Cowpunchers such as Tresler had heard of. Some were still wearing their fringed "chapps," their waists belted with gun and ammunition; some were in plain overalls and thin cotton shirts. All, except one, were tanned a dark, ruddy hue, unshaven, unkempt, but tough-looking and hardy. The pale-faced exception was a thin, sick-looking fellow with deep hollows under his eyes, and lips as ashen as a corpse. He it was who was talking, and his recital demanded a great display of dramatic gesture.

Tresler came up and joined the group. "I never ast to git put up ther'," he heard the sick man saying; "never ast, an' didn't want. It was her doin's, an' I tell you fellers right here she's jest thet serrupy an' good as don't matter. I'd 'a' rotted down here wi' flies an' the heat for all they'd 'a' cared. That blind son of a – 'ud 'a' jest laffed ef I'd handed over, an' Jake – say, we'll level our score one day, sure. Next time Red Mask, or any other hoss thief, gits around, I'll bear a hand drivin' off the bunch. I ain't scrappin' no more fer the blind man. Look at me. Guess I ain't no more use'n yon 'tenderfoot.'" The speaker pointed scornfully at Tresler, and his audience turned and looked. "Guess I've lost quarts o' blood, an' have got a hole in my chest ye couldn't plug with a corn-sack. An' now, jest when I'm gittin' to mend decent, he comes an' boosts me right out to the bunkhouse 'cause he ketches me yarnin' wi' that bit of a gal o' his. But, say, she just let out on him that neat as you fellers never heerd. Yes, sir, guess her tongue's like velvet mostly, but when she turned on that blind hulk of a father of hers – wal, ther', ef I was a cat an' had nine lives to give fer her they jest wouldn't be enough by a hund'ed."

"Say, Arizona," said one of the men quietly, "what was you yarnin' 'bout? Guess you allus was sweet on Miss Dianny."

Arizona turned on the speaker fiercely. "That'll do fer you, Raw; mebbe you ain't got savee, an' don't know a leddy when you sees one. I'm a cow-hand, an' good as any man around here, an' ef you've any doubts about it, why –"

"Don't take no notice, Arizona," put in a lank youth quickly. He was a tall, hungry-looking boy, in that condition of physical development when nature seems in some doubt as to her original purpose. "E's only laffin' at you."

"Guess Mister Raw Harris ken quit right here then, Teddy. I ain't takin' his slack noways."

"Git on with the yarn, Arizona," cried another. "Say, wot was you sayin' to the gal?"

“Y’ see, Jacob,” the sick man went on, falling back into his drawling manner, “it wus this ways. Miss Dianny, she likes a feller to git yarnin’, an’, seein’ as I’ve been punchin’ most all through the States, she kind o’ notioned my yarns. Which I ’lows is reasonable. She’d fixed my chest up, an’ got me trussed neat an’ all, an’ set right down aside me fer a gas. You know her ways, kind o’ sad an’ saft. Wal, she up an’ tells me how she’d like gittin’ in to Whitewater next winter, an’ talked o’ dances an’ sech. Say, she wus jest whoopin’ wi’ the pleasure o’ the tho’t of it. Guess likely she’d be mighty pleased to git a-ways. Wal, I don’t jest know how it come, but I got yarnin’ of a barbecue as was held down Arizona way. I was tellin’ as how I wus ther’, an’ got winged nasty. It wa’n’t much. Y’ see I was tellin’ her as I wus runnin’ a bit of a hog ranch them times, an’, on o-casions, we used to give parties. The pertickler party I wus referrin’ to wus a pretty wholesome racket. The boys got good an’ drunk, an’ they got slingin’ the lead frekent ’fore daylight come around. Howsum, it wus the cause o’ the trouble as I wus gassin’ ’bout. Y’ see, Brown was one of them juicy fellers that chawed hunks o’ plug till you could nose Virginny ev’ry time you got wi’in gunshot of him. He was a cantankerous cuss was Brown, an’ a deal too free wi’ his tongue. Y’ see he’d a lady with him; leastways she wus the pot-wolloper from the saloon he favored, an’ he guessed as she wus most as han’some as a Bible ’lustration. Wal, ’bout the time the rotgut wus flowin’ good an’ frekent, they started in to pool fer the prettiest wench in the room, as is the custom down ther’. Brown, he wus dead set on his gal winnin’, I guess; an’ ‘Dyke Hole’ Bill, he’d got a pretty tidy filly wi’ him hisself, an’ didn’t reckon as no daisy from a bum saloon could gi’ her any sort o’ start. Wal, to cut it short, I guess the boys went dead out fer Bill’s gal. It wus voted as ther’ wa’n’t no gal around Spawn City as could dec’rate the country wi’ sech beauty. I guess things went kind o’ silent when Shaggy Steele read the ballot. The air o’ that place got uneasy. I located the door in one gulp. Y’ see Brown was allus kind o’ sudden. But the trouble come diff’rent. The thing jest dropped, an’ that party hummed fer a while. Brown’s gal up an’ let go. Sez she, ‘Here, guess I’m the dandy o’ this run, an’ I ain’t settin’ around while no old hen from Dyke Hole gits scoopin’ prizes. She’s goin’ to lick me till I can’t see, ef she’s yearnin’ fer that pool. Mebbe you boys won’t need more’n half an eye to locate the winner when I’m done.’ Wi’ that she peels her waist off’n her, an’ I do allow she wus a fine chunk. An’ the ‘Dyke Hole’ daisy, she wa’n’t no slouch; guess she wus jest bustin’ wi’ fight. But Brown sticks his taller-fat nose in an’ shoots his bazzoo an’ —

“An’ that’s most as fer as I got when along comes that all-fired ‘dead-eyes’ an’ points warnin’ at me while he ogled me with them gummy red rims o’ his. An’, sez he, ‘You light right out o’ here sharp, Arizona; the place fer you scum’s down in the bunkhouse. An’ I’m not goin’ to have any skulkin’ up here, telling disreputable yarns to my gal.’ I wus jest beginnin’ to argyfy. ‘But,’ sez I. An’ he cut me short wi’ a curse. ‘Out of here!’ he roared. ‘I give you ten minutes to git!’ Then she, Miss Dianny, bless her, she turned on him quick, an’ dressed him down han’some. Sez she, ‘Father, how can you be so unkind after what Arizona has done for you? Remember,’ sez she, ‘he saved you a hundred head of cattle, and fought Red Mask’s gang until help came and he fell from his horse.’ Oh, she was a dandy, and heaped it on like bankin’ a furnace. She cried lots an’ lots, but it didn’t signify. Out I wus to git, an’ out I got. An’ now I’ll gamble that swine Jake’ll try and set me to work. But I’ll level him — sure.”

One of the men, Lew Cawley, laughed silently, and then put in a remark. Lew was a large specimen of the fraternity, and history said that he was the son of an English cleric. But history says similar things of many ne’er-do-wells in the Northwest. He still used the accent of his forebears.

“Old blind-hunks knows something. With all respect, Arizona has winning ways; but,” he added, before the fiery Southerner could retort, “if I mistake not, here comes Jake to fulfil Arizona’s prophecy.”

Every one swung round as Lew nodded in the direction of the house. A huge man of about six feet five was striding rapidly down the slope. Tresler, who had been listening to the story on the outskirts of the group, eyed the newcomer with wonder. He came at a gait in which every movement displayed a vast, monumental strength. He had never seen such physique in his life. The foreman was still some distance off, and he could not see his face, only a great spread of black beard and

whisker. So this was the much-cursed Jake Harnach, and, he thought without any particular pleasure, his future boss.

There was no further talk. Jake Harnach looked up and halted. Then he signaled, and a great shout came to the waiting group.

“Hi! hi! you there! You with the pants!”

A snigger went round the gathering, and Tresler knew that it was he who was being summoned. He turned away to hide his annoyance, but was given no chance of escape.

“Say, send that guy with the pants along!” roared the foreman. And Tresler was forced into unwilling compliance.

And thus the two men, chiefly responsible for the telling of this story of Mosquito Bend, met. The spirit of the meeting was antagonistic; a spirit which, in the days to come, was to develop into a merciless hatred. Nor was the reason far to seek, nor could it have been otherwise. Jake looked out upon the world through eyes that distorted everything to suit his own brutal nature, while Tresler’s simple manliness was the result of his youthful training as a public schoolboy.

The latter saw before him a man of perhaps thirty-five, a man of gigantic stature, with a face handsome in its form of features, but disfigured by the harsh depression of the black brows over a pair of hard, bold eyes. The lower half of his face was buried beneath a beard so dense and black as to utterly disguise the mould of his mouth and chin, thus leaving only the harsh tones of his voice as a clue to what lay hidden there.

His dress was unremarkable but typical – moleskin trousers, a thin cotton shirt, a gray tweed jacket, and a silk handkerchief about his neck. He carried nothing in the shape of weapons, not even the usual leather belt and sheath-knife. And in this he was apart from the method of his country, where the use of firearms was the practice in disputes.

On his part, Jake looked upon a well-built man five inches his inferior in stature, but a man of good proportions, with a pair of shoulders that suggested possibilities. But it was the steady look in the steel-blue eyes which told him most. There was a simple directness in them which told of a man unaccustomed to any browbeating; and, as he gazed into them, he made a mental note that this newcomer must be reduced to a proper humility at the earliest opportunity.

There was no pretense of courtesy between them. Neither offered to shake hands. Jake blurted out his greeting in a vicious tone.

“Say, didn’t you hear me callin’?” he asked sharply.

“I did.” And the New Englander looked quietly into the eyes before him, but without the least touch of bravado or of yielding.

“Then why in h – didn’t you come?”

“I was not to know you were calling me.”

“Not to know?” retorted the other roughly. “I guess there aren’t two guys with pants like yours around the ranch. Now, see right here, young feller, you’ll just get a grip on the fact that I’m foreman of this layout, and, as far as the ‘hands’ are concerned, I’m boss. When I call, you come – and quick.”

The man towered over Tresler in a bristling attitude. His hands were aggressively thrust into his jacket pockets, and he emphasized his final words with a scowl. And it was his attitude that roused Tresler; the words were the words of an overweening bully, and might have been laughed at, but the attitude said more, and no man likes to be browbeaten. His anger leapt, and, though he held himself tightly, it found expression in the biting emphasis of his reply.

“When I’m one of the ‘hands,’ yes,” he said incisively.

Jake stared. Then a curious sort of smile flitted across his features.

“Hah!” he ejaculated.

And Tresler went on with cold indifference. “And, in the meantime, I may as well say that the primary object of my visit is to see Mr. Marbolt, not his foreman. That, I believe,” he added, pointing to the building on the hill, “is his house.”

Without waiting for a reply he stepped aside, and would have moved on. But Jake had swung round, and his hand fell heavily upon his shoulder.

“No, you don’t, my dandy cock!” he cried violently, his fingers painfully gripping the muscle under the Norfolk jacket.

Springing aside, and with one lithe twist, in a flash Tresler had released himself, and stood confronting the giant with blazing eyes and tense drawn muscles.

“Lay a hand on me again, and there’ll be trouble,” he said sharply, and there was an oddly furious burr in his speech.

The foreman stood for a moment as words failed him. Then his fury broke loose.

“I told you jest now,” he cried, falling back into the twang of the country as his rage mastered him, “that I run this layout – ”

“And I tell you,” broke in the equally angry Tresler, “that I’ve nothing to do with you or the ranch either until I have seen your master. And I’ll have you know that if there’s any bulldozing to be done, you can keep it until I am one of the ‘hands.’ You shan’t lack opportunity.”

The tone was as scathing as the violence of his anger would permit. He had not moved, except to thrust his right hand into his jacket pocket, while he measured the foreman with his eyes and watched his every movement.

He saw Harnach hunch himself as though to spring at him. He saw the great hands clench at his sides and his arms draw up convulsively. He saw the working face and the black eyes as they half closed and reduced themselves to mere slits beneath the overshadowing brows. Then the hoarse, rage-choked voice came.

“By G – ! I’ll smash you, you – ”

“I shouldn’t say it.” Tresler’s tone had suddenly changed to one of icy coldness. The flash of a white dress had caught his eye. “There’s a lady present,” he added abruptly. And at the same time he released his hold on the smooth butt of a heavy revolver he had been gripping in his pocket.

What might have happened but for the timely interruption it would be impossible to say. Jake’s arms dropped to his sides, and his attitude relaxed with a suddenness that was almost ludicrous. The white dress fluttered toward him, and Tresler turned and raised his prairie hat. He gave the foreman no heed whatever. The man might never have been there. He took a step forward.

“Miss Marbolt, I believe,” he said. “Forgive me, but it seems that, being a stranger, I must introduce myself. I am John Tresler. I have just been performing the same ceremony for your father’s foreman’s benefit. Can I see Mr. Marbolt?”

He was looking down into what he thought at the moment was the sweetest, saddest little face he had ever seen. It was dark with sunburn, in contrast with the prim white drill dress the girl wore, and her cheeks were tinged with a healthy color which might have been a reflection of the rosy tint of the ribbon about her neck. But it was the quiet, dark brown eyes, half wistful and wholly sad, and the slight droop at the corners of the pretty mouth, that gave him his first striking impression. She was a delightful picture, but one of great melancholy, quite out of keeping with her youth and fresh beauty.

She looked up at him from under the brim of a wide straw sun-hat, trimmed with a plain silk handkerchief, and pinned to her wealth of curling brown hair so as to give her face the utmost shade. Then she frankly held out her hand in welcome to him, whilst her eyes questioned his, for she had witnessed the scene between the two men and overheard their words. But Tresler listened to her greeting with a disarming smile on his face.

“Welcome, Mr. Tresler,” she said gravely. “We have been expecting you. But I’m afraid you can’t see father just now. He’s sleeping. He always sleeps in the afternoon. You see, daylight or night, it makes no difference to him. He’s blind. He has drifted into a curious habit of sleeping in the day as well as at night. Possibly it is a blessing, and helps him to forget his affliction. I am always careful, in consequence, not to waken him. But come along up to the house; you must have some lunch, and, later, a cup of tea.”

“You are awfully kind.”

Tresler watched a troubled look that crept into the calm expression of her eyes. Then he looked on while she turned and dismissed the discomfited foreman.

“I shan’t ride this afternoon, Jake,” she said coldly. “You might have Bessie shod for me instead. Her hoofs are getting very long.” Then she turned again to her guest. “Come, Mr. Tresler.”

And the New Englander readily complied.

Nor did he even glance again in the direction of the foreman.

Jake cursed, not audibly, but with such hateful intensity that even the mat of beard and moustache parted, and the cruel mouth and clenched teeth beneath were revealed. His eyes, too, shone with a diabolical light. For the moment Tresler was master of the situation, but, as Jake had said, he was “boss” of that ranch. “Boss” with him did not mean “owner.”

CHAPTER III

THE BLIND MAN

Tresler was unfeignedly glad to leave Jake Harnach behind him, but he looked very serious as he and his companion moved on to the house. The result of his meeting with the foreman would come back on him later, he knew, and it was as well that he was prepared. The meeting had been unfortunate, but, judging by what he had heard of Jake in Forks, he must inevitably have crossed the bully sooner or later; Jake himself would have seen to that.

Diane Marbolt paused as she came to the verandah. They had not spoken since their greeting. Now she turned abruptly, and quietly surveyed her guest. Nor was there any rudeness in her look. Tresler felt that he was undergoing a silent cross-examination, and waited, quietly smiling down at her from his superior height.

At last she smiled up at him and nodded.

“Will I do?” he asked.

“I think so.”

It was a curious position, and they both laughed. But in the girl’s manner there was no levity.

“You are not sure? Is there anything wrong about me? My – my dress, for instance?” Tresler laughed again; he had missed the true significance of his companion’s attitude toward him.

Just for a moment the dark little face took on a look of perplexity. Then the pucker of the brows smoothed out, and she smiled demurely as she answered.

“Oh, I see – no,” doubtfully. Then more decidedly, “No. You see, you are a ‘tenderfoot.’ You’ll get over it later on.”

And the last barrier of formality was set aside.

“Good,” exclaimed Tresler, emphatically. “We are going to be friends, Miss Marbolt. I knew it. It was only that I feared that ‘they’ might ruin my chances of your approbation. You see, they’ve already caused me – er – trouble.”

“Yes, I think we shall be friends,” Diane answered quietly. “In the meantime, come along into the house and have your lunch. It is ready, I saw you coming and so prepared it at once. You will not mind if I sit and look on while you eat. I have had mine. I want to talk to you before you see my father.”

There was distinct anxiety in her manner. More surely than all, her eyes betrayed her uneasiness. However, he gave no sign, contenting himself with a cordial reply.

“You are very kind. I too should like a chat. You see, I am a ‘tenderfoot,’ and you have been kind enough to pass over my shortcomings.”

Diane led the way into the house. And Tresler, following her, was struck with the simple comfort of this home in the wilds. It was a roomy two-storied house, unpretentious, but very capacious. They entered through one of three French windows what was evidently a useful sort of drawing-room-parlor. Beyond this they crossed a hallway, the entrance door of which stood open, and passed into a dining-room, which, in its turn, opened directly into a kitchen beyond. This room looked out on the woods at the back. Diane explained that her father’s sanctum was in front of this, while behind the parlor was his bedroom, opposite the dining-room and kitchen. The rooms up-stairs were bedrooms, and her own private parlor.

“You see, we keep no female servants, Mr. Tresler,” the girl said, as she brought a pot of steaming coffee from the kitchen and set it on the table. “I am housekeeper. Joe Nelson, the choreman, is my helper and does all the heavy work. He’s quite a character.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve met him,” observed Tresler, dryly.

“Ah! Try that ham. I don’t know about the cold pie, it may be tough. Yes, old Joe is an Englishman; at least, he was, but he’s quite Americanized now. He spent forty years in Texas. He’s

really an educated man. Owned a nice ranch and got burned out. I'm very fond of him; but it isn't of Joe I want to talk."

"No."

The man helped himself to the ham and veal pie, and found it anything but tough.

Diane seated herself in a chair with her back to the uncurtained window, through which the early summer sun was staring.

"You have met Jake Harnach and made an enemy of him," she said suddenly, and with simple directness.

"Yes; the latter must have come anyway."

The girl sighed, and her eyes shone with a brooding light. And Tresler, glancing at her, recognized the sadness of expression he had noticed at their first meeting, and which, he was soon to learn, was habitual to her.

"I suppose so," she murmured in response. Then she roused herself, and spoke almost sharply. "What would you have done had he struck you? He is a man of colossal strength."

Tresler laughed easily. "That depends. I'm not quite sure. I should probably have done my best to retaliate. I had an alternative. I might have shot him."

"Oh!" the girl said with impulsive horror.

"Well, what would you have?" Tresler raised his eyebrows and turned his astonished eyes upon her. "Was I to stand lamb-like and accept a thrashing from that unconscionable ruffian? No, no," he shook his head. "I see it in your eyes. You condemn the method, but not the man. Remember, we all have a right to live – if we can. Maybe there's no absolute necessity that we should, but still we are permitted to do our best. That's the philosophy I've had hammered into me with the various thrashings the school bullies at home have from time to time administered. I should certainly have done my best."

"And if you had done either of these things, I shudder to think what would have happened. It was unfortunate, terribly unfortunate. You do not know Jake Harnach. Oh, Mr. Tresler," the girl hurried on, leaning suddenly forward in her chair, and reaching out until her small brown hand rested on his arm, "please, please promise me that you won't run foul of Jake. He is terrible. You don't, you can't know him, or you would understand your danger."

"On the contrary, Miss Marbolt. It is because I know a great deal of him that I should be ready to retaliate very forcibly. I thank my stars I do know him. Had I not known of him before, your own words would have warned me to be ready for all emergencies. Jake must go his way and I'll go mine. I am here to learn ranching, not to submit to any bulldozing. But let us forget Jake for the moment, and talk of something more pleasant. What a charming situation the ranch has!"

The girl dropped back in her chair. There was no mistaking the decision of her visitor's words. She felt that no persuasion of hers could alter him. With an effort she contrived to answer him.

"Yes, it is a beautiful spot. You have not yet had time to appreciate the perfections of our surroundings." She paused for him to speak, but as he remained silent she labored on with her thoughts set on other things. "The foot-hills come right down almost to our very doors. And then in the distance, above them, are the white caps of the mountains. We are sheltered, as no doubt you have seen, by the almost inaccessible wall beyond the river, and the pinewoods screen us from the northeast and north winds of winter. South and east are miles and miles of prairie-lands. Father has been here for eighteen years. I was a child of four when we came. Whitewater was a mere settlement then, and Forks wasn't even in existence. We hadn't a neighbor nearer than Whitewater in those days, except the Indians and half-breeds. They were rough times, and father held his place only by the subtlety of his poor blind brain, and the arms of the men he had with him. Jake has been with us as long as I can remember. So you see," she added, returning to her womanly dread for his safety, "I know Jake. My warning is not the idle fear of a silly girl."

Tresler remained silent for a moment or two. Then he asked sharply —

“Why does your father keep him?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders. “Jake is the finest ranchman in the country.”

And in the silence that followed Tresler helped himself to more coffee, and finished off with cheese and crackers. Neither seemed inclined to break up the awkwardness of the pause. For the time the man’s thoughts were wandering in interested speculation as to the possibilities of his future on the ranch. He was not thinking so much of Jake, nor even of Julian Marbolt. It was of the gentler associations with the girl beside him – associations he had never anticipated in his wildest thoughts. She was no prairie-bred girl. Her speech, her manner, savored too much of civilization. Yes, he decided in his mind, although she claimed Mosquito Bend as her home since she was four, she had been educated elsewhere. His thoughts were suddenly cut short. A faint sound caught his quick ears. Then Diane’s voice, questioning him, recalled his wandering attention.

“I understand you intend to stay with us for three years?”

“Just as long as it will take to learn all the business of a ranch,” he answered readily. “I am going to become one of the – ”

Again he heard the peculiar noise, and he broke off listening. Diane was listening too. It was a soft tap, tap, like some one knocking gently upon a curtained door. It was irregular, intermittent, like the tapping of a telegraph-sounder working very slowly.

“What’s that?” he asked.

The girl had risen, and a puzzled look was in her eyes. “The noise? Oh, it’s father,” she said, with a shadowy smile, and in a lowered tone. “Something must have disturbed him. It is unusual for him to be awake so early.”

Now they heard a door open, and the tapping ceased. Then the door closed and the lock turned. A moment later there came the jingle of keys, and then shuffling footsteps accompanied the renewed tapping.

Tresler was still listening. He had turned toward the door, and while his attention was fixed on the coming of the blind rancher, he was yet aware that Diane was clearing the table with what seemed to him unnecessary haste and noise. However, his momentary interest was centred upon the doorway and the passage outside, and he paid little heed to the girl’s movements. The door stood open, and as he looked out the sound of shuffling feet drew nearer; then a figure passed the opening.

It was gone in a moment. But in that moment he caught sight of a tall man wrapped in the gray folds of a dressing-gown that reached to his feet. That, and the sharp outline of a massive head of close-cropped gray hair. The face was lost, all except the profile. He saw a long, high-bridged nose and a short, crisp grayish beard. The tapping of the stick died slowly away. And he knew that the blind man had passed out on to the verandah.

Now he turned again to the girl, and would have spoken, but she raised a warning finger and shook her head. Then, moving toward the door, she beckoned to him to follow.

“Father, this is Mr. Tresler.”

Tresler found himself looking down upon a remarkable face. He acknowledged Diane’s introduction, forgetful, for the moment, of the man’s sightless eyes. He gripped the outstretched hand heartily, while he took in his first impression of a strange personality.

They were out on the verandah. The rancher was sitting in a prim, uncushioned armchair. He had a strong, well-moulded, pale face, the sightless eyes of which held the attention. Tresler at once appreciated Shaky’s description of them.

They were dreadful eyes. The pupils were there, and, in a measure, appeared natural except for their enormous size. They were black, jet black, and divided from what should have been the whites by minute rings of blue, the only suspicion of iris they possessed. But it was the whites that gave them their dreadful expression. They were scarlet with inflammation – an inflammation which extended to the rims of the lids and had eaten away the lashes. Of the rest of the face it was impossible for him to form much of an opinion. The iron-gray brows were depressed as though with physical pain,

and so obliterated all natural expression. And the beard shut out the indications which the mouth and chin might have afforded.

"You're welcome, Mr. Tresler," he said, in a low, gentle tone. "I knew you were here some time ago."

Tresler was astonished at the quiet refinement of his voice. He had grown so accustomed to the high, raucous twang of the men of these wilds that it came as a surprise to him.

"I hope I didn't disturb you," he answered cheerily. "Miss Marbolt told me you were sleeping, and –"

"You didn't disturb me – at least, not in the way you mean. You see, I have developed a strange sensitiveness – a sort of second sight," he laughed a little bitterly. "I awoke by instinct the moment you approached the house, and heard you come in. The loss of one sense, you see, has made others more acute. Well, well, so you have come to learn ranching? Diane" – the blind man turned to his daughter – "describe Mr. Tresler to me. What does he look like? Forgive me, my dear sir," he went on, turning with unerring instinct to the other. "I glean a perfect knowledge of those about me in this way."

"Certainly." The object of the blind man's interest smiled over at the girl.

Diane hesitated in some confusion.

"Go on, child," her father said, with a touch of impatience in his manner.

Thus urged she began. "Mr. Tresler is tall. Six feet. Broad-shouldered."

The man's red, staring eyes were bent on his pupil with a steady persistency.

"Yes, yes," he urged, as the girl paused.

"Dressed in – er fashionable riding costume."

"His face?"

"Black hair, steel-blue eyes, black eyelashes and brows. Broad forehead –"

"Any lines?" questioned the blind man.

"Only two strong marks between the brows."

"Go on."

"Broad-bridged, rather large nose; well-shaped mouth, with inclination to droop at the corners; broad, split chin; well-rounded cheeks and jaw."

"Ha! clean-shaven, of course – yes."

The rancher sat silent for some moments after Diane had finished her description. His lips moved, as though he were talking to himself; but no words came to those waiting. At last he stirred, and roused from his reverie.

"You come from Springfield, Mr. Tresler, I understand?" he said pleasantly.

"Yes."

"Um. New England. A good country that breeds good men," he nodded, with an expression that was almost a smile. "I'm glad to be able to welcome you; I only wish I could see. However," he went on kindly, "you will be able to learn ranching in all its branches here. We breed horses and cattle. You'll find it rough. My foreman is not exactly gentle, but, believe me, he knows his business. He is the finest ranchman in the country, and I owe much of my success to him. You must get on the right side of Jake, though. It requires finding – the right side, I mean – but it is worth seeking."

Tresler smiled as he listened. He thoroughly agreed with the reference to the difficulty of finding Jake's "right" side. He endeavored to catch Diane's eye, but she avoided his gaze. As the rancher paused, he broke in at once.

"I presume I start work in earnest to-morrow morning?"

The blind man shook his head. "No; better start in to-day. Our agreement reads to-day; it must not be broken. You take your position as one of the hands, and will be under the control of Jake Harnach."

"We can have tea first, though," put in Diane, who had followed her father's words with what seemed unnecessary closeness.

“Tut, tut, child,” he replied impatiently. “Yes, we will have tea. ’Tis all you think of. See to it, and bring Tresler a chair; I must talk to him.”

His words were a dismissal; and after Diane had provided a chair, she retired into the house, leaving apprentice and master alone. And the two men talked, as men will talk who have just come together from the ends of the world. Tresler avoided the details of his journey; nor did the blind man seem in any way interested in his personal affairs. It was the news of men, and matters concerning the world, that they discussed. And the rancher’s information and remarks, and keen, incisive questions, set the newcomer wondering. He watched the face before him, the red, sightless eyes. He studied the quiet, gentle-voiced man, as one may study an abstruse problem. The result was disheartening. One long, weary expression of pain was all he beheld; no lights and shades of emotion and interest. It was the face of one grown patient under a lifelong course of suffering. Tresler had listened to the bitter cursings against this man, but as the soft voice and cultured expressions fell upon his ears, the easy-flowing, pointed criticisms on matters of public interest, the broad philosophy, sometimes faintly dashed with bitterness and cynicism, but always sound, he found it hard to associate him with the significant sobriquet of the ranch. Tea-time found him still wrestling with the unsolved problem. But, with the advent of Diane with the table and laden tray, he set it aside for future study.

For the next half-hour he transferred his attention to the relations between father and daughter, as they chatted pleasantly of the ranching prospects of the country, for the benefit of their visitor. This was a lesser problem, and one he came near to achieving. Before he left them, he resolved that Diane stood in great awe, not to say fear, of her father. This to him was astonishing, judging by the strength of character every feature in her face displayed. It seemed to him that she was striving hard to bestow affection on him – trying to create an affection that had no place in her heart. Her efforts were painfully apparent. She convinced him at once of a lively sense of duty – a sense she was carrying to a point that was almost pitiful. All this he felt sure of, but it was the man who finally baffled him as he had baffled him before. How he regarded Diane it was impossible to say. Sometimes he could have sworn that the man’s devotion to her was that of one who, helpless, clings to a support which never fails him; at others, he treated her to a sneering intolerance, which roused the young man’s ire; and, again, he would change his tone, till the undercurrent of absolute hatred drowned the studied courtesy which veneered it. And when he finally rose to leave the verandah and seek out the foreman and report himself for duty, it was with a genuine feeling of relief at leaving the presence of those dreadful red eyes.

Diane was packing up the tea-things, and Tresler still lingered on the verandah; he was watching the blind man as he tapped his way into the house. Then, as he disappeared, and the sound of his shuffling feet grew faint and distant, he became aware that Diane was standing holding the tray and watching him. He knew, too, by her attentive attitude, that she was listening to ascertain when her father should be out of ear-shot. As the sounds died away, and all became silent within the house, she came over to him. She spoke without pausing on her way; it seemed that she feared observation.

“Don’t forget, Mr. Tresler, what I told you about Jake. Be warned. In spite of what you say, you do not know him.”

“Thanks, Miss Marbolt,” he replied warmly; “I shall not forget.”

Diane was about to speak again, but the voice of her father, harsh and strident enough now, reached them from the hallway.

“Come in, child, and let Tresler go to his work.”

And Tresler noted the expression of fear that leapt into the girl’s face as she hurriedly passed into the house. He stood for a moment wrathful and wondering; then he strode away toward the corrals, reflecting on the strange events which had so swiftly followed one upon the other.

“Ye gods,” he muttered, “this is a queer place – and these are queer people.”

Then as he saw the great figure of Jake coming up the hill toward him, from the direction of a small isolated hut, he went out to meet him, unconsciously squaring himself as he drew near.

He expected an explosion; at least an angry demonstration. But nothing of the sort happened. The whole attitude of the man had changed to one of studied amiability. Not only that, but his diction was careful to a degree, as though he were endeavoring to impress this man from the East with his superiority over the other ranchmen.

“Well? You have seen him?”

“Yes. I have now come to report myself ready for work,” Tresler replied at once. He adopted a cold business tone, deeming it best to observe this from the start.

To his surprise Jake became almost cordial. “Good. We can do with some hands, sure. Had a pleasant talk with the old man?” The question came indifferently, but a sidelong glance accompanied it as the foreman turned away and gazed out over the distant prairie.

“I have,” replied Tresler, shortly. “What are my orders, and where do I sleep?”

“Then you don’t sleep up at the house?” Jake inquired, pretending surprise. There was a slight acidity in his tone.

“That is hardly to be expected when the foreman sleeps down there.” Tresler nodded, indicating the outbuildings.

“That’s so,” observed the other, thoughtfully. “No, I guess the old man don’t fancy folk o’ your kidney around,” he went on, relapsing into the speech of the bunkhouse unguardedly. “Mebbe it’s different wi’ the other.”

Tresler could have struck him as he beheld the meaning smile that accompanied the fellow’s words.

“Where do I sleep?” he demanded sharply.

“Oh, I guess you’ll roll into the bunkhouse. Likely the boys’ll fix you for blankets till your truck comes along. As for orders, why, we start work at sunup, and Slushy dips out breakfast before that. Guess I’ll put you to work in the morning; you can’t do a deal yet, but maybe you’ll learn.”

“Then I’m not wanted to-night?”

“Guess not.” Jake broke off. Then he turned sharply and faced his man. “I’ve just one word to say to you ’fore you start in,” he went on. “We kind o’ make allowance fer ‘tenderfeet’ around here – once. After that, we deal accordin’ – savee? Say, ther’ ain’t no tea-parties customary around this layout.”

Tresler smiled. If he had been killed for it he must have smiled. In that last remark the worthy Jake had shown his hand. And the latter saw the smile, and his face darkened with swift-rising anger. But he had evidently made up his mind not to be drawn, for, with a curt “S’long,” he abruptly strode off, leaving the other to make his way to the bunkhouse.

The men had not yet come in for their evening meal, but he found Arizona disconsolately sitting on a roll of blankets just outside the door of the quarters. He was chewing steadily, with his face turned prairieward, gazing out over the tawny plains as though nothing else in the world mattered to him.

He looked up casually as Tresler came along, and edged along the blankets to make room, contenting himself with a laconic —

“Set.”

The two men sat in silence for some moments. The pale-faced cowpuncher seemed absorbed in deep reflection. Tresler was thinking too; he was thinking of Jake, whom he clearly understood was in love with his employer’s daughter. It was patent to the veriest simpleton. Not only that, but he felt that Diane herself knew it. The way the foreman had desisted from his murderous onslaught upon himself at her coming was sufficient evidence without the jealousy he had betrayed in his reference to tea-parties. Now he understood, too, that it was because the blind man was asleep, and in going up to the house he, Tresler, would only meet Diane, and probably spend a pleasant afternoon with her until her father awoke, that Jake’s unreasoning jealousy had been aroused, and he had endeavored to forcibly detain him. He felt glad that he had learned these things so soon. All such details would be useful.

At last Arizona turned from his impassive contemplation of the prairie.

“Wal?” he questioned. And he conveyed a world of interrogation in his monosyllable.

“Jake says I begin work to-morrow. To-night I sleep in the bunkhouse.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know?” Tresler looked around in astonishment.

“Guess Jake’s bin ’long. Say, I’ll shoot that feller, sure – ’less some interferin’ cuss gits along an’ does him in fust.”

“What’s up? Anything fresh?”

For answer Arizona spat forcibly into the little pool of tobacco-juice on the ground before him. Then, with a vicious clenching of the teeth —

“He’s a swine.”

“Which is a libel on hogs,” observed the other, with a smile.

“Libel?” cried Arizona, his wild eyes rolling, and his lean nostrils dilating as his breath came short and quick. “Yes, grin; grin like a blazin’ six-foot ape. Mebbe y’ll change that grin later, when I tell you what he’s done.”

“Nothing he could do would surprise me after having met him.”

“No.” Arizona had calmed again. His volcanic nature was a study. Tresler, although he had only just met this man, liked him for his very wildness. “Say, pardner,” he went on quietly, reaching one long, lean hand toward him, “shake! I guess I owe you gratitood fer bluffin’ that hog. We see it all. Say, you’ve got grit.” And the fierce eyes looked into the other’s face.

Tresler shook the proffered hand heartily. “But what’s his latest achievement?” he asked, eager to learn the fresh development.

“He come along here ’bout you. Sed we wus to fix you up in pore Dave Steele’s bunk.”

“Yes? That’s good. I rather expected he’d have me sleep on the floor.”

Arizona gave a snort. His anger was rising again, but he checked it.

“Say,” he went on, “guess you don’t know a heap. Ther’ ain’t bin a feller slep in that bunk since Dave – went away.”

“Why?” Tresler’s interest was agog.

“Why?” Arizona’s voice rose. “Cos it’s mussed all up wi’ a crazy man’s blood. A crazy man as wus killed right here, kind of, by Jake Harnach.”

“I heard something of it.”

“Heerd suthin’ of it? Wal, I guess ther’ ain’t a feller around this prairie as ain’t yelled hisself hoarse ’bout Dave. Say, he wus the harmlessest lad as ever jerked a rope or slung a leg over a stock saddle. An’ as slick a hand as ther’ ever wus around this ranch. I tell ye he could teach every one of us, he wus that handy; an’ that’s a long trail, I ’lows. Wal, we wus runnin’ in a bunch of outlaws fer brandin’, an’ he wus makin’ to rope an old bull. Howsum he got him kind o’ awkward. The rope took the feller’s horns. ’Fore Dave could loose it that bull got mad, an’ went squar’ for the corral walls an’ broke a couple o’ the bars. Dave jumped fer it an’ got clear. Then Jake comes hollerin’ an’ swearin’ like a stuck hog, an’ Dave he took it bad. Y’ see no one could handle an outlaw like Dave. He up an’ let fly at Jake, an’ cussed back. Wot does Jake do but grab up a brandin’ iron an’ lay it over the boy’s head. Dave jest dropped plumb in his tracks. Then we got around and hunched him up, an’ laid him out in his bunk, bleedin’ awful. We plastered him, an’ doctored him, an’ after a whiles he come to. He lay on his back fer a month, an’ never a sign o’ Jake or the blind man come along, only Miss Dianny. She come, an’ we did our best. But arter a month he got up plump crazed an’ silly-like. He died back ther’ in Forks soon after.” Arizona paused significantly. Then he went on. “No, sir, ther’ ain’t bin a feller put in that bunk sense, fer they ain’t never gotten pore Dave’s blood off’n it. Say, ther’ ain’t a deal as ’ud scare us fellers, but we ain’t sleepin’ over a crazy man’s blood.”

“Which, apparently, I’ve got to do,” Tresler said sharply. Then he asked, “Is it the only spare bunk?”

“No. Ther’s Thompson’s, an’ ther’s Massy’s.”

“Then what’s the object?”

“Cussedness. It’s a kind o’ delicate attention. It’s fer to git back on you, knowin’ as us fellers ’ud sure tell you of Dave. It’s to kind o’ hint to you what happens to them as runs foul o’ him. What’s like to happen to you.”

Arizona’s fists clenched, and his teeth gritted with rage as he deduced his facts. Tresler remained calm, but it did him good to listen to the hot-headed cowpuncher, and he warmed toward him.

“I’m afraid I must disappoint him,” he said, when the other had finished. “If you fellows will lend me some blankets, I’ll sleep in Massy’s or Thompson’s bunk, and Mr. Jake can go hang.”

Arizona shot round and peered into Tresler’s face. “An’ you’ll do that – sure?”

“Certainly. I’m not going to sleep in a filthy bunk.”

“Say, you’re the most cur’usest ‘tenderfoot’ I’ve seen. Shake!”

And again the two men gripped hands.

That first evening around the bunkhouse Tresler learned a lot about his new home, and, incidentally, the most artistic manner of cursing the flies. He had supper with the boys, and his food was hash and tea and dry bread. It was hard but wholesome, and there was plenty of it. His new comrades exercised their yarning propensities for him, around him, at him. He listened to their chaff, boisterous, uncultured; their savage throes of passion and easy comradeships. They seemed to have never a care in the world but the annoyances of the moment. Even their hatred for the foreman and their employer seemed to lift from them, and vanish with the sound of the curses which they heaped upon them. It was a new life, a new world to him; and a life that appealed to him.

As the sun sank and the twilight waned, the men gradually slipped away to turn in. Arizona was the last to go. Tresler had been shown Massy’s bunk, and friendly hands had spread blankets upon it for him. He was standing at the foot of it in the long aisle between the double row of trestle beds. Arizona had just pointed out the dead man’s disused couch, all covered with gunny sacks.

“That’s Dave’s,” he said. “I kind o’ think you’ll sleep easier right here. Say, Tresler,” he went on, with a serious light in his eyes, “I’d jest like to say one thing to you, bein’ an old hand round these parts myself, an’ that’s this. When you git kind o’ worried, use your gun. Et’s easy an’ quick. Guess you’ve plenty o’ time an’ to spare after fer sizin’ things up. Ther’ ain’t a man big ’nough in this world to lift a finger ef you sez ‘no’ and has got your gun pointin’ right. S’long.”

But Tresler detained him. “Just one moment, Arizona,” he said, imitating the other’s impressive manner. “I’d just like to say one thing to you, being a new hand around these parts myself, and that’s this. You being about my size, I wonder if you could sell me a pair of pants, such as you fellows ordinarily wear?”

The cowpuncher smiled a pallid, shadowy smile, and went over to his kit-bag. He returned a moment later with a pair of new moleskin trousers and threw them on the bunk.

“You ken have them, I guess. Kind o’ remembrancer fer talkin’ straight to Jake. Say, that did me a power o’ good.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pay – ”

“Not on your life, mister.”

“Then I’ll remember your advice.”

“Good. S’long.”

CHAPTER IV

THE NIGHT-RIDERS

Tresler had not the smallest inclination for sleep. He was tired enough physically, but his brain was still much too active. Besides, the bunkhouse was uninviting to him as yet. The two lines of trestle-beds, with their unkempt occupants, were suggestive of – well, anything but congenial sleeping companions. The atmosphere was close and stuffy, and the yellow glimmer of the two oil-lamps, one stationed at each end of the room, gave the place a distasteful suggestion of squalor.

He was not unduly squeamish – far from it; but, be it remembered, he had only just left a world of ease and luxury, where snow-white linen and tasteful surroundings were necessary adjuncts to existence. Therefore these things came to him in the nature of a shock.

He looked at his blankets spread over the straw palliasse that disguised the loose bed-boards underneath, and this drew his attention to the mattress itself. It was well-worn and dusty, and as he moved it he felt that the straw inside was crushed to the smallest chaff. He laid it back carefully so as not to disturb the dust, and rearranged the blankets over it. Then he sat on the foot of it and pondered.

He gazed about him at the other beds. Some of the men were already sleeping, announcing the fact more or less loudly. Others were swathed in their blankets smoking in solemn silence. One was deep in the blood-curdling pages of a dime novel, straining his eyes in the fitful light of the lamps. The scene had novelty for him, but it was not altogether enthralling, so he filled his pipe and lit it, and passed out into the fresh night air. It was only ten o'clock, and he felt that a smoke and a comfortable think would be pleasant before facing the charms of his dusty couch.

The moon had not yet risen, but the starry sheen of the sky dimly outlined everything. He was gazing upon the peaceful scene of a ranch when night has spread her soft, velvety wings. There were few sounds to distract his thoughts. The air still hummed with the busy insect life; one of the prowling ranch dogs occasionally gave tongue, its fiercely suspicious temper no doubt aroused by some vague shadow which surely no other eyes than his could possibly have detected in the darkness; sometimes the distressful plaint of a hungry coyote, hunting for what it never seems to find – for he is always prowling and hunting – would rouse the echoes and startle the “tenderfoot” with the suddenness and nearness of its uncanny call. But for the rest all was still. And he paced to and fro before the bunkhouse, thinking.

And, strangely enough, of all the scenes he had witnessed that day, and of all the people he had met, it was the scene in which Diane Marbolt had taken part, and of her he mostly thought. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of meeting a girl so charming that held him interested. Perhaps it was the eager desire she had displayed in warning him of his personal danger. Perhaps, even, it was the recollection of the soft, brown eyes, the charming little sun-tanned face that had first looked up at him from beneath the broad-brimmed straw hat. Certain it was her sad face haunted him as no woman's face had ever haunted him before as he looked out on the vast, dark world about him. He felt that he would like to know something of her story; not out of idle curiosity, but that he might discover some means of banishing the look of sadness so out of place upon her beautiful features.

His pipe burned out, and he recharged and lit it afresh; then he extended his peregrinations. He moved out of the deeper shadows of the bunkhouse and turned the corner in the direction of the western group of corrals.

Now he saw the foreman's hut beyond the dark outline of the great implement shed, and a light was still shining in the window. Turning away he passed to the left of the shed, and strolled leisurely on to the corrals. He had no desire in the world to meet Jake Harnach; not that he thought such a contingency likely, but still there was always the chance if the man had not yet gone to bed. He had already decided that the less he saw of Jake the better it would be for both of them. He remained

for some minutes seated on the top of the corral fence, but the mosquitoes were too thick, and drove him to further wanderings.

Just as he was about to move away, he saw the door of the foreman's hut open, and in the light that shone behind, the small figure of the choreman, Joe Nelson, come out. Then the light was shut out as the great figure of Jake blocked the doorway. Now he distinctly heard them speaking.

"I shall want it first thing in the morning," said the foreman, in his great hoarse voice.

"Guess I'll see to it," replied Joe; "but 'tain't the saddle fer anybody who ain't used to it."

"That's o' no consequence. Your business is to have it there."

Then Jake retired, and the door was shut. A moment later the waiting man saw Joe emerge from the shadow and stump off in the direction of the bunkhouse. A few yards from the foreman's hut he halted and turned about. Then Tresler witnessed something that made him smile, while it raised a lively feeling of satisfaction in his heart. Joe slowly raised one arm in the direction of the hut, and, although the light was insufficient for him to see it, and he could hear no words, he felt sure that the fist was clenched, and a string of blasphemous invective was desecrating the purity of the night air. A moment later Joe passed leisurely on his way, and the light went out in Jake's dwelling.

And now, without concerning himself with his direction, Tresler continued his walk. He moved toward an open shed crowded with wagons. This he skirted, intending to avoid the foreman's hut, but just as he moved out from the shadow, he became aware that Jake's door had opened again and some one was coming out. He waited for a moment listening. He fancied he recognized the foreman's heavy tread. Curiosity prompted him to inquire further, but he checked the impulse. After all, the bully's doings were no concern of his. So he waited until the sound of receding footsteps had died out, and then passed round the back of the shed and strolled on.

There was nothing now in front of him but the dense black line of the boundary pinewoods. These stretched away to the right and left as far as the darkness permitted him to see. The blackness of their depths was like a solid barrier, and he had neither time nor inclination to explore them at that hour. Therefore he skirted away to the right, intending to leave the forest edge before he came to the rancher's house, and so make his way back to his quarters.

He was approaching the house, and it loomed dark and rigid before him. Gazing upon it, his mind at once reverted to its blind owner, and he found himself wondering if he were in bed yet, if Diane had retired, and in which portion of the house she slept.

His pipe had gone out again, and he paused to relight it. He had his matches in his hand, and was about to strike one, when suddenly a light flashed out in front of him. It came and was gone in a second. Yet it lasted long enough for him to realize that it came from a window, and the window, he knew, from its position, must be the window of Julian Marbolt's bedroom.

He waited for it to reappear, but the house remained in darkness; and, after a moment's deliberation, he realized its meaning. The door of the blind man's room must be opposite the window, and probably it was the opening of it that had revealed the lamplight in the hall. The thought suggested the fact that the rancher had just gone to bed.

He turned his attention again to his pipe; but he seemed destined not to finish his smoke. Just as he had the match poised for a second time, his ears, now painfully acute in the stillness about him, caught the sound of horses' hoofs moving through the forest.

They sounded quite near; he even heard the gush of the animals' nostrils. He peered into the depths. Then, suddenly realizing the strangeness of his own position lurking so near the house and under cover of the forest at that hour of the night, he dropped down in the shadow of a low bush. Nor was it any too soon, for, a moment or two later, he beheld two horsemen moving slowly toward him out of the black depths. They came on until they were within half a dozen yards of him, and almost at the edge of the woods. Then they drew up and sat gazing out over the ranch in silent contemplation.

Tresler strained his eyes to obtain a knowledge of their appearance, but the darkness thwarted him. He could see the vague outline of the man nearest him, but it was so uncertain that he could make

little of it. One thing only he ascertained, and that was because the figure was silhouetted against the starlit sky. The man seemed to have his face covered with something that completely concealed his profile.

The whole scene passed almost before he realized it. The horsemen had appeared so suddenly, and were gone so swiftly, returning through the forest the way they had come, that he was not sure but that the whole apparition had been a mere trick of imagination. Rising swiftly, he gazed after the vanished riders, and the crunching of the pine cones under the horses' hoofs, dying slowly away as they retreated, warned him that the stealthy, nocturnal visit was no illusion, but a curious fact that needed explanation.

Just for an instant it occurred to him that it might be two of the hands out on night work around the cattle, then he remembered that the full complement were even now slumbering in the bunkhouse. Puzzled and somewhat disquieted, he turned his steps in the direction of his quarters, fully intending to go to bed; but his adventures were not over yet.

As he drew near his destination he observed the figure of a man, bearing something on his back, coming slowly toward him. A moment later he was looking down upon the diminutive person of Joe Nelson in the act of carrying a saddle upon his shoulder.

"Hello, Nelson, where are you going at this hour of the night?" he asked, as he came face to face with the little man.

The choreman deposited the saddle on the ground, and looked his man up and down before he answered.

"Wher' am I goin'?" he said, as though he were thinking of other things. "I guess I'm doin' a job in case I git fergittin' by the mornin'. Jake reckons to want my saddle in the mornin' over at the hoss corrals. But, say, why ain't you abed, Mr. Tresler?"

"Never mind the 'mister,' Joe," Tresler said amiably.

"If you're going to the horse corrals now I'll go with you. I'm so beastly wide awake that I can't turn in yet."

"Come right along, then. Guess I ain't feelin' that ways, sure."

Joe jerked his saddle up and slung it across his back again, and the two men walked off in silence.

And as they walked, Joe, under cover of the darkness, eyed his companion with occasional sidelong glances, speculating as to what he wanted with him. He quite understood that his companion was not walking with him for the pleasure of his company. On his part Tresler was wondering how much he ought to tell this man – almost a stranger – of what he had seen. He felt that some one ought to know – some one with more experience than himself. He felt certain that the stealthy visit of the two horsemen was not wholesome. Such espionage pointed to something that was not quite open and aboveboard.

They reached the corrals, and Joe deposited his burden upon the wooden wall. Then he turned sharply on his companion.

"Wal, out wi' it, man," he demanded. "Guess you got something you're wantin' to git off'n your chest."

Tresler laughed softly. "You're pretty sharp, Joe."

"Pretty sharp, eh?" returned the little man. "Say, it don't need no razor to cut through the meanin' of a 'tenderfoot.' Wal?"

Tresler was looking up at the saddle. It was a small, almost skeleton saddle, such as, at one time, was largely used in Texas; that was before the heavier and more picturesque Mexican saddles came into vogue among the ranchmen.

"What does Jake want that for?" he asked.

His question was an idle one, and merely put for the sake of gaining time while he arrived at a definite decision upon the other matter.

“Guess it’s fer some feller to ride to-morrow – eh? Whew!”

The choreman broke off and whistled softly. Something had just occurred to him. He measured Tresler with his eye, and then looked at the short-seated saddle with its high cantle and tall, abrupt horn in front. He shook his head.

Tresler was not heeding him. Suddenly he stopped and sat on the ground, propping his back against the corral wall, while he looked up at Joe.

“Sit down,” he said seriously; “I’ve got something rather particular I want to talk about. At least, I think it’s particular, being a stranger to the country.”

Without replying, Joe deposited himself on the ground beside his new acquaintance. His face was screwed up into the expression Tresler had begun to recognize as a smile. He took a chew of tobacco and prepared to give his best attention.

“Git goin’,” he observed easily.

“Well, look here, have we any near neighbors?”

“None nigher than Forks – ‘cep’ the Breeds, an’ they’re nigh on six mile south, out toward the hills. How?”

Then Tresler told him what he had seen at the edge of the pinewoods, and the choreman listened with careful attention. At the end of his story Tresler added —

“You see, it’s probably nothing. Of course, I know nothing as yet of prairie ways and doings. No doubt it can be explained. But I argued the matter out from my own point of view, and it struck me that two horsemen, approaching the ranch under cover of the forest and a dark night, and not venturing into the open after having arrived, simply didn’t want to be seen. And their not wishing to be seen meant that their object in coming wasn’t – well, just above suspicion.”

“Tol’ble reasonin’,” nodded Joe, chewing his cud reflectively.

“What do you make of it?”

“A whole heap,” Joe said, spitting emphatically. “What do I make of it? Yes, that’s it, a whole heap. Guess that feller you see most of had his face covered. Was that cover a mask?”

“It might have been.”

“A red mask?”

“I couldn’t see the color. It was too dark. Might have been.”

Joe turned and faced his companion, and, hunching his bent knees into his arms, looked squarely into his eyes.

“See here, pard, guess you never heard o’ hoss thieves? They ain’t likely to mean much to you,” he said, with some slight contempt. Then he added, by way of rubbing it in, “You bein’ a ‘tenderfoot.’ Guess you ain’t heard tell of Red Mask an’ his gang, neither?”

“Wrong twice,” observed Tresler, with a quiet smile. “I’ve heard of both horse thieves and Red Mask.”

“You’ve heard tell of hoss thieves an’ Red Mask? Wal, I’m figgerin’ you’ve seen both to-night, anyway; an’ I’ll further tell you this – if you’d got the drop on him this night an’ brought him down, you’d ‘a’ done what most every feller fer two hundred miles around has been layin’ to do fer years, an’ you’d ‘a’ been the biggest pot in Montana by sundown to-morrow.” He spoke with an accent of triumph, and paused for effect. “Say, ther’ wouldn’t ‘a’ been a feller around as wouldn’t ‘a’ taken his hat off to you,” he went on, to accentuate the situation. “Say, it was a dandy chance. But ther’, you’re a ‘tenderfoot,’” he added, with a sigh of profound regret.

Tresler was inclined to laugh, but checked himself as he realized the serious side of the matter.

“Well, if he were here to-night, what does it portend?” he asked.

“If he was here to-night it portends a deal,” said Joe, sharply. “It portends that the biggest ‘tough,’ the biggest man-killer an’ hoss thief in the country, is on the war-path, an’ ther’ll be trouble around ‘fore we’re weeks older.”

“Who is he?”

“Who is he? Wal, I ’lows that’s a big question. Guess ther’ ain’t no real sayin’. Some sez he’s from across the border, some sez he’s a Breed, some sez he’s the feller called Duncan, as used to run a bum saloon in Whitewater, an’ shot a man in his own bar an’ skipped. No one rightly knows, ’cep’ he’s real ‘bad,’ an’ duffs nigh on to a thousand head o’ stock most every year.”

“Then what’s to be done?” Tresler asked, watching the little man’s twisted face as he munched his tobacco.

“What’s to be done? Wal, I don’t rightly know. Say, what wus you doin’ around that house? I ain’t askin’ fer cur’osity. Ye see, if you got tellin’ Jake as you wus round ther’, it’s likely he’d git real mad. Y’ see, Jake’s dead sweet on Miss Dianny. It gives him the needle that I’m around that house. O’ course, ther’ ain’t nuthin’ wi’ me an’ Miss Dianny, ’cep’ we’re kind o’ friendly. But Jake’s that mean-sperrited an’ jealous. She hates him like pizen. I know, ’cos I’m kind o’ friendly wi’ her, so to speak, meanin’ nuthin’, o’ course. But that ain’t the point. If you wus to tell him he’d make your head swim.”

“Oh, hang Jake!” exclaimed Tresler, impatiently; “I’m sick to death of hearing of his terrorizing. He can’t eat me – ”

“No, but he’ll make you wish he could,” put in the choreman, quietly.

“He’d find me a tough mouthful,” Tresler laughed.

“Mebbe. How came you around that house?”

“I simply wandered there by chance. I was smoking and taking a stroll. I’d been all round the ranch.”

“That wouldn’t suit Jake. No.” Joe was silent for a moment.

Tresler waited. At last the little man made a move and spat out his chew.

“That’s it,” he said, slapping his thigh triumphantly – “that’s it, sure. Say, we needn’t to tell Jake nuthin’. I’ll git around among the boys, an’ let ’em know as I heerd tell of Red Mask bein’ in the region o’ the Bend, an’ how a Breed give me warnin’, bein’ scared to come along to the ranch lest Red Mask got wind of it an’ shut his head lights fer him. Ther’ ain’t no use in rilin’ Jake. Meanin’ for you. He’s layin’ fer you anyways, as I’m guessin’ you’ll likely know. Savee? Lie low, most as low as a dead cat in a well. I’ll play this hand, wi’out you figgerin’ in it; which, fer you, I guess is best.”

Tresler got up and dusted his clothes. There was a slight pause while he fingered the leather-capped stirrups of the stock saddle on the wall.

Joe grew impatient. “Wal?” he said at last; “y’ ain’t bustin’ wi’ ’preciation.”

“On the contrary, I appreciate your shrewdness and kindly interest on my behalf most cordially,” Tresler replied, dropping the stirrup and turning to his companion; “but, you see, there’s one little weakness in the arrangement. Jake’s liable to underestimate the importance of the nocturnal visits unless he knows the real facts. Besides – ”

“Besides,” broke in Joe, with an impatience bred of his reading through Tresler’s lame objection, “you jest notion to rile Jake some. Wal, you’re a fool, Tresler – a dog-gone fool! Guess you’ll strike a snag, an’ snags mostly hurts. Howsum, I ain’t no wet-nurse, an’ ef you think to bluff Jake Harnach, get right ahead an’ bluff. An’ when you bluff, bluff hard, an’ back it, or you’ll drop your wad sudden. Guess I’ll turn in.”

Joe moved off and Tresler followed. At the door of the bunkhouse they parted, for Joe slept in a lean-to against the kitchen of the rancher’s house. They had said “good-night,” and Joe was moving away when he suddenly changed his mind and came back again.

“Say, ther’ ain’t nothin’ like a ‘tenderfoot’ fer bein’ a fool, ’less it’s a settin’ hen,” he said, with profound contempt but with evident good-will. “You’re kind o’ gritty, Tresler, I guess, but mebbe you’ll be ast to git across a tol’ble broncho in the mornin’. That’s as may be. But ef it’s so, jest take two thinks ’fore settin’ your six foot o’ body on a saddle built fer a feller o’ five foot one. It ain’t reason’ble, an’ it’s dangerous. It’s most like tryin’ to do that as isn’t, never wus, and ain’t like to be, an’ if it did, wouldn’t amount to a heap anyway, ’cep’ it’s a heap o’ foolishness.”

Tresler laughed. “All right. Two into one won’t go without leaving a lot over. Good-night, Joe.”

“So long. Them fellers as gits figgerin’ mostly gits crazed fer doin’ what’s impossible. Guess I ain’t stuck on figgers nohow.”

And the man vanished into the night, while Tresler passed into the bunkhouse to get what little sleep his first night as a ranchman might afford him.

CHAPTER V

TRESLER BEGINS HIS EDUCATION

But the story of the nocturnal visit of the horse thieves did not reach the foreman next morning. Jake hailed Tresler down to the corrals directly after breakfast. He was to have a horse told off to him, and this matter, and the presence of others, made him postpone his purpose to a more favorable time.

When he arrived at the corrals, three of the boys, under Jake's superintendence, were cutting out a big, raw-boned, mud-brown mare from a bunch of about sixty colts.

She stood well over sixteen hands – a clumsy, big-footed, mean-looking, clean-limbed lady, rough-coated, and scored all over with marks of "savaging." She was fiddle-headed and as lean as a hay-rake, but in build she was every inch a grand piece of horse-flesh. And Tresler was sufficient horseman to appreciate her lines, as well as the vicious, roving eye which displayed the flashing whites at every turn.

Jacob Smith was after her with a rope, and the onlookers watched his lithe, active movements as he followed her, wildly racing round and round the corral seeking a means of escape.

Suddenly the man made a dart in to head her off. She turned to retreat, but the other two were there to frustrate her purpose. Just for a second she paused irresolutely; then, lowering her head and setting her ears back, she came open-mouthed for Jacob. But he anticipated her intention, and, as she came, sprang lightly aside, while she swept on, lashing out her heels at him as she went. It was the opportunity the man sought, and, in the cloud of dust that rose in her wake, his lariat shot out low over the ground. The next moment she fell headlong, roped by the two forefeet, and all three men sprang in to the task of securing her.

It was done so quickly that Tresler had hardly realized her capture when Jake's harsh voice rang out —

"That's your mare, Tresler!" he cried; "guess that plug of yours'll do for fancy ridin'. You'll break this one to handlin' cattle. You're a tolerable weight, but she's equal to it." He laughed, and his laugh sent an angry flush into the other's face. "Say," he went on, in calmly contemptuous tones; "she's wild some. But she's been saddled before. Oh, yes, she ain't raw off the grass. You, comin' from down east, can mebbe ride. They mostly reckon to be able to ride till they come along to these parts."

Tresler understood the man's game; he also understood and fully appreciated Joe Nelson's warning. He glanced at the saddle still hanging on the corral wall. It would be simple suicide for him to attempt to ride an outlaw with a saddle fit for a boy of fifteen. And it was Jake's purpose, trading on his ignorance of such matters, to fool him into using a saddle that would probably rupture him.

"I presume she's the worst outlaw on the ranch," he replied quietly, though his blue eyes shone dangerously. "She must be," he went on, as Jake made no answer, "or you wouldn't give her to me, and point out that she's been saddled before."

"Kind o' weakenin'?" Jake asked with a sneer.

"No. I was just thinking of my saddle. It will be no use on her; she'd burst the girths."

"That needn't worry you any. There's a stock saddle there, on the fence."

"Thank you, I'll ride on a saddle that fits a man of my size, or you can ride the mare yourself."

Tresler was round and facing his man, and his words came in a tone the other was unaccustomed to. But Jake kept quite cool while he seemed to be debating with himself. Then he abruptly turned away with a short, vicious laugh.

"Guess the 'tenderfoot's' plumb scared to ride her, boys," he called out to the men, relapsing into the vernacular as he addressed them. "Any o' you boys lendin' a saddle, or shall we find him a rockin'-hoss to run around on?"

Tresler fell headlong into the trap. Jake had drawn him with a skill worthy of a better object.

“If there is anybody scared, I don’t think it is I, boys,” he said with a laugh as harsh as Jake’s had been. “If one of you will lend me a man’s saddle, I’ll break that mare or she’ll break me.”

Now, Tresler was a very ordinary horseman. He had never in his life sat a horse that knew the first rudiments of bucking; but at that moment he would have mounted to the back of any horse, even if his life were to pay the forfeit next moment. Besides, even in his blind anger, he realized that this sort of experience must come sooner or later. “Broncho-busting” would be part of his training. Therefore, when some one suggested Arizona’s saddle – since Arizona was on the sick list – he jumped at the chance, for that individual was about his size.

The mare was now on her legs again, and stood ready bridled, while two men held her with the lariat drawn tight over her windpipe. She stood as still as a rock, and to judge by the flashing of her eyes, inwardly raging. They led her out of the corral, and Arizona’s saddle was brought and the stirrups adjusted to Tresler’s requirements. She was taken well clear of the buildings into the open, and Jacob, with the subtlety and art acquired by long practice in breaking horses, proceeded to saddle her. Lew and Raw Harris choked her quiet with the lariat, and though she physically attempted to resent the indignity of being saddled, the cinchas were drawn tight.

Tresler had come over by himself, leaving Jake to watch the proceedings from the vantage ground of the rise toward the house. He was quite quiet, and the boys stole occasional apprehensive glances at him. They knew this mare; they knew that she was a hopeless outlaw and fit only for the knacker’s yard. At last Jacob beckoned him over.

“Say, ther’ ain’t no need fer you to ride her, mister,” he said, feeling that it was his duty as a man to warn him. “She’s the worstest devil on the range, an’ she’ll break your neck an’ jump on you with her maulin’ great hoofs, sure. I guess ther’ ain’t a ‘buster’ in the country ’ud tackle her fer less ’an a fi’ dollar wager, she’s that mean.”

“And she looks all you say of her, Jacob,” replied Tresler, with a grim smile. “Thanks for your warning, but I’m going to try and ride her,” he went on with quiet decision. “Not because I think I can, but because that bully up there” – with a nod in Jake’s direction – “would only be too glad of the chance of taunting me with ‘weakening.’ She shall throw me till she makes it a physical impossibility for me to mount her again. All I ask is that you fellows stand by to keep her off when I’m on the ground.”

By this time Jacob had secured the saddle, and now Tresler walked round the great beast, patting her gently and speaking to her. And she watched him with an evil, staring eye that boded nothing good. Then he took a rawhide quirt from Jacob and, twisting it on his wrist, mounted her, while the men kept the choking rope taut about her throat, and she stood like a statue, except for the heaving of her sides as she gasped for breath.

He gathered the reins up, which had been passed through the noose of the lariat, and sat ready. Jacob drew off, and held the end of the rope. Tresler gave the word. The two men left her, while, with a shake and a swift jerk, Jacob flung the lariat clear of the mare’s head. In an instant the battle had begun.

Down went the lady’s head (the boys called her by a less complimentary name), and she shot into the air with her back humped till she shaped like an inverted U with its extremities narrowed and almost touching. There was no seesaw bucking about her. It was stiff-legged, with her four feet bunched together and her great fiddle-head lost in their midst. And at the first jump Tresler shot a foot out of the saddle, lurched forward and then back, and finally came down where he had started from. And as he fell heavily into the saddle his hand struck against a coiled blanket strap behind the cantle, and he instinctively grabbed hold of it and clung to it for dear life.

Up she shot again, and deliberately swung round in the air and came down with her head where her tail had been. It was a marvelous, cat-like spring, calculated to unseat the best of horsemen. Tresler was half out of the saddle again, but the blanket strap saved him, and the next buck threw him back into his seat. Now her jumps came like the shots from a gatling gun, and the man on her back

was dazed, and his head swam, and he felt the blood rushing to his ear-drums. But with desperate resolve he clung to his strap, and so retained his seat. But it couldn't last, and he knew it, although those looking on began to have hopes that he would tire the vixen out. But they didn't know the demon that possessed her.

Suddenly it seemed as though an accident had happened to her. Her legs absolutely shot from under her as she landed from one terrific buck, and she plunged to the ground. Then her intention became apparent. But luckily the antic had defeated its own end, for Tresler was flung wide, and, as she rolled on the ground, he scrambled clear of her body.

He struggled to his feet, but not before she had realized his escape, and, with the savage instinct of a man-eater, had sprung to her feet and was making for him open-mouthed. It was Jacob's readiness and wonderful skill that saved him. The rope whistled through the air and caught her, the noose falling over her head with scarcely room between her nose and her victim's back for the rawhide to pass. In a flash the strands strung tight, and her head swung round with such a jolt that she was almost thrown from her feet.

Again she was choked down, and Tresler, breathing desperately, but with his blood fairly up, was on top of her almost before the man holding her realized his intention. The mare was foaming at the mouth, and a lather of sweat dripped from her tuckered flanks. The whites of her eyes were flaming scarlet now, and when she was let loose again she tried to savage her rider's legs. Failing this, she threw her head up violently, and, all unprepared for it, Tresler received the blow square in the mouth. Then she was up on her hind legs, fighting the air with her front feet, and a moment later crashed over backward. And again it seemed like a miracle that he escaped; he slid out of the saddle, not of his own intention, and rolled clear as she came down.

This time she was caught before she could struggle to her feet, and when at last she stood up she was dazed and shaken, though still unconquered.

Again Tresler mounted. He was bruised and bleeding, and shaking as with an ague. And now the mare tried a new move. She bucked; but it was a running buck, her body twisting and writhing with curious serpentine undulations, and her body seemed to shrink under his legs as though the brute were drawing in her whole frame of a settled purpose. Then, having done enough in this direction, she suddenly stood, and began to kick violently, with her head stretched low between her forelegs. And Tresler felt himself sliding, saddle and all, over her withers! Suddenly the blanket strap failed him. It cracked and gave, and he shot from the saddle like a new-fired rocket.

And when the mare had been caught again she was without the saddle, which was now lying close to where her rider had fallen. She had bucked and kicked herself clean through the still-fastened cinchas.

Tresler was bleeding from nose and ears when he mounted again. The saddle was cinched up very tight, and the mare herself was so blown that she was unable to distend herself to resist the pressure. But, nevertheless, she fought as though a devil possessed her, and, exhausted, and without the help of the blanket strap, he was thrown again and again. Five times he fell; and each time, as no bones were broken, he remounted her. But he was growing helpless.

But the men looking on realized that which was lost upon the rider himself. The mare was done; she was fairly beaten. The fifth time he climbed into the saddle her bucks wouldn't have thrown a babe; and when they beheld this, they, with one accord, shouted to him.

"Say, thrash her, boy! Lace h – out of her!" roared Jacob.

"Cut her liver out wi' that quirt!" cried Lew.

"Ay, run her till she can't see," added Raw.

And Tresler obeyed mechanically. He was too exhausted to do much; but he managed to bring the quirt down over her shoulders, until, maddened with pain, she rose up on her hind legs, gave a mighty bound forward, and raced away down the trail like a creature possessed.

It was dinner-time when Tresler saw the ranch again. He returned with the mare jaded and docile. He had recovered from the battle, while she had scarcely energy enough to put one foot before the other. She was conquered. To use Arizona's expression, when, from the doorway of the bunkhouse, he saw the mare crawling up the trail toward the ranch —

"Guess she's loaded down till her springs is nigh busted."

And Tresler laughed outright in Jake's face when that individual came into the barn, while he was rubbing her down, and generally returning good for evil, and found fault with his work.

"Where, I'd like to know, have you been all this time?" he asked angrily. Then, as his eyes took in the pitiful sight of the exhausted mare, "Say, you've ruined that mare, and you'll have to make it good. We don't keep horses for the hands to founder. D'you see what you've done? You've broke her heart."

"And if I'd had the chance I'd have broken her neck too," Tresler retorted, with so much heat, that, in self-defense, the foreman was forced to leave him alone.

That afternoon the real business of ranching began. Lew Cawley was sent out with Tresler to instruct him in mending barbed-wire fences. A distant pasture had been broken into by the roving cattle outside. Lew remained with him long enough to show him how to strain the wires up and splice them, then he rode off to other work.

Tresler was glad to find himself out on the prairie away from the unbearable influence of the ranch foreman. The afternoon was hot, but it was bright with the sunshine, which, in the shadow of the mountains, is so bracing. The pastures he was working in were different from the lank weedy-grown prairie, although of the same origin. They were irrigated, and had been sown and re-sown with timothy grass and clover. The grass rose high up to the horse's knees as he rode, and the quiet, hard-working animal, his own property, reveled in the sweet-scented fodder which he could nip at as he moved leisurely along.

And Tresler worked very easily that afternoon. Not out of indolence, not out of any ill-feeling toward his foreman. He was weary after his morning's exertions, and, besides, the joy of being out in the pure, bright air, on that wondrous sea of rolling green grass with its illimitable suggestion of freedom and its gracious odors, seduced him to an indolence quite foreign to him. He was beyond the view of the ranch, with two miles of prairie rollers intervening, so he did his work without concern for time.

It was well after four o'clock when the last strand of wire was strung tight. Then, for want of a shady tree to lean his back against, he sat down by a fence post and smoked, while his horse, with girths loosened, and bit removed from its mouth, grazed joyfully near by.

And then he slept. The peace of the prairie world got hold of him; the profound silence lulled his fagged nerves, his pipe went out, and he slept.

He awoke with a start. Nor, for the moment, did he know where he was. His pipe had fallen from his mouth, and he found himself stretched full length upon the ground. But something unusual had awakened him, and when he had gathered his scattered senses he looked about him to ascertain what the nature of the disturbance had been. The next moment a laughing voice hailed him.

"Is this the way you learn ranching, Mr. Tresler? Oh, shame! Sleeping the glorious hours of sunshine away."

It was the rich, gentle voice of Diane Marbolt, and its tone was one of quiet raillery. She was gazing down at him from the back of her sturdy broncho mare, Bessie, with eyes from which, for the moment at least, all sadness had vanished.

Just now her lips were wreathed in a bright smile, and her soft brown eyes were dancing with a joyous light, which, when Tresler had first seen her, had seemed impossible to them. She was out on the prairie, on the back of her favorite, Bessie; she was away from the ranch, from the home that possessed so many cares for her. She was out in her world, the world she loved, the world that was the only world for her, breathing the pure, delicious air which, even in moments of profound unhappiness,

had still power to carry her back to the days of happy, careless childhood; had still power to banish all but pleasant thoughts, and to bestow upon her that wild sense of freedom such as is only given to those who have made their home on its virgin bosom.

Tresler beheld this girl now in her native mood. He saw before him the true child of the prairie such as she really was. She was clad in a blue dungaree habit and straw sun-hat, and he marveled at the ravishing picture she made. He raised himself upon his elbow and stared at her, and a sensation of delight swept over him as he devoured each detail of face and figure. Then, suddenly, he was recalled to his senses by the abrupt fading of the smile from the face before him; and he flushed with a rueful sense of guiltiness.

"Fairly caught napping, Miss Marbolt," he said, in confusion. "I acknowledge the sloth, but not the implied laxness anent ranching. Believe me, I have learned an ample lesson to-day. I now have a fuller appreciation of our worthy foreman; a fair knowledge of the horse, most accurately termed 'outlaw', as the bruised condition of my body can testify; and, as for barbed-wire fencing, I really believe I have discovered every point in its construction worthy of consideration."

He raised a pair of lacerated hands for the girl's inspection, and rose, smiling, to his feet.

"I apologize." Diane was smiling again now as she noted the network of scratches upon his outstretched palms. "You certainly have not been idle," she added, significantly.

Then she became serious with a suddenness that showed how very near the surface, how strongly marked was that quiet, thoughtful nature her companion had first realized in her.

"But I saw you on that mare, and I thought you would surely be killed. Do you know they've tried to break her for two seasons, and failed hopelessly. What happened after she bolted?"

"Oh, nothing much. I rode her to Forks and back twice."

"Forty miles! Good gracious! What is she like now?"

"Done up, of course. Jake assures me I've broken her heart; but I haven't. My Lady Jezebel has a heart of stone that would take something in the nature of a sledge-hammer to break. She'll buck like the mischief again to-morrow."

"Yes."

The girl nodded. She had witnessed the battle between the "tenderfoot" and the mare; and, now that it was all over, she felt pleased that he had won. And there was no mistaking the approval in the glance she gave him. She understood the spirit that had moved him to drive the mare that forty miles; nor, in spite of a certain sympathy for the jaded creature, did she condemn him for it. She was too much a child of the prairie to morbidly sentimentalize over the matter. The mare was a savage of the worst type, and she knew that prairie horses in their breaking often require drastic treatment. It was the stubborn, purposeful character of the man that she admired, and thought most of. He had carried out a task that the best horse-breaker in the country might reasonably have shrunk from, and all to please the brutal nature of Jake Harnach.

"And you've christened her 'Lady Jezebel'?" she asked.

Tresler laughed. "Why, yes, it seems to suit her," he said indifferently.

Then a slight pause followed which amounted almost to awkwardness. The girl had come to find him. Her visit was not a matter of chance. She wanted to talk to this man from the East. And, somehow, Tresler understood that this was so. For some moments she sat stroking Bessie's shoulder with her rawhide riding-switch. The mare grew restive. She, too, seemed to understand something of the awkwardness, and did her best to break it up by one or two of her frivolous gambols. When she had been pacified, the girl leaned forward in her saddle and looked straight into her companion's eyes.

"Tell me," she said, abruptly; "why did you ride that animal?"

The man laughed a little harshly. "Because – well, because I hadn't sense enough to refuse, I suppose."

"Ah, I understand. Jake Harnach."

Tresler shrugged.

"I came out purposely to speak to you," the girl went on, in a quiet, direct manner. There was not the least embarrassment now. She had made up her mind to avoid all chance of misunderstanding. "I want to put matters quite plainly before you. This morning's business was only a sequel to your meeting with Jake, or rather a beginning of the sequel."

Tresler shook his head and smiled. "Not the beginning of the sequel. That occurred last evening, after I left you."

Diane looked a swift inquiry.

"Yes, Jake is not an easy man. But believe me, Miss Marbolt, you need have no fear. I see what it is; you, in the kindness of your heart, dread that I, a stranger here in your land, in your home, may be maltreated, or even worse by that unconscionable ruffian. Knowing your father's affliction, you fear that I have no protection from Jake's murderous savagery, and you are endeavoring bravely to thrust your frail self between us, and so stave off a catastrophe. Have no fear. I do not anticipate a collision. He is only an atrocious bully."

"He is more than that. You underestimate him."

The girl's face had darkened. Her lips were firmly compressed, and an angry fire burned in her usually soft eyes.

Tresler, watching, read the hatred for Jake; read the hatred, and saw that which seemed so out of place in the reliant little face. A pronounced fear was also expressed, and the two were so marked that it was hard to say which feeling predominated. Hatred had stirred depths of fire in her beautiful eyes, but fear had paled her features, had set drawn lines about her mouth and brows. He wondered.

"You are right, Mr. Tresler, in that you think I dread for your safety," she went on presently. "It was certainly that dread that brought me out here to-day. You do not anticipate a collision because you are a brave man. You have no fear, therefore you give no thought to possibilities. I am weak and a woman, and I see with eyes of understanding and knowledge of Jake, and I know that the collision will be forced upon you; and, further, when the trouble comes, Jake will take no chances. But you must not think too well of me. Believe me, there is selfishness at the root of my anxiety. Do you not see what trouble it will cause to us; my father, me?"

Tresler looked away. The girl had a strange insistence. It seemed to him folly to consider the matter so seriously. He was convinced that she was holding something back; that she was concealing her real reason – perhaps the reason of her own fear of Jake – for thus importuning him. It did not take him long to make up his mind with those lovely, appealing eyes upon him. He turned back to her with a frank smile, and held out his hand. Diane responded, and they shook hands like two friends making a bargain.

"You are right, Miss Marbolt," he said. "I promise you to do all in my power to keep the peace with Jake. But," and here he held up a finger in mock warning, "anything in the nature of a physical attack will be resented – to the last."

Diane nodded. She had obtained all the assurance he would give, she knew, and wisely refrained from further pressure.

Now a silence fell. The sun was dropping low in the west, and already the shadows on the grass were lengthening. Tresler brought his grazing horse back. When he returned Diane reverted to something he had said before.

"This 'sequel' you spoke of. You didn't tell me it." Her manner had changed, and she spoke almost lightly.

"The matter of the sequel was a trivial affair, and only took the form of Jake's spleen in endeavoring to make my quarters as uncomfortable for me as possible. No, the incident I had chiefly in mind was something altogether different. It was all so strange – so very strange," he went on reflectively. "One adventure on top of another ever since my arrival. The last, and strangest of all, did not occur until nearly midnight."

He looked up with a smile, but only to find that Diane's attention was apparently wandering.

The girl was gazing out over the waving grass-land with deep, brooding, dreamy eyes. There was no anger in them now, only her features looked a little more drawn and hard. The man waited for a moment, then as she did not turn he went on.

“You have strange visitors at the ranch, Miss Marbolt – very strange. They come stealthily in the dead of night; they come through the shelter of the pinewoods, where it is dark, almost black, at night. They come with faces masked – at least one face – ”

He got no further. There was no lack of effect now. Diane was round upon him, gazing at him with frightened eyes.

“You saw them?” she cried; and a strident ring had replaced her usually soft tones.

“Them? Who?”

For a moment they stared into each other’s eyes. He inquiringly; she with fear and mingled horror.

“These – these visitors.” The words came almost in a whisper.

“Yes.”

“And what were they like?”

The girl spoke apprehensively.

Then Tresler told his story as he had told it to Joe Nelson. And Diane hung on every word he uttered, searching him through and through with her troubled eyes.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked as he finished.

Tresler was struck with the peculiarity of the question. She expressed no surprise, no wonder. It seemed as though the matter was in nowise new to her. Her whole solicitude was in her anticipation of what he would do about it.

“I am not sure,” he said, concealing his surprise under a leisurely manner. “I had intended to tell Jake,” he went on a moment later, “only the Lady Jezebel put it out of my head. I told Joe Nelson last night. He told me I had seen Red Mask, the cattle thief, and one of his men. He also tried to get me to promise that I would say nothing about it to Jake. I refused to give that promise. He gave me no sufficient reasons, you see, and – well, I failed to see the necessity for silence.”

“But there is a necessity, Mr. Tresler. The greatest.” Diane’s tone was thrilling with an almost fierce earnestness. “Joe was right. Jake is the last person to whom you should tell your story.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Diane echoed, with a mirthless laugh. “Pshaw!”

“Yes, why? I have a right to know, Miss Marbolt.”

“You shall know all I can tell you.” The girl seemed on the verge of making an impulsive statement, but suddenly stopped; and when at last she did proceed her tone was more calm and so low as to be little above a whisper. “Visitors such as you have seen have been seen by others before. The story, as you have told it, has in each case been told to Jake by the unfortunate who witnessed these strange movements at night – ”

“Unfortunate?”

“Yes. The informant has always met with misfortune, accident – whatever you like to call it. Listen; it is a long story, but I will merely outline the details I wish to impress on you. Some years ago this Red Mask appeared from no one knows where. Curiously enough his appearance was in the vicinity of this ranch. We were robbed, and he vanished. Some time later he was seen again, much the same as you saw him last night. One of our boys gave the warning to Jake. Two days later the poor fellow who informed upon him was found shot on the trail into Forks. Later, again, another hand witnessed a somewhat similar scene and gave information. His end was by drowning in a shallow part of the river. Folks attributed his end to drink, but – Again Red Mask showed up – always at night – again he was seen, and Jake was warned. The victim this time met his death by the falling of a rock in the foot-hills. The rock killed horse and rider. And so it has gone on at varying intervals. Eight men have been similarly treated. The ninth, Arizona, barely escaped with his life a little while ago.

I've no doubt but that some accident will happen to him yet. And, mark this, in each case the warning has gone first to Jake. I may be altogether wrong; certainly other folks do not look upon the death of these various men with suspicion, but I have watched, and reasoned out all I have seen. And – ”

“Why, Jake must – ”

“Hush!”

Diane gazed round her apprehensively.

“No, no, Mr. Tresler,” she went on hurriedly, “I do not say that; I dare not think of it. Jake has been with us so long; he cares for father’s interest as for his own. In spite of his terrible nature he is father’s – friend.”

“And the man who intends to marry you,” Tresler added to himself. Aloud he asked, “Then how do you account for it?”

“That’s just it. I – I don’t account for it. I only warn you not to take your story to Jake.”

Tresler drew a step nearer, and stood so close to her that her dungaree skirt was almost touching him. He looked up in a manner that compelled her gaze.

“You do account for it, Miss Marbolt,” he said emphatically.

Nor did the girl attempt denial. Just for a moment there was a breathless silence. Then Bessie pawed the ground, and thrust her nose into the face of Tresler’s horse in friendly, caressing fashion; and the movement broke the spell.

“Urge me no further, Mr. Tresler,” Diane exclaimed appealingly. “Do not make me say something I have no right to say; something I might have cause to regret all my life. Believe me, I hardly know what to believe, and what not to believe; I hardly know what to think. I can only speak as my instinct guides me. Oh, Mr. Tresler, I – I can trust you. Yes – I know I can.”

The girl’s appeal had its effect. Tresler reached up and caught the little outstretched hands.

“Yes, you can trust me, Miss Marbolt,” he said with infinite kindness. “You have done the very best thing you could have done. You have given me your confidence – a trouble that I can see has caused you ages of unhappiness. I confess you have opened up suspicions that seem almost preposterous, but you – ” He broke off, and stood gazing down thoughtfully at the two hands he still held clasped within his. Then he seemed to become suddenly aware of the position, and, with a slight laugh, released them. “Pardon me,” he said, glancing up into the troubled eyes with a kindly smile. “I was dreaming. Come, let us return to the ranch. It is time. It will be pleasant riding in the cool. By Jove, I begin to think that it is more than possible I owe Jake considerable gratitude after all.”

“You owe him nothing,” answered Diane, with angry emphasis. “You owe him nothing but obedience as a ranch hand, and that you will have to pay him. For the rest, avoid him as you would a pest.”

Tresler sprang into the saddle, and the horses ambled leisurely off in the direction of the ranch. And, as he rode, he set aside all thoughts of Jake and of Red Mask. He thought only of the girl herself, of her delightful companionship.

His steady-going horse, with due regard for the sex of his companion, allowed Bess to lead him by a neck. He traveled amiably by her side, every now and then raising his nose as though to bite his spirited little companion, but it was only pretense. Nor did Tresler urge him faster. He preferred that they should travel thus. He could gaze to his heart’s content upon Diane without displaying rudeness. He could watch the trim, erect figure, poised so easily and gracefully upon the saddle. She rode like one born to the saddle, and by the gait of her mare, he could see that her hands were of the lightest, yet firm and convincing to the high-mettled animal they controlled.

The girl was a perfect picture as she rode; her rich, dark hair was loosely coiled, and several waving ringlets had fluffed loose with the breeze and motion of riding, and strayed from the shadow of her wide hat. Tresler’s thoughts went back to his home; and, he told himself, none of the horsewomen he had known could have displayed such an abundant grace in the saddle with their rigid habits and

smart hats. There was nothing of the riding-school here; just the horsemanship that is so much a natural instinct.

And so they rode on to the ranch.

CHAPTER VI

THE KILLING OF MANSON ORR

All was still and drowsy about the ranch. Every available hand was out at work upon some set task, part of the daily routine of the cattle world. Mosquito Bend was a splendid example of discipline, for Jake was never the man to let his men remain idle. Even Arizona had been set to herd the milch cows and generally tend the horses remaining in the barn; and Tresler, too, was further acquainting himself with the cantankerous nature of barbed-wire fencing.

On this particular afternoon there was nothing about the ranch to indicate the undercurrent of trouble Tresler had so quickly discovered to be flowing beneath its calm surface. The sun was pouring down upon the wilting foliage with a fierceness which had set the insect world droning its drowsy melody; the earth was already parching; the sloughs were already dry, and the tall grass therein was rapidly ripening against the season of haying. But in spite of the seeming peace; in spite of the cloudless sky, the pastoral beauty of the scene, the almost inaudible murmur of the distant river, the tide was flowing swiftly and surely. It was leaping with the roar of a torrent.

A clatter of horse's hoofs broke up the quiet, and came rattling over the river trail. The noise reached Jake's ears and set him alert. He recognized the eager haste, the terrific speed, of the animal approaching. He rose from his bunk and stood ready, and a look of deep interest was in his bold black eyes. Suddenly a horseman came into view. He was leaning well over his horse's neck, urging to a race with whip and spur. Jake saw him sweep by and breast the rise to the rancher's house.

At the verandah the man flung off his horse, and left the drooping beast standing while he hammered at the door. There was some delay, and he repeated his summons still more forcibly, adding his voice to his demand.

"Hello there!" he called. "Any one in?"

"Archie Orr," Jake muttered to himself, as he stepped out of his hut.

The next moment the man at the verandah was caught up in the full blast of the foreman's half-savage and wholly hectoring protest.

"What blazin' racket are you raisin' ther'?" he roared, charging up the hill with heavy, hurried strides. "This ain't Skitter Reach, you dog-gone coyote, nor that ain't your pap's shanty. What's itchin' you, blast you?"

Archie swung round at the first shout. There was a wild expression on his somewhat weak face. It was the face of a weak nature suddenly worked up into the last pitch of frenzy. But even so the approach of Jake was not without its effect. His very presence was full of threat to the weaker man. Archie was no physical coward, but, in that first moment of meeting, he felt as if he had been suddenly taken by the collar, lifted up and shaken, and forcibly set down on his feet again. And his reply came in a tone that voiced the mental process he had passed through.

"I've come for help. I was in Forks last night, and only got home this afternoon," he answered, with unnatural calmness. Then the check gave way before his hysterical condition, and Jake's momentary influence was lost upon him. "I tell you it's Red Mask! It's him and his gang! They've shot my father down; they've burned us out, and driven off our stock! God's curse on the man! But I'll have him. I'll hunt him down. Ha! ha!" The young man's blue eyes flashed and his face worked as his hysteria rose and threatened to overwhelm him. "You hear?" he shouted on – "what does it say? Blood for blood. I'll have it! Give me some help. Give me horses, and I'll have it! I'll – " His voice had risen to a shriek.

"You'll shut off that damned noise, or" – Jake's ferocious face was thrust forward, and his fierce eyes glared furiously into the other's – "or git."

Archie shrank back silenced at once. The effect suited the foreman, and he went on with a sardonic leer —

“An’ you’ll have ‘blood for blood’ o’ Red Mask? You? You who was away boozin’ in Forks when you’d a right to ha’ been around lookin’ to see that old skinflint of a father o’ yours didn’t git no hurt. You’re goin’ to round up Red Mask; you who ain’t got guts enough but to crawl round here fer help to do it. You!”

A hot reply sprang to the youngster’s lips in spite of his fear of this man, but it died suddenly as a voice from within the doorway broke in upon them.

“And a right purpose too, Archie.”

Diane stepped out on to the verandah and ranged herself at his side, while her scornful brown eyes sought the foreman’s face. There was a moment’s pause, then she looked up into the boy’s troubled face.

“You want to see my father?”

Archie was only eighteen, and though well grown and muscular, he was still only a boy.

“Yes, Miss Diane; I do want to see him. I want to borrow a couple of horses from him, and to ask his advice.”

Archie’s recent heat and hysteria had soothed under the influence of the girl’s presence. He now stood bowed and dejected; he appeared to have suddenly grown old. Jake watched the scene with a sneer on his brutal face, but remained silent now that Diane was present.

“I will rouse him myself,” she said quietly, moving toward the door. “Yes, you shall see him, Archie. I heard what you said just now, and I’ll tell him. But — ” She broke off, hesitating. Then she came back to him. “Is — is your father dead, or — only wounded?”

The boy’s head dropped forward, and two great tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. Diane turned away, and a far-off look came into her steady brown eyes. There was a silence for a moment, then a deep, heart-broken sob came from the lad at her side. She flashed one hard glance in Jake’s direction and turned to her companion, gently gripping his arm in a manner that expressed a world of womanly sympathy. Her touch, her quiet, strong helpfulness, did more for him than any formal words of condolence could have done. He lifted his head and dashed the tears from his face; and the girl smiled encouragement upon him.

“Wait here,” she said; “I will go and fetch father.”

She slipped away, leaving the two men alone. And when she had gone, the foreman’s raucous voice sounded harshly on the still air.

“Say, you ain’t smart, neither. We got one of your kidney around here now. Kind o’ reckons to fix the old man through the girl. Most weak-kneed fellers gamble a pile on petticoats. Wal, I guess you’re right out. Marbolt ain’t easy that way. You’ll be sorry you fetched him from his bed, or I don’t know him.”

Archie made no reply. Nor was any more talk possible, for at that moment there came the steady tap, tap, of the blind man’s stick down the passage, and the two men faced the door expectantly. The rancher shuffled out on to the verandah. Diane was at his side, and led him straight over to young Orr. The old man’s head was poised alertly for a second; then he turned swiftly in the foreman’s direction.

“Hah! that you, Jake?” He nodded as he spoke, and then turned back to the other. The blind man’s instinct seemed something more than human.

“Eh? Your father murdered, boy?” Marbolt questioned, without the least softening of tone. “Murdered?”

Archie gulped down his rising emotion. But there was no life in his answer — his words came in a tone of utter hopelessness.

“Yes, sir; shot down, I gather, in defense of our homestead.”

The steady stare of the rancher’s red eyes was hard to support. Archie felt himself weaken before the personality of this man he had come to see.

“Gather?”

The hardness of his greeting had now changed to the gentleness of tone in which the blind man usually spoke. But the boy drew no confidence from it while confronted by those unseeing eyes. It was Diane who understood and replied for him.

“Yes; Archie was in Forks last night, on business, father. He only learned what had happened on returning home this afternoon. He – he wants some help.”

“Yes, sir,” Archie went on quickly; “only a little help. I came home to find our homestead burned clean out. Not a roof left to shelter my mother and sister, and not one living beast left upon the place, except the dogs. Oh, my God, it is awful! Mother and Alice were sitting beside the corral gate weeping fit to break their hearts over the dead body of father when I found them. And the story, as I learned it, sir, was simple – horribly, terribly simple. They were roused at about two in the morning by the dogs barking. Father, thinking timber wolves were around, went out with a gun. He saw nothing till he got to the corrals. Then mother, watching from her window, saw the flash of several guns, and heard the rattle of their reports. Father dropped. Then the gang of murderers roused out the stock, and some drove it off, while others wantonly fired the buildings. It was Red Mask, sir, for he came up to the house and ordered mother out before the place was fired. She is sure it was him because of his mask. She begged him not to burn her home, but the devil had no remorse; he vouchsafed only one reply. Maybe she forced him to an answer with her appeal; maybe he only spoke to intimidate others who might hear of his words from her. Anyway, he said, ‘Your man and you open your mouths too wide around this place. Manson Orr wrote in to the police, and asked for protection. You won’t need it now, neither will he.’” He paused, while the horror of his story sank deeply into the heart of at least one of his hearers. Then he went on with that eager, nervous fire he had at first displayed: “Mr. Marbolt, I look to you to help me. I’ve got nothing to keep me now from following this devil of a man. I want to borrow horses, and I’ll hunt him down. I’ll hunt him down while I’ve a breath left in my body, sir,” he went on, with rising passion. “I’ll pay him if it takes me my lifetime! Only lend me the horses, sir. It is as much to your interest as mine, for he has robbed you before now; your property is no more safe than any other man’s. Let us combine to fight him, to bring him down, to measure him his full measure, to send him to hell, where he belongs. I’ll do this – ”

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