Hankins Arthur Preston

The Heritage of the Hills

Arthur Hankins

The Heritage of the Hills

Hankins A.

The Heritage of the Hills / A. Hankins — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I 5
CHAPTER II 9
CHAPTER III 12
CHAPTER IV 14
CHAPTER V 19
CHAPTER VI 21
CHAPTER VII 26
CHAPTER VIII 30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 31

Hankins Arthur Preston
The Heritage of the Hills

CHAPTER I
AT HALFMOON FLAT

The road wound ever upward through pines and spruce and several varieties of oak. Some of the latter were straight, some sprawling, all massive. Now and then a break in the timber revealed wooded hills beyond green pasture lands, and other hills covered with dense growths of buckhorn and manzanita. Poison oak grew everywhere, and, at this time of year – early spring – was most prolific, most beautiful in its dark rich green, most poisonous.

Occasionally the lone horseman crossed a riotous stream, plunging down from the snow-topped Sierras in the far distance. Rail fences, for the most part in a tumbledown condition, paralleled the dirt road here and there.

At long intervals they passed tall, old-fashioned ranch houses, with their accompanying stables, deciduous orchards and still dormant vineyards, wandering turkeys and mud-incrusted pigs. An air of decay and haphazard ambition pervaded all these evidences of the dwelling places of men.

"Well, Poche," remarked Oliver Drew, "it's been a long, hard trip, but we're getting close to home." The man spoke the word "home" with a touch of bitterness.

The rangy bay saddler slanted his left ear back at Oliver Drew and quickened his walking-trot.

"No, no!" laughed Oliver, tightening the reins. "All the more reason we should take it easy today, old horse. Don't you ever tire?"

For an hour Poche climbed steadily. Now he topped the summit of the miniature mountain, and Oliver stopped him to gaze down fifteen hundred feet into the timbered cañon of the American River. Even the cow-pony seemed enthralled with the grandeur of the scene – the wooded hills climbing shelf by shelf to the faraway mist-hung mountains; the green river winding its serpentine course far below. Far up the river a gold dredger was at work, the low rumble of its machinery carried on the soft morning breeze.

Half an hour later Poche ambled briskly into the little town of Halfmoon Flat, snuggled away in the pines and spruces, sunflecked, indolent, content. It suited Oliver's mood, this lazy old-fashioned Halfmoon Flat, with its one shady "business" street, its false-front, one-story shops and stores, redolent still of the glamorous days of '49.

He drew up before a saloon to inquire after the road he should take out of town to reach his destination. The loungers about the door of the place all proved to be French- or Spanish-Basque sheep herders; and their agglutinative language was as a closed book to the traveler. So he dropped the reins from Poche's neck and entered the dark, low-ceiled bar-room, with its many decorations of dusty deer antlers on fly-specked walls.

All was strangely quiet within. There were no patrons, no bartender behind the black, stained bar. He saw this white-aproned personage, however, a fat, wide, sandy-haired man, standing framed by the rear door, his back toward the front. Through a dirty rear window Oliver saw men in the back yard – silent, motionless men, with faces intent on something of captivating interest, some silent, muscle-tensing event.

With awakened wonder he walked to the fat bartender's back and looked out over his shoulder. Strange indeed was the scene that was revealed.

Perhaps twenty men were in an unfenced portion of the lot behind the saloon. Some of them had been pitching horseshoes, for two stood with the iron semicircles still in hand. Every man there gazed with silent intensity at two central figures, who furnished the drama.

The first, a squat, dark, slit-eyed man of about twenty-five, lazed in a big Western saddle on a lean roan horse. His left spurred heel stood straight out at right angles to the direction in which his horse faced. He hung in the saddle by the bend in his right leg, the foot out of the stirrup, the motionless man facing to the right, a leering grin on his face, half whimsical, half sardonic. That he was a fatalist was evidenced by every line on his swarthy, hairless face; for he looked sneering indifference into the wavering muzzle of a Colt .45, in the hand of the other actor in the pantomime. His own Colt lay passive against his hip. His right forearm rested across his thigh, the hand far from the butt of the weapon. A cigarette drooped lazily from his grinning lips. Yet for all his indifferent calm, there was in his glittering, Mongolic eyes an eagle watchfulness that bespoke the fires of hatred within him.

The dismounted man who had the drop on him was of another type. Tall, angular, countrified, he personified the popular conception of a Connecticut yankee. He boiled with silent rage as he stood, with long body bent forward, threatening the other with his enormous gun. Despite the present superiority of his position, there was something of pathos in his lean, bronzed face, something of a nature downtrodden, of the worm suddenly turned.

For seconds that seemed like ages the two statuesque figures confronted each other. Men breathed in short inhalations, as if fearful of breaking the spell. Then the threatened man in the saddle puffed out a cloud of cigarette smoke, and drawled sarcastically:

"Well, why don't you shoot, ol'-timer? You got the drop."

Complete indifference to his fate marked the squat man's tone and attitude. Only those small black eyes, gleaming like points of jet from under the lowered Chinamanlike lids, proclaimed that the other had better make a thorough piece of work of this thing that he had started.

The lank man found his tongue at the sound of the other's voice.

"Why don't I shoot, you coyote whelp! Why don't I shoot! You know why! Because they's a law in this land, that's why! I oughta kill ye, an' everybody here knows it, but I'd hang for it."

The man on the roan blew another puff of smoke. "You oughta thought o' that when you threw down on me," he lazily reminded the other. "*You* ain't got no license packin' a gun, pardner."

The expression that crossed his antagonist's face was one of torture, bafflement. It proved that he knew the mounted man had spoken truth. He was no killer. In a fit of rage he had drawn his weapon and got the drop on his enemy, only to shrink from the thought of taking a human life and from the consequences of such an act. But he essayed to bluster his way out of the situation in which his uncontrollable wrath had inveigled him.

"I can't shoot ye in cold blood!" he hotly cried. "I'm not the skunk that you are. I'm too much of a man. I'll let ye go this time. But mind me – if you or any o' your thievin' gang pesters me ag'in, I'll – I'll kill ye!"

"Better attend to that little business right now, pardner," came the fatalist's smooth admonition.

"Don't rile me too far!" fumed the other. "God knows I could kill ye an' never fear for the hereafter. But I'm a law-abidin' man, an'" – the six-shooter in his hand was wavering – "an' I'm a law-abidin' man," he repeated, floundering. "So this time I'll let ye – "

A fierce clatter of hoofs interrupted him. Down the street, across the board sidewalk, into the lot back of the saloon dashed a white horse, a black-haired girl astride in the saddle. She reined her horse to its haunches, scattering spectators right and left.

"Don't lower that gun!" she shrieked. "Shoot! Kill him!"

Her warning came too late. It may have been, even, that instead of a warning it was a knell. For a loud report sent the echoes galloping through the sleepy little town. The man on the ground, who had half lowered his gun as the girl raced in, threw up both hands, and went reeling about drunkenly.

Another shot rang out. The squat man still lolled in his saddle, facing to the right. The gun that he had drawn in a flash when the other's indecision had reached a climax was levelled rigidly from his hip, the muzzle slowly following his staggering, twice-wounded enemy.

In horror the watchers gazed, silent. The stricken man reeled against the legs of the girl's horse, strove to clasp them. The animal snorted at the smell of blood and reared. His temporary support removed, the man collapsed, face downward, on the ground, turned over once, lay still.

The squat man slowly holstered his gun. Then the first sound to break the silence since the shots was his voice as he spoke to the girl.

"Much obliged, Jess'my," he said; then straightened in his saddle, spurred the roan, and dashed across the sidewalk to disappear around the corner of the building. A longdrawn, derisive "Hi-yi!" floated back, and the clatter of the roan's hoofbeats died away.

The girl had sprung from her mare and was bending over the fallen man. The others crowded about her now, all talking at once. She lifted a white, tragic face to them, a face so wildly beautiful that, even under the stress of the moment, Oliver Drew felt that sudden fierce pang of desire which the first startled sight of "the one woman" brings to a healthy, manly man.

"He's dead! I've killed him!" she cried.

"No, no, no, Miss Jessamy," protested a hoarse voice quickly. "You wasn't to blame."

"O' course not!" chorused a dozen.

"He'd 'a' lowered that gun," went on her first consoler. "He was backin' out when you come, Miss Jessamy. An' as sure as he'd took his gun off Digger Foss, Digger'd 'a' killed 'im. It was a fool business from the start, Miss Jessamy."

"Then why didn't some of you warn this man?" she flamed. "You cowards! Are you afraid of Digger Foss? Oh, I – "

"Now, looky-here, Miss Jessamy," soothed the spokesman, "bein' afraid o' Digger Foss ain't got anything to do with it. It wasn't our fight. We had no call to butt in. Men don't do that in a gun country, Miss Jessamy – you know that. This fella pulled on Digger, then lost his nerve. What you told 'im to do, Miss Jessamy, was right. Man ain't got no call to throw down on another one unless he intends to shoot. You know that, Miss Jessamy – you as much as said so."

For answer the girl burst into tears. She rose, and the silent men stood back for her. She mounted and rode away without another word, wiping fiercely at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Four men carried the dead man away. The rest, obviously in need of a stimulant, crowded in and up to the black bar. Oliver joined them. The weird sight that he had witnessed had left him weak and sick at the stomach.

Silently the fat, blond bartender set out whisky glasses, then looked hesitatingly at the stranger.

"Go ahead, Swede," encouraged a big fellow at Oliver's left. "He needs one, too. He saw it."

The bartender shrugged, thumped a glass toward Oliver, and broke the laws of the land.

"What was it all about?" Oliver, encouraged by this confidence, asked of the big, goodnatured man who had vouched for him on sight.

The other looked him over. "This fella Dodd," he said, "started something he couldn't finish – that's all. Dodd's had it in for Digger Foss and the Selden boys and some more of 'em for a year. Selden was runnin' cattle on Dodd's land, and Dodd claimed they cut fences to *get* 'em on. I don't know what all was between 'em. There's always bad blood between Old Man Selden and his boys and the rest o' the Poison Oakers, and somebody.

"Anyway," he went on, "this mornin' Henry Dodd comes in and gets the drop on Digger Foss, who's thick with the Seldens, and is one o' the Poison Oakers; and then Dodd ain't got the nerve to shoot. You saw what it cost him. Fill 'em up again, boys."

"I can't understand that girl," Oliver remarked. "Why, she rode in and told the man to shoot – to kill."

"And wasn't she right?"

"None of the rest of you did it, as she pointed out to you."

"No – men wouldn't do that, I reckon. But a woman's different. They butt in for what they think's right, regardless. But I look at it like this, pardner: Dodd's a grown man and is packin' a hip gun. Why's he packin' it if he don't mean to use it? Only a kid ought to be excused from flourishin' iron like he did. He was just lettin' off steam. But he picked the wrong man to relieve himself on. If he'd 'a' killed Digger, as Miss Jessamy told him to, maybe he'd a hung for it. But he'd a had a chance with a jury. Where if he took his gat offen Digger Foss, it was sure death. I knew it; all of us knew it. And I knew he was goin' to lower it after he'd painted pictures in the air with it and thought he'd convinced all of us he was a bad man, and all that. He'd never pulled the trigger, and Digger Foss knew it."

"Then if this Digger Foss knew he was only bluffing, he – why, he practically shot the man in cold blood!" cried Oliver.

"Not practically but ab-so-lutely. Digger knew he was within the law, as they say. While he knew Dodd wouldn't shoot, no prosecutin' attorney can *prove* that he knew it. Dodd had held a gun on him and threatened to kill 'im. When Digger gets the chance he takes it – makes his lightin' draw and kills Dodd. On the face of it it's self-defence, pure and simple, and Digger'll be acquitted. He'll be in tonight and give himself up to the constable. He knows just where he stands."

Oliver's informant tossed off his liquor.

"And Miss Jessamy knew all this – see?" he continued. "She savvies gunmen. She ought to, bein' a Selden. At least she calls herself a Selden, but her right name's Lomax. Old Man Selden married a widow, and this girl's her daughter. Well, she rides in and tells Dodd to shoot. She knew it was his life or Digger's, after he'd made that crack. But the poor fool! – Well, you saw what happened. Don't belong about here, do you, pardner?"

"I do now," Oliver returned. "I'm just moving in, as it were. I own forty acres down on Clinker Creek. I came in here to inquire the way, and stumbled onto this tragedy."

"On Clinker Creek! What forty?"

"It's called the Old Tabor Ivison Place."

"Heavens above! You own the Old Tabor Ivison Place?"

"So the recorder's office says – or ought to."

For fully ten seconds the big fellow faced Oliver, his blue eyes studying him carefully, appraisingly.

"Well, by thunder!" he muttered at last. "Tell me about it, pardner. My name's Damon Tamroy."

"Mine is Oliver Drew," said Oliver, offering his hand.

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Tamroy in a low voice, his eyes, wide with curiosity, devouring Oliver. "The Old Ivison Place!"

"You seem surprised."

"Surprised! Hump! Say – le'me tell you right here, pardner; don't *you* ever pull a gun on any o' the Poison Oakers and act like Henry Dodd did. Maybe it's well you saw what was pulled off today – if you'll only remember when you get down there on the Tabor Ivison Place."

CHAPTER II
PETER DREW'S LAST MESSAGE

"I'll take a seegar," Mr. Damon Tamroy replied in response to Oliver's invitation.

They lighted up and sat at a card-table against one wall of the gloomy saloon.

"You speak of this as a gun country," remarked Oliver.

"Well, it's at least got traditions," returned Mr. Tamroy, adding the unlettered man's apology for his little fanciful flight, "'as the fella says.' Like father like son, you know. The Seldens are gunmen. Old Adam Selden's dad was a 'Forty-niner; and Adam Selden – the Old Man Selden of today – was born right close to here when his dad was about twenty-five years old. Le's see – that makes Old Adam 'round about seventy. But he's spry and full o' pep, and one o' the best rifle shots in the country.

"He takes after the old man, who was a bad actor in the days o' 'Forty-nine, and his boys take after him. They're a bad outfit, takin' 'em all in all. The boys are Hurlock, Moffat, Bolar, and Winthrop – four of 'em. All gunmen. Then there's Jessamy Selden – the only girl – who ain't rightly a Selden at all. None o' the old man's blood in Jessamy, o' course. Mis' Selden – she was an Ivison before she married Lomax – Myrtle Ivison was her name – she's a fine lady. But she won't leave the old man for all his wickedness, and Miss Jessamy won't leave her mother. So there you are!"

"I see," said Oliver musingly, not at all displeased with the present subject of conversation.

"Now, here's this Digger Foss," Tamroy went on. "He's half-American, quarter-Chinaman, and quarter-Digger-Indian. The last's what gives him his name. There's a tribe o' Digger Indians close to here. He's killed two men and got away with it. Now he's added a third to his list, and likely he'll get away with that. The rest o' the Poison Oakers are Obed Pence, Ed Buchanan, Jay Muenster, and Chuck Allegan – ten in all."

"Just what are the Poison Oakers?" Oliver asked as Damon Tamroy paused reflectively.

"Well, *anybody* who lives in this country is called a Poison Oaker. You're one now. The woods about this country are full o' poison oak, and that's where we get the name. That's what outsiders call us. But when we ourselves speak of Poison Oakers we mean Old Man Selden's gang – him, his four sons, and the hombres I just mentioned – a regular old back-country gang o' rowdies, toughs, would-be bad men. You know what I mean.

"They just drifted together by natural instinct, I reckon. Old Man Selden shot a man up around Willow Twig, and come clean at the trial. Obed Pence is a thief, and did a stretch for cattle rustlin' here about three years ago. Chuck and Ed have both done something to make 'em eligible – knife fightin' at country dances, and the like. And the Selden boys are chips off the old block."

"But what is the gang's particular purpose?"

"Meanness, s'far's I c'n see! Just meanness! Old Man Selden owns a ranch down your way that you can get to only by a trail. No wheeled vehicle can get in. All the boys live there with him. Kind of a colony, for two o' the boys are married. The other Poison Oakers live here and there about the country, on ranches. Ambition don't worry none of 'em much. Old Man Selden's said to distil jackass brandy, but it's never been proved."

"Now about the Old Tabor Ivison Place?" said Oliver.

"Well, it's there yet, I reckon; but I ain't been down that way for years. Now and then a deer hunt leads me into Clinker Creek Cañon, but not often.

"It's a lonely, deserted place, and the road to it is fierce. Several families lived down in there thirty years ago; but the places have been abandoned long since, and all the folks gone God knows where. It's a pretty country if a fella likes trees and rocks and things, and wild and rough; but down in that cañon it's too cold for pears and such fruit – and that's about all we raise on these rocky hills.

"Old Tabor Ivison homesteaded your place. He's been dead matter o' fifteen years. Died down there. For years he'd lived there all by 'imself. Good old man. Asked for little in life – and got it.

"But for years now all that country's been abandoned. There's pretty good pickin's down in there; and Old Man Selden and some more o' the Poison Oakers have been runnin' cattle on all of it."

"I'm glad there's pasture," Oliver interposed.

"Oh, pasture's all right. But Selden's outfit has looked at that land as theirs for so long that you won't find it particularly congenial. You're bound to have trouble with the Poison Oakers, Mr. Drew, and I'd consider the land not worth it. Why, I can buy a thousan' acres down in there for two and a half an acre! You'll starve to death if you have to depend on that forty for a livin'. How come you to own the place?"

"My father willed it to me," Oliver replied.

"Your father?"

"Yes, Peter Drew. Have you ever heard of him?"

"No," returned Damon Tamroy. "I reckon he was here before my time. How'd he come by the place? I thought one o' the Ivison girls – Nancy – still owned it."

"I'm sure I can't tell you how Dad came to own it," Oliver made answer. "I haven't an abstract of title. I know, though, that Dad owned it for some time before his death."

"Well, well!" Damon Tamroy's eyes roved curiously over the young man once more. They steadied themselves on the silver-mounted Spanish spurs on Oliver's riding boots. "Travellin' horseback?" he wanted to know, and his look of puzzlement deepened.

"Yes," said Oliver a little bitterly. "I'm riding about all that I possess in this world, since you have pronounced the Old Tabor Ivison Place next to worthless." He grew thoughtful. "You're puzzled over me," he smiled at last. "Frankly, though, you're no more puzzled over me than I am over myself and my rather odd situation. I'm a man of mystery." He laughed. "I think I'll tell you all about it.

"As far back as I can remember, my home has been on a cow ranch in the southern part of the state. I can't remember my mother, who died when I was very young. I always thought my father wealthy until he died, two weeks ago, and his will was read to me. He had orange and lemon groves besides the cattle ranch, and was a stockholder in a substantial country bank. I was graduated at the State University, and went from there to France. Since, I've been resting up and sort of managing Dad's property.

"My father was a peculiar man, and was never overly confidential with me. He was uneducated, as the term is understood today – a rough-and-ready old Westerner who had made his strike and settled down to peaceful days – or so I always imagined. But two weeks ago he died suddenly from a stroke of apoplexy; and when his will was read to me I got a jolt from which I haven't yet recovered.

"The home ranch and the other real estate, together with all livestock and appurtenances – with one exception, which I shall mention later – were willed to the Catholic Church, to be handled as they saw fit. It seemed that there was little else to be disposed of. I was left five hundred dollars in cash, a saddle horse named Poche, a silver-mounted bridle and saddle and martingales, the old Spanish spurs you see on my feet, and the Old Tabor Ivison Place, in Chaparral County, of which I knew almost nothing. That was all – with the exception of the written instructions in my father's handwriting that were given me by his lawyers. Maybe you can throw some light on the matter, Mr. Tamroy. Would you care to hear my father's last message to me?"

Tamroy evinced his eagerness by scraping forward his chair.

Oliver took from a leather billbook a folded piece of paper. "I don't know that I ought to," he smiled, "but, after all, I'll never learn the mystery of it if I keep the matter from people about here. So here goes:

"'*My dear son Oliver*:

"'As you know perfectly well, I am an ignorant old Westerner. There is no use mincing matters in regard to this. When I was young I didn't have much of a

chance to get an education; but when I grew up and married, and you was born, I said you'd never be allowed to grow up in ignorance like I did. So I tried to give you an education, and you didn't fail me.'

"'I did this for a double purpose, Oliver. I knew that I was going to die someday, and that then you'd have to settle a little matter that's bothered me since before you was born. For pretty near thirty years, Oliver, I've had a problem to fight; and I never knew how to settle the matter because I wasn't educated. So I let it rest and waited for you to grow up, and go through college. And now that's happened; and you're educated and fit to answer the question that's bothered me for nearly half my life. The answer is either Yes or No, and you've got to find out which is right.'

"'I'm leaving you Poche, the best cow horse in Southern California, my old silver-mounted saddle that's carried me thousands of miles, the martingales, and my old silver-mounted bridle, which same three things made me the envy of all the vaqueros of the Clinker Creek Country over thirty years ago, and my Spanish spurs that go along with the outfit. These things, Oliver, and five hundred dollars in Cash, and forty acres of land on Clinker Creek, in Chaparral county, called the Old Tabor Ivison Place.'

"'They are all you'll need to find the answer to the question that's bothered me for thirty years. Buckle on the spurs, throw the saddle on Poche, bridle him, put the five hundred dollars and the deed to the Old Tabor Ivison Place in your jeans, and hit the trail for Clinker Creek. Stay there till you know whether the answer is Yes or No. Then go to my lawyers and tell them which it is. And the God of your mother go with you!'

"'Your affectionate father,'

"'Peter Drew.'

"'In his seventy-third year.'"

Oliver folded the paper. Damon Tamroy only sat and stared at him.

CHAPTER III
B FOR BOLIVIO

"Boy," said the kindly Mr. Tamroy, leaning forward toward Oliver Drew, "those are the queerest last words of a father to his son that I ever listened to. What on earth you goin' to do?"

Oliver shrugged and spread his hands. "Keep on obeying instructions," he said. "I've followed them to the letter so far. I'm only a few miles from my destination, and I've ridden in the silver-mounted saddle on Poche's back the entire five hundred miles and over. My father was not a fool. He was of sound mind, I fully believe, when he wrote that message for me. There's some deep meaning underlying all this. I must simply stay on the Old Tabor Ivison Place till I know what puzzled old Dad all those years, and find out whether the answer is Yes or No."

"Heavens above!" muttered Mr. Tamroy. "But how you goin' to live? What're you goin' to do down in there? Gonta get a job? It's too far away from everything for you to go and come to a job, Mr. Drew."

"I'll tell you," said Oliver. "At the University I took an agricultural course. Since my graduation I have written not a few articles and sold them to leading farm journals. If the Old Tabor Ivison Place is of any value at all, I want to experiment in raising all sorts of things on a small scale, and write articles about my results. I'll have a few stands of bees, and maybe a cow. I'll try all sorts of things, get a second-hand typewriter, and go to it. I think I can live while I'm waiting for my father's big question to crop up."

"You can raise a garden all right, I reckon," Oliver's new friend told him, following him as he rose to continue his journey. "But you got to irrigate, and there ain't the water in Clinker Creek there used to be. Folks up near the headwaters use nearly all of it, and in the hot months what they turn back will all go up in evaporation before it gets down to you. There's a good spring, though, but it strikes me it don't flow anything like it did when Old Tabor Ivison lived on the land."

"Is there a house on the place?"

"Only an old cabin. At least there was last time I chased a buck down in there. And something of a fence, if I remember right. But fifteen years is a long time – I reckon everything left is next to worthless."

They came to a pause at the edge of the sidewalk beside an aged villager, who stood leaning on his crooked manzanita cane as he gazed at Poche and his silver-mounted trappings.

"That's Old Dad Sloan," whispered Damon Tamroy. "He's one o' the last of the 'Forty-niners. Just hobbles about on his cane, livin' off the county, and waitin' to die. Never saw him take much interest in anything before, but that outfit o' yours has caught his eye. Little wonder, by golly!"

Oliver stepped into the street and lifted the hair-tassled reins of the famous bridle. He turned to find the watery blue eyes of the patriarch fixed on him intently. With a trembling left hand the old man brushed back his long grey hair, then the fingers shakily caressed a grizzled beard, flaring and wiry as excelsior. A long finger at length pointed to the horse.

"Where'd you get that outfit, young feller?" came the quavering tones.

Mr. Tamroy winked knowingly at Oliver.

"It was my father's," said Oliver in eager tones.

The 'Forty-niner cupped a hand back of his ear. "Hey?" he shrilled.

Oliver lifted his voice and repeated.

"Yer papy's hey?" He tottered into the street and fingered the heavily silvered Spanish halfbreed bit, which, Oliver had been told, was very valuable intrinsically and as a relic. Then the knotty fingers travelled up an intricately plaited cheekstrap to one of the glittering silver-bordered *conchas*. The old fellow fumbled for his glasses, placed them on his nose, and studied the last named conceit with

careful, lengthy scrutiny. "Is that there glass, young feller?" he croaked at last, pointing to the setting of the *concha*, a lilac-hued crystal about two inches in diameter.

"I think it is," Oliver shouted.

The old man shook his head. "I can't see well any more," he quavered. "But this don't look like glass to me."

"I've never had it examined," Oliver told him. "I supposed the settings of the *conchas* to be glass or some sort of quartz."

"Quartz?"

"Yes, sir."

The grey head slowly shook back and forth. "Young man," came the piping tones, "is they a 'B' cut in the metal that holds them stones in place?"

Oliver's eyes widened. "There is," he said. "On the inside of each one."

The old man stared at him, and his bearded lips trembled. "Bolivio!" he croaked weirdly.

"I don't understand," said Oliver.

"Bolivio made them *conchas*, young feller. Bolivio made that bit. Bolivio plaited that bridle. Bolivio made them martingales."

"And who is Bolivio?" puzzled the stranger.

"Dead and gone – dead and gone!" crooned the ancient. "That outfit's maybe a hundred years old, young feller – part of it, 'tleast. And that ain't glass in there – and it ain't quartz in in there – and there's only one man ever in this country ever had a bridle like that."

"And who was he?" asked Oliver almost breathlessly.

"Dan Smeed – that's who! Dan Smeed – outlaw, highwayman, squawman! Dan Smeed – gone these thirty years and more. That's his bridle – that's his saddle – all made by Bolivio, maybe a hundred years ago. And them stones in them *conchas* are gems from the lost mine o' Bolivio. The lost gems o' Bolivio, young feller!"

Oliver and Tamroy stared into each other's eyes as the old man tottered back to the sidewalk.

"Tell me more!" cried Oliver, as the ancient began tapping his crooked cane along the street.

There was no answer.

"He didn't hear," said Tamroy. "We'll get at him again sometime. Maybe he'll tell what he knows and maybe he won't. He's awful childish – awful headstrong. For days at a time he won't speak to a soul."

Oliver stood in deep thought, mystified beyond measure, yet thrilled with the thought that he was nearing the beginning of the trail to the mysterious question. He roused himself at length.

"Well, I must be getting along," he said. "I'll go right down to Clinker Creek now, if you'll point the way. I've enough grub behind my saddle for tonight and tomorrow morning. There's grass for the horse at present?"

"Oh, yes – horse'll get along all right."

"Then I'll go down and give my property the once-over, and be up tomorrow to get what I need."

Damon Tamroy showed him the road and shook hands with him. "Ride up and get acquainted regular someday," he invited. "I got a little ranch up the line – pears and apples and things. Give you some cherries a little later on. Well, so-long. Remember the Poison Oakers!"

Oliver galloped away, his flashing equipment the target of all eyes, on the road that led to the Old Tabor Ivison Place, his brain in a whirl of excitement.

CHAPTER IV
THE FIRST CALLER

Toward noon Poche was carefully feeling his way down the rocky cañon of Clinker Creek, over a forgotten road. Oliver walked, for Poche needs must scramble over huge boulders, fallen pines, and tangles of driftwood. The road followed the course of the creek for the most part, and in many places the creek had broken through and washed great gaps.

But the country was delightful. Wild grapevines grew in profusion at the creekside, gracefully festooned from overhanging buckeye limbs. Odorous alders, several varieties of willow, and white oak also followed the watercourse; and up on the hills on either side were black oaks and live oaks, together with yellow and sugar and digger pines, and spruce. Everywhere grew the now significant poison oak.

Finally Poche scraped through chaparral that almost hid the road and came out in a clearing. Oliver at last stood looking at his future home.

A quaint old cabin, with a high peaked roof, apparently in better repair than he had expected, stood on a little rise above the creek. The cañon widened here, and narrowed again farther down. The creek bowed and followed the base of the steep hills to the west. A level strip of land comprising about an acre paralleled the creek, and invited tillage. All about the clearing, perhaps fifteen acres in area, stood tall pines and spruce, and magnificent oaks rose above the cabin, their great limbs sprawled over it protectingly. Acres and acres of heavy, impenetrable chaparral covered both steep slopes beyond the conifers.

For several minutes Oliver drank in the beauty of it, then heaved himself into the saddle and galloped to the cabin over the unobstructed land.

He loosed Poche when the saddle and bridle were off, and the horse eagerly buried his muzzle in the tall green grass. Up in the branches paired California linnets, red breasted for their love season, went over plans and specifications for nest-building with much conversation and flit-flit of feathered wings. Wild canaries engaged in a like pursuit. Overhead in the heavens an eagle sailed. From the sunny chaparral came the scolding quit-quit-quit of mother quail, while the pompous cocks perched themselves at the tops of manzanita bushes and whistled, "Cut that out! Cut that out!" All Nature was home-building; and Oliver forgot the loss of the fortune he had expected at his father's death and caught the spirit.

He collected oak limbs and built a fire. He carried water from the creek and set it on to boil. While waiting for this he strolled about, revelling in the soft spring air, fragrant with the smell of wild flowers.

That the cabin had been occupied often by hunters and other wanderers in the cañon was evidenced by the many carvings on the door and signs of bygone campfires all about. He stepped upon the rotting porch and studied the monograms, initials, and flippant messages of the lonely men who had passed that way.

"All hope abandon, ye who enter here" was carved in ancient letters just under the lintel of the door. Next he was informed that "Fools names, like their faces, are always seen in public places." "Only a sucker would live here" was the parting decision of some disgruntled guest. "Home, Sweet Home" adorned the bottom of the door. One panel had proved an excellent target, and no less than twenty bullet holes had made a sieve of it. "Welcome, Wanderer!" and "Dew Drop Inn" and "Though lost to sight to memory dear" occupied conspicuous places. Then on the right-hand frame he noticed this:

The carving was neatly executed. The leaves represented were indisputably those of the poison oak.

Had some one carved this in a jocular effort to warn chance visitors to the place of the danger of the poison weed? Or did the carving represent the emblem of the Poison Oakers?

Oliver smiled grimly and opened the door.

He passed through the three small rooms of the house and investigated the loft. The structure seemed solid. A new roof would be necessary, and new windows and frames and a new porch; and as Oliver was no mean carpenter, he thought he could make the cabin snug and tight for seventy-five dollars.

The front door had closed of itself, he found, when he started back to his campfire. He stopped in the main room, and a smile, slightly bitter, flickered across his lips. As neatly carved as was the symbol of the Poison Oakers outside – if that was what it was – and evidently executed by the same hand, was this, on the inside of the door:

JESSAMY, MY SWEETHEART

Oliver went on out and squatted over his fire, peeling potatoes. His blue eyes grew studious. In the flickering blaze he saw the picture of a black-eyed, black-haired girl on a white horse crouched on its haunches.

"Great Scott!" he muttered. "I'll have to forget that!"

In the month that followed, Oliver Drew, spurred by feverish enthusiasm, worked miracles on the Old Tabor Ivison Place. He repaired the line fences and rehabilitated the cabin; bought a burro and pack-saddle and packed in lumber and tools and household necessities; fenced off his experimental garden on the level land with rabbit-tight netting; cleaned and boxed the spring; and early in May was following the spading up of his garden plot by planting vegetable seed.

With all this behind him, he went at the clearing of the road that connected him with his kind. Today as he laboured with pick and shovel and bar he was cheerful, though his thoughts clung to the subject of his father's death and the odd situation in which it had left him. He had fully expected to inherit properties and money to the extent of a hundred thousand dollars. He was not particularly resentful because this had not come to pass, for he never had been a pampered young man; but the mystery of his father's last message puzzled and chagrined him.

He would always remember Peter Drew as a peculiar man. He had been a kindly father, but a reticent one. There were many pages in his past that never had been opened to his son. Oliver was the child of Peter Drew's second wife. About the queer old Westerner's former marriage he had been told practically nothing.

Believing his father to have been of sound mind when he penned that last strange communication, Oliver could not hold that the situation which it imposed was not for the best. Surely old Peter Drew had had some wise reason for his act, and in the end Oliver would know what it was. He had been told to seek the Clinker Creek Country to learn the question that had puzzled his father for thirty years, to decide whether the proper answer was Yes or No, and communicate his decision to his father's lawyers. That was all. When in the wisdom which his father had supposed would be the natural result of his son's university training he had made his decision and placed it before these legal gentlemen, what would happen? Speculation over this led nowhere.

At first it had seemed to Oliver that the mission with which he had been intrusted was more or less a secret matter, and that he must keep still about it. Then as the staunch cow-pony bore him nearer and nearer to the Clinker Creek Country it gradually dawned upon him that, by so doing, he might stand a poor chance of even finding out what had puzzled his sire. To say nothing of the answer which he was to seek. It was then he decided that he had nothing to hide and must place his situation before the people of the country who would likely be able to help him. Hence his confidences to Mr. Damon Tamroy.

Tamroy had aided him not at all; but the 'Forty-niner, Old Dad Sloan, knew something. Dan Smeed, outlaw, highwayman, had owned a saddle and bridle like Oliver's. The old man had

mysteriously mentioned the lost mine of Bolivio, and had said the settings in Oliver's *conchas* were gems. If only the old man could be made to talk!

The muffled thud of a horse's hoofs came between the strokes of Oliver's pick. With an odd and unfamiliar sensation he glimpsed a white horse and rider approaching through the pines.

It was she – Jessamy Selden – the black-haired, black-eyed girl of whom he reluctantly had thought so often since his first day in the Clinker Creek Country.

She was riding straight down the cañon, the white mare gingerly picking her way between boulders and snarls of driftwood. The girl looked up. Oliver felt that she saw him. Her ears could not have been insensible to the ring of his pick on the flinty stones. She did not leave the trail, however, but continued on in his direction.

He rested on the handle of his tool and waited.

"Good morning," he ventured, sweeping off his battered hat, as the mare stopped without pressure on the reins and gravely contemplated him.

The girl smiled and returned his greeting brightly.

"If you had waited a few days longer for your ride down here," said Oliver, "I'd have had a better trail for you."

"Oh, I don't know that I want it any better," she laughed. "I like things pretty much as they are, when Old Mother Nature has built them. I ride down this way frequently."

She was no fragile reed, this girl. She was rather more substantially built than most members of her sex. Her figure was straight and tall and rounded, and her strong, graceful neck upreared itself proudly between sturdy shoulders. Grace and strength, rather than purely feminine beauty, predominated in the impression she created in Oliver. She wore a man's Stetson hat over her lavish crown of coal-black hair, a man's flannel shirt, a whipcord divided skirt, and dark-russet riding boots. The saddle that she rode in had not been built for a woman to handle, and, with its long, pointed tapaderos, must have weighed close to fifty pounds. The steady, friendly, confident gaze of her large black eyes was thrilling. A man instinctively felt that, if he could win this woman, he would have acquired a wife among a thousand, a loyal friend and comrade, and a partner who could and would shoulder more than a woman's share of their load.

Still, Oliver knew nothing at all about her. What he had heard of her was not exactly of the best. Yet he felt that she was gloriously all right, and did not try to argue otherwise.

"Well, I suppose I must introduce myself first," she was saying in her full, ringing tones. "I'm Jessamy Selden. My name is not Selden, though, but Lomax. When my mother married Adam Selden I took her new name. I heard somebody had moved onto the Old Ivison Place, and I deliberately rode down to get acquainted."

"You waited a month, I notice," Oliver laughingly reproached. "My name is Oliver Drew. If you'll get off your horse I'll tell you what a wonderful man I am."

She swung to the ground and held out a strong, brown, ungloved hand.

"I'll walk to your cabin with you," she said, "if you'll invite me. I'd like to see how you've been improving your time since your arrival."

Scarce able to find words with which to meet such delightful frankness, Oliver walked beside her, the white mare following and nosing at his pockets to prove that she was a privileged character.

The girl loosed her within the inclosure, and let her drag her reins. Poche trotted up to make the white's acquaintance, followed by the new mouse-coloured burro, Smith, who long since had assumed a "where thou goest I will go" affection for the bay saddler.

Jessamy Selden came to a stop before the cabin, her black eyes dancing.

"Who would have thought," she said in low tones, "that the Clinker Creek people ever would see the old Ivison cabin rebuilt and inhabited once more! How sturdily it must have been built to stand up against wind and storm all these years. Are you going to invite me in and show me around?" She levelled that direct glance at him and showed her white teeth in a smile.

Oliver was thinking of the carving on the inside of the old door, "Jessamy, My Sweetheart." He had not replaced the door with a new one, for every penny counted. It still was serviceable; and, besides, there seemed to be a sort of companionship about the carved observations of the unknowns who had been sheltered by the old cabin during the past fifteen years.

"You've been in the house often, I suppose?" He made it a question.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I've lunched in it many a time, and have run in out of the rain during winter months. I slept in it all night once."

"You seem to be an independent sort of young woman," suggested Oliver.

"I'm a rather lonely sort of woman, if that's what you mean," she replied. "Yes, I ride about lots alone. I like it. Don't you want me to go in?"

"Er – why, certainly," he stammered. "Please don't think me inhospitable. Come on."

He led the way, and stood back for her at the door. He would leave the door open, swung back into the corner, he thought, so that she would not see the carving. She had been in the cabin many times. Did she know the carving to be there? Of course it might have been executed since her last visit, though it did not seem very fresh. Who had carved the words? Oliver could imagine any of the young Clinker Creek swains as being secretly in love with this marvellous girl, and pouring out his tortured soul through the blade of his jack-knife when securely hidden from profane eyes in this vast wilderness.

She passed complimentary remarks about his practically built home-made furniture, and the neatness and necessary simplicity of everything.

"What an old maid you are for one so young!" she laughed. "And, please, what's the typewriter for – if I'm not too bold?"

"Well," said Oliver, "it occurred to me that I must make a living down here. I'm a graduate of the State College of Agriculture, and I like to farm and write about it. I've sold several articles to agricultural papers. I'm going to experiment here, and try to make a living by writing up the results!"

"Why, how perfectly fine!" she cried enthusiastically. "I couldn't imagine anything more engrossing. I'm a State University girl."

"You don't say!"

And this furnished a topic for ten minutes' conversation.

"If you're as good a writer and farmer as you are tinker and carpenter," she observed, passing into the front room again, "you'll do splendidly." She was standing, straight as a young spruce, hands on hips, looking with twinkling eyes at the open door. "The old door still hangs, I see," she murmured. "Now just why didn't you replace it, Mr. Drew?"

Oliver looked apprehensive. "Well," he replied hesitatingly, "for several reasons. First, a new door costs money, and so would the lumber with which to make one – and I haven't much of that article. Second, I get some amusement from looking at those old carvings and speculating on the possible personalities of the carvers. For all I know, some great celebrities' ideas may be among those expressed there – some future great man, at any rate. The boy one meets in the street may one day be president, you know. Then there's a sort of companionship about those names and monograms and quotations. The fellow that informs me that only suckers live here I'd like to meet. He was so blunt about it, so sure. He – er – "

Smiling, she had stepped to the door and, arms still akimbo, allowed her glance to travel from one design to another. She raised an arm and levelled a finger.

"What do you think of that one?" she asked.

"Well," said Oliver, "that's a rather well executed poison oak leaf. The hills are covered with the plant. I imagine that some wanderer not immune from the poison came into contact with it, and, though his eyes were swelled half shut and his fingers itched and tingled, his right hand had not lost its cunning. So he took out his trusty blade and carved a warning for all future pilgrims who chanced this way to beware of this tree that is in the midst of the garden, and to not touch it lest they – "

"Itch," Jessamy gravely put in. "Quite pretty and poetic," she supplemented. "But you are entirely wrong, Mr. Drew. That carving is, first of all, a copy of the brand of Old Man Selden, and you'll find it on all his cows. All but the word 'Beware,' of course, you understand. Second, it represents the silly symbol of a gang that infests this country known as the Poison Oakers. Oh, you've heard of them!" she had turned suddenly and surprised the look on his face.

"It sounds very bloodthirsty," he laughed confusedly.

"I'll tell you more, then, when I know you better," she said. "No, I'll tell you today," she added quickly.

Then before he could make a move she had closed the door to examine what might be carved on the inner side.

"Tell me now," said Oliver quickly. "Try this chair here by the window. I'm rather proud of this one. It's my first attempt at a morris ch – "

"Come here, please," she commanded, standing with her back to him.

"Don't act so like a boy," she reproved as he dutifully stepped up behind her. "Anybody would know you are clumsily trying to detract my attention from – that."

The brown finger was pointing straight at JESSAMY, MY SWEETHEART.

She turned and levelled her frank, unabashed eyes straight at his.

"So that's why you hesitated about inviting me in," she stated, her lips twitching and dimples appearing and disappearing in her cheeks.

"Frankly, yes," he told her gravely.

Her glance did not leave him. "Mr. Tamroy told me he had mentioned me to you," she said. "So of course you knew, when you saw this carving, that I was the subject of the raving. And when you saw me you wished to spare me embarrassment. Thank you. But you see I'm not at all embarrassed. I have never before seen this masterpiece in wood, and imagine it has been done since I was in the cabin last. Let's see – I doubt if I've been inside for a year or more. I think perhaps Mr. Digger Foss is the one who tried to make his emotions deathless by this work of art. 'Jessamy, My Sweetheart,' eh?" She threw back her glorious head and laughed till two tears streamed down her tanned cheeks. "Poor Digger!" she said soberly at last. "I suppose he does love me."

"Who wouldn't," thought Oliver, but bit his lips instead of speaking.

"You may leave that, Mr. Drew," she told him, "until you get ready to replace the old door with a new one. I would not have the irrefutable evidence of at least one conquest blotted out for worlds. Now let's go out in that glorious sunlight, and I'll tell you about Old Man Selden and the Poison Oakers."

CHAPTER V
"AND I'LL HELP YOU!"

What Jessamy Selden told Oliver Drew of the Poison Oakers was about the same as he had heard from Damon Tamroy.

She used his sawbuck for a seat, and sat with one booted ankle resting on a knee, idly spinning the rowel of her spur as she talked. Oliver listened without interruption until she finished and once more levelled that straightforward glance at him.

"The cows have been down below on winter pasture," she added. "Adam Selden and the boys rode out yesterday to start the spring drive into the foothills. You'll awake some morning soon to find red cattle all about you, and they'll be here till August."

"Well," he said, "I don't know that I shall mind them. My fence is pretty fair, and with a little more repairing will turn them, I think."

She twirled her rowel in silence for a time, her eyes fixed on it. Then she said:

"It isn't that, Mr. Drew. I may as well tell you right now what I came down here purposely to tell you. You're not wanted here. All of this land has been abandoned so long that Adam Selden and the gang have come to consider it their property – or at least free range."

"But they'll respect my right of ownership."

"I don't know – I don't know. I'm afraid they won't. They're a law unto themselves down in here. They'll try to run you out."

"How?"

"Any way – every way. If nothing else occurs to them, they'll begin a studied system of persecution with the idea of making you so sick of your bargain that you'll pull stakes and hit the trail. That poor man Dodd! Mr. Tamroy told me you happened into the saloon in time to see the shooting. Wasn't it terrible! And how they persecuted him – fairly drove him into the rash act that cost him his life!"

She lifted her glance again. "Mr. Tamroy tells me that you were shocked at me that day."

"I guess I didn't fully understand the circumstances."

"I did," she firmly declared, her lips setting in what would have been a grim smile but for the dimples that came with it. "I understood the situation," she went on. "Digger Foss had been waiting for just that chance. There's just enough Indian and Chinese blood in him to make him a fatalist. He's therefore deadly. Has no fear of death. He's cruel, merciless. I knew when I saw Henry Dodd covering him with that gun that, if he didn't finish what he'd started, he was a dead man. He couldn't even have backed off gracefully, keeping Digger covered, and got away alive. Digger is so quick on the draw, and his aim is so deadly. He's a master gunman. Even had Dodd succeeded in getting away then, he would have been a marked man. He had thrown down on Digger Foss. Digger would have got the drop on him next time they met and killed him as you would a coyote. So in my excitement I rushed in with my well meant warning, and – Oh, it was horrible!"

"And you meant actually for Dodd to kill Foss?"

Her black eyes dilated, and an angry flush blended with the tan on her cheeks.

"It was one or the other of them," she told him coldly. "Mr. Dodd was an honest, plodding man – a good citizen. Foss is a renegade. Was I so very bloodthirsty in trying to make the best of a bad situation by choosing, on the spur of the moment, which man ought to live on? I'm not the fainting kind of woman, Mr. Drew. One must be practical, if he can, even over matters like that."

"I'm not condemning," he said. "I'm only wondering that a woman could be so practical in such a situation."

"Digger Foss hasn't seen me since then," she observed. "He's in jail, awaiting trial, at the county seat. He'll be acquitted, of course. I'm wondering what he'll have to say to me when he is free again."

Oliver said nothing to this.

"I must be going," she declared, rising suddenly. "As I said, I came down to warn you to be on your guard against the Poison Oakers."

He caught her pony and led it to her. She swung into the saddle, then slued toward him, leaned an elbow on the horn and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. Once more that direct gaze of her frank black eyes looked him through and through.

"Well," she asked, "will the Poison Oakers run you off?"

"Oh, I think not," he laughed lightly.

"They'll be ten against one, Mr. Drew."

"There's law in the land."

"Yes, there's law," she mused. "But it's so easy for unscrupulous people to get around the law. They can subject you to no end of persecution, and you won't even be able to prove that one of them is behind it."

She looked him over deliberately.

"I'm glad you've come," she said. "You're an educated man, and blessed with a higher order of character than has been anybody else who stood to cross the Poison Oakers. Somehow, I feel that you are destined to be their undoing. They must be corralled and their atrocities brought to an end. You must be the one to put the quietus on that gang. And I'll help you. Good-bye!"

She lifted the white mare into a lope, opened the gate, rode through and closed it without leaving the saddle, then, waving back at him, disappeared in the chaparral.

CHAPTER VI
ACCORDING TO THE RECORDS

Oliver Drew had found a bee tree on the backbone of the ridge between the Old Ivison Place and the American River. He stood contemplating it, watching the busy little workers winging their way to and from the hole in the hollow trunk, planning to change their quarters and put them to work for him.

Far below him, down a precipitous pine-studded slope, the green American River raced toward the ocean. There had been a week of late rains, and good grass for the summer was assured.

Away through the tall trees below him he saw red cows filtering along, cropping eagerly at the lush growth after a long dusty trip from the drying lowlands. Now and then he saw a horseman galloping along a mile distant. He heard an occasional faint shout, borne upward on the soft spring wind. The Seldens were ending the drive of their cattle to summer pastures.

He turned suddenly as he heard the tramp of hoofs. Six horsemen were approaching, along the backbone of the ridge, winding in and out between clumps of the sparse chaparral.

In the lead, straight and sturdy as some ancient oak, rode a tall man with grey hair that hung below his ears and a flowing grey beard. He wore the conventional cowpuncher garb, from black-silk neckerchief, held in place by a poker chip with holes bored in it, to high-heeled boots and chaps. He rode a gaunt grey horse. His tapaderos flapped loosely against the undergrowth, and, so long were the man's legs, they seemed almost to scrape the ground. A holstered Colt hung at the rider's side.

Silent, stern of face, this old man rode like the wraith of some ancient chieftain at the head of his hard-riding warriors.

Those who followed him were younger men, plainly *vaqueros*. They lolled in their saddles, and smoked and bantered. But Oliver's eyes were alone for the stalwart figure in the lead, who neither spoke nor smiled nor paid any attention to his band, but rode on grimly as if heading an expedition into dangerous and unknown lands.

Undoubtedly this was Old Man Selden and his four sons, together with other members of the Poison Oakers Gang. They had left the cows to themselves and were making their way homeward after the drive. Oliver's first impulse was to hide behind a tree and watch, for he felt that he should forego no chance of a strategic advantage. Then he decided that it was not for him to begin manœuvring, and stood boldly in full view, wondering whether the riders would pass without observing him.

They did not. He heard a sharp word or two from some follower of the old man, and for the first time the leader showed signs of knowing that he was not riding alone. He slued about in his saddle. A hand pointed in Oliver's direction. The old man reined in his grey horse and looked toward Oliver and the bee tree. The other horsemen drew up around him. There was a short consultation, then all of them leaned to the right in their saddles and galloped over the uneven land.

They reined in close to the lone man, and a dusty, sweaty, hard-looking clan they were. Keen, curious eyes studied him, and there was no mistaking the insolent and bullying attitude of their owners.

A quick glance Oliver gave the five, then his interest settled on their leader.

Adam Selden was a powerful man. His nose was of the Bourbon type, large and deeply pitted. His eyes were blue and strong and dominating.

"Howdy?" boomed a deep bass voice.

Oliver smiled. "How do you do?" he replied.

Then silence fell, while old Adam Selden sat rolling a quid of tobacco in his mouth and studying the stranger with inscrutable cold blue eyes.

"I've found a bee tree," said Oliver when the tensity grew almost unbearable. "I was just figuring on the best way to hive the little rascals."

Selden slowly nodded his great head up and down with exasperating exaggeration.

"Stranger about here, ain't ye?" he asked.

"Well, I've been here over a month," Oliver answered. "I own the Old Tabor Ivison Place, down there in the valley. My name is Oliver Drew, and I guess you're Mr. Selden."

Another long pause, then —

"Yes, I'm Selden. Them's my cows ye see down there moseyin' up the river bottom and over the hills. I been runnin' cows in here summers for a good many years. Just so!"

"I see," said Oliver, not knowing what else to say.

"Three o' these men are my boys," Selden drawled on. "The rest are friends o' ours. Has anybody told ye about the poison oak that grows 'round here?"

"I'm familiar with it," Oliver told him.

"Ain't scared o' poison oak, then?"

"Not at all. I'm immune."

"It's a pesterin' plant. You'll chafe under it and chafe under it, and think it's gone; then here she comes back again, redder and lumpier and itchier than ever."

"I'm quite familiar with its persistence," Oliver gravely stated.

"And still ye ain't afraid o' poison oak?"

"Not in the least."

The gang was grinning, but the chief of the

Poison Oakers maintained a straight face.

"Ain't scared of it, then," he drawled on. "Well, now, that's handy. I like to meet a man that ain't scared o' poison oak. Got yer place fenced, I reckon?"

"Yes, I've repaired the fence."

"That's right. That's always the best way. O' course the law says we got to see that our stock don't get on your prop'ty. Whether that there's a good and just law or not I ain't prepared to say right now. But we got to obey it, and we always try to keep our cows offen other folks' pasture. But it's best to fence, whether ye got stock o' yer own or not. Pays in the long run, and keeps a fella outa trouble with his neighbours. But the best o' fencin' won't keep out the poison oak. O' course, though, you know that. Now what're ye gonta do down there on the Old Ivison Place? – if I ain't too bold in askin'."

"Have a little garden, and maybe get a cow later on. Put a few stands of bees to work for me, if I can find enough swarms in the woods. I have a saddle horse and a burro to keep the grass down now. I don't intend to do a great deal in the way of farming."

"I'd think not," Selden drawled. "Land about here's good fer nothin' but grazin' a few months outa the year. Man would be a fool to try and farm down where you're at. How ye gonta make a livin'? – if I'm not too bold in askin'."

"I intend to write for agricultural papers for my living," said Oliver.

Silence greeted this. So far as their experience was concerned, Oliver might as well have stated that he was contemplating the manufacture of tortoise-shell side combs to keep soul and body to their accustomed partnership.

"How long ye owned this forty?" Old Man Selden asked.

"Only since my father's death, this year."

"Yer father, eh? Who was yer father?"

"Peter Drew, of the southern part of the state."

"How long'd he own that prop'ty before he died?"

"He owned it for some time, I understand," said Oliver patiently.

The grey head shook slowly from side to side. "I can show ye, down to the county seat, that Nancy Fleet – who was an Ivison and sister o' the woman I married here about four year ago – owned that land up until the first o' the year, anyway. It was left to her by old Tabor Ivison when he died.

That was fifteen year ago, and I've paid the taxes on it ever since for Nancy Fleet, for the privilege o' runnin' stock on it. I paid the taxes last year. What 'a' ye got to say to that?"

Oliver Drew had absolutely nothing to say to it. He could only stare at the gaunt old man.

"But I have the deed!" he burst out at last.

"And I've got last year's tax receipts," drawled Adam Selden. "Ye better go down to the county seat and have a look at the records," he added, swinging his horse about. "Then when ye've done that, I'd like a talk with ye. Just so! Just so!"

He rode off without another word, the gang following.

Early next morning Oliver was in the saddle. As Poche picked his way out of the cañon Oliver espied Jessamy Selden on her white mare, standing still in the county road.

"Good morning," said the girl. "You're late. I've been waiting for you ten minutes."

Oliver's lips parted in surprise, and she laughed good-naturedly.

"I thought you'd be riding out early this morning," she explained, "so I rode down to meet you. I feel as if a long ride in the saddle would benefit me today. Do you mind if I travel with you to the county seat?"

He had ridden close to her by this time, and offered his hand.

"You like to surprise people, don't you?" he accused. "The answer to your question is, I do not mind if you travel with me to the county seat. But let me tell you – you'll have to travel. This is a horse that I'm riding."

She turned up her nose at him. "I like to have a man talk that way to me," she said. "Don't ever dare to hold my stirrup for me, or slow down when you think the pace is getting pretty brisk, or anything like that."

"I wouldn't think of such discourtesy," he told her seriously. "You noticed that I let you mount unaided the other day. I might have walked ahead, though, and opened the gate for you if you hadn't loped off."

"That's why I did it," she demurely confessed. "I'm rather proud of being able to take care of myself. And as for that wonderful horse of yours, he does look leggy and capable. But, then, White Ann has a point or two herself. Let's go!"

Their ponies took up the walking-trot of the cattle country side by side toward Halfmoon Flat.

"Well," Oliver began, "of course my meeting you means that you know I've had an encounter with Adam Selden, and that he has told you he doubts if I am the rightful owner of the Tabor Ivison Place."

"Yes, I overheard his conversation with Hurlock last night," she told him. "So I thought I'd ride down with you, sensing that you would be worried and would hit the trail this morning."

"I am worried," he said. "I can't imagine why your step-father made that statement."

"Just call him Adam or Old Man Selden when you're speaking of him to me," she prompted. "Even the 'step' in front of 'father' does not take away the bad taste. And you might at least *think* of me as Jessamy Lomax. I will lie in the bed I made when I espoused the name of Selden, for it would be stupid to go about now notifying people that I have gone back to Lomax again. My case is not altogether hopeless, however. You are witness that I have a fair chance of some day acquiring the name of Foss, at any rate. So you are worried about the land tangle?"

"What can it mean?" he puzzled.

"This probably is not the first instance in which a deed has not been recorded promptly," she ventured. "That won't affect your ownership. Personally I know that Aunt Nancy Fleet's name appears in the records down at the county seat as the owner of the property. She sold it to your father, doubtless, and the transfer never was recorded. Where is your deed?"

He slapped his breast.

"See that you keep it there," she said significantly.

"You say you know that your Aunt Nancy Fleet is named as owner of the property in the county records?"

She nodded.

"Then she has allowed Adam Selden to believe that she still owns it!" he cried. "And this is proved by reason of her having allowed him to pay the taxes for the right to run stock on the land."

She nodded again.

He wrinkled his brows. "It would seem to be a sort of conspiracy against Adam Selden by your Aunt Nancy and – " He paused.

"And who?"

"Well, it's not like my father's business methods to allow a deed to go unrecorded for fifteen years," he told her. "Not at all like Dad. So I must name him as a party to this conspiracy against old Adam. But what is the meaning of it, Miss Selden?"

"I'm sure I am not in a position to say," she replied lightly. "Some day, when you've got things to running smoothly down there, I'll take you to see Aunt Nancy. She lives up in Calamity Gap – about ten miles to the north of Halfmoon Flat. Maybe she can and will explain."

He regarded her steadily; but for once her eyes did not meet his, though he could not say that this was intentional on her part.

"By George, I believe *you* can explain it!" he accused.

"I?"

"You heard me the first time."

"Did you learn that expression at the University of California or in France?"

"I stick to my statement," he grumbled.

"Do so, by all means. Just the same, I am not in a position to enlighten you. But I promise to take you to Aunt Nancy whenever you're ready to go. There's an Indian reservation up near where she lives. You'll want to visit that. We can make quite a vacation of the trip. You'll see a riding outfit or two that will run close seconds to yours for decoration and elaborate workmanship. My! What a saddle and bridle you have! I've been unable to keep my eyes off them from the first; but you were so busy with your land puzzle that I couldn't mention them. I've seen some pretty elaborate rigs in my day, but nothing to compare with yours. It's old, too. Where did you get it?"

"They were Dad's," he told her. "He left them and Poche to me at his death. I must tell you of something that happened when I first showed up in Halfmoon Flat in all my grandeur. Do you know Old Dad Sloan, the 'Forty-niner?"

She nodded, her glance still on the heavy, chased silver of his saddle.

Then Oliver told her of the queer old man's mysterious words when he saw the saddle and bridle and martingales, and the stones that were set in the silver *conchas*.

She was strangely silent when he had finished. Then she said musingly:

"The lost mine of Bolivio. Certainly that sounds interesting. And Dan Smeed, squawman, highwayman, and outlaw. The days of old, the days of gold – the days of 'Forty-nine! Thought of them always thrills me. Tell me more, Mr. Drew. I know there is much more to be told."

"I'll do it," he said; and out came the strange story of Peter Drew and his last message to his son.

Her wide eyes gazed at him throughout the recital and while he read the message aloud. They were sparkling as he concluded and looked across at her.

"Oh, that dear, delightful, romantic old father of yours!" she cried. "You're a man of mystery – a knight on a secret quest! Oh, if I could only help you! Will you let me try?"

"I'd be only too glad to shift half the burden of finding the question and its correct answer to your strong shoulders," he said.

"Then we'll begin just as soon as you're ready," she declared. "I have a plan for the first step. Wait! I'll help you!"

Shortly before noon they dropped rein before the court house and sought the county recorder's office. Oliver gave the legal description of his land, and soon the two were pouring over a cumbersome book, heads close together.

To his vast surprise, Oliver found that his deed had been recorded the second day after his father's death, and that, up until that recent date, the land had appeared in the records as the property of Nancy Fleet.

"Dad's lawyers did this directly after his death," he said to Jessamy. "They sent the deed up here and had it recorded just before turning it over to me. Adam Selden hasn't seen it yet. Say, this is growing mighty mysterious, Miss Selden."

"Delightfully so," she agreed. "Now as you weren't expecting me to come along, have you enough money for lunch for two? If not, I have. We'd better eat and be starting back."

CHAPTER VII
LILAC SPODUMENE

Once more Oliver Drew rode out of Clinker Creek Cañon to find Jessamy Selden, straight and strong and dependable looking, waiting for him in her saddle. On this occasion he joined her by appointment.

She looked especially fresh and contrasty today. Her black hair and eyes and her red lips and olive skin, with the red of perfect health so subtly blended into the tan, always made her beauty rather startling. This morning she had plaited her hair in two long, heavy braids that hung to the bottom of her saddle skirts on either side.

Oliver's gaze at her was one of frank admiration.

"How do you do it?" he laughed.

"Do what?"

"Make yourself so spectacular and – er – outstanding, without leaving any traces of art?"

"Am I spectacular?"

"Rather. Different, anyway – to use a badly overworked expression. But what puzzles me is what makes you look like that. You seem perfectly normal, and nothing could be plainer than the clothes you wear. You're not beautiful, and you're too big both physically and mentally to be pretty. But I'll bet my hat you're the most popular young woman in this section!"

She regarded him soberly. "Are you through?" she asked.

"I've exhausted my stock of descriptive words, anyway," he told her.

"Then we'd better be riding," she said.

He swung Poche to the side of White Ann, and they moved off along the road, knee and knee.

"You're not offended?" he asked.

She threw back her head and laughed till Oliver thought of meadow larks, and robins calling before a shower.

"Offended! You must think me some sort of freak. Who ever heard of a woman being offended when a man admires her? I like it immensely, Mr. Oliver Drew. And if you can beat that for square shooting, there's no truth in me. But if you'll analyse my 'difference' you'll find it's only because I'm big and strong and healthy, and try always to shoot straight from the shoulder and look folks straight in the eye. That's all. Let's let 'em out!"

They broke into a smart gallop, and continued it up and down pine-toothed hills till they clattered into Halfmoon Flat.

Curious eyes met them, old men stopped in their tracks and leaned on their canes to watch, and folks came to windows and doors as they loped through the village.

"'Whispering tongues can poison truth,'" Jessamy quoted as they turned a corner and cantered up a hill toward a grove of pines on the outskirts of the town. "It seems odd that Adam Selden has not mentioned you to me. Surely some one has seen us together who would tell some one else who would tell Old Man Selden all about it. But not a cheep from him as yet."

"Have you any bosom friends in the Clinker Creek district?" he asked, not altogether irrelevantly.

"No, none at all. But I'm friends with everybody, though I have nothing in common with any one. I don't consider myself superior to the natives here about, but, just the same, they don't interest me. I'm speaking of the women. I like most of the men. I guess I'm what they call a man's woman. I can't sit and talk about clothes and dances, and gossip, and what one did on one's vacation last summer. It all bores me stiff, so I don't pretend it doesn't. Men, now – they can talk about horses and saddles and cows and cutting wood and prizefights and poker games and election – "

"And women and Fords," he interrupted.

She laughed and led the way into a little trail that snaked on up the hill between lilacs and buckeye trees to a little cabin half-hidden in the foliage.

They dismounted at the door and loosed their horses. Jessamy tapped vigorously on the panels. Again and again – and then there was heard a shuffling, unsteady step inside, and a cane thumped hollowly. Presently the door opened, and Old Dad Sloan bleared out at them from behind his flaring, mattress-stuffing hair and whiskers.

"How do you do, Mr. Sloan!" cried Jessamy almost at the top of her voice.

A veined hand shook its way to form a cup behind the ancient's ear.

"Hey?" he squealed.

Jessamy filled her sturdy lungs with air and tried again.

"I say – How do you do!" The effort left her neck red but for a blue outstanding artery.

"Oh!" exclaimed Dad Sloan, with a look of relief. "Why, howdy?"

Jessamy ascended a step to the door, took him by both shoulders, and placed her satin lips close to the ear that he inclined her way.

"We've come to make you a call," she announced. "I want you to meet a friend of mine; and we want to ask you some questions."

The grey head nodded slowly up and down, more to indicate that its owner heard and understood than to signify acquiescence. But he tottered back and held the door wide open; and Jessamy and Oliver went into the cabin.

Dad Sloan managed to live all alone in this sequestered little nook by reason of the county's generosity. He was old and feeble, and at times irritatingly childish and petulant. Jessamy Selden often brought him cakes, fried chicken, and the like; and, provided he was in the right mood, he would be more likely to be confidential with her than with anybody else in the country.

But the girl's task was difficult. The old man shook hands listlessly with Oliver at her bidding, but seemed entirely to have forgotten their previous meeting. They sat in the uncomfortable straight-backed, thong-bottom chairs while Jessamy shrieked the conversation into the desired channel. The old eyes gathered a more intelligent look as she spoke of the lost mine of Bolivio.

Pieced together, the fragments that fell from the bearded lips of Old Dad Sloan made some such narrative as follows:

Bolivio had been a Portuguese or a Spaniard, or some "black furriner," who had been in the country in the memorable days of '49 and afterward. His knowledge of some tongue based on the Latin had made it easy for him to communicate with the Pauba Indians that inhabited the country, as some of them had learned Spanish from the Franciscan Fathers down at the coast. Bolivio mingled with the tribe, and finally became a squawman.

One day he appeared at the Clinker Creek bar and exhibited a beautiful stone. A gold miner who was present had once followed mining in South Africa, and knew something of diamonds. He examined Bolivio's stone, and gave it such simple tests as were at his command, then advised the owner to send it to New York to find out if it was possessed of value.

It required months in those days to communicate with the Atlantic seaboard. Bolivio's stone was started on its long journey around the Horn. He hinted that there were more of the stones where he had found this one, and created the impression that his Indian brethren had showed them to him.

More they could not get out of him. Nor did anybody try very hard to learn his secret, for no one imagined the find of much intrinsic value.

Bolivio was a saddler, and was skilled in the art of the silversmith. Gold dust was plentiful in the country in that day, and the foreigner found ready buyers for his masterpieces in leather and precious metals. The finest equestrian outfit that he made was finally acquired from the Indians by Dan Smeed, a miner who afterward turned highwayman, married an Indian girl, became an outlaw,

and finally disappeared altogether. In the *conchas* with which the plaited bridle was adorned Bolivio had set two large stones from his secret store, which he himself had crudely polished.

One day, a month or more before word came from New York regarding the stone, Bolivio was found dead in the forest. A knife had been plunged into his heart. The secret of the brilliant stones had died with him.

Then came the answer. The stone was said to be spodumene, of a very high class, and had a a lilac tint theretofore unknown. It was the finest of its kind ever to have been reported as found in the United States. The finder was offered a thousand dollars for the sample sent; one hundred dollars a pound was offered for all stones that would grade up to the sample.

But Bolivio was dead, and no one knew from whence the stone had come.

Efforts were made, of course, to find the source of this wealth. The Indians were tried time and again, but not one word would they speak regarding the matter. The new quest was finally dropped; for those were the days of gold, gold, gold, and so frenzied were men and women to find it that other precious minerals were cast aside as worthless. None had time to seek for stones worth a hundred dollars a pound, with gold worth more than twice as much. So the lost mine of Bolivio became only a memory.

Years later this same stone was discovered six hundred miles farther south. It is now on the market as kunzite, and a cut stone of one karat in weight sells for fifty dollars and more. The San Diego County discovery was supposed to mark the introduction of the stone in the United States, for the lost mine of Bolivio was all but forgotten.

Old Dad Sloan thumped out at Jessamy's request and once again critically examined Oliver's saddle and bridle and the brilliants in the *conchas*.

"It's the same fine outfit Bolivio made, and that afterwards belonged to Dan Smeed, outlaw, highwayman, and squawman," he pronounced. "They never was another outfit like it in this country."

"Tell us more about Dan Smeed!" screamed the girl.

The patriarch shook his head. "Bad egg; bad egg!" he said sonorously. "He married a squaw, and that's how come it he got the grandest saddle and bridle Bolivio ever made. Bolivio's squaw kep' it after Bolivio was knifed. And by and by along come this Dan Smeed and his partner to this country. And when Dan Smeed married into the tribe he got the saddle and bridle and martingales somehow. That was later – years later. Bolivio's been dead over seventy year."

"Have you ever heard the name Peter Drew?" Oliver asked him.

But the old eyes remained blank, and the grey head shook slowly from side to side. "I recollect clear as day what happened sixty to seventy year ago, but I can't recollect what I did last week or where I went," Dad Sloan said pathetically. "If I'd ever heard o' Peter Drew in the days o' forty-nine to seventy, I'd recollect it."

"You mentioned Dan Smeed's partner," prompted Jessamy. "Can you recall his name?"

"Yes, Dan Smeed had a partner," mused Dad Sloan. "Bad egg, Dan Smeed. Squawman, highwayman, outlaw. Disappeared with his fine saddle and bridle and martingales and the stones from the lost mine o' Bolivio."

"But his partner's name?" the girl persisted.

The old mind seemed to be wandering once more. "Bad eggs – both of 'em. Bad eggs," was the only answer she could get.

"Well, we're progressing slowly," Jessamy observed as they rode away. "Our next step must be to visit the Indians. I know a number of them. Filipe Maquaquish, for instance, and Chupurosa are as old or older than Old Dad Sloan. Chupurosa's face is a pattern in crinkled leather. When we go to see Aunt Nancy Fleet we'll visit the Indian village. And that will be – when?"

"Tomorrow, if you say so," Oliver replied. "I meant to irrigate my garden tomorrow, but it can wait a day."

"By the way," she asked, "have you written that letter to Mr. Selden, telling him what we found out down at the county seat?"

"I have it in my pocket," he told her.

"Give it to me," she ordered. "I'll hand it in at the post office, get them to stamp the postmark on it, and take it home with me when I go."

"Will you dare do that? Won't the post-master scent a conspiracy against Old Man Selden?"

"Let him scent!" said Jessamy. "I'm dying to see Selden's face when he reads that letter."

They parted at the headwaters of Clinker Creek, with the understanding that she would meet him in the county road next morning for the ride to her aunt's and the Indian reservation.

CHAPTER VIII
POISON OAK RANCH

The trail that meandered down Clinker Creek Cañon extended at right angles to the one that led to the Selden ranch. The latter climbed a baldpate hill; then, winding its narrow way through dense locked chaparral higher than horse and rider, dipped down precipitously into the deep cañon of the American River.

Jessamy waved good-bye to her new friend at the parting of the ways and lifted White Ann into her long lope to the summit of the denuded hill. For a little, as they crossed the topmost part of it, the deep, rugged scar that marked the course of the river was visible. Ragged and rocky and covered with trees and chaparral, the cañonside slanted down dizzily for over fifteen hundred feet. At the bottom the deep green river rushed pell-mell to the lower levels. A moment and the view was lost to the girl, as White Ann entered the thick chaparral and started the swift descent.

At last they reached the bottom, forded the swirling stream, and began clambering up a trail as steep as the first on the other side. Soon the river was lost to view again, for once more the trail had been cut through a seemingly impenetrable chaparral of buckthorn, manzanita and scrub oak. Around and about tributary cañons they wound their way, and at last reached the end of the steep climb. For a quarter of a mile now the trail followed the backbone of a ridge, then entered a cañon that eventually spread out into a pine-bordered plateau on the mountainside. Just ahead lay Poison Oak Ranch. Beyond, the deep, dark forest extended in miles numbered by hundreds to the snow-mantled peaks of the Sierra Nevada range.

While it was possible to reach Poison Oak Ranch from this side of the river, the journey on Shank's mare would have taken on something of the nature of an exploring expedition into unmapped lands. Occasionally hunters wandered to or past the ranch on this side; but for the most part any one who fancied that he had business at Poison Oak Ranch came over the narrow trail that connected the spot with outside civilization. Few entertained such a fancy, however, for Poison Oak Ranch, secluded, hidden from sight, tucked away in the Hills of Nowhere, and difficult of access, was owned and controlled by a clannish family that had little in common with the world.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.