

Seltzer Charles Alden

The Ranchman



Charles Seltzer

The Ranchman

«Public Domain»

Seltzer C.

The Ranchman / C. Seltzer — «Public Domain»,

© Seltzer C.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I – CONCERNING DAWES	5
CHAPTER II – SLICK DUDS	10
CHAPTER III – THE SERPENT TRAIL	13
CHAPTER IV – THE HOLD-UP	15
CHAPTER V – THE UNEXPECTED	19
CHAPTER VI – A MAN MAKES PLANS	24
CHAPTER VII – THE SHADOW OF THE PAST	27
CHAPTER VIII – CONCERNING “SQUINT”	30
CHAPTER IX – A MAN LIES	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Charles Alden Seltzer

The Ranchman

CHAPTER I – CONCERNING DAWES

The air in the Pullman was hot and, despite the mechanical contrivances built into the coach to prevent such a contingency, the dust from the right-of-way persisted in filtering through crevices.

Even the electric fans futilely combated the heat; their droning hum bespoke terrific revolutions which did not materially lessen the discomfort of the occupants of the coach; and the dry, dead dust of the desert, the glare of a white-hot sun, the continuing panorama of waste land, rolling past the car windows, afforded not one cool vista to assuage the torture of travel.

For hours after leaving Kansas City, several of the passengers had diligently gazed out of the windows. But when they had passed the vast grass plains and had entered the desert, where their eyes met nothing but endless stretches of feathery alkali dust, beds of dead lava, and clumps of cacti with thorny spire and spatula blade defiantly upthrust as though in mockery of all life – the passengers drew the shades and settled down in their seats to endure the discomfort of it all.

A *blasé* tourist forward reclined in one seat and rested his legs on another. From under the peak of a cap pulled well down over his eyes he smiled cynically at his fellow-passengers, noting the various manifestations of their discomfort. The tourist was a transcontinental traveler of note and he had few expectations. It amused him to watch those who had.

A girl of about twenty, seated midway in the coach to the left of the tourist, had been an intent watcher of the desert. With the covert eye of the tourist upon her she stiffened, stared sharply out of the window, then drew back, shuddering, a queer pallor on her face.

“She’s seen something unpleasant,” mused the tourist. “A heap of bleached bones – which would be the skeleton of a steer; or a rattlesnake – or most anything. She’s got nerves.”

One passenger in the car had no nerves – of that the tourist was convinced. The tourist had observed him closely, and the tourist was a judge of men. The nerveless one was a young man who sat in a rear seat staring intently out into the inferno of heat and sand, apparently absorbed in his thoughts and unaware of any physical discomfort.

“Young – about twenty-seven or twenty-eight – maybe thirty,” mused the tourist; “but an old-timer in this country. I wised up to him when he got aboard at Kansas City. Been a miner in his time – or a cow-puncher. I’d hate to cross him.”

Among the other passengers were two who attracted the attention of the tourist. They occupied the seat in front of the young man.

One of the two, who sat nearest the window, was not much older than the young man occupying the seat behind him. The tourist guessed his age to be around thirty-five or thirty-six. He was big, almost massive, and had lived well – as the slightly corpulent stomach revealed. Despite that, however, he was in good physical condition, for his cheeks glowed with good healthy color under the blue-black sheen of his fresh-shaved beard; there was a snapping twinkle in his black eyes, which were penetrating and steady; and there was a quiet confidence in his manner which told that he knew and appreciated himself. He was handsome in a heavy, sensuous fashion, and his coal-black hair, close-cropped and wavy, gave him an appearance of virility and importance that demanded a second look. The man seated beside him was undersized and ordinary-looking, with straight, iron-gray hair and a look of having taken orders all his life. The tourist set his age at fifty-five.

The girl was of the type that the tourist admired. He had seen her kind in the far corners of the world, on the thronged streets of cosmopolitan cities, in isolated sections of the world – the self-

reliant, quietly confident American girl whose straight-in-the-eye glance always made a man feel impelled to respectfully remove his hat.

She was not beautiful, but she was undeniably good-looking. She was almost tall, and the ease and grace of her movements sufficed to convey to the tourist some conception of the symmetrical lines of her figure. If her features had been more regular, the girl would have been plain; but there was a slight uptilt to her nose that hinted of piquancy, denied by the quiet, steady eyes.

A brown mass of hair, which she had twisted into bulging coils and glistening waves, made the tourist wonder over her taste in that feminine art.

“She knows what becomes her,” he decided.

He knew the two men seated in front of the young man were traveling with her, for he had seen them together, with the older man patting her shoulder affectionately. But often she left them with their talk, which did not seem to interest her, while she withdrew to a distant seat to read or to gaze out of the window.

She had not seemed to notice either the man of colorless personality or the young man who occupied the seat behind her friends. If she had glanced at them at all it was with that impersonal interest one feels in the average traveler one meets anywhere.

But long ago – which, to be strictly accurate, was when he had entered the coach at Kansas City – Quinton Taylor had been interested in her. He was content, though, to conceal that interest, and not once when she chanced to look toward him did she catch him looking at her.

Taylor knew he was no man to excite the interest of women, not even when he looked his best. And he knew that in his present raiment he did not look his best. He was highly uncomfortable.

For one thing, the white, starched collar he wore irritated him, choked him, reddening his face and bulging his eyes. The starched shirt had a pernicious habit of tightly sticking to him, the seams chafing his skin.

The ready-made suit he had bought at Kansas City was too small, and he could feel his shoulders bulging through the arms of the coat, while the trousers – at the hips and the knees – were stretched until he feared the cloth would not stand the strain.

The shoes were tight, and the derby hat – he glowered humorously at it in the rack above his head and gazed longingly at the suitcase at his feet, into which he had crammed the clothing he had discarded and which he had replaced at the suggestion of his banker in Kansas City. Cowboy rigging was not uncommon to Kansas City, the banker had told him, but still – well, if a man was wealthy, and wished to make an impression, it might be wise to make the change.

Not in years had Taylor worn civilized clothing, and he was fully determined that before reaching his home town he would resume the clothing to which he was accustomed – and throw the new duds out of a window. He reddened over an imaginary picture of himself descending from the train in his newly acquired rigging to endure the humorous comments of his friends. Old Ben Mullarky, for instance, would think he had gone loco – and would tell him so. Yes, the new clothes were doomed; some ragged overland specimen of the genus “hobo” would probably find them or, if not, they would clutter up the right-of-way as the sad memento of a mistake he had made during a fit of momentary weakness.

As a matter of fact the girl had noticed Taylor. A girl will notice men, unconsciously. Sitting at her window even now, she was thinking of him.

She was not aware that she had studied him, or that she had even glanced at him. But despite her lack of interest in him she had a picture of him in mind, and her thoughts dwelt upon him.

She, too, had been aware that Taylor’s clothes did not fit him. She had noticed the bulging shoulders, the tight trousers, the shoes, squeaking with newness, when once he had passed through the car to go out upon the platform. She had noticed him screwing his neck around in the collar; she had seen him hunch his shoulders intolerantly; she had seen that the trousers were too short; that he looked

like an awkward farmer or homesteader abroad on a pleasure trip, and decidedly uncomfortable in the unaccustomed attire.

She had giggled to herself, then. For Taylor did make a ridiculous figure. But later – when he had reentered the car and she had looked fairly, though swiftly, at him as he advanced down the aisle – she had seen something about him that had impressed her. And that was what she was thinking about now. It was his face, she believed. It was red with self-consciousness and embarrassment, but she had seen and noted the strength of it – the lean, muscular jaw, the square, projecting chin, the firm, well-controlled mouth; the steady, steel-blue eyes, the broad forehead. It had seemed to her that he was humorously aware of the clothes, but that he was grimly determined to brazen the thing out.

Her mental picture now gave her the entire view of Taylor as he had come toward her. And she could see him in a different environment, in cowboy regalia, on a horse, perfectly at ease. He made a heroic figure. So real was the picture that she caught herself saying: “Clothes *do* make the man!” And then she smiled at her enthusiasm and looked out of the window.

Taylor had been thinking of her with the natural curiosity of the man who knows he has no chance and is not looking for one. But she had impressed him as resembling someone with whom he had been well acquainted. For an hour he puzzled his brain in an endeavor to associate hers with some face of his recollection, but elusive memory resisted his demands on it with the result that he gave it up and leaned back as restfully as he could with the consciousness of the physical torture he was undergoing.

And then he heard the younger of the two men in front of him speak to the other:

“We’ll make things hum in Dawes, once we get hold of the reins.”

“But there will be obstacles, Carrington.”

“Sure! Obstacles! Of course. That will make the thing all the more enjoyable.”

There was a ring in Carrington’s voice that struck a chord of sudden antagonism in Taylor, a note of cunning that acted upon Taylor instantly, as though the man had twanged discord somewhere in his nature.

Dawes was Taylor’s home; he had extensive and varied interests there; he had been largely responsible for Dawes’s growth and development; he had fought for the town and the interests of the town’s citizens against the aggressions of the railroad company and a grasping land company that had succeeded in clouding the titles to every foot of land owned by Dawes’s citizens – his own included.

And he had heard rumors of outside interests that were trying to gain a foothold in Dawes. He had paid little attention to these rumors, for he knew that capital was always trying to drive wedges that would admit it to the golden opportunities afforded by new towns, and he had ascribed the rumors to idle gossip, being aware that such things are talked of by irresponsibles.

But the words, “Get hold of the reins,” had a sound of craft and plotting. And there was something in Carrington’s manner and appearance that suggested guile and smooth cunning. Seething with interest, Taylor closed his eyes and leaned his head back upon the cushion behind him, simulating sleep.

He felt Carrington turn; he could feel the man’s eyes on him, and he knew that Carrington was speculating over him.

He heard the other man whisper, though he could not catch the words. However, he heard Carrington’s answer:

“Don’t be uneasy – I’m not ‘spilling’ anything. *He* wouldn’t know the difference if I did. A homesteader hitting town for the first time in a year, probably. Did you notice him? Lord, what an outfit!”

He laughed discordantly, resuming in a whisper which carried to Taylor:

“As I was saying, we’ll make things hum. The good folks in Dawes don’t know it, but we’ve been framing them for quite a spell – been feeding them Danforth. You don’t know Danforth, eh? He’s quite a hit with these rubes. Knows how to smear the soft stuff over them. He’s what we call

a 'mixer' back in Chicago. Been in Dawes for about a year, working in the dark. Been going strong during the past few months. Running for mayor now – election is today. It'll be over by the time we get there. He'll win, of course; he wired me it was a cinch. Cost a lot, though, but it's worth it. We'll own Dawes before we get through!"

It was with an effort that Taylor kept his eyes closed. He heard nothing further, for the man's voice had dropped lower and Taylor could not hear it above the roar of the train.

Still, he had heard enough to convince him that Carrington had designs on the future welfare of Dawes, and his muscles swelled until the tight-fitting coat was in dire danger of bursting.

Danforth he knew slightly. He had always disliked and distrusted the man. He remembered Danforth's public *début* to the people of Dawes. It had been on the occasion of Dawes's first anniversary and some public-spirited citizens had decided upon a celebration. They had selected Danforth as the speaker of the day because of his eloquence – for Danforth had seized every opportunity to publicly air his vigorous voice, and Taylor had been compelled to acknowledge that Danforth was a forceful and able speaker.

Thereafter, Danforth's voice often found the public ear. He was a lawyer, and the sign he had erected over the front of the frame building adjoining the courthouse was as magnificent as Danforth was eloquent.

But though Taylor had distrusted Danforth, he had found no evidence – until now – that the lawyer intended to betray his fellow-citizens. Before leaving Dawes the week before he had heard some talk, linking Danforth's name with politics, but he had discredited the talk. His own selection had been Neil Norton, and he had asked his friends to consider Norton.

Taylor listened intently, with the hope of hearing more of the conversation being carried on between the two men in front of him. But he heard no more on the subject broached by Carrington. Later, however, his eyes still closed, still pretending to be asleep, he saw through veiled eyelids the girl rise from her seat and come toward the two men in front of him.

For the first time he got a clear, full view of her face and a deep, disturbing emotion thrilled him. For now, looking fairly at her, he was more than ever convinced that he had seen her before, or that her resemblance to someone he had known was more startling than he had thought.

Then he heard Carrington speak to her.

"Getting tired, Miss Harlan?" said Carrington. "Well, it will soon be ended, now. One more night on the train – and then Dawes."

The older man laughed, and touched the girl's arm playfully. "You don't mind it, do you, Marion?"

The older man said more, but Taylor did not hear him. For at his mention of the girl's given name, so soon after Carrington's pronouncement of "Harlan," Taylor's eyes popped open, and he sat erect, staring straight at the girl.

Whether her gaze had been drawn by his, or whether her woman's curiosity had moved her to look at him, Taylor never knew. But she met his wide gaze fairly, and returned his stare with one equally wide. Only, he was certain, there was a glint of mocking accusation in her eyes – to remind him, he supposed, that she had caught him eavesdropping.

And then she smiled, looking at Carrington.

"One is recompensed for the inconveniences of travel by the interesting characters one chances to meet."

And she found opportunity, with Carrington looking full at her, to throw a swift, significant glance at Taylor.

Taylor flushed scarlet. Not, however, because of any embarrassment he felt over her words, but because at that instant was borne overwhelmingly upon him the knowledge that the girl, and the man, Carrington, who accompanied her – even the older man – were persons with whom Fate had

insisted that he play – or fight. They were to choose. And that they had chosen to fight was apparent by the girl's glance, and by Carrington's words, "We'll own Dawes before we get through."

Taylor got up and went to the smoking-room, where he sat for a long time, staring out of the window, his eyes on the vast sea of sagebrush that stretched before him, his mental vision fixed on an earlier day and upon a tragedy that was linked with the three persons in the coach – who seemed desirous of antagonizing him.

CHAPTER II – SLICK DUDS

After a time Taylor's lips wreathed into a smile. He searched in his pockets – he had transferred all his effects from the clothing in the suitcase to his present uncomfortable raiment – and produced a long, faded envelope in danger of imminent disintegration.

The smile faded from his lips as he drew out the contents of the envelope, and a certain grim pity filled his eyes. He read:

Squint:

That rock falling on me has fixed me. There is no use in me trying to fool myself. I'm going out. There's things a man can't say, even to a friend like you. So I'm writing this. You won't read it until after I'm gone, and then you can't tell me what you think of me for shoving this responsibility on you. But you'll accept, I know; you'll do it for me, won't you?

I've had a lot of trouble – family trouble. It wouldn't interest you. But it made me come West. Maybe I shouldn't have come. I don't know; but it seemed best.

You've been a mighty persevering friend, and I know you from the ground up. You never inquired about my past, but I know you've wondered. Once I mentioned my daughter, and I saw you look sharp at me. Yes, there is a daughter. Her name is Marion. There was a wife and her brother, Elam Parsons. But only Marion counts. The others were too selfish and sneaking.

You won't be interested in that. But I want Marion taken care of. She was fifteen when I saw her last. She looked just like me; thank God for that! She won't have any of the characteristics of the others!

Squint, I want you to take care of her. You'll find her in Westwood, Illinois. You and me have talked of selling the mine. Sell it; take my share and for it give Marion a half-interest in your ranch, the Arrow. If there is any left, put it in land in Dawes – that town is going to boom. Guard it for her, and marry her, Squint; she'll make you a good wife. Tell her I want her to marry you; she'll do it, for she always liked her "dad."

There was more, but Taylor read no further. He stuffed the envelope into a pocket and sat looking out of the window, regarding morosely the featureless landscape. After a time he grinned saturninely:

"Looks to me like a long chance, Larry," he mused. "Considered as a marrying proposition she don't seem to be enthusiastic over me. Now what in thunder is she doing out here, and why is that man Carrington with her – and where did she pick him up?"

There came no answer to these questions.

Reluctant, after the girl's mocking smile, to seem to intrude, Taylor sat in the smoking-compartment during the long afternoon, until the dusk began to descend – until through the curtains of the compartment he caught a glimpse of the girl and her companions returning from the dining-car. Then, after what he considered a decent interval, he emerged from the compartment, went to the diner, ate heartily, and returned to the smoking-room.

He had met Larry Harlan about three years before. Harlan had appeared at the Arrow one morning, looking for a job. Taylor had hired him, not because he needed men, but because he thought Harlan needed work. A friendship had developed, and when one day Harlan had told Taylor about a mine he had discovered in the Sangre de Christo Mountains, some miles southwestward, offering Taylor a half-interest if the latter would help him get at the gold, Taylor had agreed.

They had found the mine, worked it, and had taken considerable gold out of it, when one day a huge rock had fallen on Harlan. Taylor had done what he could, rigging up a drag with which to take Harlan to town and a doctor, but Harlan had died before town could be reached.

That had been the extent of Taylor's friendship for the man. But he had followed Harlan's directions.

Sitting in the smoking-compartment, he again drew out Harlan's note to him and read further:

Marion will have considerable money, and I don't want no sneak to get hold of it – like the sneak that got hold of the money my wife had, that I saved. There's a lot of them around. If Marion is going to fall in love with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave – the man would get it away from her.

Use your own judgment, and I'll be satisfied.

It was not difficult for Taylor to divine what had happened to Harlan, nor was it difficult to understand that the man's distrust of other men amounted to an obsession. However, Taylor had no choice but to assume the trust and no course but to obey Harlan's wishes in the matter.

Taylor's trip eastward to Kansas City had been for the purpose of attending to his own financial interests, and incidentally to conclude the deal for the sale of the mine. He had deposited the money in his own name, but he intended – or had intended – after returning to the Arrow to make arrangements for his absence, to go to Westwood to find Marion Harlan. The presence of the girl on the train and the certain conviction that she was bound for Dawes made the trip to Westwood unnecessary.

For Taylor had no doubt that the girl was the daughter of Larry Harlan. That troublesome resemblance of hers to someone of his acquaintance bothered him no longer, for the girl was the living image of Larry Harlan.

Taylor had not anticipated the coming of Carrington into his scheme of things. For the first time since Larry Harlan's letter had come into his possession he realized that deep in his heart was a fugitive desire for the coming of the girl to the Arrow. He had liked Larry Harlan, and he had drawn mental pictures of what the daughter would be like; and, though she was not exactly as he had pictured her, she was near enough to the ideal he had visualized. He wanted, now more than ever, to faithfully fulfil his obligation to Larry Harlan.

The presence of Carrington on the train, coupled with the inference that Carrington was a close friend of the girl's, irritated Taylor. For at the first glance he had felt a subtle antagonism for the man. Yet he was more disturbed over the mockery in the girl's eyes when she had looked directly at him when she had caught him listening to her talk with Carrington and the older man.

Still, Taylor was not the type of man who permits the imminence of discord to disturb his mental equanimity, and he grinned into the growing darkness of the plains with a grimly humorous twist to his lips that promised interesting developments should Carrington oppose him.

When he again looked out of the aperture in the curtains screening the smoking-compartment from the aisle he saw the porter pass, carrying bedclothing. Later he saw the porter returning, smilingly inspecting a bill. After an interval the porter stuck his head through the curtains and surveyed him with a flashing grin:

“Is you ready to retiah, boss?” he asked.

A quarter of an hour later Taylor was alone in his berth, gazing at his reflection in the glass while he undressed.

“You wouldn't have the nerve to think she is interested in you, would you – you homely son-of-a-gun?” he queried of his reflection. “Why, no, she ain't, of course,” he added; “no woman could be interested in you. You've been all day looking like a half-baked dude – and no woman is interested in dudes!”

Carefully removing the contents of the several pockets of the despised wearing apparel in which he had suffered for many days, he got into his nightclothes and rang for the porter. When the latter

appeared with his huge grin, Taylor gave him the offensive clothing, bundled together to form a large ball.

“George,” he said seriously, almost solemnly, “I’m tired of being a dude. Some day I may decide to be a dude; but not now. Take these duds and save them until I ask for them. If you offer them to me before I ask for them, I’ll perforate you sure as hell!”

He produced a big Colt pistol from somewhere, and as the weapon glinted in the light the porter’s eyes bulged and he backed away, gingerly holding the bundle of clothing.

“Yassir, boss – yassir! I shuah won’t mention it till you does, boss!”

When the porter had gone, Taylor grinned into the glass.

“I sure have felt just what I looked,” he said.

Then he got into his berth and dreamed all night of a girl whose mocking eyes seemed to say:

“Well, do you think you have profited by listening?”

“Why, sure,” he retorted, in his dreams; “I’ve seen you, ain’t I?”

CHAPTER III – THE SERPENT TRAIL

Marion Harlan did not dream of Quinton Taylor, though her last waking thought was of him, and when she opened her eyes in the morning it was to see him as he had sat in the seat behind Carrington and her uncle, his eyes wide with interest, or astonishment – or some emotion that she could not define – looking directly at her.

She had been certain then, and still was certain that he had been feigning sleep, that he had been listening to the talk carried on between her uncle and Carrington.

Why had he listened?

That interrogation absorbed her thoughts as she dressed.

She had not meant to be interested in him, for she had, in her first glance at him, mentally decided that he was no more interesting than many another ill-dressed and uncouth westerner whom she had seen on the journey toward Dawes.

To be sure, she had seen signs of strength in him, mental and physical, but that had been when she looked at him coming toward her down the aisle. But even then he had not interested her; her interest began when she noted his interest in the conversation of her traveling companions. And then she had noticed several things about him that had escaped her in other glances at him.

For one thing, despite the astonishment in his eyes, she had observed the cold keenness of them, the odd squint at the corners, where little wrinkles, splaying outward, indicated either deliberate impudence or concealed mirth. She was rather inclined to believe it the latter, though she would not have been surprised to discover the wrinkles to mean the former.

And then she had noted his mouth; his lips had been straight and firm; she had been sure they were set resolutely when she had surprised him looking at her. That had seemed to indicate that he had taken more than a passing interest in what he had overheard.

She speculated long over the incident, finally deciding that much would depend upon what he had overheard. There was only one way to determine that, and at breakfast in the dining-car she interrogated Carrington.

“Of course, you and uncle are going to Dawes on business, and I am merely tagging along to see if I can find any trace of my father. But have you any business secrets that might interest an eavesdropper? On a train, for instance – a train going toward Dawes?”

“What do you mean?” Carrington’s eyes flashed as he leaned toward her.

“Have you and uncle talked business within hearing distance of a stranger?”

Carrington’s face flushed; he exchanged a swift glance with the other man.

“You mean that clodhopper with the tight-fitting hand-me-down in the seat behind us – yesterday? He was asleep!”

“Then you did talk business – business secrets,” smiled the girl. “I thought really big men commonly concealed their business secrets from the eager ears of outsiders.”

She laughed aloud at Carrington’s scowl, and then went on:

“I don’t think the clodhopper was asleep. In fact, I rather think he was very wide awake. I wouldn’t say for certain, but I *think* he was awake. You see, when I came back to talk with you he was sitting very straight, and his eyes were wide open.

“And I shall tell you something else,” she went on. “During all the time he sat behind you, when you were talking, I watched him, he was pretending to sleep, for at times he opened his eyes and looked at you, and I am sure he was not thinking pleasant thoughts. And I don’t believe he is a clodhopper. I think he amounts to something; and if you will look well at him you will see, too. When he was listening to you there was a look in his eyes that made me think of fighting.” And then, after a momentary pause, she added slowly, “there isn’t anything wrong about the business you are going to transact out here – is there?”

“Wrong?” he laughed. “Oh, no! Business is business.” He leaned forward and gazed deliberately into her eyes, his own glowing significantly. “You don’t think, with me holding your good opinion – and always hoping to better it – that I would do anything to destroy it, Marion?”

The girl’s cheeks were suffused with faint color.

“You are assuming again, Mr. James J. Carrington. I don’t care for your subtle speeches. I like you best when you talk frankly; but I am not sure that I shall ever like you enough to marry you.”

She smiled at the scowl in his eyes, then looked speculatively at him. It should have been apparent to him that she had spoken the truth regarding her feeling for him.

The uncle knew she had spoken the truth, for she left them presently, and the car door had hardly closed behind her when Carrington said, smiling grimly:

“She’s a thoroughbred, Parsons. That’s why I like her. I’ll have her, too!”

“Careful,” grinned the other, smoothly. “If she ever discovers what a brute you are – ” He made a gesture of finality.

“Brute! Bah! Parsons, you make me sick! I’ll take her when I want her! Why do you suppose I told her that fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality? To get her out here with me, of course – where there isn’t a hell of a lot of law, and a man’s will is the only thing that governs him. She won’t have me, eh? Well, we’ll see!”

Parsons smirked at the other. “Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country?”

“Sure,” admitted Carrington. “Why not?”

Parsons looked leeringly at Carrington. “Suppose I should tell her?”

Carrington glared at the older man. “You won’t,” he declared. “In the first place, you don’t love her as an uncle should because she looks like Larry Harlan – and you hated Larry. Suppose I should tell her that you were the cause of the trouble between her parents; that you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry? Why, you damned, two-faced gopher, she’d wither you!”

He grinned at the other and got up, turning, when he reached his feet, to see Quinton Taylor, standing beside a chair at the next table, just ready to sit down, but delaying to hear the remainder of the extraordinary conversation carried on between the two men.

Taylor had donned the garments he had discarded in Kansas City. A blue woolen shirt, open at the throat; corduroy trousers, the bottoms stuffed into the soft tops of high-heeled boots; a well-filled cartridge-belt, sagging at the right hip with the weight of a heavy pistol – and a broad-brimmed felt hat, which a smiling waiter held for him – completed his attire.

Freshly shaved, his face glowed with the color that betokens perfect health; and just now his eyes were also glowing – but with frank disgust and dislike.

Carrington flushed darkly and stepped close to Taylor. Carrington’s chin was thrust out belligerently; his eyes fairly danced with a rage that he could hardly restrain.

“Listening again, eh?” he said hoarsely. “You had your ears trained on us yesterday, in the Pullman, and now you are at it again. I’ve a notion to knock your damned head off!”

Taylor’s eyelids flickered once, the little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening a trifle. But his gaze was steady, and the blue of his eyes grew a trifle more steely.

“You’ve got a bigger notion not to, Mr. Man,” he grinned. “You run a whole lot to talk.”

He sat down, twisted around in the chair and faced the table, casting a humorous eye at the black waiter, and ignoring Carrington.

“I’ll want a passable breakfast this morning, George,” he said; “I’m powerful hungry.”

He did not turn when Carrington went out, followed by Parsons.

The waiter hovered near him, grinning widely.

“I reckon you-all ain’t none scary, boss!” he said, admiringly.

CHAPTER IV – THE HOLD-UP

After breakfast – leaving a widely grinning waiter, who watched him admiringly – Taylor reentered the Pullman.

Stretching out in the upholstered seat, Taylor watched the flying landscape. But his thoughts were upon the two men he had overheard talking about the girl in the diner. Taylor made a grimace of disgust at the great world through which the train was speeding; and his feline grin when his thoughts dwelt definitely upon Carrington, indicated that the genial waiter had not erred greatly in saying Taylor was not “scary.”

Upon entering, Taylor had flashed a rapid glance into the car. He had seen Carrington and Parsons sitting together in one of the seats and, farther down, the girl, leaning back, was looking out of the window. Her back was toward Taylor. She had not seen him enter the car – and he was certain she had not seen him leave it to go to the diner. He had thought – as he had glanced at her as he went into the smoking compartment – that, despite the girl’s seemingly affectionate manner toward Parsons, and her cordial treatment of the big man, her manner indicated the presence of a certain restraint. And as he looked toward her, he wondered if Parsons or the big man had told her anything of the conversation in the diner in which he himself figured.

And now, looking out of the window, he decided that even if the men had told her, she would not betray her knowledge to him – unless it were to give him another scornful glance – the kind she threw at him when she saw him as he sat behind the two men when they had been talking of Dawes. Taylor reddened and gritted his teeth impotently; for he knew that if the two men had told her anything, they would have informed her, merely, that they had again caught him listening to them. And for that double offense, Taylor knew there would be no pardon from her.

Half an hour later, while still thinking of the girl and the men, Taylor felt the train slowing down. Peering as far ahead as he could by pressing his face against the glass of the window, Taylor saw the train was entering a big cut between some hills. It was a wild section, with a heavy growth of timber skirting the hills – on Taylor’s side of the train – and running at a sharp angle toward the right-of-way came a small river.

Taylor recognized the place as Toban’s Siding. He did not know how the spot had come by its name; nor did he know much about it except that there was a spur of track and a water-tank. And when the train began to slow down he supposed the engineer had decided to stop to take on water. He found himself wondering, though, why that should be necessary, for he was certain the train had stopped for water a few miles back, while he had been in the dining-car.

The train was already late, and Taylor grinned as he settled farther back in the seat and drew a sigh of resignation. There was no accounting for the whims of an engineer, he supposed.

He felt the train come to a jerking stop; and then fell a silence. An instant later the silence was broken by two sharp reports, a distinct interval between them. Taylor sat erect, the smile leaving his face, and his lips setting grimly as the word “Hold-up” came from between them.

Marion Harlan also heard the two reports. Stories of train robberies – recollections of travelers’ tales recurred in her brain as she sat, for the first tense instant following the reports, listening for other sounds. Her face grew a little pale, and a tremor ran over her; but she did not feel a bit like screaming – though in all the stories she had ever read, women always yielded to the hysteria of that moment in which a train-robber makes his presence known.

She was not frightened, though she was just a trifle nervous, and more than a trifle curious. So she pressed her cheek against the window-glass and looked forward.

What she saw caused her to draw back again, her curiosity satisfied. For on the side of the cut near the engine, she had seen a man with a rifle – a masked man, tall and rough-looking – and it seemed to her that the weapon in his hands was menacing someone in the engine-cab.

She stiffened, looking quickly around the car. None of the passengers had moved. Carrington and Parsons were still sitting together in the seat. They were sitting erect, though, and she saw they, too, were curious. More, she saw that both men were pale, and that Carrington, the instant she turned, became active – bending over, apparently trying to hide something under a seat. That movement on Carrington's part was convincing, and the girl drew a deep breath.

While she was debating the wisdom of permitting her curiosity to drive her to the door nearest her to determine what had happened, the door burst open and a masked man appeared in the opening!

While she stared at him, he uttered the short, terse command:

“Hands up!”

She supposed that meant her, as well as the men in the car, and she complied, though with a resentful glare at the mask.

Daringly she turned her head and glanced back. Carrington had his hands up, too; and Parsons – and the tourist, and the other man. She did not see Taylor – though she wondered, on the instant, if he, too, would obey the train-robber's command.

She decided he would – any other course would have been foolhardy; though she could not help remembering that queer gleam in Taylor's eyes. That gleam, it had seemed to her, was a reflection of – not foolhardiness, but of sheer courage.

However, she had little time to speculate. The masked man advanced, a heavy gun in his right hand, its muzzle moving from side to side, menacing them all.

He halted when he had advanced to within a step of the girl.

“You guys set tight!” he ordered gruffly – in the manner of the train-robber of romance. “If you go to lettin' down your sky-hooks one little quiver, I bore you so fast an' plenty that you'll think you're a colander!” Then he turned the mask toward the girl; she could feel his eyes burning through it.

“Shell out, lady!” he commanded.

She stared straight back at the eye-slits in the mask, defiance glinting her own eyes.

“I haven't any money – or anything of value – to give you,” she returned.

“You've got a pocketbook there – in your hand!” he said. “Fork it over!” He removed his hat, held it in his left hand, and extended it toward her. “Toss it in there!”

Hesitatingly, she obeyed, though not without a vindictive satisfaction in knowing that he would find little in the purse to compensate him for his trouble. She could see his eyes gleam greedily as he still looked at her.

“Now that chain an' locket you've got around your neck!” he ordered. “Quick!” he added, savagely, as she stiffened and glared at him.

She did as she was bidden, though; for she had no doubt he would kill her – at least his manner indicated he would. And so she removed it, held it lingering in her hand for an instant, and then tossed it into the hat. She gulped as she did so, for the trinket had been given to her by her father before he left home to go on that pilgrimage from which he had never returned.

“That's all, eh?” snarled the man. “Well, I ain't swallowin' that! I'm goin' to search you!”

She believed she must have screamed at that. She knew she stood up, prepared to fight him if he attempted to carry out his threat; and once on her feet she looked backward.

Neither Carrington nor Parsons had moved – they were palely silent, watching, not offering to interfere. As for that, she knew that any sign of interference on the part of her friends would result in their instant death. But she did not know what they *should* do! Something must be done, for she could not permit the indignity the man threatened!

Still looking backward, she saw Taylor standing at the end of the car – where the partition of the smoking-compartment extended outward. He held a gun in each hand. He had heard her scream, and on his face as the girl turned toward him, she saw a mirthless grin that made her shiver. She believed it must have been her gasp that caused the train-robber to look swiftly at Taylor.

Whatever had caused the man to look toward the rear of the car, he saw Taylor; and the girl saw him stiffen as his pistol roared in her ears. Taylor's pistols crashed at the same instant – twice – the reports almost together. Afterward she could not have told what surprised her the most – seeing the man at her side drop his pistol and lurch limply against a corner of the seat opposite her, and from there slide gently to the floor, grunting; or the spectacle of Taylor, arrayed in cowboy garb, emerging from the door of the smoking-compartment, the mirthless smile on his face, and his guns – he had used both – blazing forth death to the man who had threatened her.

Nor could she – afterward – have related what followed the sudden termination of the incident in the car. Salient memories stood out – the vivid and tragic recollection of chief incidents that occurred immediately; but she could not have even guessed how they happened.

She saw Taylor as he stood for an instant looking down at the man after he came running forward to where the other lay; and she saw Taylor leap for the front door of the car, vanish through it, and slam it after him.

For an instant after that there was silence, during which she shuddered as she tried to keep her gaze from the thing that lay doubled oddly in the aisle.

And then she heard more shooting. It came from the direction of the engine – the staccato crashing of pistols; the shouts of men, their voices raised in anger.

Pressing her cheek against the window-pane, and looking forward toward the engine, she saw Taylor. With a gun in each hand, he was running down the little level between the track and the steep wall of the cut, toward her. She noted that his face still wore the mirthless grin that had been on it when he shot the train-robber in the car; though his eyes were alight with the lust of battle – that was all too plain – and she shivered. For Taylor, having killed one man, and grimly pursuing others, seemed to suggest the spirit of this grim, rugged country – the threat of death that seemed to linger on every hand.

She saw him snap a shot as he ran, bending far over to send the bullet under the car; she heard a pistol crash from the other side of the car; and then she saw Taylor go to his knees.

She gasped with horror and held to the window-sill, for she feared Taylor had been killed. But almost instantly she saw her error, for Taylor was on his hands and knees crawling when she could again concentrate her gaze; and she knew he was crawling under the car to catch the man who had shot from the other side.

Then Taylor disappeared, and she did not see him for a time. She heard shots, though; many of them; and then, after a great while, a silence. And during the silence she sat very still, her face white and her lips stiff, waiting.

The silence seemed to endure for an age; and then it was broken by the sound of voices, the opening of the door of the car, and the appearance of Taylor and some other men – several members of the train-crew; the express-messenger; the engineer, his right arm hanging limply – and two men, preceding the others, their hands bound, their faces sullen.

On Taylor's face was the grin that had been on it all along. The girl wondered at the man's marvelous self-control – for certainly during those moments of excitement and danger he must have been aware of the terrible risk he had been running. And then the thought struck her – she had not considered that phase of the situation before – that she *must* have screamed; that he had heard her, and had emerged from the smoking-room to protect her. She blushed, gratitude and a riot of other emotions overwhelming her, so that she leaned weakly back in the seat, succumbing to the inevitable reaction.

She did not look at Taylor again; she did not even see him as he walked toward the rear of the car, followed by the train-crew, and preceded by the two train-robbers he had captured.

But as the train-crew passed her, she heard one of them say:

“That guy's a whirlwind with a gun! Didn't do no hesitatin', did he?”

And again:

“Now, what do you suppose would make a guy jump in that way an’ run a chance of gettin’ plugged – plenty? Do you reckon he was just yearnin’ fer trouble, or do you reckon they was somethin’ else behind it?”

The girl might have answered, but she did not. She sat very still, comparing Carrington with this man who had plunged instantly into a desperate gun-fight to protect her. And she knew that Carrington would not have done as Taylor had done. And had Carrington seen her face just at that moment he would have understood that there was no possibility of him ever achieving the success of which he had dreamed.

She heard one of the men say that the two men were to be placed in the baggage-car until they reached Dawes; and then Carrington and Parsons came to where she sat.

They talked, but the girl did not hear them, for her thoughts were on the picture Taylor made when he appeared at the door of the smoking-compartment arrayed in his cowboy rigging, the grim smile on his face, his guns flaming death to the man who thought to take advantage of her helplessness.

CHAPTER V – THE UNEXPECTED

The train pulled out again presently, and the water-tank and the cut were rapidly left in the rear. Taylor returned to the smoking-room and resumed his seat, and while the girl looked out of the window, some men of the train-crew removed the body of the train-robber and obliterated all traces of the fight. And Carrington and Parsons, noting the girl's abstractedness, again left her to herself.

It had been the girl's first glimpse of a man in cowboy raiment, and, as she reflected, she knew she might have known Taylor was an unusual man. However, she knew it now.

Cursory glances at drawings she had seen made her familiar with the type, but the cowboys of those drawings had been magnificently arrayed in leather *chaparajos*, usually fringed with spangles; and with long-roweled spurs; magnificent wide brims – also bespangled, and various other articles of personal adornment, bewildering and awe inspiring.

But this man, though undoubtedly a cow-puncher, was minus the magnificent raiment of the drawings. And, paradoxical as it may seem, the absence of any magnificent trappings made *him* seem magnificent.

But she was not so sure that it was the lack of those things that gave her that impression. He did not *bulge* in his cowboy clothing; it fitted him perfectly. She was sure it was he who gave magnificence to the clothing. Anyway, she was certain he was magnificent, and her eyes glowed. She knew, now that she had seen him in clothing to which he was accustomed, and which he knew how to wear, that she would have been more interested in him yesterday had he appeared before her arrayed as he was at this moment.

He had shown himself capable, self-reliant, confident. She would have given him her entire admiration had it not been for the knowledge that she had caught him eavesdropping. That action had almost damned him in her estimation – it would have completely and irrevocably condemned him had it not been for her recollection of the stern, almost savage interest she had seen in his eyes while he had been listening to Carrington and Parsons.

She knew because of that expression that Carrington and Parsons had been discussing something in which he took a personal interest. She had not said so much to Carrington, but her instinct told her, warned her, gave her a presentiment of impending trouble. That was what she had meant when she had told Carrington she had seen *fighting* in Taylor's eyes.

Taylor confined himself to the smoking-compartment. The negro porter, with pleasing memories of generous tips and a grimmer memory to exact his worship, hung around him, eager to serve him, and to engage him in conversation; once he grinningly mentioned the incident of the cast-off clothing of the night before.

"I ain't mentionin' it, boss – not at all! I ain't givin' you them duds till you ast for them. You done took me by s'prise, boss – you shuah did. I might' near caved when you shoved that gun under ma nose – I shuah did, boss. I don't want to have nothin' to do with your gun, boss – I shuah don't. She'd go 'pop,' an' I wouldn't be heah no more!

"I didn't reco'nize you in them heathen clo's you had on yesterday, boss; but I minds you with them duds on. I knows you; you're 'Squint' Taylor, of Dawes. I've seen you on that big black hoss of yourn, a prancin' an' a prancin' through town – more'n once I've seen you. But I didn't know you in them heathen clo's yesterday, boss – 'deed I didn't!"

Later the porter slipped into the compartment. For a minute or two he fussed around the room, setting things to order, meanwhile chuckling to himself. Occasionally he would cease his activities long enough to slap a knee with the palm of a hand, with which movement he would seem to be convulsed with merriment, and then he would resume work, chuckling audibly.

For a time Taylor took no notice of his antics, but they assailed his consciousness presently, and finally he asked:

“What’s eating you, George?”

The query was evidently just what “George” had been waiting for. For now he turned and looked at Taylor, his face solemn, but a white gleam of mirth in his eyes belying the solemnity.

“Tips is comin’ easy for George this mornin’,” he said; “they shuah is. No trouble at all. If a man wants to get tips all he has to be is a dictionary – he, he, he!”

“So you’re a dictionary, eh? Well, explain the meaning of this.” And he tossed a silver dollar to the other.

The dollar in hand, George tilted his head sidewise at Taylor.

“How on earth you know I got somethin’ to tell you?”

“How do I know I’ve got two hands?”

“By lookin’ at them, boss.”

“Well, that’s how I know you’ve got something to tell me – by looking at you.”

The porter chuckled. “I reckon it’s worth a dollar to have a young lady interested in you,” he told himself in a confidential voice, without looking at Taylor; “yassir, it’s sure worth a dollar.” He slapped his knee delightedly. “That young lady a heap interested in you, ’pears like. While ago she pens me in a corner of the platform. ‘Porter, who’s that man in the smoking-compartment – that cowboy? What’s his name, an’ where does he live?’ I hesitates, ’cause I didn’t want to betray no secrets – an’ scratch my haid. Then she pop half a dollar in my hand, an’ I tole her you are Squint Taylor, an’ that you own the Arrow ranch, not far from Dawes. An’ she thank me an’ go away, grinnin’.”

“And the young lady, George; do you know her name?”

“Them men she’s travelin’ with calls her Marion, boss.”

He peered intently at Taylor for signs of interest. He saw no such signs, and after a while, noting that Taylor seemed preoccupied, and was evidently no longer aware of his presence, he slipped out noiselessly.

At nine thirty, Taylor, looking out of the car window, noted that the country was growing familiar. Fifteen minutes later the porter stuck his head in between the curtains, saw that Taylor was still absorbed, and withdrew. At nine fifty-five the porter entered the compartment.

“We’ll be in Dawes in five minutes, boss,” he said. “I’ve toted your baggage to the door.”

The porter withdrew, and a little later Taylor got up and went out into the aisle. At the far end of the car, near the door, he saw Marion Harlan, Parsons, and Carrington.

He did not want to meet them again after what had occurred in the diner, and he cast a glance toward the door behind him, hoping that the porter had carried his baggage to that end of the car. But the platform was empty – his suitcase was at the other end.

He slipped into a seat on the side of the train that would presently disclose to him a view of Dawes’s depot, and of Dawes itself, leaned an elbow on the window-sill, and waited. Apparently the three persons at the other end of the car paid no attention to him, but glancing sidelong once he saw the girl throw an interested glance at him.

And then the air-brakes hissed; he felt the train slowing down, and he got up and walked slowly toward the girl and her companions. At about the same instant she and the others began to move toward the door; so that when the train came to a stop they were on the car platform by the time Taylor reached the door. And by the time he stepped out upon the car platform the girl and her friends were on the station platform, their baggage piled at their feet.

Dawes’s depot was merely a roofless platform; and there was no shelter from the glaring white sun that flooded it. The change from the subdued light of the coach to the shimmering, blinding glare of the sun on the wooden planks of the platform affected Taylor’s eyes, and he was forced to look downward as he alighted. And then, not looking up, he went to the baggage-car and pulled his two prisoners out.

Looking up as he walked down the platform with the two men, he saw a transformed Dawes.

The little, frame station building had been a red, dingy blot beside the glistening rails that paralleled the town. It was now gaily draped with bunting – red, white, and blue – which he recognized as having been used on the occasion of the town's anniversary celebration.

A big American flag topped the ridge of the station; other flags projected from various angles of the frame.

Most of the town's other buildings were replicas of the station in the matter of decorations – festoons of bunting ran here and there from building to building; broad bands of it were stretched across the fronts of other buildings; gay loops of it crossed the street, suspended to form triumphal arches; flags, wreaths of laurel, Japanese lanterns, and other paraphernalia of the decorator's art were everywhere.

Down the street near the Castle Hotel, Taylor saw transparencies, but he could not make out the words on them.

He grinned, for certainly the victor of yesterday's election was outdoing himself.

He looked into the face of a man who stood near him on the platform – who answered his grin.

"Our new mayor is celebrating in style, eh?" he said.

"Right!" declared the man.

He was about to ask the man which candidate had been victorious – though he was certain it was Neil Norton – when he saw Marion Harlan, standing a little distance from him, smiling at him.

It was a broad, impersonal smile, such as one citizen of a town might exchange with another when both are confronted with the visible evidences of political victory; and Taylor responded to it with one equally impersonal. Whereat the girl's smile faded, and her gaze, still upon Taylor, became speculative. Its quality told Taylor that he should not presume upon the smile.

Taylor had no intention of presuming anything. Not even the porter's story of the girl's interest in him had affected him to the extent of fatuous imaginings. A woman's curiosity, he supposed, had led her to inquire about him. He expected she rarely saw men arrayed as he was – and as he had been arrayed the day before.

The girl's gaze went from Taylor to the street in the immediate vicinity of the station, and for the first time since alighting on the platform Taylor saw a mass of people near him.

Looking sharply at them, he saw many faces in the mass that he knew. They all seemed to be looking at him and, with the suddenness of a stroke came to him the consciousness that there was no sound – that silence, deep and unusual, reigned in Dawes. The train, usually merely stopping at the station and then resuming its trip, was still standing motionless behind him. With a sidelong glance he saw the train-crew standing near the steps of the cars, looking at him. The porter and the waiter with whose faces he was familiar, were grinning at him.

Taylor felt that his own grin, as he gazed around at the faces that were all turned toward him, was vacuous and foolish. He *felt* foolish. For he knew something had attracted the attention of all these people to him, and he had not the slightest idea what it was. For an instant he feared that through some mental lapse he had forgotten to remove his "dude" clothing; and he looked down at his trousers and felt of his shirt, to reassure himself. And he gravely and intently looked at his prisoners, wondering if by any chance some practical joker of the town had arranged the train robbery for his special benefit. If that were the explanation it had been grim hoax – for two men had been killed in the fight.

Looking up again, he saw that the grins on the faces of the people around him had grown broader – and several loud guffaws of laughter reached his ears. He looked at Marion Harlan, and saw a puzzled expression on her face. Carrington, too, was looking at him, and Parsons, whose smile was a smirk of perplexity.

Taylor reddened with embarrassment. A resentment that grew swiftly to an angry intolerance, seized him. He straightened, squared his shoulders, thrust out his chin, and shoving his prisoners before him, took several long strides across the station platform.

This movement brought him close to Marion Harlan and her friends, and his further progress was barred by a man who placed a hand against his chest.

This man, too, was grinning. He seized Taylor's shoulders with both hands and looked into his face, the grin on his own broad and expanding.

"Welcome home – you old son-of-a-gun!" said the man.

His grin was infectious and Taylor answered it, dropping his suitcase and looking the other straight in the eyes.

"Norton," he said, "what in hell is the cause of all this staring at me? Can't a man leave town for a few days and come back without everybody looking at him as though he were a curiosity?"

Norton – a tall, slender, sinewy man with broad shoulders – laughed aloud and deliberately winked at several interested citizens who had followed Taylor's progress across the platform, and who now stood near him, grinning.

"You are a curiosity, man. You're the first mayor of this man's town! Lordy," he said to the surrounding faces, "he hasn't tumbled to it yet!"

The color left Taylor's face; he stared hard at Norton; he gazed in bewilderment at the faces near him.

"Mayor?" he said. "Why, good Lord, man, I wasn't here yesterday!"

"But your friends were!" yelled the delighted Norton. He raised his voice, so that it reached far into the crowd on the street:

"He's sort of fussed up, boys; this honor being conferred on him so sudden; but give him time and he'll talk your heads off!" He leaned over to Taylor and whispered in his ear.

"Grin, man, for God's sake! Don't stand there like a wooden man; they'll think you don't appreciate it! It's the first time I ever saw you lose your nerve. Buck up, man; why, they simply swamped Danforth; wiped him clean off the map!"

Norton was whispering more into Taylor's ear, but Taylor could not follow the sequence of it, nor get a coherent meaning out of it. He even doubted that he heard Norton. He straightened, and looked around at the crowd that now was pressing in on him, and for the first time in his life he knew the mental panic and the physical sickness that overtakes the man who for the first time faces an audience whose eyes are focused on him.

For a bag of gold as big as the mountains that loomed over the distant southern horizon he could not have said a word to the crowd. But he did succeed in grinning at the faces around him, and at that the crowd yelled.

And just before the crowd closed in on him and he began to shake hands with his delighted supporters, he glanced at Marion Harlan. She was looking at him with a certain sober interest, though he was sure that back in her eyes was a sort of humorous malice – which had, however, a softening quality of admiration and, perhaps, gratitude.

His gaze went from her to Carrington. The big man was watching him with a veiled sneer which, when he met Taylor's eyes, grew open and unmistakable.

Taylor grinned broadly at him, for now it occurred to him that he would be able to thwart Carrington's designs of "getting hold of the reins." His grin at Carrington was a silent challenge, and so the other interpreted it, for his sneer grew positively venomous.

The girl caught the exchange of glances between them, for Taylor heard her say to Parsons, just before the noise of the crowd drowned her voice:

"Now I *know* he overheard you!"

Meanwhile, the two prisoners were standing near Taylor. Taylor had almost forgotten them. He was reminded of their presence when he saw Keats, the sheriff, standing near him. At just the instant Taylor looked at Keats, the latter was critically watching the prisoners.

Keats and Taylor had had many differences of opinion, for the sheriff's official actions had not merited nor received Taylor's approval. Taylor's attitude toward the man had always been that

of good-natured banter, despite the disgust he felt for the man. And now, pursuing his customary attitude, Taylor called to him:

“Specimens, eh! Picked them up at Toban’s this morning. They yearned to hold up the train. There were four, all together, but we had to put two out of business. I came pretty near forgetting them. If I hadn’t seen you just now, maybe I would have walked right off and left them here. Take them to jail, Keats.”

Keats advanced. He met Taylor’s eyes and his lips curved with a sneer:

“Pullin’ off a little grand-stand play, eh! Well, it’s a mighty clever idea. First you get elected mayor, an’ then you come in here, draggin’ along a couple of mean-lookin’ hombres, an’ say they’ve tried to hold up the train at Toban’s. It sounds mighty fishy to me!”

Taylor laughed. He heard a chuckle behind him, and he turned, to see Carrington grinning significantly at Keats. Taylor’s eyes chilled as his gaze went from one man to the other, for the exchange of glances told him that between the men there was a common interest, which would link them together against him. And in the dead silence that followed Keats’s words, Taylor drawled, grinning coldly:

“Meaning that I’m a liar, Keats?”

His voice was gentle, and his shoulders seemed to droop a little as though in his mind was a desire to placate Keats. But there were men in Dawes who had seen Taylor work his guns, and these held their breath and began to shove backward. That slow, drooping of Taylor’s shoulders was a danger signal, a silent warning that Taylor was ready for action, swift and violent.

And faces around Taylor whitened as the man stood there facing Keats, his shoulders drooping still lower, the smile on his face becoming one of cold, grim mockery.

The discomfiture of Keats was apparent. Indecision and fear were in the set of his head – bowed a little; and a dread reluctance was in his shifting eyes and the pasty-white color of his face. It was plain that Keats had overplayed; he had not intended to arouse the latent tiger in Taylor; he had meant merely to embarrass him.

“Meaning that I’m a liar, Keats?”

Again Taylor’s voice was gentle, though this time it carried a subtle taunt.

Desperately harried, Keats licked his hot lips and cast a sullen glance around at the crowd. Then his gaze went to Taylor’s face, and he drew a slow breath.

“I reckon I wasn’t meanin’ just that,” he said.

“Of course,” smiled Taylor; “that’s no way for a sheriff to act. Take them in, Keats,” he added, waving a hand at the prisoners; “it’s been so long since the sheriff of this county arrested a man that the jail’s gettin’ tired, yawning for somebody to get into it.”

He turned his back on Keats and looked straight at Carrington:

“Have you got any ideas along the sheriff’s line?” he asked.

Carrington flushed and his lips went into a sullen pout. He did not speak, merely shaking his head, negatively.

Keats’s glance at Taylor was malignant with hate; and Carrington’s sullen, venomous look was not unnoticed by the crowd. Keats stepped forward and seized the two prisoners, hustling them away, muttering profanely.

And then Taylor was led away by Norton and a committee of citizens, leaving Carrington, the girl and Parsons alone on the platform.

“Looks like we’re going to have trouble lining things up,” remarked Parsons. “Danforth – ”

“You shut up!” snapped Carrington. “Danforth’s an ass and so are you!”

CHAPTER VI – A MAN MAKES PLANS

Within an hour after his arrival in Dawes, Carrington was sitting in the big front room of his suite in the Castle Hotel, inspecting the town.

A bay window projected over the sidewalk, and from a big leather chair placed almost in the center of the bay between two windows and facing a third, at the front, Carrington had a remarkably good view of the town.

Dawes was a thriving center of activity, with reasons for its prosperity. Walking toward the Castle from the railroad station, Carrington had caught a glimpse of the big dam blocking the constricted neck of a wide basin west of the town – and farther westward stretched a vast agricultural section, level as a floor, with a carpet of green slumbering in the white sunlight, and dotted with young trees that seemed almost ready to bear.

There were many small buildings on the big level, some tenthouses, and straight through the level was a wide, sparkling stream of water, with other and smaller streams intersecting it. These streams were irrigation ditches, and the moisture in them was giving life to a vast section of country that had previously been arid and dead.

But Carrington's interest had not been so much for the land as for the method of irrigation. To be sure, he had not stopped long to look, but he had comprehended the system at a glance. There were locks and flumes and water-gates, and plenty of water. But the irrigation company had not completed its system. Carrington intended to complete it.

Dawes was two years old, and it had the appearance of having been hastily constructed. Its buildings were mostly of frame – even the Castle, large and pretentious, and the town's aristocrat of hostelry, was of frame. Carrington smiled, for later, when he had got himself established, he intended to introduce an innovation in building material.

The courthouse was a frame structure. It was directly across the street from the Castle, and Carrington could look into its windows and see some men at work inside at desks. He had no interest in the post office, for that was of the national government – and yet, perhaps, after a while he might take some interest in that.

For Carrington's vision, though selfish, was broad. A multitude of men of the Carrington type have taken bold positions in the eternal battle for progress, and all have contributed something toward the ultimate ideal. And not all have been scoundrels.

Carrington's vision, however, was blurred by the mote of greed. Dawes was flourishing; he intended to modernize it, but in the process of modernization he intended to be the chief recipient of the material profits.

Carrington had washed, shaved himself, and changed his clothes; and as he sat in the big leather chair in the bay, overlooking the street, he looked smooth, sleek, and capable.

He had seemed massive in the Pullman, wearing a traveling suit of some light material, and his corpulent waist-line had been somewhat accentuated.

The blue serge suit he wore now made a startling change in his appearance. It made his shoulders seem broader; it made the wide, swelling arch of his chest more pronounced, and in inverse ratio it contracted the corpulent waist-line – almost eliminating it.

Carrington looked to be what he was – a big, virile, magnetic giant of a man in perfect health.

He had not been sitting in the leather chair for more than fifteen minutes when there came a knock on a door behind him.

"Come!" he commanded.

A tall man entered, closed the door behind him and with hat in hand stood looking at Carrington with a half-smile which might have been slightly diffident, or impudent or defiant – it was puzzling.

Carrington had twisted in his chair to get a glimpse of his visitor; he now grunted, resumed his former position and said, gruffly:

“Hello, Danforth!”

Danforth stepped over to the bay, and without invitation drew up a chair and seated himself near Carrington.

Danforth was slender, big-framed, and sinewy. His shoulders were broad and his waist slim. There was a stubborn thrust to his chin; his nose was a trifle too long to perfectly fit his face; his mouth a little too big, and the lips too thin. The nose had a slight droop that made one think of selfishness and greed, and the thin lips, with a downward swerve at the corners, suggested cruelty.

These defects, however, were not prominent, for they were offset by a really distinguished head with a mass of short, curly hair that ruffled attractively under the brim of the felt hat he wore.

The hat was in his right hand, now, but it had left its impress on his hair, and as he sat down he ran his free hand through it. Danforth knew where his attractions were.

He grinned shallowly at Carrington when the latter turned and looked at him.

He cleared his throat. “I suppose you’ve heard about it?”

“I couldn’t help hearing,” Carrington scowled at the other. “What in hell was wrong? We send you out here, give you more than a year’s time and all the money you want – which has been plenty – and then you lose. What in the devil was the matter?”

“Too much Taylor,” smirked the other.

“But what else?”

“Nothing else – just Taylor.”

Carrington exclaimed profanely.

“Why, the man didn’t even know he was a candidate! He was on the train I came in on!”

“It was Neil Norton’s scheme,” explained Danforth. “I had *him* beaten to a frazzle. I suppose he knew it. Two days before election he suddenly withdrew his name and substituted Taylor’s. You know what happened. He licked me two to one. He was too popular for me – damn him!”

“Norton owns a newspaper here – the only one in the county – the *Eagle*.”

“Why didn’t you buy him?”

Danforth grinned sarcastically: “I didn’t feel that reckless.”

“Honest, eh?”

Carrington rested his chin in the palm of his right hand and scowled into the street. He was convinced that Danforth had done everything he could to win the election, and he was bitterly chagrined over the result. But that result was not the dominating thought in his mind. He kept seeing Taylor as the latter had stood on the station platform, stunned with surprise over the knowledge that he had been so signally honored by the people of Dawes.

And Carrington had seen Marion Harlan’s glances at the man; he had been aware of the admiring smile she had given Taylor; and bitter passion gripped Carrington at the recollection of the smile.

More – he had seen Taylor’s face when the girl had smiled. The smile had thrilled Taylor – it had held promise for him, and Carrington knew it.

Carrington continued to stare out into the street. Danforth watched him furtively, in silence.

At last, not opening his lips, Carrington spoke:

“Tell me about this man, Taylor.”

“Taylor owns the Arrow ranch, in the basin south of here. His ranch covers about twenty thousand acres. He has a clear title.

“According to report, he employs about thirty men. They are holy terrors – that is, they are what is called ‘hard cases,’ though they are not outlaws by any means. Just a devil-may-care bunch that raises hell when it strikes town. They swear by Taylor.”

So far as Carrington could see, everybody in Dawes swore by Taylor. Carrington grimaced.

“That isn’t what I want to know,” he flared. “How long has he been here; what kind of a fellow is he?”

“Taylor owned the Arrow before Dawes was founded. When the railroad came through it brought with it some land-sharks that tried to frame up on the ranch-owners in the vicinity. It was a slick scheme, they tell me. They had clouded every title, and figured to grab the whole county, it seems.

“Taylor went after them. People I’ve talked with here say it was a dandy shindy while it lasted. The land-grabbers brought the courts in, and a crooked judge. Taylor fought them, crooked judge and all, to a bite-the-dust finish. Toward the end it was a free-for-all – and the land-grabbers were chased out of the county.

“Naturally, the folks around here think a lot of Taylor for the part he played in the deal. Besides that, he’s a man that makes friends quickly – and holds them.”

“Has Taylor any interests besides his ranch?”

“A share in the water company, I believe. He owns some land in town; and he is usually on all the public committees here.”

“About thirty, isn’t he?”

“Twenty-eight.”

Carrington looked at the other with a sidelong, sneering grin:

“Have any ladies come into his young life?”

Danforth snickered. “You’ve got me – I hadn’t inquired. He doesn’t seem to be much of a ladies’ man, though, I take it. Doesn’t seem to have time to monkey with them.”

“H-m!” Carrington’s lips went into a pout as he stared straight ahead of him.

Danforth at last broke a long silence with:

“Well, we got licked, all right. What’s going to happen now? Are you going to quit?”

“Quit?” Carrington snapped the word at the other, his eyes flaming with rage. Then he laughed, mirthlessly, resuming: “This defeat was unexpected; I wasn’t set for it. But it won’t alter things – very much. I’ll have to shake a leg, that’s all. What time does the next train leave here for the capital?”

“At two o’clock this afternoon.” Danforth’s eyes widened as he looked at Carrington. The curiosity in his glance caused Carrington to laugh shortly.

“You don’t mean that the governor is in this thing?” said Danforth.

“Why not?” demanded Carrington. “Bah! Do you think I came in with my eyes closed!”

There was a new light in Danforth’s eyes – the flame of renewed hope.

“Then we’ve still got a chance,” he declared.

Carrington laughed. “A too-popular mayor is not a good thing for a town,” he said significantly.

CHAPTER VII – THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

Marion Harlan and her uncle, Elam Parsons, did not accompany Carrington to the Castle Hotel. By telegraph, through Danforth, Carrington had bought a house near Dawes, and shortly after Quinton Taylor left the station platform accompanied by his friends and admirers, Marion and her uncle were in a buckboard riding toward the place that, henceforth, was to be their home.

For that question had been settled before the party left Westwood. Parsons had declared his future activities were to be centered in Dawes, that he had no further interests to keep him in Westwood, and that he intended to make his home in Dawes.

Certainly Marion had few interests in the town that had been the scene of the domestic tragedy that had left her parentless. She was glad to get away. For though she had not been to blame for what had happened, she was painfully conscious of the stares that followed her everywhere, and aware of the morbid curiosity with which her neighbors regarded her. Also – through the medium of certain of her “friends,” she had become cognizant of speculative whisperings, such as: “To think of being brought up like that? Do you think she will be like her mother?” Or – “What’s bred in the bone, *et cetera*.”

Perhaps these good people did not mean to be unkind; certainly the crimson stains that colored the girl’s cheeks when she passed them should have won their charity and their silence.

There was nothing in Westwood for her; and so she was glad to get away. And the trip westward toward Dawes opened a new vista of life to her. She was leaving the old and the tragic and adventuring into the new and promising, where she could face life without the onus of a shame that had not been hers.

Before she was half way to Dawes she had forgotten Westwood and its wagging tongues. She alone, of all the passengers in the Pullman, had not been aware of the heat and the discomfort. She had loved every foot of the great prairie land that, green and beautiful, had flashed past the car window; she had gazed with eager, interested eyes into the far reaches of the desert through which she had passed, filling her soul with the mystic beauty of this new world, reveling in its vastness and in the atmosphere of calm that seemed to engulf it.

Dawes had not disappointed her; on the contrary, she loved it at first sight. For though Dawes was new and crude, it looked rugged and honest – and rather too busy to hesitate for the purpose of indulging in gossip – idle or otherwise. Dawes, she was certain, was occupying itself with progress – a thing that, long since, Westwood had forgotten.

Five minutes after she had entered the buckboard, the spirit of this new world had seized upon the girl and she was athrob and atingle with the joy of it. It filled her veins; it made her cheeks flame and her eyes dance. And the strange aroma – the pungent breath of the sage, borne to her on the slight breeze – she drew into her lungs with great long breaths that seemed to intoxicate her.

“Oh,” she exclaimed delightedly, “isn’t it great! Oh, I love it!”

Elam Parsons grinned at her – the habitual smirk with which he recognized all emotion not his own.

“It *does* look like a good field for business,” he conceded.

The girl looked at him quickly, divined the sordidness of his thoughts, and puckered her brows in a frown. And thereafter she enjoyed the esthetic beauties of her world without seeking confirmation from her uncle.

Her delight grew as the journey to the new home progressed. She saw the fertile farming country stretching far in the big section of country beyond the water-filled basin; her eyes glowed as the irrigation ditches, with their locks and gates, came under her observation; and she sat silent, awed by the mightiness of it all – the tall, majestic mountains looming somberly many miles distant behind a glowing mist – like a rose veil or a gauze curtain lowered to partly conceal the mystic beauty of them.

Intervening were hills and flats and draws and valleys, and miles and miles of level grass land, green and peaceful in the shimmering sunlight that came from somewhere near the center of the big, pale-blue inverted bowl of sky; she caught the silvery glitter of a river that wound its way through the country like a monstrous serpent; she saw dark blotches, miles long, which she knew were forests, for she could see the spires of trees thrusting upward. But from where she rode the trees seemed to be no larger than bushes.

Looking backward, she could see Dawes. Already the buckboard had traveled two or three miles, but the town seemed near, and she had quite a shock when she looked back at it and saw the buildings, mere huddled shanties, spoiling the beauty of her picture.

A mile or so farther – four miles altogether, Parsons told her – and they came in sight of a house. She had difficulty restraining her delight when they climbed out of the buckboard and Parsons told her the place was to be their permanent home. For it was such a house as she had longed to live in all the days of her life.

The first impression it gave her was that of spaciousness. For though only one story in height, the house contained many rooms. Those, however, she saw later.

The exterior was what intrigued her interest at first glance. So far as she knew, it was the only brick building in the country. She had seen none such in Dawes.

There was a big porch across the front; the windows were large; there were vines and plants thriving in the shade from some big cottonwood trees near by – in fact, the house seemed to have been built in a grove of the giant trees; there were several outhouses, one of which had chickens in an enclosure near it; there was a garden, well-kept; and the girl saw that back of the house ran a little stream which flowed sharply downward, later to tumble into the big basin far below the irrigation dam.

While Parsons was superintending the unloading of the buckboard, Marion explored the house. It was completely furnished, and her eyes glowed with pleasure as she inspected it. And when Parsons and the driver were carrying the baggage in she was outside the house, standing at the edge of a butte whose precipitous walls descended sharply to the floor of the irrigation basin, two or three hundred feet below. She could no longer see the cultivated level, with its irrigation ditches, but she could see the big dam, a mile or so up the valley toward Dawes, with the water creeping over it, and the big valley itself, slumbering in the pure, white light of the morning.

She went inside, slightly awed, and Parsons, noting her excitement, smirked at her. She left him and went to her room. Emerging later she discovered that Parsons was not in the house. She saw him, however, at a distance, looking out into the valley.

And then, in the kitchen, Marion came upon the housekeeper, a negro woman of uncertain age. Parsons had not told her there was to be a housekeeper.

The negro woman grinned broadly at her astonishment.

“Lawsey, ma’am; you jes’ got to have a housekeeper, I reckon! How you ever git along without a housekeeper? You’re too fine an’ dainty to keep house you’self!”

The woman’s name, the latter told her, was Martha, and there was honest delight – and, it seemed to Marion, downright relief in her eyes when she looked at the new mistress.

“You ain’t got no ‘past,’ that’s certain, honey,” she declared, with a delighted smile. “The woman that lived here befo’ had a past, honey. A man named Huggins lived in this house, an’ she said she’s his wife. Wife! Lawsey! No man has a wife like that! She had a past, that woman, an’ mebbe a present, too – he, he, he!”

“He was the man what put the railroad through here, honey. I done hear the woman say – her name was Blanche, honey – that Huggins was one of them ultra rich. But whatever it was that ailed him, honey, didn’t help his looks none. Pig-eye, I used to call him, when I’s mad at him – which was mostly all the time – he, he, he!”

The girl’s face whitened. Was she never to escape the atmosphere she loathed? She shuddered and Martha patted her sympathetically on the shoulder.

“There, there, honey; you ain’t ’sponsible for other folks’ affairs. Jes’ you hold you’ head up an’ go about you’ business. Nobody say anything to you because you’ livin’ here.”

But Martha’s words neither comforted nor consoled the girl. She went again to her room and sat for a long time, looking out of a window. For now all the cheer had gone out of the house; the rooms looked dull and dreary – and empty, as of something gone out of them.

CHAPTER VIII – CONCERNING “SQUINT”

Marion Harlan had responded eagerly to Carrington’s fabrication regarding the rumor of Lawrence Harlan’s presence in Dawes. Carrington’s reference to her father’s sojourn in the town had been vague – he merely told her that a rumor had reached him – a man’s word, without details – and she had accepted it at its face value. She was impatient to run the rumor down, to personally satisfy herself, and she believed Carrington.

But she spent a fruitless week interrogating people in Dawes. She had gone to the courthouse, there to pass long hours searching the records – and had found nothing. Then, systematically, she had gone from store to store – making small purchases and quizzing everyone she came in contact with. None had known a man named Harlan; it seemed that not one person in Dawes had ever heard of him.

Parsons had returned to town in the buckboard shortly after noon on the day of their arrival at the new house, and she had not seen him again until the following morning. Then he had told her that Carrington had gone away – he did not know where. Carrington would not return for a week or two, he inferred.

Parsons had bought some horses. A little bay, short-coupled but wiry, belonged to her, Parsons said – it was a present from Carrington.

She hesitated to accept the horse; but the little animal won her regard by his affectionate mannerisms, and at the end of a day of doubt and indecision she accepted him.

She had ridden horses in Westwood – bareback when no one had been looking, and with a side-saddle at other times – but she discovered no side-saddle in Dawes. However, she did encounter no difficulty in unearthing a riding-habit with a divided skirt, and though she got into that with a pulse of trepidation and embarrassment, she soon discovered it to be most comfortable and convenient.

And Dawes did not stare at her because she rode “straddle.” At first she was fearful, and watched Dawes’s citizens furtively; but when she saw that she attracted no attention other than would be attracted by any good-looking young woman in more conventional attire, she felt more at ease. But she could not help thinking about the sanctimonious inhabitants of Westwood. Would they not have declared their kindly predictions vindicated had they been permitted to see her? She could almost hear the chorus of “I-told-you-so’s” – they rang in her ears over a distance of many hundreds of miles!

But the spirit of the young, unfettered country had got into her soul, and she went her way unmindful of Westwood’s opinions.

For three days she continued her search for tidings of her father, eager and hopeful; and then for the remainder of the week she did her searching mechanically, doggedly, with a presentiment of failure to harass her.

And then one morning, when she was standing beside her horse near the stable door, ready to mount and fully determined to pursue the Carrington rumor to the end, the word she sought was brought to her.

She saw a horseman coming toward her from the direction of Dawes. He was not Parsons – for the rider was short and broad; and besides, Parsons was spending most of his time in Dawes.

The girl watched the rider, assured, as he came nearer, that he was a stranger; and when he turned his horse toward her, and she saw he *was* a stranger, she leaned close and whispered to her own animal:

“Oh, Billy; what if it *should* be!”

An instant later she was watching the stranger dismount within a few feet of where she was standing.

He was short and stocky, and undeniably Irish. He was far past middle age, as his gray hair and seamed wrinkles of his face indicated; but there was the light of a youthful spirit and good-nature in his eyes that squinted at the girl with a quizzical interest.

With the bridle-rein in the crook of his elbow and his hat in his hand, he bowed elaborately to the girl.

“Would ye be Miss Harlan, ma’am?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed, her face alight with eagerness, for now since the man had spoken her name the presentiment of news grew stronger.

The man’s face flashed into a wide, delighted grin and he reached out a hand, into which she placed one of hers, hardly knowing that she did it.

“Me name’s Ben Mullarky, ma’am. I’ve got a little shack down on the Rabbit-Ear – which is a crick, for all the name some locoed ignoramus give it. You c’ud see the shack from here, ma’am – if ye’d look sharp.”

He pointed out a spot to her – a wooded section far out in the big level country southward, beside the river – and she saw the roof of a building near the edge of the timber.

“That’s me shack,” offered Mullarky. “Me ol’ woman an’ meself owns her – an’ a quarter-section – all proved. We call it seven miles from the shack to Dawes. That’d make it about three from here.”

“Yes, yes,” said the girl eagerly.

He grinned at her. “Comin’ in to town this mornin’ for some knickknacks for me ol’ woman, I hear from Coleman – who keeps a store – that there’s a fine-lookin’ girl named Harlan searchin’ the country for news of her father, Larry Harlan. I knowed him, ma’am.”

“You did? Oh, how wonderful!” She stood erect, breathing fast, her eyes glowing with mingled joy and impatience. She had not caught the significance of Mullarky’s picturesque past tense, “*knowed*,” but when he repeated it, with just a slight emphasis:

“I *knowed* him, ma’am,” she drew a quick, full breath and her face whitened.

“You knew him,” she said slowly. “Does that mean – ”

Mullarky scratched his head and looked downward, not meeting her eyes.

“Squint Taylor would tell you the story, ma’am,” he said. “You see, ma’am, he worked for Squint, an’ Squint was with him when it happened.”

“He’s dead, then?” She stood rigid, tense, searching Mullarky’s face with wide, dreading eyes, and when she saw his gaze shift under hers she drew a deep sigh and leaned against Billy, covering her face with her hands.

Mullarky did not attempt to disturb her; he stood, looking glumly at her, reproaching himself for his awkwardness in breaking the news to her.

It was some minutes before she faced him again, and then she was pale and composed, except for the haunting sadness that had come into her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. “Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Taylor – ‘Squint,’ you called him? Is that the Taylor who was elected mayor – last week?”

“The same, ma’am.” He turned and pointed southward, into the big, level country that she admired so much.

“Do you see that big timber grove ’way off there – where the crick doubles to the north – with that big green patch beyond?” She nodded. “That’s Taylor’s ranch – the Arrow. You’ll find him there. He’s a mighty fine man, ma’am. Larry Harlan would tell you that if he was here. Taylor was the best friend that Larry Harlan ever had – out here.” He looked at her pityingly. “I’m sorry, ma’am, to be the bearer of ill news; but when I heard you was in town, lookin’ for your father, I couldn’t help comin’ to see you.”

She asked some questions about her father – which Mullarky answered; though he could tell her nothing that would acquaint her with the details of her father’s life between the time he had left Westwood and the day of his appearance in this section of the world.

“Mebbe Taylor will know, ma’am,” he repeated again and again. And then, when she thanked him once more and mounted her horse, he said:

“You’ll be goin’ to see Squint right away, ma’am, I suppose. You can ease your horse right down the slope, here, an’ strike the level. You’ll find a trail right down there. You’ll follow it along the crick, an’ it’ll take you into the Arrow ranchhouse. It’ll take you past me own shack, too; an’ if you’ll stop in an’ tell the ol’ woman who you are, she’ll be tickled to give you a snack an’ a cup of tea. She liked Larry herself.”

The girl watched Mullarky ride away. He turned in the saddle, at intervals, to grin at her.

Then, when Mullarky had gone she leaned against Billy and stood for a long time, her shoulders quivering.

At last, though, she mounted the little animal and sent him down the slope.

She found the trail about which Mullarky had spoken, and rode it steadily; though she saw little of the wild, virgin country through which she passed, because her brimming eyes blurred it all.

She came at last to Mullarky’s shack, and a stout, motherly woman, with an ample bosom and a kindly face, welcomed her.

“So you’re Larry Harlan’s daughter,” said Mrs. Mullarky, when her insistence had brought the girl inside the cabin; “you poor darlin’. An’ Ben told you – the blunderin’ idiot. He’ll have a piece of my mind when he comes back! An’ you’re stoppin’ at the old Huggins house, eh?” She looked sharply at the girl, and the latter’s face reddened. Whereat Mrs. Mullarky patted her shoulder and murmured:

“It ain’t your fault that there’s indacint women in the world; an’ no taint of them will ever reach you. But the fools in this world is always waggin’ their tongues, associatin’ what’s happened with what they think will happen. An’ mebbe they’ll wonder about you. It’s your uncle that’s there with you, you say? Well, then, don’t you worry. You run right along to see Squint Taylor, now, an’ find out what he knows about your father. Taylor’s a mighty fine man, darlin’.”

And so Marion went on her way again, grateful for Mrs. Mullarky’s kindness, but depressed over the knowledge that the atmosphere of suspicion, which had enveloped her in Westwood, had followed her into this new country which, she had hoped, would have been more friendly.

She came in sight of the Arrow ranchhouse presently, and gazed at it admiringly. It was a big building, of adobe brick, with a wide porch – or gallery – entirely surrounding it. It was in the center of a big space, with timber flanking it on three sides, and at the north was a green stretch of level that reached to the sloping banks of a river.

There were several smaller buildings; a big, fenced enclosure – the corrals, she supposed; a pasture, and a garden. Everything was in perfect order, and had it not been for the aroma of the sage that assailed her nostrils, the awe-inspiring bigness of it all, the sight of thousands of cattle – which she could see through the trees beyond the clearing, she could have likened the place to a big eastern farmhouse of the better class, isolated and prosperous.

She dismounted from her horse at a corner of the house, near a door that opened upon the wide porch, and stood, pale and hesitant, looking at the door, which was closed.

And as she stared at the door, it swung inward and Quinton Taylor appeared in the opening.

CHAPTER IX – A MAN LIES

Taylor was arrayed as Marion had mentally pictured him that day when, in the Pullman, she had associated him with ranches and ranges. Evidently he was ready to ride, for leather chaps incased his legs. The chaps were plain, not even adorned with the spangles of the drawings she had seen; and they were well-worn and shiny in spots. A pair of big, Mexican spurs were on the heels of his boots; the inevitable cartridge-belt about his middle, sagging with the heavy pistol; a quirt dangled from his left hand. Assuredly he belonged in this environment – he even seemed to dominate it.

She had wondered how he would greet her; but his greeting was not at all what she had feared it would be. For he did not presume upon their meeting on the train; he gave no sign that he had ever seen her before; there was not even a glint in his eyes to tell her that he remembered the scornful look she had given him when she discovered him listening to the conversation carried on between her uncle and Carrington. His manner indicated that if *she* did not care to mention the matter *he* would not. His face was grave as he stepped across the porch and stood before her. And he said merely:

“Are you looking for someone, ma’am?”

“I came to see you, Mr. Taylor,” she said. (And then he knew that the negro porter on the train had not lied when he said the girl had paid him for certain information.)

But Taylor’s face was still grave, for he thought he knew what she had come for. He had overheard a great deal of the conversation between Parsons and Carrington in the dining-car, and he remembered such phrases as: “That fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality; To get her out here, where there isn’t a hell of a lot of law, and a man’s will is the only thing that governs him;” and, “Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country.” Also, he remembered distinctly another phrase, uttered by Carrington: “That you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry.”

All of that conversation was vivid in Taylor’s mind, and mingled with the recollection of it now was a grim pity for the girl, for the hypocritical character of her supposed friends.

To be sure, the girl did not know that Parsons had lied about her father having been seen in the vicinity of Dawes; but that did not alter the fact that Larry Harlan had really been here; and Taylor surmised that she had made inquiries, thus discovering that there was truth in Carrington’s statement.

He got a chair for her and seated himself on the porch railing.

“You came to see me?” he said, encouragingly.

“I am Marion Harlan, the daughter of Lawrence Harlan,” began the girl. And then she paused to note the effect of her words on Taylor.

So far as she could see, there was no sign of emotion on Taylor’s face. He nodded, looking steadily at her.

“And you are seeking news of your father,” he said. “Who told you to come to me?”

“A man named Ben Mullarky. He said my father had worked for you – that you had been his best friend.”

She saw his lips come together in straight lines.

“Poor Larry. You knew he died, Miss Harlan?”

“Mullarky told me.” The girl’s eyes moistened. “And I should like to know something about him – how he lived after – after he left home; whether he was happy – all about him. You see, Mr. Taylor, I loved him!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.