Bower B. M.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
LITTLE FISH

Quirt Creek flowed sluggishly between willows which sagged none too gracefully across its deeper pools, or languished beside the rocky stretches that were bone dry from July to October, with a narrow channel in the centre where what water there was hurried along to the pools below. For a mile or more, where the land lay fairly level in a platter-like valley set in the lower hills, the mud that rimmed the pools was scored deep with the tracks of the "TJ up-and-down" cattle, as the double monogram of Hunter and Johnson was called.

A hard brand to work, a cattleman would tell you. Yet the TJ up-and-down herd never seemed to increase beyond a niggardly three hundred or so, though the Quirt ranch was older than its lordly neighbours, the Sawtooth Cattle Company, who numbered their cattle by tens of thousands and whose riders must have strings of fifteen horses apiece to keep them going; older too than many a modest ranch that had flourished awhile and had finished as line-camps of the Sawtooth when the Sawtooth bought ranch

and brand for a lump sum that looked big to the rancher, who immediately departed to make himself a new home elsewhere: older than others which had somehow gone to pieces when the rancher died or went to the penitentiary under the stigma of a long sentence as a cattle thief. There were many such, for the Sawtooth, powerful and stern against outlawry, tolerated no pilfering from their thousands.

The less you have, the more careful you are of your possessions. Hunter and Johnson owned exactly a section and a half of land, and for a mile and a half Quirt Creek was fenced upon either side. They hired two men, cut what hay they could from a field which they irrigated, fed their cattle through the cold weather, watched them zealously through the summer, and managed to ship enough beef each fall to pay their grocery bill and their men's wages and have a balance sufficient to buy what clothes they needed, and perhaps pay a doctor if one of them fell ill. Which frequently happened, since Brit was becoming a prey to rheumatism that sometimes kept him in bed, and Frank occasionally indulged himself in a gallon or so of bad whisky and suffered afterwards from a badly deranged digestion.

Their house was a two-room log cabin, built when logs were easier to get than lumber. That the cabin contained two rooms was the result of circumstances rather than design. Brit had hauled from the mountain-side logs long and logs short, and it had seemed a shame to cut the long ones any shorter. Later, when the outside world had crept a little closer to their wilderness – as,

go where you will, the outside world has a way of doing – he had built a lean-to shed against the cabin from what lumber there was left after building a cowshed against the log-barn.

In the early days, Brit had had a wife and two children, but the wife could not endure the loneliness of the ranch nor the inconvenience of living in a two-room log cabin. She was continually worrying over rattlesnakes and diphtheria and pneumonia, and begging Brit to sell out and live in town. She had married him because he was a cowboy, and because he was a nimble dancer and rode gallantly with silver-shanked spurs ajingle on his heels and a snake-skin band around his hat, and because a ranch away out on Quirt Creek had sounded exactly like a story in a book.

Adventures, picturesqueness, even romance, are recognised and appreciated only at a distance. Mrs Hunter lost the perspective of romance and adventure, and shed tears because there was sufficient mineral in the water to yellow her week's washing, and for various other causes which she had never foreseen and to which she refused to resign herself.

Came a time when she delivered a shrill-voiced, tear-blurred ultimatum to Brit. Either he must sell out and move to town, or she would take the children and leave him. Of towns Brit knew nothing except the post-office, saloon, cheap restaurant side, – and a barber shop where a fellow could get a shave and hair-cut before he went to see his girl. Brit could not imagine himself actually *living*, day after day, in a town. Three or four days had

always been his limit. It was in a restaurant that he had first met his wife. He had stayed three days when he had meant to finish his business in one, because there was an awfully nice girl waiting on table in the Palace, and because there was going to be a dance on Saturday night, and he wanted his acquaintance with her to develop to the point where he might ask her to go with him, and be reasonably certain of a favourable answer.

Brit would not sell his ranch. In this Frank Johnson, old-time friend and neighbour, who had taken all the land the government would allow one man to hold, and whose lines joined Brit's, profanely upheld him. They had planned to run cattle together, had their brand already recorded, and had scraped together enough money to buy a dozen young cows. Luckily, Brit had "proven up" on his homestead, so that when the irate Mrs Hunter deserted him she did not jeopardise his right to the land.

Brit was philosophical, thinking that a year or so of town life would be a cure. If he missed the children, he was free from tears and nagging complaints, so that his content balanced his loneliness. Frank proved up and came down to live with him, and the partnership began to wear into permanency. Share and share alike, they lived and worked and wrangled together like brothers.

For months Brit's wife was too angry and spiteful to write. Then she wrote acrimoniously, reminding Brit of his duty to his children. Royal was old enough for school and needed clothes. She was slaving for them as she had never thought to slave when Brit promised to honour and protect her, but the fact remained

that he was their father even if he did not act like one. She needed at least ten dollars.

Brit showed the letter to Frank, and the two talked it over solemnly while they sat on inverted feed buckets beside the stable, facing the unearthly beauty of a cloud-piled Idaho sunset. They did not feel that they could afford to sell a cow, and two-year-old steers were out of the question. They decided to sell an unbroken colt that a cow-puncher fancied. In a week Brit wrote a brief, matter-of-fact letter to Minnie and enclosed a much-worn ten-dollar bank-note. With the two dollars and a half which remained of his share of the sale, Brit sent to a mail-order house for a mackinaw coat, and felt cheated afterwards because the coat was not "wind and waterproof" as advertised in the catalogue.

More months passed, and Brit received, by registered mail, a notice that he was being sued for divorce on the ground of non-support. He felt hurt, because, as he pointed out to Frank, he was perfectly willing to support Minnie and the kids if they came back where he could have a chance. He wrote this painstakingly to the lawyer and received no reply. Later he learned from Minnie that she had freed herself from him, and that she was keeping boarders and asking no odds of him.

To come at once to the end of Brit's matrimonial affairs, he heard from the children once in a year, perhaps, after they were old enough to write. He did not send them money, because he seemed never to have any money to send, and because they did not ask for any. Dumbly he sensed, as their handwriting and their

spelling improved, that his children were growing up. But when he thought of them they seemed remote, prattling youngsters whom Minnie was for ever worrying over and who seemed to have been always under the heels of his horse, or under the wheels of his wagon, or playing with the pitchfork, or wandering off into the sage while he and their distracted mother searched for them. For a long while – how many years Brit could not remember – they had been living in Los Angeles. Prospering, too, Brit understood. The girl, Lorraine – Minnie had wanted fancy names for the kids, and Brit apologised whenever he spoke of them, which was seldom – Lorraine had written that "Mamma has an apartment house." That had sounded prosperous, even at the beginning. And as the years passed and their address remained the same, Brit became fixed in the belief that Casa Grande was all that its name implied, and perhaps more. Minnie must be getting rich. She had a picture of the place on the stationery which Lorraine used when she wrote him. There were two palm trees in front, with bay windows behind them, and pillars. Brit used to study these magnificences and thank God that Minnie was doing so well. He never could have given her a home like that. Brit sometimes added that he had never been cut out for a married man, anyway.

Old-timers forgot that Brit had ever been married, and late comers never heard of it. To all intents the owners of the Quirt outfit were old bachelors who kept pretty much to themselves, went to town only when they needed supplies, rode old, narrow-

fork saddles and grinned scornfully at "swell-forks" and "buckin'-rolls," and listened to all the range gossip without adding so much as an opinion. They never talked politics nor told which candidates received their two votes. They kept the same two men season after season, – leathery old range hands with eyes that saw whatever came within their field of vision, and with the gift of silence, which is rare.

If you know anything at all about cattlemen, you will know that the Quirt was a poor man's ranch, when I tell you that Hunter and Johnson milked three cows and made butter, fed a few pigs on the skim milk and the alfalfa stalks which the saddle horses and the cows disdained to eat, kept a flock of chickens, and sold what butter, eggs and pork they did not need for themselves. Cattlemen seldom do that. More often they buy milk in small tin cans, butter in "squares," and do without eggs.

Four of a kind were the men of the TJ up-and-down, and even Bill Warfield – president and general manager of the Sawtooth Cattle Company, and of the Federal Reclamation Company and several other companies, State senator and general benefactor of the Sawtooth country – even the great Bill Warfield lifted his hat to the owners of the Quirt when he met them, and spoke of them as "the finest specimens of our old, fast-vanishing type of range men." Senator Warfield himself represented the modern type of range man and was proud of his progressiveness. Never a scheme for the country's development was hatched but you would find Senator Warfield closely allied with it, his voice the deciding one

when policies and progress were being discussed.

As to the Sawtooth, forty thousand acres comprised their holdings under patents, deeds and long-time leases from the government. Another twenty thousand acres they had access to through the grace of the owners, and there was forest-reserve grazing besides, which the Sawtooth could have if it chose to pay the nominal rental sum. The Quirt ranch, was almost surrounded by Sawtooth land of one sort or another, though there was scant grazing in the early spring on the sagebrush wilderness to the south. This needed Quirt Creek for accessible water, and Quirt Creek, save where it ran through cut-bank hills, was fenced within the section and a half of the TJ up-and-down.

So there they were, small fish making shift to live precariously with other small fish in a pool where big fish swam lazily. If one small fish now and then disappeared with mysterious abruptness, the other small fish would perhaps scurry here and there for a time, but few would leave the pool for the safe shallows beyond.

This is a tale of the little fishes.

CHAPTER II
THE ENCHANTMENT OF LONG DISTANCE

Lorraine Hunter always maintained that she was a Western girl. If she reached the point of furnishing details she would tell you that she had ridden horses from the time that she could walk, and that her father was a cattle-king of Idaho, whose cattle fed upon a thousand hills. When she was twelve she told her playmates exciting tales about rattlesnakes. When she was fifteen she sat breathless in the movies and watched picturesque horsemen careering up and down and around the thousand hills, and believed in her heart that half the Western pictures were taken on or near her father's ranch. She seemed to remember certain landmarks, and would point them out to her companions and whisper a desultory lecture on the cattle industry as illustrated by the picture. She was much inclined to criticism of the costuming and the acting.

At eighteen she knew definitely that she hated the very name Casa Grande. She hated the narrow, half-lighted hallway with its "tree" where no one ever hung a hat, and the seat beneath where no one ever sat down. She hated the row of key-and-mail boxes on the wall, with the bell buttons above each apartment number. She hated the jangling of the hall telephone, the scurrying to

answer, the prodding of whichever bell button would summon the tenant asked for by the caller. She hated the meek little Filipino boy who swept that ugly hall every morning. She hated the scrubby palms in front. She hated the pillars where the paint was peeling badly. She hated the conflicting odours that seeped into the atmosphere at certain hours of the day. She hated the three old maids on the third floor and the frowsy woman on the first, who sat on the front steps in her soiled breakfast cap and bungalow apron. She hated the nervous tenant who occupied the apartment just over her mother's three-room-and-bath, and pounded with a broom handle on the floor when Lorraine practised overtime on chromatic scales.

At eighteen Lorraine managed somehow to obtain work in a Western picture, and being unusually pretty she so far distinguished herself that she was given a small part in the next production. Her glorious duty it was to ride madly through the little cow-town "set" to the post-office where the sheriff's posse lounged conspicuously, and there pull her horse to an abrupt stand and point quite excitedly to the distant hills. Also she danced quite close to the camera in the "Typical Cowboy Dance" which was a feature of this particular production.

Lorraine thereby earned enough money to buy her fall suit and coat and cheap furs, and learned to ride a horse at a gallop and to dance what passed in pictures as a "square dance."

At nineteen years of age Lorraine Hunter, daughter of old Brit Hunter of the TJ up-and-down, became a real "range-bred girl"

with a real Stetson hat of her own, a green corduroy riding skirt, gray flannel shirt, brilliant neckerchief, boots and spurs. A third picture gave her further practice in riding a real horse, – albeit an extremely docile animal called Mouse with good reason. She became known on the lot as a real cattle-king's daughter, though she did not know the name of her father's brand and in all her life had seen no herd larger than the thirty head of tame cattle which were chased past the camera again and again to make them look like ten thousand, and which were so thoroughly "camera broke" that they stopped when they were out of the scene, turned and were ready to repeat the performance *ad lib*.

Had she lived her life on the Quirt ranch she would have known a great deal more about horseback riding and cattle and range dances. She would have known a great deal less about the romance of the West, however, and she would probably never have seen a sheriff's posse riding twenty strong and bunched like bird-shot when it leaves the muzzle of the gun. Indeed, I am very sure she would not. Killings such as her father heard of with his lips drawn tight and the cords standing out on the sides of his skinny neck she would have considered the grim tragedies they were, without once thinking of the "picture value" of the crime.

As it was, her West was filled with men who died suddenly in gobs of red paint and girls who rode loose-haired and panting with hand held over the heart, hurrying for doctors, and cowboys and parsons and such. She had seen many a man whip pistol from holster and dare a mob with lips drawn back in a wolfish grin

over his white, even teeth, and kidnappings were the inevitable accompaniment of youth and beauty.

Lorraine learned rapidly. In three years she thrilled to more blood-curdling adventure than all the Bad Men in all the West could have furnished had they lived to be old and worked hard at being bad all their lives. For in that third year she worked her way enthusiastically through a sixteen-episode movie serial called "The Terror of the Range." She was past mistress of romance by that time. She knew her West.

It was just after the "Terror of the Range" was finished that a great revulsion in the management of this particular company stopped production with a stunning completeness that left actors and actresses feeling very much as if the studio roof had fallen upon them. Lorraine's West vanished. The little cow-town "set" was being torn down to make room for something else quite different. The cowboys appeared in tailored suits and drifted away. Lorraine went home to the Casa Grande, hating it more than ever she had hated it in her life.

Some one up-stairs was frying liver and onions, which was in flagrant defiance of the Rule Four which mentioned cabbage, onions and fried fish as undesirable foodstuffs. Outside, the palm leaves were dripping in the night fog that had swept soggily in from the ocean. Her mother was trying to collect a gas bill from the dressmaker down the hall, who protested shrilly that she distinctly remembered having paid that gas bill once and had no intention of paying it twice.

Lorraine opened the door marked LANDLADY, and closed it with a slam intended to remind her mother that bickerings in the hall were less desirable than the odour of fried onions. She had often spoken to her mother about the vulgarity of arguing in public with the tenants, but her mother never seemed to see things as Lorraine saw them.

In the apartment sat a man who had been too frequent a visitor, as Lorraine judged him. He was an oldish man with the lines of failure in his face and on his lean form the sprightly clothing of youth. He had been a reporter, – was still, he maintained. But Lorraine suspected shrewdly that he scarcely made a living for himself, and that he was home-hunting in more ways than one when he came to visit her mother.

The affair had progressed appreciably in her absence, it would appear. He greeted her with a fatherly "Hello, kiddie," and would have kissed her had Lorraine not evaded him skilfully.

Her mother came in then and complained intimately to the man, and declared that the dressmaker would have to pay that bill or have her gas turned off. He offered sympathy, assistance in the turning off of the gas, and a kiss which was perfectly audible to Lorraine in the next room. The affair had indeed progressed!

"L'raine, d'you know you've got a new papa?" her mother called out in the peculiar, chirpy tone she used when she was exuberantly happy. "I knew you'd be surprised!"

"I am," Lorraine agreed, pulling aside the cheap green portières and looked in upon the two. Her tone was

unenthusiastic. "A superfluous gift of doubtful value. I do not feel the need of a papa, thank you. If you want him for a husband, mother, that is entirely your own affair. I hope you'll be very happy."

"The kid don't want a papa; husbands are what means the most in her young life," chuckled the groom, restraining his bride when she would have risen from his knee.

"I hope you'll both be very happy indeed," said Lorraine gravely. "Now you won't mind, mother, when I tell you that I am going to dad's ranch in Idaho. I really meant it for a vacation, but since you won't be alone, I may stay with dad permanently. I'm leaving to-morrow or the next day – just as soon as I can pack my trunk and get a Pullman berth."

She did not wait to see the relief in her mother's face contradicting the expostulations on her lips. She went out to the telephone in the hall, remembered suddenly that her business would be overheard by half the tenants, and decided to use the public telephone in a hotel farther down the street. Her decision to go to her dad had been born with the words on her lips. But it was a lusty, full-voiced young decision, and it was growing at an amazing rate.

Of course she would go to her dad in Idaho! She was astonished that the idea had never before crystallised into action. Why should she feed her imagination upon a mimic West, when the great, glorious real West was there? What if her dad had not written a word for more than a year? He must be alive; they would

surely have heard of his death, for she and Royal were his sole heirs, and his partner would have their address.

She walked fast and arrived at the telephone booth so breathless that she was compelled to wait a few minutes before she could call her number. She inquired about trains and rates to Echo, Idaho!

Echo, Idaho! While she waited for the information clerk to look it up the very words conjured visions of wide horizons and clean winds and high adventure. If she pictured Echo, Idaho, as being a replica of the "set" used in the movie serial, can you wonder? If she saw herself, the beloved queen of her father's cowboys, dashing into Echo, Idaho, on a crimply-maned broncho that pirouetted gaily before the post-office while handsome young men in chaps and spurs and "big four" Stetsons watched her yearningly, she was merely living mentally the only West that she knew.

From that beatific vision Lorraine floated into others more entrancing. All the hairbreadth escapes of the heroine of the movie serial were hers, adapted by her native logic to fit within the bounds of possibility, – though I must admit they bulged here and there and threatened to overlap and to encroach upon the impossible. Over the hills where her father's vast herds grazed, sleek and wild and long-horned and prone to stampede, galloped the Lorraine of Lorraine's dreams, on horses sure-footed and swift. With her galloped strong men whose faces limned the features of her favourite Western "lead."

That for all her three years of intermittent intimacy with a disillusioning world of mimicry, her dreams were pure romance, proved that Lorraine had still the unclouded innocence of her girlhood unspoiled.

CHAPTER III
REALITY IS WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING

Still dreaming her dreams, still featuring herself as the star of many adventures, Lorraine followed the brakeman out of the dusty day coach and down the car steps to the platform of the place called Echo, Idaho. I can only guess at what she expected to find there in the person of a cattle-king father, but whatever it was she did not find it. No father, of any type whatever, came forward to claim her. In spite of her "Western" experience she looked about her for a taxi, or at least a streetcar. Even in the wilds of Western melodrama one could hear the clang of street-car gongs warning careless autoists off the track.

After the train had hooted and gone on around an absolutely uninteresting low hill of yellow barrenness dotted with stunted sage, it was the silence that first impressed Lorraine disagreeably. Echo, Idaho, was a very poor imitation of all the Western sets she had ever seen. True, it had the straggling row of square-fronted, one-story buildings, with hitch rails, but the signs painted across the fronts were absolutely common. Any director she had ever obeyed would have sent for his assistant director and would have used language which a lady must not listen to. Behind the store and the post-office and the blacksmith shop, on the brow of

the low hill around whose point the train had disappeared, were houses with bay windows and porches absolutely out of keeping with the West. So far as Lorraine could see, there was not a log cabin in the whole place.

The hitch rails were empty, and there was not a cowboy in sight. Before the post-office a terribly grimy touring car stood with its running-boards loaded with canvas-covered suitcases. Three goggled, sunburned women in ugly khaki suits were disconsolately drinking soda water from bottles without straws, and a goggled, red-faced, angry-looking man was jerking impatiently at the hood of the machine. Lorraine and her suitcase apparently excited no interest whatever in Echo, Idaho.

The station agent was carrying two boxes of oranges and a crate of California cabbages in out of the sun, and a limp individual in blue gingham shirt and dirty overalls had shouldered the mail sack and was making his way across the dusty, rut-scored street to the post-office.

Two questions and two brief answers convinced her that the station agent did not know Britton Hunter, – which was strange, unless this happened to be a very new agent. Lorraine left him to his cabbages and followed the man with the mail sack.

At the post-office the anaemic clerk came forward, eyeing her with admiring curiosity. Lorraine had seen anaemic young men all her life, and the last three years had made her perfectly familiar with that look in a young man's eyes. She met it with impatient disfavour founded chiefly upon the young man's need

of a decent hair-cut, a less flowery tie and a tailored suit. When he confessed that he did not know Mr Britton Hunter by sight he ceased to exist so far as Lorraine was concerned. She decided that he also was new to the place and therefore perfectly useless to her.

The postmaster himself – Lorraine was cheered by his spectacles, his shirt sleeves, and his chin whiskers, which made him look the part – was better informed. He, too, eyed her curiously when she said "My father, Mr Britton Hunter," but he made no comment on the relationship. He gave her a telegram and a letter from the General Delivery. The telegram, she suspected, was the one she had sent to her dad announcing the date of her arrival. The postmaster advised her to get a "livery rig" and drive out to the ranch, since it might be a week or two before any one came in from the Quirt. Lorraine thanked him graciously and departed for the livery stable.

The man in charge there chewed tobacco meditatively and told her that his teams were all out. If she was a mind to wait over a day or two, he said, he might maybe be able to make the trip. Lorraine took a long look at the structure which he indicated as the hotel.

"I think I'll walk," she said calmly.

"*Walk?*" The stableman stopped chewing and stared at her. "It's some consider'ble of a walk. It's all of eighteen mile – I dunno but twenty, time y'get to the house."

"I have frequently walked twenty-five or thirty miles. I am a

member of the Sierra Club in Los Angeles. We seldom take hikes of less than twenty miles. If you will kindly tell me which road I must take – "

"There she is," the man stated flatly, and pointed across the railroad track to where a sandy road drew a yellowish line through the sage, evidently making for the hills showing hazily violet in the distance. Those hills formed the only break in the monotonous gray landscape, and Lorraine was glad that her journey would take her close to them.

"Thank you so much," she said coldly and returned to the station. In the small lavatory of the depot waiting room she exchanged her slippers for a pair of moderately low-heeled shoes which she had at the last minute of packing tucked into her suitcase, put a few extra articles into her rather smart travelling bag, left the suitcase in the telegraph office and started. Not another question would she ask of Echo, Idaho, which was flatter and more insipid than the drinking water in the tin "cooler" in the waiting room. The station agent stood with his hands on his hips and watched her cross the track and start down the road, pardonably astonished to see a young woman walk down a road that led only to the hills twenty miles away, carrying her luggage exactly as if her trip was a matter of a block or two at most.

The bag was rather heavy and as she went on it became heavier. She meant to carry it slung across her shoulder on a stick as soon as she was well away from the prying eyes of Echo's inhabitants. Later, if she felt tired, she could easily hide it behind

a bush along the road and send one of her father's cowboys after it. The road was very dusty and carried the wind-blown traces of automobile tires. Some one would surely overtake her and give her a ride before she walked very far.

For the first half hour she believed that she was walking on level ground, but when she looked back there was no sign of any town behind her. Echo had disappeared as completely as if it had been swallowed. Even the unseemly bay-windowed houses on the hill had gone under. She walked for another half hour and saw only the gray sage stretching all around her. The hills looked farther away than when she started. Still, that beaten road must lead somewhere. Two hours later she began to wonder why this particular road should be so unending and so empty. Never in her life before had she walked for two hours without seeming to get anywhere, or without seeing any living human.

Both shoulders were sore from the weight of the bag on the stick, but the sagebushes looked so exactly alike that she feared she could not describe the particular spot where the cowboys would find her bag, wherefore she carried it still. She was beginning to change hands very often when the wind came.

Just where or how that wind sprang up she did not know. Suddenly it was whooping across the sage and flinging up clouds of dust from the road. To Lorraine, softened by years of southern California weather, it seemed to blow straight off an ice field, it was so cold.

After an interminable time which measured three hours on

her watch, she came to an abrupt descent into a creek bed, down the middle of which the creek itself was flowing swiftly. Here the road forked, a rough, little-used trail keeping on up the creek, the better travelled road crossing and climbing the farther bank. Lorraine scarcely hesitated before she chose the main trail which crossed the creek.

From the creek the trail she followed kept climbing until Lorraine wondered if there would ever be a top. The wind whipped her narrow skirts and impeded her, tugged at her hat, tingled her nose and watered her eyes. But she kept on doggedly, disgustedly, the West, which she had seen through the glamour of swift-blooded Romance, sinking lower and lower in her estimation. Nothing but jack rabbits and little, twittery birds moved through the sage, though she watched hungrily for horsemen.

Quite suddenly the gray landscape glowed with a palpitating radiance, unreal, beautiful beyond expression. She stopped, turned to face the west and stared awestruck at one of those flaming sunsets which makes the desert land seem but a gateway into the ineffable glory beyond the earth. That the high-piled, gorgeous cloud-bank presaged a thunderstorm she never guessed; and that a thunderstorm may be a deadly, terrifying peril she never had quite believed. Her mother had told of people being struck by lightning, but Lorraine could not associate lightning with death, especially in the West, where men usually died by shooting, lynching, or by pitching over a cliff.

The wind hushed as suddenly as it had whooped. Warned by the twinkling lights far behind her – lights which must be the small part at last visible of Echo, Idaho – Lorraine went on. She had been walking steadily for four hours, and she must surely have come nearly twenty miles. If she ever reached the top of the hill, she believed that she would see her father's ranch just beyond.

The afterglow had deepened to dusk when she came at last to the highest point of that long grade. Far ahead loomed a cluster of square, black objects which must be the ranch buildings of the Quirt, and Lorraine's spirits lightened a little. What a surprise her father and all his cowboys would have when she walked in upon them! It was almost worth the walk, she told herself hearteningly. She hoped that dad had a good cook. He would wear a flour-sack apron, naturally, and would be tall and lean, or else very fat. He would be a comedy character, but she hoped he would not be the grouchy kind, which, though very funny when he rampages around on the screen, might be rather uncomfortable to meet when one is tired and hungry and out of sorts. But of course the crankiest of comedy cooks would be decently civil to *her*. Men always were, except directors who are paid for their incivility.

A hollow into which she walked in complete darkness and in silence, save the gurgling of another stream, hid from sight the shadowy semblance of houses and barns and sheds. Their disappearance slumped her spirits again, for without them she was no more than a solitary speck in the vast loneliness. Their

actual nearness could not comfort her. She was seized with a reasonless, panicky fear that by the time she crossed the stream and climbed the hill beyond they would no longer be there where she had seen them. She was lifting her skirts to wade the creek when the click of hoofs striking against rocks sent her scurrying to cover in a senseless fear.

"I learned this act from the jack rabbits," she rallied herself shakily, when she was safely hidden behind a sagebush whose pungency made her horribly afraid that she might sneeze, which would be too ridiculous.

"Some of dad's cowboys, probably, but still they *may* be bandits."

If they were bandits they could scarcely be out banditting, for the two horsemen were talking in ordinary, conversational tones as they rode leisurely down to the ford. When they passed Lorraine, the horse nearest her shied against the other and was sworn at parenthetically for a fool. Against the skyline Lorraine saw the rider's form bulk squatty and ungraceful, reminding her of an actor whom she knew and did not like. It was that resemblance perhaps which held her quiet instead of following her first impulse to speak to them and ask them to carry her to the house.

The horses stopped with their forefeet in the water and drooped heads to drink thirstily. The riders continued their conversation.

" – and as I says time and again, they ain't big enough to fight

the outfit, and the quicker they git out the less lead they'll carry under their hides when they do go. What they want to try an' hang on for, beats me. Why, it's like setting into a poker game with a five-cent piece! They ain't got my sympathy. I ain't got any use for a damn fool, no way yuh look at it."

"Well, there's the TJ – they been here a long while, and they ain't packin' any lead, and they ain't getting out."

"Well, say, lemme tell yuh something. The TJ'll git theirs and git it right. Drink all night, would yuh?" He swore long and fluently at his horse, spurred him through the shallows, and the two rode on up the hill, their voices still mingled in desultory argument, with now and then an oath rising clearly above the jumble of words.

They may have been law-abiding citizens riding home, to families that were waiting supper for them, but Lorraine crept out from behind her sagebush, sneezing and thanking her imitation of the jack rabbits. Whoever they were, she was not sorry she had let them ride on. They might be her father's men, and they might have been very polite and chivalrous to her. But their voices and their manner of speaking had been rough; and it is one thing, Lorraine reflected, to mingle with made-up villains – even to be waylaid and kidnapped and tied to trees and threatened with death – but it is quite different to accost rough-speaking men in the dark when you know they are not being rough to suit the director of the scene.

She was so absorbed in trying to construct a range of war or

something equally thrilling from the scrap of conversation she had heard that she reached the hilltop in what seemed a very few minutes of climbing. The sky was becoming overcast. Already the stars to the west were blotted out, and the absolute stillness of the atmosphere frightened her more than the big, dark wilderness itself. It seemed to her exactly as though the earth was holding its breath and waiting for something terrible to happen. The vague bulk of buildings was still some distance ahead, and when a rumble like the deepest notes of a pipe organ began to fill all the air, Lorraine thrust her grip under a bush and began to run, her soggy shoes squashing unpleasantly on the rough places in the road.

Lorraine had seen many stage storms and had thrilled ecstatically to the mimic lightning, knowing just how it was made. But when that huge blackness behind and to the left of her began to open and show a terrible brilliance within, and to close abruptly, leaving the world ink black, she was terrified. She wanted to hide as she had hidden from those two men; but from that stupendous monster, a real thunderstorm, sagebrush formed no protection whatever. She must reach the substantial shelter of buildings, the comforting presence of men and women.

She ran, and as she ran she wept aloud like a child and called for her father. The deep rumble grew louder, nearer. The revealed brilliance became swift sword-thrusts of blinding light that seemed to stab deep the earth. Lorraine ran awkwardly, her hands over her ears, crying out at each lightning flash, her

voice drowned in the thunder that followed it close. Then, as she neared the sombre group of buildings, the clouds above them split with a terrific, rending crash, and the whole place stood pitilessly revealed to her, as if a spotlight had been turned on. Lorraine stood aghast. The buildings were not buildings at all. They were rocks, great, black, forbidding boulders standing there on a narrow ridge, having a diabolic likeness to houses.

The human mind is wonderfully resilient, but readjustment comes slowly after a shock. Dumbly, refusing to admit the significance of what she had seen, Lorraine went forward. Not until she had reached and had touched the first grotesque caricature of habitation did she wholly grasp the fact that she was lost, and that shelter might be miles away. She stood and looked at the orderly group of boulders as the lightning intermittently revealed them. She saw where the road ran on, between two square-faced rocks. She would have to follow the road, for after all it must lead *somewhere*, – to her father's ranch, probably. She wondered irrelevantly why her mother had never mentioned these queer rocks, and she wondered vaguely if any of them had caves or ledges where she could be safe from the lightning.

She was on the point of stepping out into the road again when a horseman rode into sight between the two rocks. In the same instant of his appearance she heard the unmistakable crack of a gun, saw the rider jerk backward in the saddle, throw up one hand – and then the darkness dropped between them.

Lorraine crouched behind a juniper bush close against the

rock and waited. The next flash came within a half-minute. It showed a man at the horse's head, holding it by the bridle. The horse was rearing. Lorraine tried to scream that the man on the ground would be trampled, but something went wrong with her voice, so that she could only whisper.

When the light came again the man who had been shot was not altogether on the ground. The other, working swiftly, had thrust the injured man's foot through the stirrup. Lorraine saw him stand back and lift his quirt to slash the horse across the rump. Even through the crash of thunder Lorraine heard the horse go past her down the hill, galloping furiously. When she could see again she glimpsed him running, while something bounced along on the ground beside him.

She saw the other man, with a dry branch in his hand, dragging it across the road where it ran between the two rocks. Then Lorraine Hunter, hardened to the sight of crimes committed for picture values only, realised sickeningly that she had just looked upon a real murder, – the cold-blooded killing of a man. She felt very sick. Queer little red sparks squirmed and danced before her eyes. She crumpled down quietly behind the jumper bush and did not know when the rain came, though it drenched her in the first two or three minutes of downpour.

CHAPTER IV
"SHE'S A GOOD GIRL WHEN SHE AIN'T CRAZY"

When the sun has been up just long enough to take the before-dawn chill from the air without having swallowed all the diamonds that spangle bush and twig and grass-blade after a night's soaking rain, it is good to ride over the hills of Idaho and feel oneself a king, – and never mind the crown and the sceptre. Lone Morgan, riding early to the Sawtooth to see the foreman about getting a man for a few days to help replace a bridge carried fifty yards downstream by a local cloudburst, would not have changed places with a millionaire. The horse he rode was the horse he loved, the horse he talked to like a pal when they were by themselves. The ridge gave him a wide outlook to the four corners of the earth. Far to the north the Sawtooth range showed blue, the nearer mountains pansy purple where the pine trees stood, the foothills shaded delicately where canyons swept down to the gray plain. To the south was the sagebrush, a soft, gray-green carpet under the sun. The sky was blue, the clouds were handfuls of clean cotton floating lazily. Of the night's storm remained no trace save slippery mud when his horse struck a patch of clay, which was not often, and the packed sand still wet and soggy from the beating rain.

Rock City showed black and inhospitable even in the sunlight. The rock walls rose sheer, the roofs slanted rakishly, the signs scratched on the rock by facetious riders were pointless and inane. Lone picked his way through the crooked defile that was marked MAIN STREET on the corner of the first huge boulder and came abruptly into the road. Here he turned north and shook his horse into a trot.

A hundred yards or so down the slope beyond Rock City he pulled up short with a "What the hell!" that did not sound profane, but merely amazed. In the sodden road were the unmistakable footprints of a woman. Lone did not hesitate in naming the sex, for the wet sand held the imprint cleanly, daintily. Too shapely for a boy, too small for any one but a child or a woman with little feet, and with the point at the toes proclaiming the fashion of the towns, Lone guessed at once that she was a town girl, a stranger, probably, – and that she had passed since the rain; which meant since daylight.

He swung his horse and rode back, wondering where she could have spent the night. Halfway through Rock City the footprints ended abruptly, and Lone turned back, riding down the trail at a lope. She couldn't have gone far, he reasoned, and if she had been out all night in the rain, with no better shelter than Rock City afforded, she would need help, – "and lots of it, and pretty darn quick," he added to John Doe, which was the ambiguous name of his horse.

Half a mile farther on he overtook her. Rather, he sighted her

in the trail, saw her duck in amongst the rocks and scattered brush of a small ravine, and spurred after her. It was precarious footing for his horse when he left the road, but John Doe was accustomed to that. He jumped boulders, shied around buckthorn, crashed through sagebrush and so brought the girl to bay against a wet bank, where she stood shivering. The terror in her face and her wide eyes would have made her famous in the movies. It made Lone afraid she was crazy.

Lone swung off and went up to her guardedly, not knowing just what an insane woman might do when cornered. "There, now, I'm not going to hurt yuh at all," he soothed. "I guess maybe you're lost. What made you run away from me when you saw me coming?"

Lorraine continued to stare at him.

"I'm going to the ranch, and if you'd like a ride, I'll lend you my horse. He'll be gentle if I lead him. It's a right smart walk from here." Lone smiled, meaning to reassure her.

"Are you the man I saw shoot that man and then fasten him to the stirrup of the saddle so the horse dragged him down the road? If you are, I – I – "

"No – oh, no, I'm not the man," Lone said gently. "I just now came from home. Better let me take you in to the ranch."

"I was going to the ranch – did you see him shoot that man and make the horse drag him —*make* the horse – he *slashed* that horse with the quirt – and he went tearing down the road dragging – it – it was —*horrible*!"

"Yes – yes, don't worry about it. We'll fix him. You come and get on John Doe and let me take you to the ranch. Come on – you're wet as a ducked pup."

"That man was just riding along – I saw him when it lightened. And he shot him – oh, can't you *do* something?"

"Yes, yes, they're after him right now. Here. Just put your foot in the stirrup – I'll help you up. Why, you're soaked!" Perseveringly Lone urged her to the horse. "You're soaking wet!" he exclaimed again.

"It rained," she muttered confusedly. "I thought it was the ranch – but they were rocks. Just rocks. Did you *see* him shoot that man? Why – why it shouldn't be allowed! He ought to be arrested right away – I'd have called a policeman but – isn't thunder and lightning just perfectly *awful*? And that horse – going down the road dragging – "

"You'd better get some one to double for me in this scene," she said irrelevantly. "I – I don't know this horse, and if he starts running the boys might not catch him in time. It isn't safe, is it?"

"It's safe," said Lone pityingly. "You won't be dragged. You just get on and ride. I'll lead him. John Doe's gentle as a dog."

"Just straight riding?" Lorraine considered the matter gravely. "Wel-ll – but I saw a man dragged, once. He'd been shot first. It – it was awful!"

"I'll bet it was. How'd you come to be walking so far?"

Lorraine looked at him suspiciously. Lone thought her eyes were the most wonderful eyes – and the most terrible – that he

had ever seen. Almond-shaped they were, the irises a clear, dark gray, the eyeballs blue-white like a healthy baby's. That was the wonder of them. But their glassy shine made them terrible. Her lids lifted in a sudden stare.

"You're not the man, are you? I – I think he was taller than you. And his hat was brown. He's a brute – a *beast*! To shoot a man just riding along – It rained," she added plaintively. "My bag is back there somewhere under a bush. I think I could find the bush – it was where a rabbit was sitting – but he's probably gone by this time. A rabbit," she told him impressively, "wouldn't sit out in the rain all night, would he? He'd get wet. And a rabbit would feel horrid when he was wet – such thick fur he never *would* get dried out. Where do they go when it rains? They have holes in the ground, don't they?"

"Yes. Sure, they do. I'll show you one, down the road here a little piece. Come on – it ain't far."

To see a rabbit hole in the ground, Lorraine consented to mount and ride while Lone walked beside her, agreeing with everything she said that needed agreement. When she had gone a few rods, however, she began to call him Charlie and to criticise the direction of the picture. They should not, she declared, mix murders and thunderstorms in the same scene. While the storm effect was perfectly *wonderful*, she thought it rather detracted from the killing. She did not believe in lumping big stuff together like that. Why not have the killing done by moonlight, and use the storm when the murderer was getting away, or something

like that? And as for taking them out on location and making all those storm scenes without telling them in advance so that they could have dry clothes afterwards, she thought it a perfect outrage! If it were not for spoiling the picture, she would quit, she asserted indignantly. She thought the director had better go back to driving a laundry wagon, which was probably where he came from.

Lone agreed with her, even though he did not know what she was talking about. He walked as fast as he could, but even so he could not travel the six miles to the ranch very quickly. He could see that the girl was burning up with fever, and he could hear her voice growing husky, – could hear, too, the painful labouring of her breath. When she was not mumbling incoherent nonsense she was laughing hoarsely at the plight she was in, and after that she would hold both hands to her chest and moan in a way that made Lone grind his teeth.

When he lifted her off his horse at the foreman's cottage she was whispering things no one could understand. Three cowpunchers came running and hindered him a good deal in carrying her into the house, and the foreman's wife ran excitedly from one room to the other, asking questions and demanding that some one do something "for pity's sake, she may be dying for all you know, while you stand there gawping like fool-hens."

"She was out all night in the rain – got lost, somehow. She said she was coming here, so I brought her on. She's down with a cold, Mrs Hawkins. Better take off them wet clothes and put hot

blankets around her. And a poultice or something on her chest, I reckon." Lone turned to the door, stopped to roll a cigarette, and watched Mrs Hawkins hurrying to Lorraine with a whisky toddy the cook had mixed for her.

"A sweat's awful good for a cold like she's got," he volunteered practically. "She's out of her head – or she was when I found her. But I reckon that's mostly scare, from being lost all night. Give her a good sweat, why don't you?" He reached the doorstep and then turned back to add, "She left a grip back somewhere along the road. I'll go hunt it up, I reckon."

He mounted John Doe and rode down to the corral, where two or three riders were killing time on various pretexts while they waited for details of Lone's adventure. Delirious young women of the silk stocking class did not arrive at the Sawtooth every morning, and it was rumoured already amongst the men that she was some looker, which naturally whetted their interest in her.

"I'll bet it's one of Bob's girls, come trailin' him up. Mebby another of them heart-ballum cases of Bob's," hazarded Pop Bridgers, who read nothing unless it was printed on pink paper, and who refused to believe that any good could come out of a city. "Ain't that right, Loney? Hain't she a heart-ballum girl of Bob's?"

From the saddle Lone stared down impassively at Pop and Pop's companions. "I don't know a thing about her," he stated emphatically. "She said she was coming to the ranch, and she was scared of the thunder and lightning. That's every word of sense

I could get outa her. She ain't altogether ignorant – she knows how to climb on a horse, anyway, and she kicked about having to ride sideways on account of her skirts. She was plumb out of her head, and talked wild, but she handled her reins like a rider. And she never mentioned Bob, nor anybody else excepting some fellow she called Charlie. She thought I was him, but she only talked to me friendly. She didn't pull any love talk at all."

"Charlie?" Pop ruminated over a fresh quid of tobacco. "Charlie! Mebby Bob, he stakes himself to a different name now and then. There ain't any Charlie, except Charlie Werner; she wouldn't mean him, do yuh s'pose?"

"Charlie Werner? Hunh! Say, Pop, she ain't no squaw – is she, Loney?" Sid Sterling remonstrated.

"If I can read brands," Lone testified, "she's no girl of Bob's. She's a good, honest girl when she ain't crazy."

"And no good, honest girl who is not crazy could possibly be a girl of mine! Is that the idea, Lone?"

Lone turned unhurriedly and looked at young Bob Warfield standing in the stable door with his hands in his trousers pockets and his pipe in his mouth.

"That ain't the argument. Pop, here, was wondering if she was another heart-ballum girl of yours," Lone grinned unabashed. "I don't know such a hell of a lot about heart-balm ladies, Bob. I ain't a millionaire. I'm just making a guess at their brand – and it ain't the brand this little lady carries."

Bob removed one hand from his pocket and cuddled the bowl

of his pipe. "If she's a woman, she's a heart-balmer if she gets the chance. They all are, down deep in their tricky hearts. There isn't a woman on earth that won't sell a man's soul out of his body if she happens to think it's worth her while – and she can get away with it. But don't for any sake call her *my* heart-balmer."

"That was Pop," drawled Lone. "It don't strike me as being any subject for you fellows to make remarks about, anyway," he advised Pop firmly. "She's a right nice little girl, and she's pretty darn sick." He touched John Doe with the spurs and rode away, stopping at the foreman's gate to finish his business with Hawkins. He was a conscientious young man, and since he had charge of Elk Spring camp, he set its interests above his own, which was more than some of the Sawtooth men would have done in his place.

Having reported the damage to the bridge and made his suggestions about the repairs, he touched up John Doe again and loped away on a purely personal matter, which had to do with finding the bag which the girl had told him was under a bush where a rabbit had been sitting.

If she had not been so very sick, Lone would have laughed at her naïve method of identifying the spot. But he was too sorry for her to be amused at the vagaries of her sick brain. He did not believe anything she had said, except that she had been coming to the ranch and had left her bag under a bush beside the road. It should not be difficult to find it, if he followed the road and watched closely the bushes on either side.

Until he reached the place where he had first sighted her, Lone rode swiftly, anxious to be through with the business and go his way. But when he came upon her footprints again, he pulled up and held John Doe to a walk, scanning each bush and boulder as he passed.

It seemed probable that she had left the grip at Rock City where she must have spent the night. She had spoken of being deceived into thinking the place was the Sawtooth ranch until she had come into it and found it "just rocks." Then, he reasoned, the storm had broken, and her fright had held her there. When daylight came she had either forgotten the bag or had left it deliberately.

At Rock City, then, Lone stopped to examine the base of every rock, even riding around those nearest the road. The girl, he guessed shrewdly, had not wandered off the main highway, else she would not have been able to find it again. Rock City was confusing unless one was perfectly familiar with its curious, winding lanes.

It was when he was riding slowly around the boulder marked "Palace Hotel, Rates Reasnible," that he came upon the place where a horse had stood, on the side best sheltered from the storm. Deep hoof marks closely overlapping, an overturned stone here and there gave proof enough, and the rain-beaten soil that blurred the hoofprints farthest from the rock told him more. Lone backed away, dismounted, and, stepping carefully, went close. He could see no reason why a horse should have stood there

with his head toward the road ten feet away, unless his rider was waiting for something – or some one. There were other boulders near which offered more shelter from rain.

Next the rock he discovered a boot track, evidently made when the rider dismounted. He thought of the wild statement of the girl about seeing some one shoot a man and wondered briefly if there could be a basis of truth in what she said. But the road showed no sign of a struggle, though there were, here and there, hoofprints half washed out with the rain.

Lone went back to his horse and rode on, still looking for the bag. His search was thorough and, being a keen-eyed young man, he discovered the place where Lorraine had crouched down by a rock. She must have stayed there all night, for the scuffed soil was dry where her body had rested, and her purse, caught in the juniper bush close by, was sodden with rain.

"The poor little kid!" he muttered, and with a sudden impulse he turned and looked toward the rock behind which the horse had stood. Help had been that close, and she had not known it, unless —

"If anything happened there last night, she could have seen it from here," he decided, and immediately put the thought away from him.

"But nothing happened," he added, "unless maybe she saw him ride out and go on down the road. She was out of her head and just imagined things."

He slipped the soaked purse into his coat pocket, remounted

and rode on slowly, looking for the grip and half-believing she had not been carrying one, but had dreamed it just as she had dreamed that a man had been shot.

He rode past the bag without seeing it, for Lorraine had thrust it far back under a stocky bush whose scraggly branches nearly touched the ground. So he came at last to the creek, swollen with the night's storm so that it was swift and dangerous. Lone was turning back when John Doe threw up his head, stared up the creek for a moment and whinnied shrilly. Lone stood in the stirrups and looked.

A blaze-faced horse was standing a short rifle-shot away, bridled and with an empty saddle. Whether he was tied or not Lone, could not tell at that distance, but he knew the horse by its banged forelock and its white face and sorrel ears, and he knew the owner of the horse. He rode toward it slowly.

"Whoa, you rattle-headed fool," he admonished, when the horse snorted and backed a step or two as he approached. He saw the bridle-reins dangling, broken, where the horse had stepped on them in running. "Broke loose and run off again," he said, as he took down his rope and widened the loop. "I'll bet Thurman would sell you for a bent nickel, this morning."

The horse squatted and jumped when he cast the loop, and then stood quivering and snorting while Lone dismounted and started toward him. Ten steps from the horse Lone stopped short, staring. For down in the bushes on the farther side half lay, half hung the limp form of a man.

CHAPTER V
A DEATH "BY ACCIDENT"

Lone Morgan was a Virginian by birth, though few of his acquaintances knew it.

Lone never talked of himself except as his personal history touched a common interest with his fellows. But until he was seventeen he had lived very close to the centre of one of the deadliest feuds of the Blue Ridge. That he had been neutral was merely an accident of birth, perhaps. And that he had not become involved in the quarrel that raged among his neighbours was the direct result of a genius for holding his tongue. He had attended the funerals of men shot down in their own dooryards, he had witnessed the trials of the killers. He had grown up with the settled conviction that other men's quarrels did not concern him so long as he was not directly involved, and that what did not concern him he had no right to discuss. If he stood aside and let violence stalk by unhindered, he was merely doing what he had been taught to do from the time he could walk. "Mind your own business and let other folks do the same," had been the family slogan in Lone's home. There had been nothing in Lone's later life to convince him that minding his own business was not a very good habit. It had grown to be second nature, – and it had made him a good man for the Sawtooth Cattle Company to have on

its pay roll.

Just now Lone was stirred beyond his usual depth of emotion, and it was not altogether the sight of Fred Thurman's battered body that unnerved him. He wanted to believe that Thurman's death was purely an accident, – the accident it appeared. But Lorraine and the telltale hoofprints by the rock compelled him to believe that it was not an accident. He knew that if he examined carefully enough Fred Thurman's body he would find the mark of a bullet. He was tempted to look, and yet he did not want to know. It was no business of his; it would be foolish to let it become his business.

"He's too dead to care now how it happened – and it would only stir up trouble," he finally decided and turned his eyes away.

He pulled the twisted foot from the stirrup, left the body where it lay, and led the blaze-faced horse to a tree and tied it securely. He took off his coat and spread it over the head and shoulders of the dead man, weighted the edges with rocks and rode away.

Halfway up the hill he left the road and took a narrow trail through the sage, a short-cut that would save him a couple of miles.

The trail crossed the ridge half a mile beyond Rock City, dipping into the lower end of the small gulch where he had overtaken the girl. The place recalled with fresh vividness her first words to him: "Are *you* the man I saw shoot that other man and fasten his foot in the stirrup?" Lone shivered and threw away the cigarette he had just lighted.

"My God, that girl mustn't tell that to any one else!" he exclaimed apprehensively. "No matter who she is or what she is, she mustn't tell that!"

"Hello! Who you talking to? I heard somebody talking – " The bushes parted above a low, rocky ledge and a face peered out, smiling good-humouredly. Lone started a little and pulled up.

"Oh, hello, Swan. I was just telling this horse of mine all I was going to do to him. Say, you're a chancey bird, Swan, yelling from the brush like that. Some folks woulda taken a shot at you."

"Then they'd hit me, sure," Swan observed, letting himself down into the trail. He, too, was wet from his hat crown to his shoes, that squelched when he landed lightly on his toes. "Anybody would be ashamed to shoot at a mark so large as I am. I'd say they're poor shooters." And he added irrelevantly, as he held up a grayish pelt, "I got that coyote I been chasing for two weeks. He was sure smart. He had me guessing. But I made him guess some, maybe. He guessed wrong this time."

Lone's eyes narrowed while he looked Swan over. "You must have been out all night," he said. "You're crazier about hunting than I am."

"Wet bushes," Swan corrected carelessly. "I been tramping since daylight. It's my work to hunt, like it's your work to ride." He had swung into the trail ahead of John Doe and was walking with long strides, – the tallest, straightest, limberest young Swede in all the country. He had the bluest eyes, the readiest smile, the healthiest colour, the sunniest hair and disposition the Sawtooth

country had seen for many a day. He had homesteaded an eighty-acre claim on the south side of Bear Top and had by that means gained possession of two living springs and the only accessible portion of Wilder Creek where it crossed the meadow called Skyline before it plunged into a gulch too narrow for cattle to water with any safety.

The Sawtooth Cattle Company had for years "covered" that eighty-acre patch of government land, never dreaming that any one would ever file on it. Swan Vjolmar was there and had his log cabin roofed and ready for the door and windows before the Sawtooth discovered his presence. Now, nearly a year afterwards, he was accepted in a tolerant, half-friendly spirit. He had not objected to the Sawtooth cattle which still watered at Skyline Meadow. He was a "Government hunter" and he had killed many coyotes and lynx and even a mountain lion or two. Lone wondered sometimes what the Sawtooth meant to do about the Swede, but so far the Sawtooth seemed inclined to do nothing at all, evidently thinking his war on animal pests more than atoned for his effrontery in taking Skyline as a homestead. When he had proven up on his claim they would probably buy him out and have the water still.

"Well, what do you know?" Swan turned his head to inquire abruptly. "You're pretty quiet."

Lone roused himself. "Fred Thurman's been dragged to death by that damned flighty horse of his," he said. "I found him in the brush this side of Granite Creek. Had his foot caught in the

stirrup. I thought I'd best leave him there till the coroner can view him."

Swan stopped short in the trail and turned facing Lone. "Last night my dog Yack whines to go out. He went and sat in a place where he looks down on the walley, and he howled for half an hour. I said then that somebody in the walley has died. That dog is something queer about it. He knows things."

"I'm going to the Sawtooth," Lone told him. "I can telephone to the coroner from there. Anybody at Thurman's place, do you know?"

Swan shook his head and started again down the winding, steep trail. "I don't hunt over that way for maybe a week. That's too bad he's killed. I like Fred Thurman. He's a fine man, you bet."

"He was," said Lone soberly. "It's a damn shame he had to go – like that."

Swan glanced back at him, studied Lone's face for an instant and turned into a tributary gully where a stream trickled down over the water-worn rocks. "Here I leave you," he volunteered, as Lone came abreast of him. "A coyote's crossed up there, and I maybe find his tracks. I could go do chores for Fred Thurman if nobody's there. Should I do that? What you say, Lone?"

"You might drift around by there if it ain't too much out of your way, and see if he's got a man on the ranch," Lone suggested. "But you better not touch anything in the house, Swan. The coroner'll likely appoint somebody to look around and see if

he's got any folks to send his stuff to. Just feed any stock that's kept up, if nobody's there."

"All right," Swan agreed readily. "I'll do that, Lone. Good-bye."

Lone nodded and watched him climb the steep slope of the gulch on the side toward Thurman's ranch. Swan climbed swiftly, seeming to take no thought of where he put his feet, yet never once slipping or slowing. In two minutes he was out of sight, and Lone rode on moodily, trying not to think of Fred Thurman, trying to shut from his mind the things that wild-eyed, hoarse-voiced girl had told him.

"Lone, you mind your own business," he advised himself once. "You don't know anything that's going to do any one any good, and what you don't know there's no good guessing. But that girl – she mustn't talk like that!"

Of Swan he scarcely gave a thought after the Swede had disappeared, yet Swan was worth a thought or two, even from a man who was bent on minding his own business. Swan had no sooner climbed the gulch toward Thurman's claim than he proceeded to descend rather carefully to the bottom again, walk along on the rocks for some distance and climb to the ridge whose farther slope led down to Granite Creek. He did not follow the trail, but struck straight across an outcropping ledge, descended to Granite Creek and strode along next the hill where the soil was gravelly and barren. When he had gone some distance, he sat down and took from under his coat two huge, crudely made

moccasins of coyote skin. These he pulled on over his shoes, tied them around his ankles and went on, still keeping close under the hill.

He reached the place where Fred Thurman lay, stood well away from the body and studied every detail closely. Then, stepping carefully on trampled brush and rocks, he approached and cautiously lifted Lone's coat. It was not a pretty sight, but Swan's interest held him there for perhaps ten minutes, his eyes leaving the body only when the blaze-faced horse moved. Then Swan would look up quickly at the horse, seem reassured when he saw that the animal was not watching anything at a distance, and return, to his curious task. Finally he drew the coat back over the head and shoulders, placed each stone exactly as he had found it and went up to the horse, examining the saddle rather closely. After that he retreated as carefully as he had approached. When he had gone half a mile or so upstream he found a place where he could wash his hands without wetting his moccasins, returned to the rocky hillside and took off the clumsy footgear and stowed them away under his coat. Then with long strides that covered the ground as fast as a horse could do without loping, Swan headed as straight as might be for the Thurman ranch.

About noon Swan approached the crowd of men and a few women who stood at a little distance and whispered together, with their faces averted from the body around which the men stood grouped. The news had spread as such news will, even in a country so sparsely settled as the Sawtooth. Swan counted

forty men, – he did not bother with the women. Fred Thurman had been known to every one of them. Some one had spread a piece of canvas over the corpse, and Swan did not go very near. The blaze-faced horse had been led farther away and tied to a cottonwood, where some one had thrown down a bundle of hay. The Sawtooth country was rather punctilious in its duty toward the law, and it was generally believed that the coroner would want to see the horse that had caused the tragedy.

Half an hour after Swan arrived, the coroner came in a machine, and with him came the sheriff. The coroner, an important little man, examined the body, the horse and the saddle, and there was the usual formula of swearing in a jury. The inquest was rather short, since there was only one witness to testify, and Lone merely told how he had discovered the horse there by the creek, and that the body had not been moved from where he found it.

Swan went over to where Lone, anxious to get away from the place, was untying his horse after the jury had officially named the death an accident.

"I guess those horses could be turned loose," he began without prelude. "What you think, Lone? I been to Thurman's ranch, and I don't find anybody. Some horses in a corral, and pigs in a pen, and chickens. I guess Thurman was living alone. Should I tell the coroner that?"

"I dunno," Lone replied shortly. "You might speak to the sheriff. I reckon he's the man to take charge of things."

"It's bad business, getting killed," Swan said vaguely. "It makes me feel damn sorry when I go to that ranch. There's the horses waiting for breakfast – and Thurman, he's dead over here and can't feed his pigs and his chickens. It's a white cat over there that comes to meet me and rubs my leg and purrs like it's lonesome. That's a nice ranch he's got, too. Now what becomes of that ranch? What you think, Lone?"

"Hell, how should I know?" Lone scowled at him from the saddle and rode away, leaving Swan standing there staring after him. He turned away to find the sheriff and almost collided with Brit Hunter, who was glancing speculatively from him to Lone Morgan. Swan stopped and put out his hand to shake.

"Lone says I should tell the sheriff I could look after Fred Thurman's ranch. What you think, Mr Hunter?"

"Good idea, I guess. Somebody'll have to. They can't – " He checked himself. "You got a horse? I'll ride over with yuh, maybe."

"I got legs," Swan returned laconically. "They don't get scared, Mr Hunter, and maybe kill me sometime. You could tell the sheriff I'm government hunter and honest man, and I take good care of things. You could do that, please?"

"Sure," said Brit and rode over to where the sheriff was standing.

The sheriff listened, nodded, beckoned to Swan. "The court'll have to settle up the estate and find his heirs, if he's got any. But you look after things – what's your name? Vjolmar – how

yuh spell it? I'll swear you in as a deputy. Good Lord, you're a husky son-of-a-gun!" The sheriff's eyes went up to Swan's hat crown, descended to his shoulders and lingered there admiringly for a moment, travelled down his flat, hard-muscled body and his straight legs. "I'll bet you could put up some fight, if you had to," he commented.

Swan grinned good-humouredly, glanced conscience-stricken at the covered figure on the ground and straightened his face decorously.

"I could lick you good," he admitted in a stage whisper. "I'm a son-off-a-gun all right – only I don't never get mad at somebody."

Brit Hunter smiled at that, it was so like Swan Vjolmar. But when they were halfway to Thurman's ranch – Brit on horseback and Swan striding easily along beside him, leading the blaze-faced horse, he glanced down at Swan's face and wondered if Swan had not lied a little.

"What's on your mind, Swan?" he asked abruptly.

Swan started and looked up at him, glanced at the empty hills on either side, and stopped still in the trail.

"Mr Hunter, you been longer in the country than I have been. You seen some good riding, I bet. Maybe you see some men ride backwards on a horse?"

Brit looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Backwards?"

Swan led up the blaze-faced horse and pointed to the right stirrup. "Spurs would scratch like that if you jerk your foot, maybe. You're a good rider, Mr Hunter, you can tell. That's a

right stirrup, ain't it? Fred Thurman, he's got his left foot twist around, all broke from jerking in his stirrup. Left foot in right stirrup – " He pushed back his hat and rumpled his yellow hair, looking up into Brit's face inquiringly. "Left foot in right stirrup is riding backwards. That's a damn good rider to ride like that – what you think, Mr Hunter?"

CHAPTER VI
LONE ADVISES SILENCE

Twice in the next week Lone found an excuse for riding over to the Sawtooth. During his first visit, the foreman's wife told him that the young lady was still too sick to talk much. The second time he went, Pop Bridgers spied him first and cackled over his coming to see the girl. Lone grinned and dissembled as best he could, knowing that Pop Bridgers fed his imagination upon denials and argument and remonstrance and was likely to build gossip that might spread beyond the Sawtooth. Wherefore he did not go near the foreman's house that day, but contented himself with gathering from Pop's talk that the girl was still there.

After that he rode here and there, wherever he would be likely to meet a Sawtooth rider, and so at last he came upon Al Woodruff loping along the crest of Juniper Ridge. Al at first displayed no intention of stopping, but pulled up when he saw John Doe slowing down significantly. Lone would have preferred a chat with some one else, for this was a sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued man; but Al Woodruff stayed at the ranch and would know all the news, and even though he might give it an ill-natured twist, Lone would at least know what was going on. Al hailed him with a laughing epithet.

"Say, you sure enough played hell all around, bringin' Brit

Hunter's girl to the Sawtooth!" he began, chuckling as if he had some secret joke. "Where'd you pick her up, Lone? She claims you found her at Rock City. That right?"

"No, it ain't right," Lone denied promptly, his dark eyes meeting Al's glance steadily. "I found her in that gulch away this side. She was in amongst the rocks where she was trying to keep outa the rain. Brit Hunter's girl, is she? She told me she was going to the Sawtooth. She'd have made it, too, if it hadn't been for the storm. She got as far as the gulch, and the lightning scared her from going any farther." He offered Al his tobacco sack and fumbled for a match. "I never knew Brit Hunter had a girl."

"Nor me," Al said and sifted tobacco into a cigarette paper. "Bob, he drove her over there yesterday. Took him close to all day to make the trip – and Bob, he claims to hate women!"

"So would I, if I'd got stung for fifty thousand. She ain't that kind. She's a nice girl, far as I could tell. She got well, all right, did she?"

"Yeah – only she was still coughing some when she left the ranch. She like to of had pneumonia, I guess. Queer how she claimed she spent the night in Rock City, ain't it?"

"No," Lone answered judicially, "I don't know as it's so queer. She never realised how far she'd walked, I reckon. She was plumb crazy when I found her. You couldn't take any stock in what she said. Say, you didn't see that bay I was halter-breaking, did yuh, Al? He jumped the fence and got away on me, day before yesterday. I'd like to catch him up again. He'll make a good

horse."

Al had not seen the bay, and the talk tapered off desultorily to a final "So-long, see yuh later." Lone rode on, careful not to look back. So she was Brit Hunter's girl! Lone whistled softly to himself while he studied this new angle of the problem, – for a problem he was beginning to consider it. She was Brit Hunter's girl, and she had told them at the Sawtooth that she had spent the night at Rock City. He wondered how much else she had told; how much she remembered of what she had told him.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a round leather purse with a chain handle. It was soiled and shrunken with its wetting, and the clasp had flecks of rust upon it. What it contained Lone did not know. Virginia had taught him that a man must not be curious about the personal belongings of a woman. Now he turned the purse over, tried to rub out the stiffness of the leather, and smiled a little as he dropped it back into his pocket.

"I've got my calling card," he said softly to John Doe. "I reckon I had the right hunch when I didn't turn it over to Mrs Hawkins. I'll ask her again about that grip she said she hid under a bush. I never heard about any of the boys finding it."

His thoughts returned to Al Woodruff and stopped there. Determined still to attend strictly to his own affairs, his thoughts persisted in playing truant and in straying to a subject he much preferred not to think of at all. Why should Al Woodruff be interested in the exact spot where Brit Hunter's daughter had spent the night of the storm? Why should Lone instinctively

discount her statement and lie whole-heartedly about it?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.