

Seltzer Charles Alden

The Coming of the Law



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CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAN

If the passengers on the west-bound train that pulled up at the little red wooden station at Dry Bottom at the close of a June day in 18—, were interested in the young man bearing the two suit cases, they gave no evidence of it. True, they noted his departure; with casual glances they watched him as he stepped down upon the platform; but immediately they forgot his athletic figure and his regular featured, serious face as their thoughts returned to the heat, the dust, and the monotony of travel.

There was the usual bustle and activity which always follows the arrival of a train. A mail bag was dumped out of the mail car, another thrown in; some express packages were unceremoniously deposited near the door of the station by the agent; the conductor ran to the telegrapher's window to receive an order; ran back, signaling as he ran; the engine bell clanged, the drivers clanked, the wheels ground, the passengers sighed, and the train departed on its way.

The young man who had alighted stood motionless for a moment, listening to the clatter of the wheels over the rail-joints, watching the smoke from the engine-stack befoul the clear blue of the sky. Then he smiled grimly, threw a rapid glance toward a group of loungers standing at a corner of the station, and walked over to where the station agent stood examining some newly arrived packages.

“Do you mind directing me to the courthouse?” said the young man.

The agent looked up, turned, and ran a measuring, speculative eye over the new arrival. He noted the Eastern cut of the young man's clothing and beneath the dust of travel the clear, healthy white skin of his face. “Stranger here?” observed the agent, with a slight, humorous narrowing of the eyes.

“Yes.”

“No, I don't mind,” resumed the agent, answering the young man's question. “You won't have any trouble findin' the courthouse. There's only one street in this town an' the courthouse is down to the other end of it—you couldn't miss it if you tried.” He grinned with some amusement at the young man's back as the latter with a cordial “thank you,” returned to his suit cases, gripped them firmly by the handles, and strode down the wooden platform toward the street, ignoring the group of loungers at the corner of the station.

“Nother tenderfoot,” remarked one of the loungers as the young man passed out of hearing; “they're runnin' this country plum to hell!”

The young man strode slowly down the board sidewalk that paralleled the buildings on one side of the street, mentally taking in the dimensions of the town. It was not an inviting picture. Many buildings of various descriptions snuggled the wide, vacant space which the station agent had termed a “street.” Most of the buildings were unpainted and crude, composed of rough boards running perpendicularly, with narrow battens over the joints. There were several brick buildings two stories in height, bearing the appearance of having been recently erected, and these towered over the squat, one-story frames in seeming contemptuous dignity. There were many private dwellings, some stores, but the young man's first impression was that there was an enormous number of saloons.

He saw few people; those who came within range of vision were apparently cowboys, for they were rigged in the picturesque garb that he had studied many times in the illustrations of Eastern magazines. He had admired them afar, for there was something about them, something in the free, wild life they led, that appealed to him; something that struck at the primitive in his heart. He had

heard tales of them; travelers returning from these regions had related sundry stories of these wild men of the plains; stories of their hardihood, of their recklessness, of their absolute fearlessness—clothing them with a glamor and romance that had deeply impressed the young man. His own life had been rather prosaic.

He saw some cowponies hitched to rails in front of several of the saloons; in front of a store he observed a canvas-covered wagon which he recognized (from sketches he had seen) as a “prairie schooner”; in front of another store he saw a spring wagon of the “buckboard” variety. That was all. The aroma of sage-brush filled his nostrils; the fine, flint-like, powdered alkali dust lay thick everywhere. It was unattractive and dismal.

The town, as it lay before him, began in desolation and ended in desolation. Except that it was a trifle larger it differed in no important particular from many others that littered the face of the world through which he had passed during the last twenty-four hours. It was a mere dot in the center of a flat grass country covering a vast area. It sat, serene in its isolation, as far from civilization as Genesis from Revelation. In the stifling heat of the lazy June afternoon it drowsed, seemingly deserted except for the ponies and the two wagons, and the few incurious cowboys who had rewarded the young man with their glances. Apparently whatever citizens were here were busy in the saloons. As this thought flashed upon the young man his lips straightened grimly. But he continued slowly on his way, giving much attention to objects that came within his range of vision. The more he saw of the town, the less pleased he was with it.

The suit cases were heavy; he paused in front of a building and set them down, while with his handkerchief he mopped the dust and perspiration from his forehead. He saw a flaring sign on the roof of the building in front of which he had stopped and he read the legend with a smile of derision: “The Fashion Saloon.” Several ponies were hitched to the rail in front of the building; the bridle of one was gaily decorated with a bow of ribbon. Only a woman would have decorated a pony thus, the young man decided with a smile. Yet what sort of woman would hitch her pony in front of a saloon? He looked about him for some explanation and saw a vacant space beside him and beside the vacant space a store. There was no hitching rail in front of the store, therefore here was the explanation. He heard a sound behind him and turning he beheld the figures of a man and a woman in the vacant space between the two buildings.

The woman seemed to be little more than a girl, for as the young man watched she turned slightly toward him—though not seeing him—and he saw youth pictured on her face, and innocence, though withal she gave the young man an impression of sturdy self-reliance that awakened instant admiration for her in his mind.

She was attired in picturesque costume, consisting of short riding skirt, boots, felt hat, woolen blouse with a flowing tie at the throat, gloves, and spurs. It was not the sort of thing to which the young man was accustomed, but she made an attractive picture and he took in every detail of her appearance with eager eyes.

It was some time before he noticed the man. The latter stood facing the girl and he could not get a view of his face. He had a gigantic frame, with huge shoulders that loomed above the girl, dwarfing her. The young man remained motionless, watching the two, for there was something in the big man’s attitude that held him. The man turned presently and the young man had a glimpse of his face. It was heavy featured, coarse, and an unmistakable brutality was betrayed in it. The young man’s lips curled. He did not like the type, and it was the girl’s face that held him now that he had seen the man’s.

He leaned easily against the front of the building, not over fifteen feet distant from the two, trying to appear uninterested, but not concealing his interest. He believed the girl had not seen him, for though she had looked in his direction he was sure that her glance had passed him to rest on the pony at the hitching rail. Swift as the glance had been the young man had seen in her face an expression that caused him to decide to remain where he was until the girl mounted her pony, no

matter how long that time might be. So he relaxed, leaning against the building—attentive, listening, though apparently entirely unconcerned over their conversation.

The girl seemed moved with some deep emotion over something the big man had said, for her slight figure had stiffened and she stood looking at him with an angry, intense gaze. The big man had been taunting her, for his teeth showed in a mocking grin as he hovered near her, apparently sure of her. It was like a lion playing with a mouse. Then the young man heard the big man's voice:

“So you don't take kindly to my courting? Don't want anything to do with me at all?” His forced laugh had a harshness in it that caused the young man's muscles to stiffen. He took a sly glance at the girl and saw her chin uplift with disdain.

“Do you think it necessary for me to tell you that—again?” she said.

A strange satisfaction thrilled the young man; sympathy for her drew his mouth into a peculiarly grim smile. But he had no time to enjoy his satisfaction for the big man spoke and this time he did not laugh.

“Well,” he said shortly, “you're going to have something to do with me. You're going to hook up with me or I'm putting that crazy brother of yours out of business!”

The girl was suddenly rigid and a deep red as suddenly suffused her cheeks. The young man's face paled at the threat, his teeth came together with a snap, and he leaned forward, wishing to hear some more of this extraordinary conversation. More of it came quickly. The girl spoke, her voice even and well controlled, though burdened with a biting sarcasm:

“What a terrible man you are, to be sure, to threaten to make war upon a defenseless girl and her afflicted brother. But I'm not afraid of you!”

She took a step toward him, standing very close to him and looking straight into his eyes. She was fighting bravely for her composure, but the young man had seen that her lips had quivered pitifully during her brief speech. He stiffened with sympathy. He could not, of course, understand this strange conversation, but he could discern its drift, and the suggestive underplay in the big man's words. But plainly he had not been mistaken in his estimate of the young woman—she seemed entirely able to take care of herself.

He crowded a little closer, though he knew that this conversation was none of his affair further than that he was interested—as any man would be interested—in seeing that the young woman received decent treatment. Certainly so far she had not received that, yet neither had the big man said anything to warrant interference by a stranger. Stealing another glance, the young man saw a heavy revolver at the man's hip, and he did not doubt, from what he had thus far seen of him, that he would use the weapon should he turn and discover that there was a listener to his conversation. Such an action would accord perfectly with tales that the young man had heard of this section of the country. But he edged closer.

The big man's face had become poisonously bloated. The girl's defiance seemed to have enraged him.

“Hell!” he said venomously. “You're talking damn brave!” He leaned closer to her. “And you think you'd be disgraced if folks knowed you was a friend of mine?” He laughed harshly. “Most folks are tickled to be known as my friend. But I'm telling you this: If I ain't a friend I'm an enemy, and you're doing as I say or I'm making things mighty unpleasant for you and your poor, 'afflicted' brother!”

The young man saw the girl's hands clench, saw her face grow slowly pale. Twice now had the big man taunted her about her brother, and plainly his words had hurt her. Words trembled on her lips but refused to come. But for an instant she forced her eyes to meet those of the man and then they suddenly filled with tears. She took a backward step, her shoulders drooping. The big man followed her, gloating over her. Again the young man's thoughts went to the lion and the mouse.

“Hurts, does it?” said the big man, brutally. “Well, you've brought it on yourself, being such a damn prude!”

He reached out and grasped her by the shoulder. She shrank back, struggling with him, trying to grasp the butt of an ivory-handled revolver that swung at her right hip. The big man pinned her arms and the effort was futile.

And then retribution—like an avalanche—struck the big man. He heard the movement, sensed the danger, and flung his right hand toward his pistol butt. There was a silent struggle; a shot, one of the young man's arms swung out—flail like—the clenched hand landing with a crash. The big man went down like a falling tree—prone to the ground, his revolver flying ten feet distant, a little blue-white smoke curling lazily upward out of its muzzle. The big man was raised again—bodily—and hurled down again. He lay face upward in the white sunlight—a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh.

The young man's anger had come and gone. He stood over the big man, looking down at him, his white teeth gleaming through his slightly parted lips.

“I think that will do for you,” he said in an even, passionless voice.

For an instant there was a tense silence. The young man turned and looked at the girl, who was regarding him with surprised and bewildered eyes.

The young man smiled mirthlessly. “I think I waited rather too long. But he won't bother you again—at least for a few minutes.”

He saw the girl's gaze directed to a point somewhere behind him and he turned to see that a door in the side of the Fashion Saloon was vomiting men. They came rushing out, filling the space between the two buildings—cowboys mostly, with a sprinkling of other men whose appearance and attire proclaimed them citizens. The young man stood silent while the newcomers ranged themselves about him, others giving their attention to the big man who still lay on the ground. The girl had not moved; she was standing near the young man, her face pale, her slight figure rigid, her eyes wide and flashing. The young man looked from her to the men who had crowded about him and he became aware that one of the men—a slender, olive-skinned cowboy—evidently a half-breed—was speaking to him. He stood looking at the man, saw menace in his eyes, heard his voice, writhing in profane accusation:

“So you've shot Beeg Beel, you tenderfoot – !” said the man. His right hand was hooked in his cartridge belt, near the butt of his six-shooter.

The young man had been coldly scrutinizing the face of the half-breed; he had seen a sneering insolence on the thin, snarling lips, and he knew instantly that this man was a friend of his fallen adversary. He had smiled grimly when the man had begun speaking, being willing to argue the justice of his action in striking the big man, but at the man's vile insult his white teeth gleamed again and his right arm flew out—like a flail—the fist crashing against the half-breed's jaw. Like the big man the half-breed collapsed in a heap on the ground. There was a sudden movement in the crowd, and pistols flashed in the sunlight. The young man took a backward step, halted, drew himself up and faced them, his lips curling.

“Of course you'll shoot now,” he said bitterly.

He heard a rustle beside him, and turned to see the girl standing within a foot of him, the ivory-handled pistol in hand, her eyes flashing coldly.

“I don't think that any of them are going to shoot,” she declared evenly, her voice resounding in the sudden silence that had fallen; “Big Bill got just what he deserved, and this gentleman will not be molested. He isn't armed,” she said, with a dry laugh; “shooting him would be murder, and if he is shot I promise to avenge him immediately.” She turned slightly, speaking to the young man while keeping her eyes on the men around her. During the pause that followed her words several of the men stealthily sheathed their weapons and stepped back.

“I think Big Bill is able to fight his own battles,” continued the girl, taking advantage of the evident reluctance of the men to force trouble.

Her face became slightly paler as she saw the big man sit up and stare about him. He got to his feet and stood, swaying dizzily for an instant, and then his gaze sought out the young man and was

fixed on him with foreboding malignance. His right hand fell to his holster, and finding no weapon there he turned and sought it, finding it, and returning to a point near the young man, the weapon in hand. As he halted there was another movement and the half-breed was on his feet and dragging at his revolver. The young man crouched, prepared to spring, and the big man spoke sharply to the half-breed.

“Quit it!” he said, snarling. “Mind your own business!” Then he seemed to realize that the half-breed had been worsted also, for he looked at the latter, saw the dust on his clothing and grinned expressively.

“So he got you too, did he, Yuma?” His heavy features wreathed into a mocking sneer as he faced the young man.

“Knocked me down!” he said in a silky, even voice. “Knocked me cold with a punch. Knocked Yuma Ed down too!” He took another step toward the young man and surveyed him critically, his eyes glinting with something very near amusement. Then he stepped back, laughing shortly.

“I ain’t shooting you,” he said. “I’ve got an idea that you and me will meet again.” There was an ominous threat in his voice as he continued: “Shooting you wouldn’t half pay you back. Mark that, young man—shooting you wouldn’t half pay you back.”

He stepped away from the young man, motioning the other men into the door through which they had emerged to come to his assistance, and they filed slowly in without protest. The big man paused long enough to look again at the young man.

“Knocked me down!” he said as though scarcely able to realize the truth; “knocked me cold with a punch!” He laughed, his coarse features twisting into an odd expression. “Well, I’ll be damned!” He turned abruptly and disappeared through the door through which the other men had gone.

For an instant the young man stood, looking after him. Then he turned and saw the young woman, standing near her pony, regarding him with grave eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. He caught a flashing smile and then she was in the saddle, loping her pony down the street toward the station. For a moment the young man looked after her and then with a smile he returned to his suit cases and was off down the street toward the courthouse, which he saw in the distance.

CHAPTER II

THE RULE OF CATTLE

The courthouse was a low, one-story redbrick building, sitting well back from the street. It was evidently newly built, for an accumulation of débris, left by the workmen, still littered the ground in the vicinity. A board walk led from the street to the wide, arched entrance. From the steps one could look down the street at the station and the other buildings squatting in the sunlight, dingy with the dust of many dry days. Except for the cowponies and the buckboard and the prairie schooner there was a total absence of life or movement, offering a striking contrast to the bustling cities to which the young man had been accustomed.

He walked rapidly down the board walk, entered the courthouse, and paused before a door upon which appeared the legend: "United States District Court. J. Blackstone Graney." The young man set his suit cases down, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, making a wry face at the dust that appeared on the linen after his use of it, and then knocked lightly, but firmly, on the door. A voice inside immediately admonished him to "come in." The young man smiled with satisfaction, turned the knob and opened the door, standing on the threshold. A man seated at one of the windows of the room was gazing steadily out at the vast, dry, sun-scorched country. He turned at the young man's entrance and got slowly to his feet, apparently waiting for the visitor to speak. He was a short man, not heavily, but stockily built, giving a clear impression of stolidity. Yet there was a certain gleam in his eyes that gave the lie to this impression, a gleam that warned of an active, analytical mind. Judicial dignity lurked all over him.

The young man bowed respectfully. "Are you Judge Graney?" he questioned.

The judge nodded and the young man smiled slightly. "I am Kent Hollis," he said.

The judge had been approaching a big table that stood in the center of the room and at the young man's words he took a second glance at him, but did not hesitate in his walk toward the table. However, he smiled when he reached it, sinking into a chair and motioning the young man to another.

"I have been expecting you," he said after he had become seated. "Take a chair." He waited until the young man had drawn a chair opposite him and then he leaned over the table and stretched out his hand in greeting. "I'm glad to see you," he continued cordially. He held the young man's hand for an instant, peering steadily into the latter's unwavering eyes, apparently making a mental estimate of him. Then he dropped the hand and sat back, a half smile on his face. "You look like your father," he said.

The young man's face clouded. "Poor dad," he said slowly.

For a moment there was a silence; the judge studied the young man's face. Something that he saw in it must have pleased him, for he smiled, becoming serious instantly.

"I am sorry you could not get here in time," he said. "We buried your father yesterday."

"I couldn't make it," returned the young man regretfully. "I should have liked to see him before he died. Where did you bury him?"

"We took him out to his ranch—the Circle Bar," returned the judge, "where he said he wanted to be buried when he died. You'll find that the Circle Bar boys have done their best for him—which was little enough. Poor fellow, he deserved something better." He looked keenly at the young man.

Lines of pain came into the latter's face; he bowed his head, nodding at the Judge's words.

"I have always thought that it was his own fault," he said gently. "It might have been different." He looked slowly up at the judge, his face reddening with embarrassment. "Of course you know something of his life," he said. "You were his friend—he wrote me a while back, telling me that. I don't pretend to know what came between him and mother," he continued; "mother would never tell and father never mentioned it in his letters. I have thought it was drink," he added, watching the judge's

face closely. He caught the latter's slight nod and his lips straightened. "Yes, it must have been drink," he continued; "I have inferred that from what mother has hinted now and then. But –" and a wistful gleam came into his eyes—"I have hoped that it would not be drink that would cause his –"

He caught the judge's slow, grave nod and he broke off abruptly, his eyes filling with an expression of resignation. "Well," he said, "it is ended, no matter what did it." He shoved back his chair. "I thank you for what you did for him," he added, rising; "I assure you that if it is possible for me to repay –"

"Sit down," said the judge, waving a hand to the young man's chair. "No thanks are due me. I did only what any friend would do for another. I have arranged for you to go out to the Circle Bar," he informed Hollis as the latter hesitated over resuming his chair. "Neil Norton, your range boss, is to be here at six o'clock with the buckboard." He consulted his watch. "He ought to be here in half an hour—if he is on time. Meantime there are some things I would like to say to you."

Hollis smiled. "Fire away," he directed.

The judge leaned his elbows on the table and narrowed his eyes at Hollis. "Don't think my questions impertinent," he said gravely, "for I assure you that nothing is further from my mind than a desire to pry into your affairs. But I take it you will need some advice—which, of course, you may disregard if you wish. I suppose you don't make a secret of your age?"

"No," was the instant reply, given with a grin, "I am twenty-six."

The judge smiled dryly. "We have great ambitions at twenty-six," he said. "I remember that at twenty-six I was rather determined on making the Supreme bench. You can see for yourself how far I missed it. I do not say that we never realize our ambitions," he added quickly as he saw a flash light up the young man's eyes; "I merely wish to show that in my case they were rather extravagant." He grimaced, continuing with a smile: "You are a college man, of course—I can see that."

Hollis nodded. The judge continued, with an admiring glance at the young man's muscular frame and broad shoulders.

"Went in for athletics—football, and such?" he said. "Well," he added, catching the young man's nod, "it didn't hurt you a particle—it doesn't hurt anybody. Rather prepares a man for hard knocks—which he is sure to get sooner or later. If you have decided to live in this country you must expect hard knocks. And I presume you are going to live here?"

"That depends," returned Hollis. "If father has left his affairs in such shape that it is necessary for me to stay here and straighten them out, why of course I shall stay. Otherwise –" He hesitated and laughed quietly, continuing: "Well, I also have an ambition, and if I am compelled to remain here it will have to be sacrificed. It is a rather humble ambition compared to yours," he laughed. "It is journalism," he continued, suddenly serious; "I want to own a newspaper. I am city editor now and in a few years –" He laughed. "I am not going to prophesy, but I have been working hard."

The judge's eyelashes flickered, but his face remained grave. "I am afraid that you will have to remain here. That is"—he added dryly—"if you expect to realize anything from the property."

"I expect there can't be much property," observed Hollis.

The judge smiled. "A thousand acres of good grass land, some buildings, and"—here the judge's eyes gleamed and he drawled his words—"a newspaper."

Hollis sat erect. "A newspaper!" he gasped. "A newspaper in this country? Why, man, a newspaper –"

The judge laughed. "So you will not have to go back East in order to be able to realize your ambition—you can own a newspaper here—your father's newspaper—the Dry Bottom *Kicker*. It was quite a recent venture; I believe it appeared about a dozen times—intermittently. Ostensibly it was a weekly, but in reality it was printed at those times when your father's affliction sat least heavily upon him. He used to hire a compositor from Las Vegas to set the type,—a man named Potter—a worthless sort of fellow, but a genius in his way—when sober. I suspect that much of the matter that went into the *Kicker* emanated from the brain of Dave Potter."

Hollis's smile revealed just a trace of derision. "You don't happen to know how father happened to think that a newspaper would pay—in this place?" he asked.

The judge looked at him meditatively, a gleam of quiet amusement in his eyes. "I don't remember to have said that the paper made any money for your father," he returned slowly; "nor do I remember hearing your father say that he expected it to make any money. As I understand the situation, your father founded the paper on principle. He expected to use it as a weapon."

"Please go on," urged Hollis. "That strikes me as a rather Quixotic proceeding."

"It was, rather," admitted the judge; "that is, it would seem Quixotic as viewed by an Eastern newspaper man. But out here people are apt to ignore money and methods in considering results. After you have been here a while you will be able to see the force and truth of that statement. Your father was after results and he seized upon the idea of founding a newspaper as a means by which to obtain them. And I feel certain that had he lived he would have succeeded."

"I plead ignorance," said Hollis, watching the judge closely. "What particular result did my father desire?"

Judge Graney's eyes gleamed with earnestness. He leaned forward, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"I am going to illustrate my point by giving you a brief history of your father's experiences out here—as I had it from him. He came out here about fifteen years ago and took up a quarter-section of land over on Rabbit-Ear Creek, the present site of the Circle Bar ranch. For quite a few years he was a nester—as the small owner is called in this country, but he was unmolested for the reason that there were few large owners in the vicinity and each man was willing that his neighbor should succeed. Your father prospered and after a few years began to buy land. He finally acquired a thousand acres; he told me that at one time he had about five thousand head of cattle. Of course, these cattle could not live on your father's thousand acres, but the ranges are free and the thousand acres answered very well as a headquarters.

"Eight years ago some men in Santa Fe organized what is known as the Union County Cattlemen's Association. This company secured a section of land adjoining your father's property, on the other side of Rabbit-Ear Creek. The company called its ranch the Circle Cross. Perhaps it strikes you as peculiar that the Association should have chosen a brand so closely resembling your father's. I will digress long enough to explain the action."

The judge drew out a pencil and picked up a piece of paper that lay near him on the desk, making some crude hieroglyphics and poising his pencil above them.

"Here," he explained, indicating a sketch which he had drawn, "is the Circle Bar brand—a bar within a circle. And this—" indicating another sketch, "—is the Circle Cross—a cross within a circle. It is of course, perfectly obvious that all the Circle Cross company had to do when it desired to appropriate one of the Circle Bar cattle was to add a vertical bar to the Circle Bar brand and the brand became the Circle Cross. From a mechanical standpoint it was a very trifling operation, the manipulator of the brands having merely to apply the hot iron through a piece of wet blanket—that gives a new brand the appearance of age.

"To get back to the main subject. The new company called its ranch the Circle Cross and it erected new buildings within a few miles of the Circle Bar buildings. Not long after the advent of the new company it tried to buy the Circle Bar, but your father refused to sell. Bill Dunlavey, the Circle Cross manager, attempted to negotiate the purchase of the Circle Bar and when he was met with refusal hard words passed between him and your father. Not long after that your father began to miss cattle—rustlers began a systematic attack upon his herds. Your father recognized this thievery as the work of the Cattlemen's Association and he fought back.

"A number of times he changed his brands but each time the company checkmated him. To illustrate: Your father changed his brand to appear thus:" The judge drew again on the paper. "That is the 'Wine-Glass' brand. You can see that it resembles a wine glass when held up vertically, though

of course as it appeared on the Circle Bar cattle it lay on its side. But this move was futile, for among the Circle Cross cattle now appeared many branded with the sign of the 'Hour-Glass,' thus:" The judge drew again. "This was achieved by merely adding a semi-circle to the wine-glass, closing over the bowl."

"As I have said your father altered his brand a good many times. But the Circle Bar cattle continued to disappear. Years of warfare followed. The Cattlemen's Association lost no opportunity to harass your father or, for that matter, all the other small owners in the vicinity. Desperate, dissolute men were imported from Texas and Arizona, men who took delight in the shedding of human blood. These men roamed the ranges, stealing the Circle Bar cattle and killing Circle Bar cowboys. Your father had trouble in keeping men; in order to surround himself with enough men to protect his cattle and resist the aggressions of Dunlavey's hired assassins he was forced to pay ruinous wages.

"Even then he could not prevent rustling. Dunlavey bribed his men; his herds dwindled; he saw that he was facing ruin if he did not devise some means to successfully cope with his enemies. He went over to Santa Fe to see the governor—a piffling carpet-bagger. He was told that the government was powerless; that the same condition existed all over the country, and that the government was unable to combat it. The Law had not come.

"Your father returned home, discouraged but not beaten. He approached the several other small owners in the vicinity, asking for co-operation and assistance. Fearful of Dunlavey's wrath, the small owners refused to organize. But your father decided to carry on the fight alone. He recognized the fact that nothing but the Law could defeat the association's aims, and he determined to force the Law into the Territory. With this end in view he established his newspaper. He succeeded in arousing public interest with the result that a court was established here."

The judge smiled dryly, continuing: "Yes, the Law is here. Or what is more to the point, a representative of the Law is here. 'I am the Law,'" he quoted, ironically. "But my hands are tied; this court is a mere travesty upon justice. The government at Washington has seen fit to send me here—alone. I can't go out and get evidence; I couldn't secure a conviction if I did. The people here who are not Dunlavey's friends were afraid of him. I can't get a jury. Dunlavey elects the sheriff—controls the election machinery. I am powerless—a mere figurehead. This is the situation in a nutshell. I could go into detail, but I imagine it is plain enough as it is."

Hollis's face had become gravely serious; his lips were straightened with an expression that hinted at the conflict that was going on in his mind.

"Isn't there an army post near?" he questioned.

"Over at Fort Union—a hundred miles or so southwest. I have pleaded for a detail, but have been informed that it can't be had; that the soldiers are needed to keep the Indians in order. Independent cattlemen are supposed to fight it out alone. At least that is the inference, if we are to consider the attitude of the government."

Hollis was gravely silent. The judge leaned back in his chair, watching him with a queer expression. He realized that he had said enough to discourage the average young man from remaining in the country a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. He would not have been surprised had Hollis told him that he did not intend to remain. But from what he had seen of the young man he felt sure that his decision, when it did come, would be final. More than once since Hollis had been in the office had the judge observed the serene, steady gleam in his eyes, and he had catalogued him with the rare class of men whose mental balance is so perfect that nothing disturbs it. The judge had met a few such men in the West and he knew the type. As he sat looking at the young man he decided that Providence had made a mistake in allowing him to waste his time in the East. The West teemed with opportunities for men of his kind.

He was not surprised at Hollis's next question; it showed that he was considering the situation from many angles before committing himself.

"What is the condition of Circle Bar ranch at present?" he asked.

“The title to the land is intact and cannot be assailed. But Norton informs me that there are not above two hundred head of cattle on the range, and that the buildings are run down. Not a very cheerful prospect?”

He had told the truth about the land and the cattle, but he had purposely exaggerated concerning the condition of the buildings, being grimly determined to place the situation in its most unfavorable light that he might be the better able to test the young man’s mettle. He smiled as Hollis thoughtfully stroked his chin.

“Well, now,” admitted the latter, flashing a queer smile at the judge, “I quite agree with you that the prospect isn’t cheering. But so long as the condition is such as it is there is no need to grumble. I didn’t come out here expecting to fall into a bed of roses.”

“Then you won’t be disappointed,” returned the judge dryly. He filled and lighted a pipe, smoking meditatively, his eyes on the younger man with a curious expression. He had determined to push the test a little farther.

“You could probably sell the Circle Bar,” he said finally. “Your father told me before he died that he had been offered ten dollars an acre for his land. That would total to a tidy sum.”

Hollis looked quickly at the judge, his eyes flashing with grim amusement. “Would you advise me to sell?” he questioned.

The judge laughed quietly. “That is an unfair question,” he equivocated, narrowing his eyes whimsically. “If I were heir to the property and felt that I did not care to assume the danger of managing it I should sell, without doubt. If, on the other hand, I had decided to continue my father’s fight against an unscrupulous company, I would stay no matter what the consequences. But”—He puffed slowly at his pipe, his voice filling with unmistakable sarcasm—“it would be so much easier to sell and return at once to a more peaceful atmosphere. With ten thousand dollars you could go back East and go on with your newspaper work, well equipped, with a chance of realizing your ambition—and not be troubled with continuing a fight in which, no doubt, there would be many blows to be taken.”

“Thank you,” returned Hollis quietly. He looked steadily into the judge’s eyes, his own glinting with a grim humor. “You have succeeded in making it very plain,” he continued slowly. “But I am not going to run—I have decided on that. Of course I feel properly resentful over the way my father has been treated by this man Dunlavey and his association.” His eyes flashed with a peculiar hardness. “And I would stay here and fight Dunlavey and his parcel of ruffians if for no other reason than to secure revenge on personal grounds.

“But there is one other reason. There is a principle at stake. I don’t care very much about the personal side of the question; little as I knew my father, I believe he would have ignored personalities were he confronted with the condition that confronts me. It is my belief that as an American citizen he chafed under conditions that prevented him from enjoying that freedom to which we are all entitled under the Constitution. Judging from your conversation you are in entire sympathy with that sentiment.” He smiled at the judge. “Of course I am not mistaken?” he added.

The tobacco in the bowl of the judge’s pipe spluttered; he brought his right fist heavily down upon the table, rattling the pens and ink bottles that littered its top. “No, young man; you are not mistaken—you have hit the nail squarely on the head. If you are going to stay here and fight Dunlavey and his crew, Blackstone Graney is with you until —”

“Until the Law comes,” suggested Hollis.

“Yes, by thunder!” declared the judge. “You can go further than that and say: ‘until the Law rules!’”

CHAPTER III

NORTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

Judge Graney rose and leaned over the table, taking the young man's hand and holding it tightly. Then he sat down again and resumed smoking. Neither man said a word during the hand-clasp and yet both knew that their hearts and minds were united in a common cause. Words would have been unnecessary and futile.

Hollis's path of duty lay straight and open before him. There was no by-way that would lead him around the dangers that were sure to beset him. Nor had he thought to search for any. Long before the judge had concluded his recital of conditions in the county Hollis had decided to meet the issue squarely. He had been able to see beyond the petty, personal side of the question; had even ignored it to get at the big, pithy principle of equal rights. The Law must come. If he could assist in bringing it he would be accomplishing something real and tangible and he would be satisfied. He did not believe that Destiny had anything to do with his appearance upon the scene at this particular time; rather he felt that his coming was merely a result of a combination of circumstances such as might have occurred to any man. And like any man with courage and deeply settled convictions he was prepared to move forward to the issue, trusting himself. He had no thought of appearing heroic.

Yet to the judge he appeared so. The latter had been prepared to hear excuses from him; had been prepared to resist a natural inclination to berate the young man soundly for lack of parental loyalty, though conscious that he could advance no valid reason for the young man sacrificing himself upon the altars of an old feud. It was against human nature for any man to so sacrifice himself, he had assured himself when trying to build up a defense for the young man.

And now that Hollis had shown that he needed no defender; that he was willing to take up the cudgels in behalf of his father, the judge was scarcely able to restrain himself. To state calmly that he intended to fight the Cattlemen's Association when there was a life of comparative safety awaiting him in another section of the country was an heroic decision. Many another man would have cringed—would have surrendered without striking a blow.

Judge Graney had long known that the action of his government in sending him to Union County was an ironical surrender on the part of the government to the forces in the West which had been long demanding the Law. He had been sent here, presumably to enforce the law, but in reality to silence the government's critics. He was not expected to convict anyone. Theoretically he was supposed to uphold the majesty of the law in Union County, but in reality he merely remained and drew his salary. There was no law to enforce.

In the fight that had been waged between the elder Hollis and the Cattlemen's Association his sympathies had been with Hollis, though he had never been able to assist him in a legal way. But the judge knew that eventually the Law must come, and so he encouraged Hollis, assuring him that victory would be his in the end.

And then Hollis had died—suddenly. The Las Vegas doctor who had attended him had shaken his head sagely when the judge had questioned him regarding his patient and had pointed significantly to one of Dry Bottom's saloons. The doctor had told the judge there was no hope, and the latter had telegraphed East. The appearance of young Hollis had been the result. The judge's heart had warmed toward the young man.

“What are your intentions regarding the newspaper—the *Kicker*?” he questioned.

Hollis looked up quickly, his face grave. “Perhaps if there had been no *Kicker* here my decision might have been different,” he said. “But so long as it is here it is in business to stay!”

“I expect that decision won't please Dunlavey a whole lot,” the judge returned.

“Perhaps not,” drawled Hollis; “still, we can’t aim to please everybody. I expect I might be able to get hold of that printer–Potter I believe you called him?”

“Potter won’t be hard to find,” assured the judge; “a search of the saloons would uncover him, I imagine.” He smiled. “When you get ready to get the *Kicker* out just let me know; I promise to have Potter on hand.”

To the ears of the two men came a rattle of wheels and a voice. The judge leaned back in his chair and looked out through the window. His face wreathed into a broad smile as he resumed his former position and looked at Hollis. “Your range boss is here,” he said.

They heard a step on the board walk, and a man stood in the doorway looking at them.

The newcomer gave an instant impression of capability. He stood on the threshold, entirely composed, saturnine, serene eyed, absolutely sure of himself. He was arrayed in high heeled boots, minus spurs; the bottoms of a pair of dust-covered overalls were tucked into the boot legs; a woolen shirt, open at the throat, covered a pair of admirable shoulders; a scarlet handkerchief was knotted around his neck; and a wide brimmed hat, carelessly dented in the crown, was shoved rakishly back from his forehead. Sagging from his slim waist was a well filled cartridge belt and at the right hip a heavy revolver.

“Howdy, judge!” he said with a smile, in response to Judge Graney’s cordial greeting.

“Just come in?” questioned the judge.

“Been in town an hour,” returned Norton.

He flashed a searching glance at Hollis, which that young man met steadily. The thought crossed Hollis’s mind that the buckboard that he had seen in front of a store soon after leaving the station must have been Norton’s. But now Norton was speaking again and Hollis listened.

“Dropped into the Fashion to see my friend Red Eggers,” resumed Norton, smiling broadly. “Same old crowd–Dunlavey, Yuma Ed, Ten Spot, Greasy–most of the bunch which has been makin’ things interestin’ for us hereabouts.”

At the mention of “Yuma Ed” Hollis looked up. That was the name of the second man he had struck in the affair near the Fashion Saloon. He wondered if Norton knew. He did not remember to have seen the latter among the men who had surrounded him in the space between the two buildings. But the judge was now introducing him to Norton and he stood up, holding the latter’s hand and meeting his inspecting gaze fairly. He found that the range boss was fully as tall as he; indeed, Hollis discovered that he was compelled to look up slightly in order to meet the latter’s level gaze. Norton smiled peculiarly; there was a friendly expression in his eyes, but mingled with it was a reserved, appraising, speculative gleam, which drew a smile to Hollis’s lips.

“So you’re Jim Hollis’s boy?” said Norton. “My new boss?” He grinned, evidently willing to go more than half way in forming a friendship with his “new boss”. “I don’t reckon that you’re much stuck on this here country–much as you’ve seen of it?”

“I’ve been used to keeping busy,” laughed Hollis, “and my impression is that it seems rather dull out here.”

Norton’s eyelashes flickered. He deliberately closed one eye at the judge, carefully averting his face so that Hollis could not see.

“So you’re lookin’ for action?” he said to Hollis in a grave voice. “Mebbe it ain’t none of my business,” he added, his eyes gleaming, “but I’m askin’ you if you’re thinkin’ to stay in this country–keepin’ your dad’s ranch an’ his newspaper?”

Hollis nodded. Norton’s eyes gleamed with a savage delight. “Bully!” he declared. “If you stay here you’ll get plenty of action. I was afraid you wouldn’t stay.” He turned to Judge Graney, a grin of satisfaction on his face. “I’m tellin’ you somethin’ that will tickle you a heap,” he said. “I told you that I had stopped in Red Egger’s saloon. I did. Dunlavey’s bunch was feelin’ mighty sore over somethin’. I stayed there a while, tryin’ to find out what it was all about, but there wasn’t none of them sayin’ anything to me. But pretty soon I got Red over into a corner an’ he told me. Accordin’ to him Dunlavey

had corraled that Hazelton girl outside an' was tellin' her somethin' pretty strong when a tenderfoot, which hadn't any regard for Dunlavey's delicate feelin's, up an' lambasted him in the jaw!"

"Struck him?" queried the judge, grinning delightedly.

"Knocked him cold," affirmed Norton, his eyes dancing. "Pasted him so hard that he thought it was night an' went to sleep. Then Yuma busted in an' thought to work his guns. He got his'n, too. That there tenderfoot didn't have no respect for guns. Red says he never thought any man could hit so hard. It must have been sumptuous!" He laughed delightedly. "I'd like to shake hands with that tenderfoot—he's my friend!"

Hollis pulled out a cigar case, selected a cigar, lighted it, and smoked in silence.

So her name was Hazelton. Admiration over the manner in which she had held the men at bay before Dunlavey got to his feet still lingered; she had impressed him deeply. But a deeper satisfaction overshadowed his thoughts of the girl, for he had slugged Dunlavey, his father's enemy. His satisfaction grew to amusement. Did Dunlavey know who had slugged him? He must have suspected, for Hollis recalled the man's significant expression when, after he had risen from the ground he said: "I've got an idea that you an' me will meet again."

Hollis's thoughts flitted rapidly from Dunlavey to the girl. Now that he had decided to stay he had determined to search her out. He remembered that Dunlavey had spoken slightly of her brother and he assured himself that he would not be entirely satisfied until he had uncovered the mystery. He might have questioned Norton or the judge, for both men evidently knew the girl, but he was reluctant to betray his interest in her to either man.

He heard Norton make an exclamation of surprise, and looking up he saw him holding his right hand out, the palm upward, examining it. There was a splotch of blood on the palm and another on the under side of the thumb.

"Shucks!" Norton was saying. "Now where in thunder did I get that?" He looked again at the hand and then suddenly dove forward to Hollis's side, seized his right hand, peered at the knuckles and held the hand triumphantly aloft.

"I reckon this is where I got it!" he grinned.

Hollis looked ruefully down at his knuckles. The skin was gashed—evidently where it had come in contact with a bone in either Dunlavey's or Yuma's jaw. He had intended to keep the story of adventure to himself. But he saw that Norton had stepped back and was gazing soberly at the suitcases, which Hollis had deposited near the door. Norton suddenly let out a chirp of delight.

"Two of them!" he said, suppressing his excitement; "Two grips! Red Eggers said there was two an' that the tenderfoot had come down toward the court house!" He walked to Hollis and halted in front of him, looking at him with admiration and satisfaction.

"Own up now!" he said. "You ain't tellin' us that it wasn't you, durn you! Oh, say!" He uttered a whoop that must have startled the horses in front of the building. Then he sobered down, speaking in a low, regretful voice: "You durn tenderfoot! Here I've been waitin' for years to get a crack at that big four-flusher, an' here you come, a-fannin' along from your little old East an' get ahead of me!" He stifled a cackle of mirth. "An' so you're lookin' for action? Lordy! If you don't call what you done to Dunlavey an' Yuma action this country's goin' to set up an' take notice when you get to goin' in earnest!"

Judge Graney loomed somberly over the table. "I suppose it must have been you?" he said gravely.

Hollis nodded. "I may as well confess," he said. "I saw a man giving a young lady a mighty bad moment and I slugged him. Another man called me a vile name and I slugged him, too. That was all."

The judge sat down again, his face slightly pale. A significant glance passed between him and Norton, but the latter laughed grimly.

"I reckon he's opened the ball, right off the reel," he suggested.

Judge Graney drew a deep breath. “Yes,” he returned. “I suppose that way is as good as any other. It was bound to come anyway. It will be war to the finish now!”

CHAPTER IV AT THE CIRCLE BAR

In the two weeks that followed his arrival at Dry Bottom, Hollis had much time to meditate upon the great change that had come into his life. His conclusion that there was nothing in common between cattle raising and journalism was not a result of an involved process of reasoning, and had he not been endowed with a sense of humor he might have become embittered. Though a sacrifice be made cheerfully, there lingers always its ghost to draw mental pictures of “what might have been.” Hollis would have been more than human had he not felt some little regret over his sacrifice.

It had seemed to him, as two weeks before he had ridden away from the court house—sitting on the seat of the buckboard beside Neil Norton, his suitcases tucked snugly away underneath—that he was once and for all severing his connection with the big, bustling world in which he had moved; in whose busy scenes he had been so vitally interested. His had been a big work; seated at his desk in the “city” room of his newspaper he had many times likened himself unto an argus-eyed recording angel whose business it was to keep in view each of the many atoms of a busy multitude and to accord to them that amount of space that their importance seemed to demand. He had loved his work; it had broadened him, had provided him with exactly the proportion of mental exercise needed to keep him on edge and in a position to enjoy life. He had lived in the East—really lived. Out here he would merely exist, though, he assured himself grimly, his enemies would have to pay dearly for his sacrifice.

The picture of his journey to the Circle Bar ranch was still fresh in his mind as he rode slowly away from Neil Norton, whom he had left sitting in his saddle on a ridge, watching him. The long twilight had brought its lengthening shadows that night before Norton had struck the Circle Bar trail, and before they had traveled a mile of the ten that lay before them night had come. Hollis had been little inclined to talk and Norton did not disturb him, but gave his attention to the horses. There had been no moon and few stars, and darkness, as under a blanket, had settled over them before they were many miles from Dry Bottom.

The country seemed nothing more than a vast plain, broken here and there by ridges and depressions. Occasionally a low hill loomed out of the darkness, the shadows deepening around it; now and then the buckboard passed through a draw, the wheels sinking hub-deep in the loose sand. Several dry arroyos crossed the trail, but with a knowledge that seemed almost marvelous Norton cleverly avoided these pitfalls. Hollis could not see a foot ahead, but the location of the trail seemed to be no mystery to the range boss, for he drove the horses steadily on, hesitating for nothing.

Once during the ride Norton broke the silence with a subdued cackle of mirth, and at another time he laughed aloud.

“I’d liked to have seen Big Bill when you hit him!” he observed, regret in his voice. “I reckon he might have been just a little surprised!”

To which Hollis made no reply. At another time Norton broke the silence long enough to inquire:

“I reckon mebbe you wouldn’t have hit him so hard if you’d knowed who he was?”

“I think I should have hit a little harder,” returned Hollis quietly.

“Why, hell!” declared Norton with a laugh; “I reckon you would have done just that!”

About ten o’clock they came in sight of some straggling posts, and Norton assured Hollis that the posts were strung with wire, forming a fence which skirted one side of the Circle Bar pasture. A few minutes later a dog barked and at Norton’s call came bounding up to the buckboard, yipping joyously. Hollis could make out his shape as he cavorted about.

“My dog,” offered the range boss. “Half wolf, the other half just dog.” He chuckled over his joke. “Best dog you ever see,” he boasted; “money couldn’t buy him. Like dogs?”

Hollis nodded and then realizing that Norton could not see him in the darkness, voiced a quick “yes”.

In the distance Hollis saw a sudden square of light illuminate the wall of darkness into which they had been driving; a door had been opened. Evidently the dog’s barking had aroused the inmates of the building, for as the buckboard drew nearer Hollis saw several figures flit out of the door-way. Norton drove the horses close to the building and brought them to a halt with a sonorous “whoa”! Then he turned to Hollis and spoke with a drawl: “This here building is the Circle Bar bunkhouse; them’s some of your men.”

Hollis remarked the size of the building and Norton laughed grimly. “There was a time when it wasn’t any too big,” he said. “Five years ago your dad had twenty-seven men on the pay-roll. If Dunlavey an’ his damn association hadn’t showed up he’d have had them yet.” He turned toward three men who were lounging in the doorway. “Hey, you guys!” he yelled; “this here’s your new boss. If you-all ain’t glued there you might grab his grips an’ tote them up to the ranchhouse. Tell the missus that I’ll be along directly with the boss.”

Amusement over the Southern twang that marked Norton’s speech filled Hollis. He had noticed it before and it had made plain to him the reason of Norton’s unhurried movements, his slow humor, his habit of quiet scrutiny.

But he had little time for reflection. At Norton’s words two men sprang forward to the buckboard and he saw his suitcases disappear into the darkness in the direction of a light that he now saw flickering from some little distance. He jumped out of the buckboard and saw another man spring to the horses’ heads and lead them away into the darkness. Then he followed Norton into the light from the open doorway. Presently he was shaking hands with a man who stood there, whose chief articles of raiment were overalls, boots, and a woolen shirt. Almost instantly, it seemed, two of the others had returned and Norton was introducing them as “Ace,” “Lanky,” and “Weary.” These pseudonyms were picturesque and descriptive, though at the time Hollis was in a state of pained incomprehension concerning them. Later he was informed that Ace had been so named on account of having once been caught slipping a playing card of that character into his bootleg during a game of poker. Incidentally—Hollis was told—gun-play had resulted. That Ace was still active proved that the other man might have profited by keeping his knowledge to himself. Obviously, Lanky deserved his appellation—he was a trifle over six feet tall and proportioned like a young sapling. Weary had been born tired—so Hollis was told by the latter’s defamers; defamers, for later Hollis discovered that no man in the outfit could show more surprising agility on occasion than this same Weary.

Hollis found himself inside the bunkhouse, where he was critically inspected by the three men—and before he left, by the fourth, who answered to the name of “Bud.” Norton told him that these four comprised his outfit—Bud acting as blacksmith. Hollis remained with the men only long enough to announce that there would be no change; that he intended to hang on and fight for his rights. When Norton told them that Hollis had already begun the fight by slugging Dunlavey and Yuma Ed, the enthusiasm of the four men was unbounded. They assured him profanely that they were with him to the “finish”—whatever it might be. After which Hollis departed to the ranchhouse.

He found Mrs. Norton to be a pleasant faced woman of twenty-seven or eight, who had—according to Norton—“bossed him for seven years.” Norton grinned hugely over his wife’s embarrassed protest.

“I haven’t ‘bossed’ him,” she told Hollis, while Norton looked on with amusement, “though there have been times when he richly deserved it.” There was a spirited flash in the lady’s eyes as she looked at her lord.

“I don’t wish to take sides in any marital controversy,” Hollis told them. “I don’t care to parade my ignorance. However,” he smiled, with a wink at Norton, “most men need a boss, if for no other reason than to teach them the value of discipline.”

“There!” said Mrs. Norton with a triumphant laugh, and immediately left the two men and went into the kitchen.

After partaking of a hearty meal Hollis and Norton went out on the porch for a smoke and a talk, and it was near midnight when Hollis tumbled into bed, distinctly pleased with the range boss and his admirable wife. He was asleep within five minutes.

The sun was streaming into his window when he hopped out of bed the next morning, refreshed and eager to make a trip of inspection over his property. He came down stairs lightly, in the hope of being able to slip outside without disturbing anybody, but upon opening the stair door he was surprised to find the cloth on the table in the dining room already spread and hot food steaming upon it. Mrs. Norton was bustling about from the kitchen to the dining room. Evidently the Nortons had been astir for hours.

Mrs. Norton smilingly directed him to a wash basin on a bench just outside the door and stood in the opening a moment, watching him as he drenched his face with the cold water. There was in her manner only the solicitous concern of the hostess whose desire is to place a guest at ease. Hollis decided that Norton had been most fortunate in his choice of a “boss.”

“Neil has gone down into the big basin to look after the men,” she told him from the doorway. “I don’t expect him to return for some little time. Come in to breakfast when you are ready.”

To his protest that he would wait until Norton’s return before breakfasting she replied with a smile that her husband had already breakfasted, telling him also that in this part of the country everyone rose with the sun.

He stood on the edge of the porch for a moment after washing, drinking in the air that came to him from the plains—a breeze laden with the clear aroma of the sage-brush moist with the dew of the night. When he entered the house Mrs. Norton was nowhere to be seen and he drew up a chair and breakfasted alone.

A little later he embarked upon a tour of inspection. All of the buildings, with the exception of the ranchhouse, which was constructed of logs, with a gable roof and plastered interstices—were built of adobe, low, squat structures with flat roofs. There were six of them—the bunkhouse, mess house, blacksmith shop, the range boss’s private shack (from which Norton and his wife had removed after the death of the elder Hollis), the stable, and one other building for the storing of miscellaneous articles. Hollis inspected them all and was not quite convinced that they had reached the stage of dilapidation suggested by Judge Graney.

During his inspection Hollis had seen a patch of garden, some chickens, and down in a small pasture some cows that he supposed were kept for milking. He was leaning on the top rail of the corral fence after he had concluded his trip of inspection when he heard a clatter of hoofs behind him and turned to observe Norton, just riding up to the corral gate. The range boss wore a grin of pleasure.

“How you findin’ things?” he questioned.

“In better shape than I expected—after listening to Judge Graney,” smiled Hollis.

Norton looked critically at him. “Then you ain’t changed your mind about stayin’ here?” he inquired.

“No,” returned Hollis; “I believe I shall get used to it in time.”

Norton dismounted, his eyes alight with satisfaction. “That’s the stuff!” he declared. He threw the reins over his pony’s head and seized Hollis by an arm. “Come along with me—down to my shack,” he said; “I’ve got somethin’ to show you.”

Without further words he led Hollis toward a building—the one he had occupied previous to the death of the elder Hollis. There were three rooms in the building and in the front one were several articles of furniture and some boxes. One of these boxes Norton opened, taking therefrom several articles of wearing apparel, consisting of a pair of corduroy trousers, a pair of leathern chaps, boots, spurs, two woolen shirts, a blue neckerchief, a broad felt hat, and last, with a grin of amusement over Hollis’s astonished expression, a cartridge belt to which was attached a holster containing a Colt .45.

“I bought this outfit over at Santa Fé two months ago,” he informed Hollis, who was gravely contemplating the lay-out, “expectin’ to wear them myself some day. But when I got home I found they didn’t quite fit.” He surveyed Hollis with a critical eye. “I’ve been thinkin’ ever since you come that you’d fit pretty snug in them.” He raised a protesting hand as Hollis was about to speak. “I ain’t givin’ them to you,” he grinned. “But you can’t wear no tenderfoot clothes out here. Some day when we’re together an’ we’ve got time you can blow me to another outfit; I won’t hesitate about takin’ it.” He leaned over and tapped the butt of the Colt. “You ever handle one of them?” he questioned.

Hollis nodded. Once during a shooting tournament he had done good work with a pistol. But Norton laughed at his nod.

“Mebbe we do it a little different out here,” he smiled. “You hop into them duds an’ we’ll go out into the cottonwood yonder an’ try out your gun.” He pointed through the door to a small clump of cottonwoods beyond the bunkhouse.

He went out and fifteen minutes later Hollis joined him, looking thoroughly at home in his picturesque rigging. An hour later they returned to the corral fence, where Norton caught up his pony and another, saddling the latter for Hollis. He commented briefly upon the new owner’s ability with the six-shooter.

“You use your fists a little better than you use a gun,” he remarked with his peculiar drawl, “but I reckon that on the whole you’ll be able to take care of yourself—after you’ve had a little practise gettin’ your gun out.” He laughed with a grim humor. “More men have been killed in this country on account of bein’ slow on the draw than for any other reason. Don’t never monkey with it unless you intend to use it, an’ then see that you get it out middlin’ rapid. That’s the recipe,” he advised.

The pony that he had selected for Hollis was a slant-eyed beast, larger than the average, with rangy limbs, black in color with a white muzzle and fetlocks. Hollis voted him a “beaut” after he had ridden him a mile or two and found that he had an easy, steady stride.

Together they made a round of the basin, returning to the ranchhouse for dinner. Hollis was saddle weary and when Norton proposed another trip during the afternoon he was met with the response that the new owner purposed enjoying the cool of the ranchhouse porch for the remainder of the day.

The next morning Hollis was up with the dawn and out on the porch splashing water over his face from the wash basin that stood outside the door. For a long time after washing he stood on the porch, looking out over the big basin at this new and strange world. Endless it seemed, lying before him in its solemn silence; a world of peace, of eternal sunlight, smiling skies, and infinite distance. It seemed unreal to him. Did this same planet hold the busy cities to which he had been accustomed? The stuffy room, with its smell of damp ink, its litter of papers—his room in the newspaper offices, filled with desks and the clatter of typewriters? Through whose windows came the incessant clamor that welled up from the streets below? He laughed at the thought and turned to see Norton standing in the doorway looking at him with a smile.

“Comparin’ her with your little old East?” inquired the latter.

Hollis confessed that he had been doing something of that sort.

“Well,” returned Norton, “there ain’t any way to compare this country with anything else. Seems as though when the world was made the Lord had a few million miles left which he didn’t know what to do with an’ so he just dumped it down out here. An’ then, havin’ business somewhere else about that time he forgot about it an’ left it to get along as best it could—which wasn’t none too rapid.”

This conversation had taken place just twelve days ago, yet Norton’s words still remained fresh in Hollis’s mind. Yet he did not altogether agree with Norton. The West had impressed him far more than he cared to admit.

This morning, directly after breakfast Hollis and Norton had saddled their horses and ridden out of the basin toward the river, into a section of the country that Hollis had not yet explored. Emerging from the basin, they came to a long, high ridge. On its crest Norton halted. Hollis likewise drew in

his pony. From here they could see a great stretch of country, sweeping away into the basin beneath it, toward a mountain range whose peaks rose barren and smooth in the white sunlight.

“This here’s ‘Razor-Back’ ridge,” explained Norton as the ponies halted; “called that on account of bein’ so unusually narrow on the top.” He pointed to some buildings which Hollis had seen but to which he had given very little attention, thinking they were those of the Circle Bar. “Them’s the Circle Cross buildings,” resumed Norton. “They’re about three miles from the Circle Bar ranchhouse, directly north through that cottonwood back of the bunkhouse where you tried your gun the day after you come out here. Down below there—where you see them two big cottonwood trees—is ‘Big Elk’ crossin’. There’s another somethin’ like it back up the crick a ways, on the other side of the ranchhouse, called the ‘Narrows.’” He laughed grimly. “But we don’t use them crossins’ much—they’re dead lines; generally you’ll find there’s a Circle Cross man or so hangin’ around them—with a rifle. So it don’t pay to go monkeyin’ around there unless you’ve got pressin’ business.”

He made a grimace. “It’s my opinion that a good many Circle Bar cattle have crossed the crick in them two places—never to come back.” He swept a hand up the river, indicating the sentinel like buttes that frowned above the bed of the stream. “The crick is pretty shallow,” he continued, “but Big Elk an’ the Narrows are the only two places where a man can cross in safety—if we consider that there wouldn’t be any Circle Cross man hangin’ around them two places. But there ain’t no other place to cross an’ so we don’t go on the other side much.”

He turned to Hollis, looking at him with a quaint smile. “From here you can see everything that amounts to anything in this section—which ain’t a heap. Of course over there are some mountains—where we was a few days ago lookin’ up the boys”—he pointed to some serrated peaks that rose somberly in the southwestern distance—“but as you saw there ain’t much to them except rocks an’ lava beds. There’s some hills there”—pointing to the south—“but there ain’t nothin’ to see in them. They look a heap better from here than they do when you get close to them. That’s the way with lots of things, ain’t it?”

Hollis smiled. “I like it,” he said quietly, “much better than I did when I came.” He turned to Norton with a whimsical smile. “I suppose it will strike you as peculiar, but I’ve got a notion that I would like to ride around a while alone. I don’t mean that I don’t like your company, for I do. But the notion has just struck me.”

Norton laughed indulgently. “I reckon I won’t consider that you’re trying to slight me,” he returned. “I know exactly how you feel; that sort of thing comes over everybody who comes to this country—sooner or later. Generally it’s later, when a man has got used to the silence an’ the bigness an’ so on. But in your case it’s sooner. You’ll have to have it out with yourself.”

His voice grew serious. “But don’t go ridin’ too far. An’ keep away from the river trail.”

In spite of his ready acquiescence he sat for some time on his pony, watching Hollis as the latter urged his pony along the ridge. Just before Hollis disappeared down the slope of the ridge he turned and waved a hand to Norton, and the latter, with a grim, admiring smile, wheeled his pony and loped it over the back trail.

Once down the slope of the ridge Hollis urged his pony out into the level of the basin, through some deep saccatone grass, keeping well away from the river trail as advised by the range boss.

In spite of his serious thoughts Hollis had not been dismayed over the prospect of remaining at the Circle Bar to fight Dunlavy and his crew. He rather loved a fight; the thought of clashing with an opposing force had always filled him with a sensation of indefinable exultation. He reveled in the primitive passions. He had been endowed by nature with those mental and physical qualities that combine to produce the perfect fighter. He was six feet of brawn and muscle; not an ounce of superfluous flesh encumbered him—he had been hammered and hardened into a state of physical perfection by several years of athletic training, sensible living, and good, hard, healthy labor. Circumstances had not permitted him to live a life of ease. The trouble between his parents—which had always been much of a mystery to him—had forced him at a tender age to go out into the world

and fight for existence. It had toughened him; it had trained his mind through experience; it had given him poise, persistence, tenacity—those rare mental qualities without which man seldom rises above mediocrity.

Before leaving Dry Bottom to come to the Circle Bar he had telegraphed his mother that he would be forced to remain indefinitely in the West, and the sending of this telegram had committed him irrevocably to his sacrifice. He knew that when his mother received a letter from him explaining the nature of the work that required his presence in Dry Bottom she would approve his course. At least he was certain that she would not advise surrendering.

After riding for more than an hour he came to a shallow draw and urged his pony through the deep sand of its center. On the other side of the draw the country became suddenly rocky; great boulders were strewn indiscriminately about, as though some giant hand had distributed them carelessly, without regard to their final resting place. A lava bed, looming gray and dead under a barren rock hill, caught his attention, and he drew his pony to a halt and sat quietly in the saddle examining it. From the lava bed his gaze went to a weird mineral shape that rose in the distance—an inverted cone that seemed perfectly balanced on its narrowest point. He studied this long without moving, struck with the miraculous stability of the thing; it seemed that a slight touch would send it tumbling down.

He realized that he had stumbled upon a spot that would have provided pleasure to a geological student. To him it was merely a source of wonder and awe. Some mighty upheaval of nature had created this, and he continued to gaze at it, his mind full of conjecture.

To his right rose a precipitous rock wall surmounted by a fringe of thick shrubbery. On the left was another wall, perpendicular, flat on its top and stretching away into the distance, forming a grass plateau. Directly in front of him was a narrow canyon through which he could see a plain that stretched away into the unknown distance.

It was a magnificent country; he did not now regret his decision to remain here. He pulled out his watch, noting that its hands pointed to ten, and realized that he must be off if he expected to reach the Circle Bar by noon.

He sat erect in the saddle, about to wheel his pony toward the draw through which he had entered, when he heard a sharp sound. Startled, he glanced swiftly to his right, searching the immediate vicinity for the agency which had created sound in this vast silence. He stiffened slowly in the saddle, his face gradually paling. Not over a hundred feet from him, partly concealed by a big boulder, stood a man with a rifle, the muzzle of the weapon trained fairly on him.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL OF DRY BOTTOM

Hollis was not frightened, though he was in a position that might have aroused fear or apprehension in any man's mind. He was alone, the man had him covered with the rifle, and assuredly this was one of Dunlavey's hirelings.

Hollis glanced swiftly around. Certain signs—some shrubbery that he saw through the canyon, a bald butte or two rising in the distance—told him that he was near the river. And Norton had told him to keep away from the river trail. In his eagerness to explore the country he had forgotten all about Norton's warning.

The prospect was not a hopeful one, yet Hollis could not have admitted to feeling any alarm. He realized that had the man intended any immediate harm he would have shot him down long before this—while he had sat motionless in the saddle inspecting the place. Concerning the man's intentions he could only speculate, but assuredly they were not peaceful.

For a little time the man remained motionless and Hollis sat quiet, looking at him. The weapon had not moved; its muzzle still menaced him and he watched it closely, wondering whether the man would give him any warning when about to pull the trigger.

Many minutes dragged and the man did not move. A slow anger began to steal over Hollis; the man's inaction grated on his nerves.

“Well!” he challenged sharply. “What do you want?”

There was no answer. Hollis could see only the man's head and shoulders projecting above the boulder, and the rifle—steady and level—menacing him. With an exclamation of rage and disdain he seized the bridle rein and pulled sharply on it, swinging the pony's head around. The rifle crashed venomously; Hollis felt the right sleeve of his shirt flutter, and he pulled the pony abruptly up.

“Just to show you!” came the man's voice, mockingly. “If you move again until I give the word you won't know where you've been hit!”

Hollis was satisfied—the man undoubtedly meant business. He settled back into the saddle and looked down at his shirt sleeve. The bullet had passed very close to the arm. If the man had meant the bullet for that particular spot he was a deadly marksman. In the face of such marvelous shooting Hollis did not care to experiment further. But his anger had not yet abated.

“No doubt you are enjoying yourself!” he said with bitter sarcasm. “But the pleasure is all yours. I am not enjoying myself a bit, I assure you. And I don't like the idea of being a target for you to shoot at!”

A laugh came back to Hollis—a strange, unnatural, sardonic cackle that, in spite of his self-control, caused his flesh to creep. And then the man's voice:

“No, you don't like it. I knew that all along. But you're going to stay here for seven weeks while I shoot holes in you!” He laughed again, his voice high and shrill, its cackling cadences filling the place.

“Seven weeks in Devil's Hollow!” came the voice again. “Seven weeks! Seven weeks!”

Hollis felt his heart thumping heavily against his ribs, while a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach told him that his courage was touched. He realized now why the man had not shot him down immediately. He was a maniac!

For a few terrible seconds Hollis sat in the saddle while the world reeled around him; while the rocks and cliffs danced fantastically. Courage he had to be sure; he had already become resigned to death before the man's rifle, but he had imagined the man to be in full possession of his senses; imagined his death to have been planned out of the deliberate coolness of reason. Such a death would have been bad enough, but to meet death at the hands of a man mentally unbalanced! Somehow it seemed different, seemed horribly unreal—like a terrible nightmare.

It was some seconds before he regained control of himself, and then he steadied himself in the saddle, assuring himself in a burst of bitter, ironic humor that death at the hands of a crazy man could be no worse than death at the hands of a rational one.

He looked up again, a defiant smile on his lips, to see that both man and rifle had disappeared. In a flash he saw his chance and took advantage of it. In an instant he was off his pony; in another he was behind a convenient rock, breathing easier, his senses alert. For some little time he remained in the shelter of the rock, awaiting the other man's movements. He did not doubt that acting upon some freakish impulse, the man had left his boulder and was even now stalking him from some other direction. He peered carefully about him. He had no thought of shooting the man—that would be murder, for the man was not mentally responsible for his actions. His efforts must be centered solely upon some plan for saving his own life.

To do this he realized that he must be careful. In view of the man's unerring marksmanship it would be certain death for him to expose himself for an instant. But he must take some chances. Convinced of this he peered around the edge of his rock, taking a flashing glance around him. The man was nowhere to be seen. Hollis waited some little time and then taking another glance and not seeing the man, rose slowly to his feet and crouched. Then, filled with a sudden, reckless impulse, he sprang for another rock a dozen feet distant, expecting each instant to hear the crash of the man's rifle. But he succeeded in gaining the shelter of the other rock intact. Evidently the man was looking for him in some other direction.

Emboldened with his success he grimly determined on advancing to another rock some twenty or thirty feet farther on. As in the first instance he succeeded in gaining it in safety. His maneuvering had been circuitous, bringing him into a position from which he could see partly behind the rock where the man had been concealed.

And now, having gained the second rock in safety, Hollis decided to take no more chances. Sooner or later, he was convinced, the man was sure to see him as he jumped. He did not like the picture that his imagination conjured up. Therefore his actions were now marked with more caution. It took him a long time to gain a position where he could peer over the upper edge of the rock behind which he was concealed. But he gained it finally and then dropped back with an exclamation of surprise. He had caught a glimpse of the man. He was lying face upward behind the boulder, his arms outstretched, his rifle lying in the dust near him.

Hollis was tempted to make a run for his pony, mount, and race out of the hollow. But a second thought restrained him. He had considered the man's action merely a ruse, but why should he attempt it after he had once had an opportunity to make use of his rifle? Still for an instant Hollis hesitated, for he knew there was no rule by which a maniac's actions might be judged. Then with a grim laugh he sprang over the few feet that separated him from the man, approaching him carefully, still slightly doubtful.

But the man was not shamming; Hollis could see that when he had approached close enough to see his face. It bore a curious pallor, his eyes were wide open and staring, and some foam flecked his lips. Evidently he had been overcome by a paroxysm of his malady at about the moment Hollis had discovered it.

Hollis stepped back and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he stepped over to where the man's rifle lay, taking it up and removing the cartridges. Returning to the man he removed the cartridges from his belt and drew his six-shooter from its holster, determined that when the man recovered from his stupor there would be no danger of a recurrence of the previous incident. Then he leaned against the boulder to await the man's recovery.

Ten minutes later, while he still watched the man, he heard a clatter of hoofs. Determined not to be taken by surprise again he drew his own six-shooter and peered cautiously around the edge of the boulder. What he saw caused him to jam the weapon back into its holster very hurriedly. Then he stepped out of his concealment with a red, embarrassed face to greet a young woman whose

expression of doubt and fear was instantly replaced by one of pleasure and recognition as she caught sight of him. It was the girl of Dry Bottom.

“Oh!” she said. “Is it you? I was afraid – ” And then she saw the man and was off her pony in a flash and at his head, supporting it and pouring something down his throat from a bottle.

She rose presently, embarrassment crimsoning her face. Hollis saw her lips quiver when she turned and spoke to him.

“He will be all right–now,” she said, facing Hollis, her eyes drooping as though ashamed to meet his. “He has had another attack of his–his trouble.” She looked suddenly up at Hollis, bravely trying to repress her emotion–but with little success.

“You heard what he–Big Bill Dunlavey–said about my brother?” she questioned, her eyes full and moist. Hollis nodded and she continued rapidly, her voice quavering: “Well, he told the truth.” Her voice trailed away into a pitiful wail, and she stepped over and leaned against the boulder, sobbing quietly into her hands. “That’s why it hurts so,” she added.

Hollis yielded to a sudden wave of sympathy. He stood close to her, aware of his inability to cope with this strange situation. She looked so small, so out of place, he felt that whatever he did or said would not help matters. What he did say, however, assisted in restoring her composure.

“I am glad I slugged him!” he said heatedly.

She turned suddenly to him, her eyes flashing spiritedly through the moisture in them.

“Oh, it was great!” she declared, her hands clenching at the recollection. “I could have shaken hands with you–with the hand that struck him!”

Hollis smiled whimsically. “I’ve still got the hand,” he said significantly, extending it toward her–“if you have not reconsidered.” He laughed as she took it and pressed it firmly. “I rather think that we’ve both got a shake coming on that,” he added. “I didn’t understand then about your brother or I would have added a few extra pounds to that punch.”

Her face clouded as he mentioned her brother. “Poor Ed,” she said in a low voice. She went over to the man, leaning over him and smoothing back the hair from his forehead, Hollis looking glumly on, clenching his teeth in impotent sympathy.

“These attacks do not come often,” she volunteered as she again approached Hollis. “But they do come,” she added, her voice catching. Hollis did not reply, feeling that he had no right to be inquisitive. But she continued, slightly more at ease and plainly pleased to have some one in whom she might confide.

“Ed was injured a year ago through a fall,” she informed Hollis. “He was breaking a wild horse and a saddle girth broke and he fell, striking on his head. The wound healed, but he has never been the same. At intervals these attacks come on and then he is irresponsible–and dangerous.” She shuddered. “You were watching him,” she added, looking suddenly at him; “did you find him as he is or did he attack you? Frequently when he has these attacks he comes here to Devil’s Hollow, explaining that he expects to find some of Dunlavey’s men. He doesn’t like Dunlavey,” she added with a flush, “since Dunlavey – ” She hesitated and then went on determinedly–“well, since Dunlavey told him that he wanted to marry me. But Ed says that Dunlavey has a wife in Tucson and–well, I wouldn’t have married him anyway–the brute!”

“Exactly,” agreed Hollis gravely, trying to repress a thrill of satisfaction; “of course you couldn’t marry him.” He understood now the meaning of Dunlavey’s words to her in Dry Bottom. “If you wasn’t such a damn prude,” he had said. He looked at the girl with a sudden, grim smile. “He said something about running you and your brother out of the country,” he said; “of course you won’t allow him to do that?”

The girl’s slight figure stiffened. “I would like to see him try it!” she declared defiantly.

Hollis grinned. “That’s the stuff!” he sympathized. “I rather think that Dunlavey is something of a bluffer–that folks in this country have allowed him to have his own way too much.”

She shook her head doubtfully. “I don’t know about that,” she returned. Then she smiled. “You are the new owner of the Circle Bar, aren’t you?”

Hollis startled, looking at her with a surprised smile. “Yes,” he returned, “I am the new owner. But how did you know it? I haven’t told anyone here except Neil Norton and Judge Graney. Have Norton and the Judge been talking?”

“They haven’t talked to me,” she assured him with a demure smile. “You see,” she added, “you were a stranger in Dry Bottom, and after you left the Fashion you went right down to the court house. I knew Judge Graney had been your father’s friend. And then I saw Neil Norton coming into town with the buckboard.” She laughed. “You see, it wasn’t very hard to add two and two.”

“Why, no,” Hollis agreed, “it wasn’t. But how did you happen to see me go down to the court house?”

“Why, I watched you!” she returned. And then suddenly aware of her mistake in admitting that she had felt an interest in him at their first meeting, she lowered her gaze in confusion and stood, kicking with her booted toe into a hummock, her face suddenly very red.

The situation might have been embarrassing for her had not her brother created a diversion by suddenly sighing and struggling to sit up. The girl was at his side in an instant, assisting him. The young man’s bewilderment was pitiful. He sat silent for a full minute, gazing first at his sister and then at Hollis, and finally at his surroundings. Then, when a rational gleam had come into his eyes he bowed his head, a blush of shame sweeping over his face and neck.

“I expect I’ve been at it again,” he muttered, without looking up.

The girl leaned over him, reassuring him, patting his face lovingly, letting him know by all a woman’s arts of the sympathy and love she bore for him. Hollis watched her with a grim, satisfied smile. If he had had a sister he would have hoped that she would be like her. He stepped forward and seized the young man by the arm, helping him to his feet.

“You are right now,” he assured him; “there has been no harm done.”

Standing, the young man favored Hollis with a careful inspection. He flushed again. “You’re the man that rode through the draw,” he said. “I saw you and thought you were one of Dunlavey’s men. I shot at you once, and was going to shoot again, but something cracked in my head. I hope I didn’t hit you.” Embarrassment again seized him; his eyes drooped. “Of course you are not one of Dunlavey’s men,” he added, “or you wouldn’t be here, talking to sis. No friend of Dunlavey’s could do that.” He looked at the girl with a tender smile. “I don’t know what I’d do if it wasn’t for her,” he added, speaking to Hollis. “But I expect it’s a good thing that I’m not crazy all the time.” He looked searchingly at Hollis. “I’ve never seen you before,” he said. “Who are you?”

“I am Kent Hollis.”

The young man’s eyes lighted. “Not Jim Hollis’s son?” he asked.

Hollis nodded. The young man’s face revealed genuine pleasure. “You going to stay in this here country?” he asked.

“I am going to run the Circle Bar,” returned Hollis slowly.

“Bully!” declared the young man. “There’s some folks around here said you wouldn’t have nerve enough to stay.” He made a wry face. “But I reckon you’ve got nerve or you’d have hit the breeze when I started to stampede.” He suddenly held out a hand. “I like you,” he said impulsively. “You and me are going to be friends. Shake!”

Hollis saw a smile of pleasure light up the girl’s face, which she tried to conceal by brushing the young man’s clothing with a gloved hand, meanwhile keeping him between her and Hollis.

Hollis stood near the boulder, watching them as they prepared to depart, the girl telling her brother that he would find his pony on the plains beyond the canyon.

“I am glad I didn’t hit you,” the young man told Hollis as he started away with the girl. “If you are not scared off you might take a run down to the shack some time—it’s just down the creek a ways.”

Hollis hesitated and then, catching the girl’s glance, he smiled.

“I can’t promise when,” he said, looking at the girl, “but you may be sure that I will look you up the first chance I get.”

He stood beside the boulder until he saw them disappear around the wall of the canyon. Then with a satisfied grin he walked to his pony, mounted, and was off through the draw toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER VI

HOLLIS RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE

Rumor, that mysterious disseminator of news whose tongues are legion, whispered that the Dry Bottom *Kicker* was to come to life. Wherefore curiosity led many of Dry Bottom's citizens past the door of the *Kicker* office to steal covert glances at the young man whose figure was bent over the desk inside. Many passed in silence after looking at the young man—he did not see them. Others commented gravely or humorously according to their whim—the young man did not hear them. Seated at the desk he gave his attention to the tasks before him—he was not concerned with rumor; the curiosity of Dry Bottom's citizens did not affect him. Seriously, methodically, steadily, he worked at his desk, while rumor wagged her tongues and curiosity lounged past the window.

It was Hollis's first visit to the *Kicker* office; he had come to work and there was much that he could do. He had found the *Kicker* installed in a one story frame building, verging upon dilapidation, unpainted, dingy. The appearance of its exterior had given Hollis a queer sensation in the pit of the stomach. He was cheered a little by the businesslike appearance of the interior. It was not what he had been used to, but he felt that it would answer very well in this locality, and—well, he planned to make improvements.

About twenty by forty, he estimated the size of the interior. Originally there had been only one room. This had been divided into three sections by partitions. An old, flat-topped desk sat near the front window, a swivel chair before it. Along the wall above the desk were several rows of shelving with paste-board boxes and paper piled neatly up. Calendars, posters, and other specimens of the printer's art covered the walls. In the next room was another desk. Piles of advertising electrotypes, empty forms, and papers filled the corners. The composing room was in the rear. Everything was in order here; type cases, stands, forms. There were a proof press, some galley racks, a printing press, with a forlorn-looking gasolene engine near it. A small cast-iron stove stood in a corner with its door yawning open, its front bespattered with tobacco juice. A dilapidated imposing stone ranged along the rear wall near a door that opened into the sunlight. A man stood before one of the type cases distributing type. He did not look up at Hollis's entrance.

"Hello!" greeted Hollis.

The man hesitated in his work and looked up. "Hello," he returned, perfunctorily.

"I suppose your name is Potter?" Hollis inquired cordially. Judge Graney had told him that if he succeeded in finding the compositor he would have him at the *Kicker* office this morning. Potter had gone to work without further orders.

"Yes," said the man. He came forward.

"I am the new owner of the *Kicker*," Hollis informed him with a smile.

"Jim Hollis's boy?" inquired Potter, straightening. At Hollis's nod he stepped quickly forward and grasped the hand the latter offered him, squeezing it tightly. "Of course you are Jim Hollis's boy!" he said, finishing his inspection. "You are the living image of him!" He swept his hand around toward the type case. "I am working, you see. Judge Graney wrote me last week that you wanted me and I came as soon as I could. Is it true that the *Kicker* is going to be a permanent institution?"

"The *Kicker* is here to stay!" Hollis informed him.

Potter's face lighted with pleasure. "That's bully!" he said. "That's bully!"

He was of medium height, slender, lean faced, with a magnificent head, and a wealth of brown hair thickly streaked with silver. His thin lips were strong; his chin, though a trifle weak, was well formed; his eyes slightly bleared, but revealing, in spite of this defect, unmistakable intelligence. In the first flashing glance which Hollis had taken at him he had been aware that here was a person of more than ordinary mental ability and refinement. It was with a pang of pity that he remembered

Judge Graney's words to the effect that he was a good workman—"when sober." Hollis felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I have had a talk with Judge Graney," volunteered Potter. "He tells me that you are a newspaper man. Between us we ought to be able to get out a very respectable paper."

"We will," calmly announced Hollis; "and we'll get the first issue out Saturday. Come in here and we'll talk about it."

He led the way to the front room and seated himself at the desk, motioning Potter to another chair. Within the next hour he knew all about the *Kicker*. It was a six-column sheet of four pages. The first page was devoted to local news. The second carried some local advertisements, exchange clippings, and two or three columns of syndicate plate matter. On the third page two columns were devoted to editorials, one to advertisements, and three to local news in large type. The fourth, and last page was filled with more plate matter and a litter of "foreign" advertising—patent-medicines, soaps, hair-dye.

At the first glance it appeared that the paper must be a paying proposition, for there were a goodly proportion of advertisements. Yet Hollis had his suspicions about the advertisements. When he had spoken to Potter about them he discovered that quite a number of them were what is known to the craft as "dead ads"—which meant advertisements upon which payment had ceased and which were carried either for the purpose of filling up the paper or because it was found cheaper to run them than to set type for the space which would be left by their absence.

"We won't carry any dead ads!" announced Hollis.

"Several of these are big merchants," said Potter, pointing them out with inky forefinger; "though the contracts have run out the appearance of their ads lends the *Kicker* a certain moral support—the little fellows don't know that they are not paid for and it draws their business."

"We don't care for that kind of business," smiled Hollis; "we're going to run a real newspaper. We're going to get paid ads!"

"I hope so," hesitatingly replied Potter.

"Of course you do," laughed Hollis; "but whether we get paid ads or not this newspaper is coming out regularly and on time. Furthermore, we're going to cut down on this plate stuff; we don't want a paper filled with stale articles on snakes, antedated ocean disasters, Egyptian monoliths, and the latest style in opera hats. We'll fill the paper with local news—we'll ginger things up a little. You are pretty well acquainted here—I'll leave the local items to you. What town near here compares with Dry Bottom in size?"

"There's Lazette," returned Potter; "over in Colfax County."

"How far from here?"

"Eighty miles."

"Got a newspaper?"

"Yes; the *Eagle*."

"Bully! Step on the *Eagle's* toes. Make the *Eagle* scream. Get into an argument with it about something—anything. Tell Lazette that as a town it's forty miles behind Dry Bottom. That will stir up public spirit and boom our subscription list. You see, Potter, civic pride is a big asset to a newspaper. We'll start a row right off the reel. Furthermore, we're going to have some telegraph news. I'll make arrangements for that to-day."

Hollis's enthusiasm was infectious; a flash of spirit lighted up Potter's eyes as he rose from his chair. "I'm going to set up the head for the first page," he said. "Probably you'll want a slogan; that sort of thing is the style out here."

"We'll have one," returned Hollis briskly. "Set this in triple leads: *We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!*"

"Good!" declared Potter. He went into the composing room and Hollis saw his fine old head bent over a type case. Hollis turned to his desk.

He sat there long, his tall, lithe body slack, grim, serious lines in his lean face. He had thought of his conversation with Judge Graney concerning ambition—his ambition, the picture upon which his mind had dwelt many times. A little frame printing office in the West was not one of its features. He sighed with resignation and began methodically to look over the papers in the desk, finding many things to interest him. He discovered that in spite of his father's one great fault he had been a methodical man. He smiled regretfully, wishing that he might have been able to have seen more of him. Among the papers he hoped to find a personal note—a word—from his father. He found nothing of that character.

After a time he took up a pen and began to write. Long ago he had decided that in the first issue of the paper he would attack the Cattlemen's Association. Judge Graney had ridden out to the Circle Bar on the previous Saturday afternoon, remaining over Sunday, and accompanying Hollis on the return trip Monday morning.

While at the ranch the Judge had spent much of his time in communicating to Hollis his views of the situation in Union County and in acquainting him with the elder Hollis's intentions regarding the newspaper. Hollis had made some inquiries on his own account, with the result that when he reached the *Kicker* office this morning he felt that he had acquired a good and sufficient knowledge of the situation.

Looking over the old copy of the *Kicker* he studied some of the advertisements. Evidently some Dry Bottom merchants had been brave enough to antagonize Dunlavey by advertising in the *Kicker*. With this copy of the *Kicker* in hand Hollis rose from his desk, told Potter he was going out, and proceeded to visit some of the merchants whose advertisements appeared in the paper, hoping that their bravery still abided with them. He made a good solicitor. Some of the merchants flatly refused, saying they did not care to risk Dunlavey's anger. Others demurred, confidentially announcing that they had never considered the paper seriously and that there was really no good in advertising in Dry Bottom anyway—the town wasn't big enough. Half a dozen listened quietly while he told them that the *Kicker* was in Dry Bottom to stay and then smiled and told him to run their advertisements. They rather admired his “nerve” and were not afraid of Dunlavey.

At noon Hollis stepped into a restaurant called the Alhambra. While he ate he was critically inspected; the Alhambra swarmed with customers, and the proprietor quietly informed him that he was a “drawin' card” and hoped he'd “grub” there regularly. In return for his promise to do so Hollis secured his advertisement.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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