

Cullum Ridgwell

The Law-Breakers



Ridgwell Cullum

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Cullum R.

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CHAPTER I

WATCHING THE LINE

There was no shade anywhere. The terrible glare of the summer sun beat down upon the whole length of the wooden platform at Amberley. Hot as was the dry, bracing air, it was incomparable with the blistering intensity of heat reflected from the planking, which burned through to the soles of the feet of the uniformed man who paced its length, slowly, patiently.

This sunburnt, gray-eyed man, with his loose, broad shoulders, his powerful, easy-moving limbs, seemed quite indifferent to the irritating climatic conditions of the moment. Even the droning of the worrying mosquitoes had no power to disturb him. Like everything else unpleasant in this distant northwestern land, he accepted these things as they came, and brushed them aside for the more important affairs he was engaged upon.

He gazed out across the wide monotony of prairie with its undulating wavelets, a tawny green beneath the scorching summer sun. He was thinking deeply; perhaps dreaming, although dreaming had small enough place in his busy life. His lot was a stern fight against crime, and, in a land so vast, so new, where crime flourished upon virgin soil, it left him little time for the more pleasant avenues of thought.

Inspector Stanley Fyles came to a halt at the eastern end of the long platform. Miles of railroad track stretched away in a dead straight line toward the distant, shimmering horizon. For miles ahead the road was unbroken by a single moving object, and, after a long, keen survey, the man abruptly turned his back upon it.

In a moment he became aware of a hollow-chested man hurrying toward him. He was coming from the direction of the only building upon the platform – the railroad office, or, as it was grandiloquently called, the “booking hall.”

Fyles recognized the man as the railroad agent, Huntly, who controlled the affairs of his company in this half-fledged prairie town.

He came up in a flurry of unusual excitement.

“She’s past New Camp, inspector,” he cried. “Guess she’s in the Broken Hills, an’ gettin’ near White Point. I’d say she’d be along in an hour – sure.”

“Damn!”

For once in his life Stanley Fyles’s patience gave way.

The man grinned.

“It ain’t no use cussin’,” he protested, with a suggestion of malicious delight. “Y’see, she’s just a bum freight. Ain’t even a ‘through.’ I tell you, these sort have emptied a pepper box of gray around my head. Yes, sir, there’s more gray to my head by reason of their sort than a hired man could hoe out in half a year.”

“Twenty minutes ago you told me she’d be in in half an hour.”

There was resentment as well as distrust in the officer’s protest.

“Sure,” the man responded glibly. “That was accordin’ to schedule. Guess Ananias must have been the fellow who invented schedules for local freights.”

The toe of Fyles’s well-polished riding-boot tapped the superheated platform.

His gray eyes suddenly fixed and held the ironical eyes of the other.

“See here, Huntly,” he said at last, in that tone of quiet authority which never deserted him for long. “I can rely on that? There’s nothing to stop her by the way – now? Nothing at all?”

But the agent shook his head, and his eyes still shone with their ironical light.

“I’d say the prophet business petered out miser’bly nigh two thousand years ago. I wouldn’t say this dogone prairie ’ud be the best place to start resurrectin’ it. No, sir! There’s too many chances for that – seein’ we’re on a branch line. There’s the track – it might give way. You never can tell on a branch line. The locomotive might drop dead of senile decay. Maybe the train crew’s got drunk, and is raisin’ hell at some wayside city. You never can tell on a branch line. Then there’s that cargo of liquor you’re yearnin’ to –”

“Cut it out, man,” broke in the officer sharply. “You are sure about the train? You know what you’re talking about?”

The agent grinned harder than ever.

“This is a prohibition territory – ” he began.

But again Fyles cut him short. The man’s irrepressible love of fooling, half good-humored, half malicious, had gone far enough.

“Anyway you don’t usually get drunk before sundown, so I guess I’ll have to take your word for it.”

Then Inspector Fyles smiled back into the other’s face, which had abruptly taken on a look of resentment at the charge.

“I tell you what it is,” he went on. “You boys get mighty close to the wind swilling prohibited liquor. It’s against the spirit of the law – anyway.”

But the agent’s good humor warmed again under the officer’s admission of his difficulties. He was an irrepressible fellow when opportunity offered. Usually he lived in a condition of utter boredom. In fact, there were only two things that made life tolerable for him in Amberley. These were the doings of the Mounted Police, and the doings of those who made their existence a necessity in the country.

Even while weighted down with the oppressive routine of his work, it was an inspiring thing to watch the war between law and lawlessness. Here in Amberley, situated in the heart of the Canadian prairie lands, was a handful of highly trained men pitted against almost a world of crime. Perhaps the lightest of their duties was the enforcing of the prohibition laws, formulated by a dear, grandmotherly government in an excess of senile zeal for the welfare of the health and morals of those far better able to think for themselves.

The laws of prohibition! The words stuck with Mr. Huntly as they stuck with every full-grown man and woman in the country outside the narrow circle of temperance advocates. The law was anathema to him. Under its influence the bettering, the purification of life in the Northwestern Territories had received a setback, which optimistic antagonists of the law declared was little less than a quarter of a century. Drunkenness had increased about one hundred per cent, since human nature had been forbidden the importation and consumption of alcohol in any form stronger than four per cent. beer.

Huntly knew that Inspector Fyles was almost solely at work upon the capture of contraband liquor. Also he knew, and hated the fact, that his own duty required that he must give any information concerning this traffic upon his railroad which the police might require. Therefore there was an added vehemence in his reply to the officer’s warning.

“Sakes, man! What ’ud you have us do?” he cried, with a laugh that was more than half angry. “Do you think we’re goin’ to sit around this darned diagram of a town readin’ temperance tracts, just because somebody guesses we haven’t the right to souse liquor? Think we’re goin’ to suck milk out of a kid’s feeder, just because you boys in red coats figure that way? No, sir. Guess that ain’t doin’ – anyway. I’m sousing all the liquor I can get my hooks on, an’ it’s all the sweeter because

of you boys. Outside my duty to the railroad company I wouldn't raise a finger to stop a gallon of good rye comin' into town, no, not if the penitentiary was yearnin' to swallow me right up."

Fyles's purposeful eyes surveyed the man with a thoughtful smile.

"Just so," he said coolly. "That clause about 'duty' squares the rest. You'll need to do your duty about these things. That's all we want. That's all we intend to have. Do you get me? I'm right here to see that duty done. The first trip, my friend, and you won't talk of penitentiary so – easily." The quietness with which he spoke did not rob his words of their significance. Then he went on, just a shade more sharply. "Now, see here. When that freight gets in I hold you responsible that the hindmost car – next the caboose – is dropped here, and the seals are intact. It's billed loaded with barrels of cube sugar, for Calford. Get me? That's your duty just now. See you do it."

Huntly understood Fyles. Everybody in Amberley understood him. And the majority recognized the deliberate purpose lying behind his calmest assurance. The agent knew that his protest had touched the limit, consequently there was nothing left him but to carry out instructions to the letter. He hated the position.

His face twisted into a wry grin.

"Guess you don't leave much to the imagination, inspector," he said sourly.

Fyles was moving away. He replied over his shoulder.

"No. Just the local color of the particular penitentiary," he said, with a laugh.

CHAPTER II

WHITE POINT

Mr. Moss was the sole employe of the railroad company at White Point flag station. His official hours were long. They extended round the dial of the clock twice daily. Curiously enough, his leisure extended to practically the same limits. The truth was, in summer, anyway, he had no duties that could seriously claim him. Thus the long summer days were spent chiefly among his vegetables, and the bits of flowers at the back of the shanty, which was at once his home and his office, in short, White Point.

Jack Huntly at Amberley grumbled at the unenlivening conditions of his existence, but compared with those of Mr. Moss he lived in a perfect whirlwind of gaiety.

There was no police station at White Point. There were no farms in the neighborhood. There was not even a half-breed camp, with its picturesque squalor, to break up the deadly drear of the surrounding plains. The only human diversion that ever marred the calm serenity of the neighborhood was the rare visit of some lodge of Indians, straying from the reservation, some sixty miles to the south, on a hunting pass.

But if White Point lacked interest from human associations its setting at least was curiously arresting. Nature's whim was the inspiration which had brought the station into existence. To the north, south, and west the prairie stretched away in the distance for untold miles; but immediately to the east quite another aspect prevailed. Here lay the reason of White Point station.

Almost from the very foot of the walls of Mr. Moss's shanty the land rose up with, as it were, a jolt. Great forest-clad hills reared their torn and barren crests to enormous heights out of the dead level of the prairie. A tumbled sea of Nature's wreckage lay strewn about unaccountably, for a distance of something like two miles, east and west, and double that distance from north to south. It was an oasis of natural splendor in the heart of a calm sea of green grass.

These strange hills necessitated a watchful eye upon the railroad track, which pierced their heart, in winter and spring. In summer there was nothing to exercise the mind of Mr. Moss. But in winter the track was constantly becoming blocked with snow, while during the spring thaw there was always the dread of a "wash-out" to disturb his nightly dreams. At such times these things kept the agent far more alive than he cared about.

Just now, however, it was the height of summer, and no such anxieties prevailed. Therefore Mr. Moss fell back upon the less exciting pastime of a perspiry afternoon among his potatoes and other vegetable luxuries.

He was hoeing the rows of potatoes with a sort of dogged determination to find interest in the work. He believed that physical effort was the only safety-valve for healthy feelings all too long bottled up. Even the streaming sweat suggested to him a feeling that it was at least hygienic, although the moist mixture of muddy consistency upon his face, merging with the growth of three days' beard, left his appearance something more than a blot upon the general view.

Just now he had nothing to disturb the blank of his mind. The only possible interruption to the work in hand, of an official character, was the passing of a local freight train. However, a local freight was a matter of no importance whatever. It might come to-day, or it might come to-morrow. He would signal it through in due course, after that he didn't much care what happened to it.

The potatoes fully occupied him, and as he came to the end of each row he took the opportunity of straightening out the crick in his back, and gazing upon his handiwork with the look of a man who feels he has surely earned his own admiration.

Once he varied this procedure by glancing up while still in the middle of a row. His glance was sharp and startled. He had heard an unaccustomed sound, distinct but distant. It seemed to him that a horse had neighed. There came an answering neigh. It was quite disturbing.

A long and careful scrutiny of the plains in every direction, however, left him with a feeling of doubt. There was no horse in sight anywhere, and the great hills adjacent offered no inducement whatsoever for any straying quadruped. He assured himself that the solitude of his life was rendering him fanciful, and forthwith returned to his work.

For some time the measured stroke of his hoe clanked upon the baking soil, and later on he paused to fill and light his pipe. He had just cut the flakes of tobacco from his plug, and was rolling them in the palms of his hands, when the thought occurred to him to glance at the time. His great coin-silver timepiece pointed the hour when he felt he might safely signal the freight train through.

Lounging round to the front of the station building he walked down the track to the foot of the semaphore, and flung the rusty lever over. His action expressed something of the contempt in which he held all "local freights." Then he sauntered back to his work with his pipe under full blast.

But his day has yet surprises in store. In half an hour's time he received his second start. A distant rumble and grinding warned him that the freight was approaching through the hills. He smiled at the sound, and his smile was largely satirical. He glanced up once, but promptly continued his work. But it was only for a few moments. The sound which had been growing had almost died out and was being replaced by the hammering of the cars as they closed up against each other. The train was stopping.

He was looking up now full of interest, and one hand went up to his head, and its fingers raked among the roots of his hair. Suddenly the engine bell began to clang violently. There was distinctly a note of protest in the sound. Something was wrong. He swung round and looked at his signal. Say – was he dreaming? What on earth – ? Half an hour ago he had lowered the semaphore, at least he had set the lever over, and now – now it was set against the train!

For a second he stared at the offending arm, then, as the bell clanged still more violently, he dashed across the intervening space to remedy his mistake.

But now incident crowded upon him. He was quite right. The lever was set as it should be set. His practiced eye glanced rapidly down the connecting rod to discover the source of the trouble, and further amazement waited upon him. The explanation of the mystery lay before his eyes. There at the triangular junction, where the connecting rod linked with the down-haul of the semaphore, the bolt had fallen out, and the whole thing was disconnected. The bolt with its screw nut and washer were lying on the ground, where, apparently, they had fallen.

The furious clanging of the engine bell, where the head of the train stood just in view round the bend of the track where it entered the hills, left him no time for consideration of the mishap. The protesting train must be passed on without further delay. Therefore, with deft hands, he quickly readjusted the bolt, and once again set the lever. This time the arm of the signal dropped.

It was not until these things were accomplished that he had time to study the cause of the disconnection. Then, at once, a curious feeling of incredulity swept over him. It was an impossibility for the thing to have happened. The bolt fitted horizontally, and the washered nut had full two inches to unscrew! Besides this, the whole thing was well rusted with years of exposure. Yet the impossible had happened!

He stood gazing at the bolt with a sort of uncanny feeling stirring within him. The engine at the head of its long string of box cars approached. It passed him, and he heard its driver hurl some uncomplimentary remark at him as the rattling old kettle clanked by. Then, as the last car passed him, and rapidly grew smaller as the distance swallowed it up, he turned back to his vegetable patch with the mystery still unsolved.

The journey through the hills was nearly over, and White Point was but a short distance ahead. The conductor and crew of the local freight were lounging comfortably in the caboose.

The brakeman's life is full of risk and little comfort, and such moments as these were all too few. When they came they were more than gratefully received. Now the men were spread out in various attitudes of repose, and, for the most part, were half asleep.

Suddenly, without the least warning, they were startled into full wakefulness by the familiar clatter, beginning at the head of the train and passing rapidly down its full length, as the cars closed up on each other. The resting men knew that the locomotive was either stopping, or had already come to a halt.

The conductor, or head brakeman, sat up with a jolt.

"Hey, you, Jack!" he cried peevishly. "Get up aloft an' get a peek out. Say, we sure ain't goin' to get held up at a bum flag layout."

His contempt was no less for the flag station than Mr. Moss's for a local freight.

The man addressed as "Jack" sprang alertly to the roof of the caboose. A moment later his voice echoed through the car below him.

"Can't see a thing," he cried. "We're on the last bend, just outside White Point. She's stopped – dead sure. Guess the flag has got us held up." With a few added curses he clambered down into the car again.

As the brakeman left the roof of the caboose the enactment of a strange scene began at the fore part of the car immediately in front of it.

A glance down at the coupling would have revealed the cautious appearance of a shock of rough hair covering a man's head from under the last box car. Slowly it twisted round till a grimy, dust-covered face was turned upward, and a pair of expectant eyes peered up at the tops of the two cars.

Apparently the preliminary survey was satisfactory, for, in a moment, the head was withdrawn, only to be replaced by an outstretched bare hand and forearm. The hand reached up and caught the iron foot rail, gripping it firmly. Then another hand appeared, and with it came the same head again and part of a man's body. The second hand reached toward the coupling-pin, which, with a dexterous movement, was slowly and noiselessly removed. The pin was lowered to the length of its chain. Then, once more the hand reached toward the coupling. This time it seized the great iron link. This, without a moment's delay, was lifted from its hook and noiselessly lowered till it swung suspended from the car in front. Then both arms, head, and body vanished once more under the car, beneath which the man must have traveled for miles.

A few moments later the welcome jolting of couplings reached the crew in the caboose, who promptly settled themselves down to await the next call of duty. The conductor's relief at the brevity of the delay was expressed in smiling contempt at the expense of all flag stations.

"Trust a darned outfit like that to hold you up," he cried witheringly. "They got to act fresh, or the company 'ud get wise they ain't no sort o' use on the line. Say –"

But he broke off listening.

The jolting had ceased. The grinding of wheels of the moving train was plainly heard. But – the caboose remained stationary.

He leaped to his feet.

"Hell!" he cried. "What the –"

But the brakeman, Jack, was on his feet, too. With a bound he sprang at the door of the caboose. But instantly he fell back with a cry.

Four gun muzzles were leveled at his body, and, behind them, stood the figures of two masked men.

One of the two spoke in the slow easy drawl of the West, which lacked nothing in conviction.

"Jest keep dead still – all o' you," he said. "Don't move – nor nothin', or we'll blow holes through your figgers that'll cause a hell of a draught. We ain't yearning to make no sort o' mess in this yer caboose. But we're going to do it – 'cep' you keep quite still, an' don't worry any."

The conductor was a man of wide experience on the railroad. He had seen many “hold-ups.” So many, he was almost used to them. But without being absolutely sure of the purpose of these men he thanked his genius of good luck that he had not seen the “pay train” for nearly a month. He was quite ready to obey. For all he cared the raiders could take locomotive, train, caboose and all, provided he was left with a whole skin.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLD-UP

Just beyond the flag station at White Point, where the forest-clad slopes of the great hills crowded in upon the railroad track, a scene of utter lawlessness was being silently enacted.

The spot was a lonely one, lonely with that oppressive solitude always to be found where the great hills of ages rear their towering heads. It was utterly cut off, too, from the outer world, by a monstrous abutment of hill which left the track a mere ribbon, like the track of some invertebrate, laboriously making its way through surroundings all uncongenial and antagonistic. Yet the station was but a few hundred yards beyond this point, where it lay open to the sweep of at least three of the four winds of Heaven. But even so, the two places were as effectually separated as though miles, and not yards, intervened.

No breath of air stirred the generous spruce and darkening pinewoods. The drooping, westerling sun, already athwart the barren crown of the hill tops, left a false, velvety suggestion of twilight in the heart of the valley, while a depressing superheat enervated all life, except the profusion of vegetation which beautified the rugged slopes. For the most part the stillness was profound, only the most trifling sounds disturbing it. There was an uneasy shuffle of moving feet; there was the occasional crisp clip of a driven axe; then, too, weighty articles being dropped into the bottom of a heavy wagon sent up their dull boom at long intervals.

The outlaws worked swiftly, but without apparent haste. The success of their efforts depended upon rapidity of execution, that and the most exact care for the detail of their organization. Provided these things were held foremost in their minds there was small enough chance of interruption. Had not the train, with its all unconscious driver, passed upon its rumbling way toward Amberley? Had not all suspicion been lulled in the mind of the bucolic agent, who was even now laboriously expending a maximum of energy for a minimum return of culinary delicacies in his vegetable patch? What was there to interfere? Nothing. These men well knew that except for the flag station there was not a habitation within ten miles, and the ruggedness of the hills barred them to every form of traffic except the irresistible impulse of railroad enterprise.

Three men carried out the work of unloading the box car, while the two others held the train crew at bay. All were masked with one exception, and he, from his evident authority and mode of dress, was obviously the leader of the gang.

He was a slight, dark man, of somewhat remarkable refinement of appearance. He was good looking, and almost boyish in the lack of hair upon his face. But this was more than counterbalanced by the determined set of his features, and the keen, calculating glance of his eyes. The latter, particularly, were darkly luminous and lit with an expression of lawless exhilaration as the work proceeded. Compared with his fellows, who were of the well-known type of ruffian, in whom the remoter prairie lands abound, he looked wholly out of place in such a transaction. His air was that of a town-bred man, and his clothing, too, suggested a refinement of tailoring, particularly the rather loose cord riding breeches he affected. The others, masked as they were, with their coatless bodies, and loose, unclean shirts, their leather chapps, and the guns they wore upon their hips – well, they made an exquisite picture of that ruffianism which bows to no law of civilization, but that which they carry in the leather holsters hanging at their waists.

The trackside was strewn with disemboweled whitewood barrels. The wreckage was grotesque. The ground was strewn in every direction with a litter of white cube sugar, like the wind-swept drifts of a summer snowfall. Barrels were still being dragged out of the car and dropped roughly to the ground, where the sharp stroke of an axe ripped out the head, revealing within the neatly packed keg of spirit, embedded so carefully in its setting of sugar. The cargo had been

well shipped by men skilled in the subtle art of contraband. It was billed, and the barrels were addressed, to a firm in Calford whose reputation for integrity was quite unimpeachable. Herein was the cunning of the smugglers. The sugar barrels were never intended to reach Calford. They were not robbing the consignees in this raid upon the freight train. They were simply possessing themselves, in unorthodox fashion, of an illicit cargo that belonged to their leader.

Fifteen kegs of spirit had been removed and bestowed in the wagon. There were still five more to complete the tally.

The leader, in easy tones, urged his men to greater speed.

“Get a hustle, boys,” he said, in a deep, steady voice, while he strove with his somewhat delicate hands to lift a keg into the wagon.

The effort was too great for him single-handed, and one of his assistants came to his aid.

“There’s no time to spare,” he went on a moment later, breathing hard from his exertion. “Maybe the loco driver’ll whistle for brakes.” He laughed with a pleasant, half humorous chuckle. “If that happens, why – why I guess the train’ll be chasing back on its tracks to pick up its lost tail.”

He spoke with a refined accent of the West. The man nearest him guffawed immoderately.

“Gee!” he exclaimed delightedly. “This game’s a cinch. Guess Fyles’ll kick thirteen holes in himself when that train gets in.”

“Thirteen?” inquired the leader smilingly.

“Sure. Guess most folks reckon that figure unlucky.”

The third man snorted as he shouldered a keg and moved toward the Wagon.

“Holes? Thirteen?” he cried, as he dropped his burden into the vehicle. Then he hawked and spat. “When that blamed train gets around Amberley he’ll hate hisself wuss’n a bank clerk with his belly awash wi’ boardin’ house wet hash.”

Again came the leader’s dark smile. But he had nothing to add.

Presently the last keg was hoisted into the wagon. The leader of the enterprise sighed.

It was a sigh of pent feeling, the sigh of a man laboring under great stress. Yet it was not wholly an expression of relief. If anything, there was regret in it, regret that work he delighted in was finished.

One of the men was removing his mask, and he watched him. Then, as the face of the man who had been concealed under the car was revealed, he signed to him.

“Get busy on the wagon,” he said.

The man promptly mounted to the driving seat, and gathered up the reins.

“Hit the south trail for the temporary cache,” the leader went on. “Guess we’ll need to ride hard if Fyles is feeling as worried as you fellows – hope.”

The man winked abundantly.

“That’s all right, all right. He’ll need to hop some when we get busy. Ho, boys!” And he chirrupped his horses out of the shallow cutting, and the wagon crushed its way into the smaller bush.

The leader stood for a moment looking after it. Then he turned to the other man, still awaiting orders.

“Get the other boys’ horses up,” he said sharply. “Then stand by on horseback, and hold the train crew while they tumble into the saddle. Then make for the cache.”

The man hurried to obey. There were no questions asked when this man gave his orders. Long experience had taught these men that there was no necessity to question. Hardy ruffians as they were they knew well enough that if they had the bodies for this work, he had a head that was far cleverer even than that of Inspector Fyles himself.

Meanwhile the leader had moved out into the center of the track, and his eyes were turned westward, toward the bend round the great hill. They were pensive eyes, almost regretful, and somehow his whole face had changed from its look of daring to match them. The exhilaration had

gone out of it; the command, even the determination had merged into something like weakness. His look was soft – even tender.

He stood there while the final details of his enterprise were completed. He heard the horses come up; he heard the two men clamber from the caboose and get into the saddle. Then, at last, he turned, and moved off the track.

Once more the old look of reckless daring was shining in his luminous eyes. He dashed off into the bush to mount his horse, leaving his softer mood somewhere behind him – in the West.

There was a clatter and rattle of speeding hoofs, which rapidly died out. Then again the hills returned to their brooding silence.

The withdrawal of the outlaws was the cue for absurd activity on the part of the train crew. A whirlwind of heated blasphemy set in, which might well have scorched the wooden sides of the car. They cursed everybody and everything, but most of all they cursed the bucolic agent at White Point.

Then came a cautious reconnoitering beyond the door. This was promptly followed by a pell-mell dash for the open. In a moment they were crowding the trackside, staring with stupid eyes and mouths agape at the miniature snowfall of sugar, and the wreckage of whitewood barrels.

The conductor was the first to gather his scattered faculties.

“The lousy bums!” he cried fiercely. Then he added, with less ferocity and more regret, “The – lousy – bums!”

A moment later he turned upon his comrades in the aggrieved fashion of one who would like to accuse.

“‘Taint no use in gawkin’ around here,” he cried sharply. “We’re up agin it. That’s how it is.” Then his face went scarlet, as a memory occurred to him. “Say, White Point’s around the corner. And that’s where we’ll find that hop-headed agent – if he ain’t done up. Anyways, if he ain’t – why, I guess we’ll just set him playin’ a miser-arey over his miser’ble wires, that’ll set ’em diggin’ out a funeral hearse and mournin’ coaches in that dogasted prairie sepulcher – Amberley.”

Mr. Moss was disentangling the crick in his back for the last time that day. His stomach had forced on him the conviction that his evening meal was a necessity not lightly to be denied.

His back eased, he shouldered his hoe and moved off toward his shanty with the dispirited air of the man who must prepare his own meal. As he passed the lean-to, where his kindling and fuel were kept, he flung the implements inside it, as though glad to be rid of the burden of his labors. Then he passed on round to the front of the building with the lagging step of indifference. There was little enough in his life to encourage hopeful anticipation.

At the door he paused. Such was his habit that his eyes wandered to the track which had somehow become the highway of his life, and he glanced up and down it. The far-reaching plains to the west offered him too wide a focus. There was nothing to hold him in its breadth of outlook. But as his gaze came in contact with the frowning crags to the east, a sudden light of interest, even apprehension, leaped into his eyes. In a moment he became a creature transformed. His bucolic calm had gone. The metamorphosis was magical.

In one bound he leaped within the hut. Then, in a moment, he was back at the door again, his tensely poised figure filling up the opening. His powerful hands were gripping his Winchester, and he stood ready. The farmer in him had disappeared. His eyes were alight with the impulse of battle.

Along the track, from out of the hills, ran four unkempt human figures. They were rushing for the flag station, gesticulating as they came. In the loneliness of the spot there was only one interpretation of their attitude for the waiting man.

Mr. Moss’s voice rang out violently, and caught the echo of the hills.

“What in hell – ?” he shouted, raising the deadly Winchester swiftly to his shoulder. “Hold up!” he went on, “or I’ll let daylight into some of you.”

The effect of this challenge was instantaneous and almost ludicrous. The oncoming figures stopped, and nearly fell over each other in their haste to thrust their hands above their heads. Then the eager, anxious shout of the gray-headed brakeman came back to him.

“Fer Gawd’s sake don’t shoot!” he cried, in terrified tones. “We’re the train crew! The freight crew! We bin held up! Say – !”

But the lowering of the threatening gun saved him further explanation at such a distance.

The light of battle had entirely died out of Mr. Moss’s eyes, but it was the brakeman’s uniform, rather than his explanation, that had inspired the white flag of peace.

The man came hastily up.

“What the – ?” began the agent. But he was permitted to proceed no further.

The angry eyes of the brakeman snapped, and his blasphemous tongue poured out its protesting story as rapidly as his stormy feelings could drive him. Then, with an added violence, he came to his final charge of the agent himself.

“What in hell did you flag us for?” he cried. “You, on this bum layout? Do you stand in with these ‘hold-ups’? I tell you right here this thing’s goin’ to be just as red-hot for you as I can make it. That train was flagged *without official reason*,” he went on with rising heat. “Get me? An’ you’re responsible.”

Having delivered himself of his threat, he assumed the hectoring air which the moral support of his companions afforded him.

“Now, you just start right in and get busy on the wires. You can just hammer seven sorts of hell into your instruments and call up Amberley quick. You’re goin’ to put ’em wise right away. Macinaw! When I’m done with this thing you’re goin’ to hate White Point wuss’n hell, an’ wish to Gawd they’d cut ‘flag station’ right out o’ the conversation of the whole durned American continent.”

Mr. Moss had listened in a perfect daze. It was his blank acceptance of the brakeman’s hectoring which had so encouraged that individual. But now that all had been told, and the man’s harsh tones ceased to disturb the peace of their surroundings, his mind cleared, and hot resentment leaped to his tongue.

He sat down at his instrument and pounded the key, calling up Amberley; and as the Morse sign clacked its metallic, broken note he verbally replied to his accuser.

“You’ve talked a whole heap that sounds to me like hot air,” he cried, with bitter feeling. “Maybe you’re old, so it don’t amount to anything. As for your bum freight it was late – as usual. It wasn’t my duty to pass it through till you shouted for signals. There ain’t any schedule for bum freights. When they’re late it’s up to them.”

But for all Mr. Moss’s contempt, and righteous indignation, the brakeman’s charge had had its effect. Well enough he remembered the disjointed connecting rod, and he wondered how these “hold-ups” had contrived it under his very nose. In his own phraseology, he felt “sore.” But his ill humor was not alone due to the brakeman’s abuse. He was thinking of something far more vital. He knew well enough that his explanation would never satisfy the heads of his department. Then, too, always hovering somewhere in the background, was the, to him, sinister figure of Inspector Fyles of the Mounted Police.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE FOOT OF AN AGED PINE

Waiting for word from the agent, Huntly, Inspector Fyles had retreated to the insignificant wooden shack which served the police as a Town Station in Amberley. It consisted of two rooms and a loft in the pitch of the roof. Its furniture was reduced to a minimum, and everything, except the loft above where the two troopers and the corporal in charge slept, was a matter of bare boards and bare wooden chairs.

The officer sat in the smaller inner room where the telephone was close to his hand, while the non-commissioned officer and his men occupied the outer room.

Fyles faced the window with his hard Windsor chair close beside the office table. His elbow rested upon its chipped and discolored surface, and his chin was supported on the palm of his hand. Just now his busy thoughts were free to wander whithersoever they listed. This was an interim of waiting, when all preparations were made for the work in hand, and there was nothing to do but await developments. So used was he to this work of seizing contraband spirits that its contemplation had not power enough to quicken one single beat of his pulse. And in this, too, he displayed that wondrous patience which was so much a part of his nature.

Stanley Fyles's reputation in these wild regions was decidedly unique. Scarcely a day passed but what some strenuous emergency arose demanding quick thought and quicker action, where life, frequently his own, hung in the balance. Yet the most strenuous of them found him always easy, always deliberate, and, as his subordinates loved to declare, he always managed to "beat the game by a second."

There were people outside, civilians, who confidently and contemptuously declared him to be a bungler; a patient, hard-working bungler. These were the men who saw few of his successes, and always contrived to smell out his failures. These people were those who had no understanding of the difficulties of a handful of men pitted against a country eaten up with every form of criminal disease. There were others, again, who insisted that far more crime slipped through his well "oiled" hands than ever was held by them. These were the people who sneered at his reputation for stern discipline, and declared it to be a mere pose to cover his tracks, while he patiently piled up a fortune through the shady channels of "graft." A small minority admitted his ability, but averred that his patience erred on the side of slackness, which was one of the causes that the flood of prohibited liquor in the country showed no abatement.

Nevertheless, one and all admitted his patience, whether it was in bungling, in harvesting his graft, or whether it was a form of slackness. Nor could they help doing so, for patience, a wonderful purposeful patience, was his greatest characteristic. Every other feature of his personality was subservient to it, and so it was that the most hardened criminals began at once a nervous scrutiny of their tracks the moment the news reached them that the lean nose of Stanley Fyles had caught their scent.

Those who knew Fyles best ignored the patience which caught the public mind so readily. They saw something more beneath it, something much more to their liking. His patience only masked a keen, swift-moving, scheming brain, packed to the uttermost with a wonderful instinct for detection. He worked on no rule-of-thumb method as so many of his comrades did. He was the fortunate possessor of an imagination, and, long since, he had learned its value in his crusade against crime.

But this man was by no means a mere detection machine. He was full of ambition. Police work was merely serving its purpose in his scheme of things. He saw advancement in it – advancement in the right direction. In five years he had raised himself from the lowest rung of the police ladder

to a commissioned rank, and from this rank he knew he could reach out in any of the directions in which he required to proceed.

There were several directions in which his ambitious eyes gazed. There were politics, with their multifarious opportunities for fortune and place. There was the land, crying aloud of the fortunes lying hidden within its bosom. There was official service upon higher planes, from which so many names were drawn to fill the roll of fame to be handed down to an adoring posterity. He was not yet thirty years of age, and he felt that any one of these things lay well within the focus his present position presented.

But the time for his next move was not yet; and herein was the real man. In his mind there were still purposes which required complete fulfilment before that further upward movement began. It was the more human side of the man dictating its will upon him, that will which can never be denied when once it rouses from its slumbers amid the living fires which course through the veins of healthy manhood.

Just now, as he leaned back in his unyielding chair, luxuriating in a comfort which only a man as hard as he could have extracted from it, the hot, living fires were stirring in his veins. His mind had gone back to a picture, one of the many pictures which so often held him in his scant leisure, that represented the first waking of those dormant fires of manhood.

The scene was a memory forming the starting point of a long series of other pictures, which always came with a rush, changing and changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity till they developed into a stream of swiftly flowing thought.

It was the picture of a quaint, straggling prairie village, half hidden in the multi-hued foliage of a deep valley, as viewed from his saddle where his horse stood upon the shoulder of land which dropped away at his feet. It was one of those wondrous fairy scenes with which the prairie, in her friendlier moods, delights to charm the eye. Perhaps "mock" would better express her whim, for many of these fair settlements in the days of the Prohibition Laws were veritable sepulchres of crime, only whitewashed by the humorous mood of nature.

Ten yards below him an aged pine reared its hoary, time-worn head toward the gleaming azure of a noonday summer sky. It was a landmark known throughout the land; it was the landmark which had guided him to this obscure village of Rocky Springs. It had been in his eye all the morning as he rode toward it, and as he drew near curiosity had impelled him to leave the trail he was on and examine more closely this wonderful specimen of a far, far distant age.

But his inspection was never fully made. Instead, his interest was abruptly diverted to that which he beheld reposing beneath its shadow. A girl was sitting, half reclining, against the dark old trunk, with a sewing basket at her side, and a perfect maze of white needlework in her lap.

She was not sewing, however, as he drew near. She was gazing out over the village below, with a pair of eyes so deep and darkly beautiful that the man caught his breath. Just for one unconscious moment Stanley Fyles had followed the direction of her gaze, then his own eyes came back to her face and riveted themselves upon it.

She was very, very beautiful. Her hair was abundant and dark. Yet it was quite devoid of that suggestion of great weight so often found in very dark hair. There was a melting luster in the velvet softness of her deeply fringed eyes. Her features were sufficiently irregular to escape the accusation of classic form, and possessed a firmness and decision quite remarkable. At that moment the solitary horseman decided in his mind that here was the most beautiful creature he had ever looked upon.

She was dressed in a light summer frock, through the delicate texture of which peeped the warm tint of beautifully rounded arms and shoulders. She was hatless, too, in spite of the summer blaze. To his fired imagination she belonged to a canvas painted by some old master whose portrayals suggested a strength and depth of character rarely seen in life. Even the beautiful olive of

her complexion suggested those southern climes whence alone, he had always been led to believe, old masters hailed.

To him it was the face of a woman whose heart and mind were crowding with a yearning for something – something unattainable. Such was her look of strength and virility that he almost regretted them, fearing that her character might belie her wondrous femininity.

But in a moment he had denial forced upon him. The girl turned slowly, and gazed up into his face with smiling frankness. Her eyes took him in from his prairie hat to his well-booted feet. They passed swiftly over his dark patrol jacket, with its star upon its shoulder, and down the yellow stripe of his riding breeches. There was nothing left him but to salute, which he did as her voice broke the silence.

“You’re Inspector Stanley Fyles?” she said, with a rising inflection in her deep musical voice.

The man answered bluntly. He was taken aback at the unconventional greeting.

“Yes – ” He cleared his throat in his momentary confusion. Then he responded to her still smiling eyes. “And – that’s Rocky Springs?” he inquired, pointing down the valley. The information was quite unnecessary.

The girl nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “a prairie village that’s full of everything interesting – except, perhaps, honesty.”

The man smiled broadly.

“That’s why I’m here.”

The girl laughed a merry, rippling laugh.

“Sure,” she nodded. “We heard you were coming. You’re going to fix a police station here, aren’t you?” Then, as he nodded, her smile died out and her eyes became almost earnest. “It’s surely time,” she declared. “I’ve heard of bad places, I’ve read of them, I guess. But all I’ve heard of, or read of, are heavens of righteousness compared with this place. Look,” she cried, rising from the ground and reaching out one beautifully rounded arm in the direction of the nestling houses, amid their setting of green woods, with the silvery gleam of the river peeping up as it wound its sluggish summer way through the heart of the valley. “Was there ever such a mockery? The sweetest picture human eyes could rest on. Fair – far, far fairer than any artist’s fancy could paint it. It’s a fit resting place for everything that’s good, and true, and beautiful in life, and – and yet – I’d say that Rocky Springs, very nearly to a man, is – against the law.”

For a moment Fyles had no reply. He was thinking of the charm of the picture she made standing there silhouetted against the green slope of the far side of the valley. Then, as she suddenly dropped her arm, and began to gather up the sewing she had tumbled upon the ground when she stood up, he pulled himself together. He beamed an unusually genial smile.

“Guess there are things we police need to be thankful for, and places like Rocky Springs are among ’em,” he said, cheerfully. “I’d say if it wasn’t for your Rocky Springs, and its like, we should be chasing around as uselessly as hungry coyotes in winter. The Government wouldn’t fancy paying us for nothing.”

By the time he had finished speaking the girl’s work was gathered in her arms.

“That’s the trail,” she said abruptly, pointing at the path which Fyles had left for his inspection of the tree. “It goes right on down to the saloon. You see,” she added slyly, “the saloon’s about the most important building in the town. Good-bye.”

Without another word she walked off down the slope, and, in a moment, was lost among the generous growth of shrubs.

This was the scene to which his mind always reverted. But there were others, many of them, and in each this beautiful girl’s presence was always the center of his focus. He had seen and spoken to her many times since then, for his duty frequently took him into the neighborhood of that aged

pine. But in spite of her frankness at their first meeting she quickly proved far more elusive than he would have believed possible, and consequently his intimacy with her had progressed very little.

The result was a natural one. The man's interest in her was still further whetted, till, in time, he finally realized that the long anticipated move upwards, which he was preparing for, could no longer be made – alone.

These were the thoughts occupying him now as he stared out through the dusty window at the scattered houses which lined Amberley's main street. These were the thoughts which conjured on his bronzed, strong features, that pleasant half-smile of satisfaction. He wanted her very much. He wanted her so much that all impulse to rush headlong and make her his was thrust aside. He must wait – wait with the same patience which he applied to all that which was important in his life, and, when opportunity offered, when the moment was ripe, he would make the great effort upon which he knew so much of his future happiness depended.

Thus he was dreaming on pleasantly, hopefully, and yet not without doubts, when a sharp knock at his door banished the last vestige of romance from his mind. In an instant he was on his feet, alert and waiting.

“Come!”

His summons was promptly answered, and the tall figure of the corporal stood framed in the doorway.

“Well?”

The question came with the sharp ring of authority.

“It's Huntly, sir,” the man explained briefly. “He's got a message. There's been a ‘hold-up’ of the freight, just beyond White Point. The ‘jumpers’ have dropped off the two hindmost cars and held the crew prisoners. Seems the train was flagged on the bend out of the hills and then allowed to pass. While it was standing the cars were cut loose. Then the train came on without them. She's in sight now. Huntly's outside.”

The Inspector gave no sign while his subordinate talked. His eyes were lowered at a point of interest on the floor. At the conclusion of the man's brief outline he glanced up.

“Has Huntly got the message with him?”

“Yes, sir.”

Fyles made a move, and the other stepped back to let him pass out.

The agent was waiting in the outer office. His eyes were wide with excitement.

“Well? Where's the message?” the officer demanded.

Huntly thrust a paper into his hand.

“It just came through.”

Fyles took it, and his strong brows drew together as he read the long story of the “hold-up” which the man had taken down from his instrument.

A deep silence prevailed while the officer read the news which so completely frustrated all his plans.

At last he looked up. Favoring the man Huntly with one inquiring glance, he turned to the corporal.

“It says here the brakeman heard the leader tell his men to make for the south trail. That was either bluff – or a mistake. They sometimes make mistakes, and that's how we get our chances. The south trail is the road into Rocky Springs. Rocky Springs is twenty-two miles from White Point. They've probably had an hour's start with a heavily loaded wagon. Rocky Springs is twenty-six from here by trail. Good. Say, tell the boys to get on the move quick. They'll strike the south trail about seven miles northeast of Rocky Springs. If they ride hard they should cut them off, or, any way, hit their trail close behind them.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Fyles turned back to the inner room and picked up the telephone, ignoring the still waiting agent, the corporal hurried away.

In a moment the telephone bell rang out and the officer was speaking.

“Yes, sir, Fyles. Yes, at the Town Station. I’m coming up to barracks right away. It’s most important. I must see you. The whisky-runners have – doubled on us.”

CHAPTER V

BOUND FOR THE SOUTHERN TRAIL

Three uniformed men rode hard across the tawny plains. They rode abreast. Their horses were a-lather; their lean sides tuckered, but their gait remained unslackening. It was a gait they would keep as long as daylight lasted.

Sergeant McBain's horse kept its nose just ahead of the others. It was as though the big, rawboned animal appreciated its rider's rank.

Quite abruptly the non-commissioned officer raised an arm and pointed.

"Yon's the Cypress Hills, boys," he cried. "See, they're getting up out of the heat haze on the skyline. We're heading too far south."

He spoke without for a moment withdrawing the steady gaze of his hard blue eyes.

One of the troopers answered him.

"Sure, sergeant," he agreed. "We need to head away to the left."

The horses swung off the line, beating the sun-scorched grass with their iron-shod hoofs with a vigor that felt good to the riders.

The bronzed faces of the men were eager. Their widely gazing eyes were alert and watchful. They were trailing a hot scent, a pastime as well as a work that was their life. They needed no greater incentive to put forth the best efforts of bodily and mental energies.

The uniform of these riders of the western plains was unassuming. Their brown canvas tunics, their prairie hats, their black, hard serge breeches, with broad, yellow stripes down the thighs, possessed a businesslike appearance not to be found in a modern soldier's uniform. These things were for sheer hard service.

The life of these men was made up of hard service. It was demanded of them by the Government; it was also demanded of them by the conditions of the country. Lawlessness prevailed on these fair, sunlit plains; lawlessness of man, lawlessness of Nature. Between the two they were left with scarce a breathing space for those comforts which only found existence in dreams that were all too brief and transitory.

Nominally, these men were military police, yet their methods were far enough removed from all matters martial. Theirs it was to obey orders, but all similarity ended there. Each man was left free to think and act for himself. Brief orders, with little detail, were hurled at him. For the rest his superiors demanded one result – achievement. A crime was committed; a criminal was at large; information of a contemplated breach of the peace was to hand. Then go – and see to it. Investigate and arrest. The individual must plan and carry out, whatever the odds. Success would meet with cool approval; failure would be promptly rewarded with the utmost rigor of the penal code governing the force. The work might take days, weeks, months. It mattered not. Nor did it matter the expense, provided success crowned the effort. But with failure resulting – ah, there must be no failure. The prestige of the force could not stand failure, for its seven hundred men were required to dominate and cleanse a territory in which half a dozen European countries could be comfortably lost.

Presently Sergeant McBain spoke again. His steady eyes were still fixed upon the horizon.

"Say, that's her," he said. "There she is. Coming right up like a mop head. That's the pine at Rocky Springs. Further away to the left still, boys."

He turned his horse, and the race against time was continued. Somewhere ahead, on the southern trail, a gang of whisky smugglers were plying their trade. Inspector Fyles had said, "Go, and – round them up."

The odds were all against these men, yet no one considered the matter. Each, with eyes and brain alert, was ready to do all of which human effort was capable.

Now that definite direction over those wastes of grass had been finally located, the sergeant, a rough, hard-faced Scot, relaxed his vigilance. His mind drifted to the purpose in hand, and a dry humor lit his eyes.

"Eh, man, but it's a shameful waste, spilling good spirit," he said, addressing no one in particular. "Governments are always prodigal – except with pay."

One of the troopers sniggered.

"Guess we could spill some of it, sergeant," he declared meaningly.

"Spill it!" The sergeant grinned. "That isn't the word, boy. Spill don't describe the warm trickle of good liquor down a man's throat. Say, I mind –"

The other trooper broke in.

"Fyles 'ud spill champagne," he cried in disgust. "A man like that needs seeing to."

The sergeant shook his head.

"Fyles would spill anything or anybody that required spilling, so he gets his nose to windward of the game. He's right, too, in this God-forgotten land. If we didn't spill, we'd be right down and out, and our lives wouldn't be worth a second's purchase. No, boys, it breaks our hearts to spill – but we got to do it – or be spilt ourselves."

The man shook his reins and hustled the great sorrel under him. The animal's response was a lengthening of stride which left his companions hard put to it to keep pace.

The brief talk was closed. It had been a moment of relaxed tension. Now, once more, every eye was fixed on the shimmering skyline. They were eagerly looking out for the southern trail.

Half an hour later its yellow, sandy surface lay beneath their feet, an open book for the reading.

All three leaped from the saddle and began a close examination of it, while their sweating horses promptly regaled themselves with the ripe, tufty grass at the trail side.

Sergeant McBain narrowly scrutinized the wheel tracks, estimating the speed at which the last vehicle to pass had been traveling. The blurred hoofmarks of the horses warned him they had been driven hard.

"We're behind 'em, boys," he declared promptly, "an' their gait says they're taking no chances."

Further down the trail one of the troopers answered him:

"There's four saddle horses with 'em," he said thoughtfully. "Two shod, and two shod on the forefeet only. Guess, with the teamster, that makes five men. Prairie toughs, I'd guess."

The sergeant concurred, while they continued their examination.

Then the third man exclaimed sharply —

"Here!" he cried, picking something up at the side of the trail.

The others joined him at once.

He was quietly tearing open a half-burned cigarette, the tobacco inside of which was still moist.

"Prairie toughs don't smoke *made* cigarettes around here. It's a Caporal. Get it? That's bought in a town."

"Ay," said McBain quickly. "Rocky Springs, I'd say. It's the Rocky Springs gang, sure as hell. It's the foulest hole of crime in the northwest. Come on, boys. We need to get busy."

Two minutes later a moving cloud of dust marked their progress down the trail in the direction of Rocky Springs. Presently, however, the dust subsided. The astute riders of the plains were giving no chances away; they had left the tell-tale trail and rode on over the grass at its edge.

The westering sun was low on the horizon. The air was still. Not a cloud was visible anywhere in the sky. The world was silent. The drowsing birds, even, had finished their evensong.

Low bush-grown hills lined the trail where it entered the wide valley of Leaping Creek, which, six miles further on, ran through the heart of the hamlet of Rocky Springs.

It was a beauty spot of no mean order. The smaller hills were broken and profuse, with dark woodland gorges splitting them in every direction, crowded with such a density of foliage as to be almost impassable. Farther on, as the valley widened and deepened, its aspect became more rugged. The land rose to greater heights, the lighter vegetation gave way to heavier growths of spruce and blue gum and maple. These too, in turn, became sprinkled with the darker and taller pines. Then, as the distance gained, a still further change met the eye. Vast patches of virgin pine woods, with their mournful, tattered crowns, toned the brighter greens to the somber grandeur of more mountainous regions.

The breathless hush of evening lay upon the valley. There was even a sense of awe in the silence. It was peace, a wonderful natural peace, when all nature seems at rest, nor could the chastened atmosphere of a cloister have conveyed more perfectly the sense of repose.

But the human contradiction lay in the heart of the valley. It was the abiding place of the hamlet of Rocky Springs, and Rocky Springs was accredited with being the very breeding ground of prairie crime.

Just now, however, the chastened atmosphere was perfect. Rocky Springs, so far away, was powerless to affect it. Even the song of the tumbling creek, which coursed through the heart of the valley, was powerless to awaken discordant echoes. Its music was low and soft. It was like the drone of the stirring insects, part of that which went to make up the atmosphere of perfect peace.

The sun dropped lower in the western sky. A velvet twilight seemed to rise out of the heart of the valley. Slowly the glowing light vanished behind a bluff of woodland. In a few minutes the trees and undergrowth were lit up as though a mighty conflagration were devouring them. Then the fire died down, and the sun sank.

But as the sun sank, a low, deep note grew softly out of the distance. For a time it blended musically with the murmuring of the bustling creek and the wakeful insect life. Then it dominated both, and its music lessened. Its note changed rapidly, so rapidly that its softer tone was at once forgotten, and only the harshness it now assumed remained in the mind. Louder and harsher it grew till from a mere rumble it jumped to a rattle and clatter which suggested speed, violence, and a dozen conflicting emotions.

Almost immediately came a further change, and one which left no doubt remaining. The clatter broke up into distinct and separate sounds. The swift beat of speeding hoofs mingled with the fierce rattle of light wheels, racing over the surface of a hard road.

All sense of peace vanished from the valley. Almost it seemed as if its very aspect had changed. A sense of human strife had suddenly possessed it, and left its painful mark indelibly set upon the whole scene.

The climax was reached as a hard driven team and wagon, escorted by four mounted men, precipitated themselves into the picture. They came over the shoulder of the valley and plunged headlong down the dangerous slope, regardless of all consequences, regardless both of life and limb. The teamster was leaning forward in his seat, his arms outstretched, grasping a rein in each hand. He was urging his horses to their utmost. In his face was that stern, desperate expression that told of perfect cognizance of his position. It said as plainly as possible, however great the danger he saw before him, it must be chanced for the greater danger behind.

Two of the horsemen detached themselves from the escort and remained hidden behind some bush at the shoulder of the hill. They were there to watch the approach to the valley. The others kept pace with the racing vehicle as the surefooted team tore down the slope.

Rocking and swaying and skidding, the vehicle seemed literally to precipitate itself to the depths below, and, as the horses, with necks outstretched and mouths beginning to gape, with ears flattened and streaming flanks, reached the bottom, the desperate nature of the journey became

even more apparent. There was neither wavering nor mercy in the eyes of the teamster and his escort as they pressed on down the valley.

One of the escort called sharply to the teamster.

“Can we make it?” he shouted.

“Got to,” came back the answer through clenched jaws. “If we got twenty minutes on the gorr darned p’lice they won’t see us for dust. Heh!”

The man’s final exclamation came as one of his horses stumbled. But he kept the straining beast on its legs by the sheer physical strength of his hands upon the reins. The check was barely an instant, but he picked up the rawhide whip lying in the wagon and plied it mercilessly.

The exhausted beasts responded and the vehicle flew down the trail, swaying and yawing the whole breadth of the road. The dust in its wake rose up in a dense cloud. Into this the escort plunged and quickly became lost to view behind the bush which lined the sharply twisting trail.

Faster and faster the horses sped under the iron hand of the teamster, till distance took hold of the clatter and finally diminished it to a rumble. In a few minutes even the rising cloud of dust, like smoke above the tree tops, thinned and finally melted away, and so, once more, peace returned to the twilit valley.

A wagon was lumbering slowly toward Rocky Springs. It was less than a mile beyond the outskirts of the village, and already an occasional flash of white paint through the trees revealed the sides of some outlying house in the distance ahead.

The horses were dejected-looking creatures, and their flanks were streaked with gray lines of caking sweat. They were walking, and the teamster on the wagon sat huddled down in the driving seat, an exquisite picture of unclean ease.

He was a hard-faced, unwashed creature, whose swarthy features were ingrained with sweat and dirt. He was clad in typical prairie costume, his loose cotton shirt well matching the unclean condition of his face. One cheek was bulging with a big chew of tobacco, while the other sank in over the hollows left by absent back teeth.

He certainly was unprepossessing. Even his contented smile only added to the evil of his expression. His contentment, however, was by no means his whole atmosphere. In fact, it was rather studied, for his eyes were alight and watchful with the furtive watchfulness so easy to detect in those of partial color. They suggested that his ears, too, were no less alert, and now and again this suggestion received confirmation in the quick turn of the head in a direction which said plainly he was listening for any unusual sound from behind him.

One of these turns of the head remained longer than usual. Then, with quite a sharp movement of the body, he swung one of the great pistols hanging at his waist, so that its barrel rested across his thigh, and its butt was ready to his hand. Then, with a malicious chuckle, he took a firmer grip of his reins, and his jaded horses raised their drooping heads.

The object of his change of attitude quickly became apparent, for, a few moments later, the distant sound of hoof-beats, far behind him, echoed through the still valley.

He checked his horses still more, and it became evident that he wished those who were behind him to come up before he reached the village. The smile on his evil face became more humorous, and he spat out a stream of tobacco juice with great enjoyment.

The sounds grew louder, and he turned about and peered down the darkening valley. There was nothing and no one in sight yet amid the woodland shadows. Only the clatter of hoofs was growing with each moment. He finally turned back and resettled himself. His attitude now became one of even more studied indifference, but his gun remained close to his hand.

The sounds behind him were drawing nearer. His tired horses pricked their ears. They, too, seemed to become interested. The pursuers came on. They were less than a hundred yards behind. In a few moments they were directly behind. Then the man lazily turned his head. For some moments

he stared stupidly at the three uniformed figures who had descended upon him. Then he suddenly sat up and brought his horses to a standstill. The policemen were surrounding his wagon.

Sergeant McBain was abreast of him on one side, one trooper drew up his horse at the other side, while the third came to a halt at the rear of the wagon and peered into it.

“Evenin’, sergeant,” cried the teamster, with deliberate cheeriness. “Makin’ Rocky Springs?”

McBain’s hard blue eyes looked straight into the half-breed’s face. He was endeavoring to fix and hold those dark, furtive eyes. But it was not easy.

“Maybe,” he said curtly.

Then he glanced swiftly over the outfit. The sweat-streaked horses interested him. The nature of the wagon. Then, finally, the contents of the wagon covered with a light canvas protection against the dust.

“Where you from?” he demanded peremptorily.

“Just got through from Myrtle,” replied the man, quite undisturbed by the other’s manner.

“Fourteen miles,” said McBain sharply. “Guess your plugs sweated some. What’s your name, and who do you work for?”

“Guess I’m Pete Clancy, an’ I’m Kate Seton’s ‘hired’ man. Been across to Myrtle for fixin’s for her.”

“Fixings?”

The sergeant’s eyes at last compelled the other’s. There was something like insolence in the way Pete Clancy returned his stare. There was also humor.

“Sure,” he returned easily. “Guess you’ll find ’em in the wagon ef you raise that cover. There’s one of them fakes fer sewin’ with. There’s a deal o’ fancy canned truck, an’ say, the leddy’s death on notions. Get a peek at the colors o’ them silk duds. On’y keep dirty hands off’n ’em, or she’ll cuss me to hell for a fust-class hog.”

McBain signed to the trooper at the rear of the wagon and the man stripped the cover off. The first thing the officer beheld was a sewing machine in its shining walnut case. Beside this was an open packing case filled with canned fruits and meats, and a large supply of groceries. In another box, packed under layers of paper, were materials for dressmaking, and a roll of white lawn for other articles of a woman’s apparel.

With obvious disgust he signed again to the trooper to replace the cover. Then Clancy broke in.

“Say,” he cried ironically, “ain’t they dandy? I tell you, sergeant, when it comes to fancy things, women ha’ got us skinned to death. Fancy us wearin’ skirts an’ things made o’ them flimsies! We’d fall right through ’em an’ break our dirty necks. An’ the colors, too. Guess they’d shame a dago wench, an’ set a three-year old stud bull shakin’ his sides with a puffic tempest of indignation. But when it comes to canned truck, well, say, prairie hash ain’t nothin’ to it, an’ if I hadn’t been raised in a Bible class, an’ had the feel o’ the cold water o’ righteousness in my bones, I’d never ha’ hauled them all this way without gettin’ a peek into them cans. I – ”

“Cut it out, man,” cried the officer sharply. “I need a straight word with you. Get me? Straight. Your bluff’ll do for other folks. You haven’t been to Myrtle. You come from White Point, where you helped hold up a freight. You ran a big cargo of liquor in this wagon, which is why your plugs are tuckered out. You’ve cached that liquor in this valley, at the place you gathered up this truck. I don’t say you aren’t ‘hired man’ to Miss Seton in Rocky Springs, but you’re playing a double game. You fetched her goods and dumped ’em at the cache, only to pick ’em up when you were through with your other game.”

The man laughed insolently.

“Gee! I must be a ter’ble bad feller, sergeant,” he cried. “Me, as was raised in a Bible class.” His eyes twinkled as he went on. “An’ I done all that? All that you sed, sergeant? Say, I’m a real bright feller. Guess I’ll get a drink o’ that liquor, won’t I? It ’ud be a bum trick – ”

The sergeant's eyes snapped.

"You'll get the penitentiary before we're through with you. You and the boys with you. We've followed your trail all the way, and that trail ends right here. We're wise to you – "

"But you ain't wise where the liquor's cached," retorted the man with a chuckle.

Then he looked straight into the officer's eyes.

"Say," he cried with his big laugh. "You can talk penitentiary till you're sick. Ther' ain't no liquor in my wagon, an' if there ever has been any, as you kind o' fancy, it's right up to you to locate it, and spill it, an' not set right there keepin' me from my work."

As he finished speaking, with elaborate display, he shook his reins and shouted at his horses, which promptly moved on.

As the wagon rolled away he turned his head and spoke over his shoulder.

"You can't spill canned truck an' sewin' machines, sergeant," he called back derisively. "That penitentiary racket don't fizz nothin'. Guess you best think again."

The officer's chagrin was complete. It was the start the outlaws had had that had beaten him. This was the wagon; this was one of the men. Of these things he was convinced. There were others in it, too, but they – . He turned to his troopers.

"I'd give a month's pay to get bracelets on that feller," he said with a grin that had no mirth in it. Then he added grimly, as he gazed after the receding wagon: "And I'm a Scotchman."

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN-HUNTERS

The girl's handsome face was turned toward the valley below her. She was staring with eyes of dreaming, half regretful, yet not without a faint light of humor, at the nestling village in the lap of the woodlands, which crowded the heart of the valley, where the silvery thread of river wound its way.

The wide foliage of the maple tree, beneath which she sat, sheltered her bare head from the burning noonday sun. And here, so high up on the shoulder of the valley, she felt there was at least air to breathe.

The book on the ground beside her had only just been laid there; its pages, wide open, had been turned face downward upon the dry, grassless patch surrounding the tree trunk.

Only a few feet away another girl, slight and fair-haired, was nimbly plying her needle upon a pile of white lawn, as to the object of which there could be small enough doubt. She was working with the care and obvious appreciation which most women display toward the manufacture of delicate underclothing.

As her companion laid her book aside and turned toward the valley, the pretty needlewoman raised a pair of gray, speculative eyes. But almost at once they dropped again to her work. It was only for a moment, however. She reached the end of her seam and began to fold the material up, and, as she did so, her eyes were once more raised in the direction of her sister, only now they were full of laughter.

"Kate," she said, in a tone in which mirth would not be denied, "do you know, it's five years to-day since we first came to Rocky Springs? Five years." She breathed a profound sigh, which was full of mockery. "You were twenty-three when we came. You are twenty-eight now, and I am twenty-two. We'll soon be old maids. The folks down there," she went on, nodding at the village below, "will soon be speaking of us as 'them two old guys,' or 'them funny old dears, the Seton sisters.' Isn't it awful to think of? We came out West to find husbands for ourselves, and here we are very nearly – old maids."

Kate Seton's eyes wore a responsive twinkle, but she did not turn.

"You're a bit of a joke, Hel," she replied, in the slow musical fashion of a deep contralto voice.

"But I'm not a joke," protested the other, with pretended severity. "And I won't be called 'Hel,' just because my name's Helen. It – it sounds like the way Pete and Nick swear at each other when they've been spending their pay at Dirty O'Brien's. Besides, it doesn't alter facts at all. It won't take much more climbing to find ourselves right on the shelf, among the frying pans and other cooking utensils. I'm – I'm tired of it – I – really am. It's no use talking. I'm a woman, and I'd sooner see a pair of trousers walking around my house than another bunch of skirts – even if they belong to my beloved sister. Trousers go every time – with me."

Kate withdrew her gaze from the village below and looked into her sister's pretty face with smiling, indulgent eyes.

"Well?" she said.

The other shook her fair head. Her eyes were still laughing, but their expression did not hide the seriousness which lay behind them.

"It's not 'well' at all," she cried. She drew herself up from the ground into a kneeling position, which left her sitting on the heels of shoes that could never have been bought in Rocky Springs. "Now, listen to me," she went on, holding up a warning finger. "I'm just going to state my case right here and now, and – and you've got to listen to me. Five years ago, Kate Seton, aged twenty-

three, and her sister, Helen Seton, were left orphans, with the sum of two thousand dollars equally divided between them. You get that?"

Her sister nodded amusedly. "Well," the girl went on deliberately. "Kate Seton was no ordinary sort of girl. Oh, no. She was most *un*ordinary, as Nick would say. She was a sort of headstrong girl with an absurd notion of woman's independence. I – I don't mean she was masculine, or any horror like that. But she believed that when it came to doing the things she wanted to do she could do them just as well, and deliberately, as any man. That she could think as well as any man. In fact, she didn't believe in the superiority of the male sex over hers. The only superiority she did acknowledge was that a man could ask a woman to marry, while the privilege of asking a man was denied to Kate's sex. But even in acknowledging this she reserved to herself an alternative. She believed that every woman had the right to make a man ask her."

The patient Kate mildly protested. "You're making me out a perfectly awful creature," she said, without the least umbrage. "Hadn't I better stand up for the – arraignment?"

But her sister's mock seriousness remained quite undisturbed.

"There's no necessity," she said, airily. "Besides, you'll be tired when I'm through. Now listen. Kate Seton is a very kind and lovable creature – really. Only – only she suffers from – notions."

The dark-eyed Kate, with her handsome face so full of decision and character, eyed her sister with the indulgence of a mother.

"You do talk, child," was all she said.

Helen nodded. "I like talking. It makes me feel clever."

"Ye – es. People are like that," returned the other ironically. "Go on."

Helen folded her hands in her lap, and for a moment gazed speculatively at the sister she knew she adored.

"Well," she went on presently. "Let us keep to the charge. Five years ago this spirit of independence and adventure was very strong in Kate Seton. Far, far stronger than it is now. That's by the way. Say, anyhow, it was so strong then that when these two found themselves alone in the world with their money, it was her idea to break through all convention, leave her little village in New England, go out west, and seek 'live' men and fortune on the rolling plains of Canada. The last part of that's put in for effect."

The girl paused, watching her sister as she turned again toward the valley below.

With a sigh of resignation Helen was forced to proceed. "That's five years – ago," she said. Then, dropping her voice to a note of pathos, and with the pretense of a sob: "Five long years ago two lonely girls, orphans, set out from their conventional home in a New England village, after having sold it out – the home, not the village – and turned wistful faces toward the wild green plains of the western wilderness, the home of the broncho, the gopher, and the merciless mosquito."

"Oh, do get on," Kate's smile was good to see.

"It's emotion," said Helen, pretending to dab her eyes. "It's emotion mussing up the whole blamed business, as Nick would say."

"Never mind Nick," cried her sister. "Anyway, I don't think he swears nearly as much as you make out. I'll soon have to go and get the Meeting House ready for to-morrow's service. So –"

"Ah, that's just it," broke in Helen, with a great display of triumph in her laughing eyes. "Five years ago Kate Seton would never have said that. She'd have said, 'bother the old Meeting House, and all the old cats who go there to slander each other in – in the name of religion.' That's what she'd have said. It's all different now. Gone is her love of adventure; gone is her defiance of convention; gone is – is her independence. What is she now? A mere farmer, a drudging female, spinster farmer, growing cabbages and things, and getting her manicured hands all mussed up, and freckles on her otherwise handsome face."

"A successful – female, spinster farmer," put in Kate, in her deep, soft voice.

Helen nodded, and there was a sort of helplessness in her admission.

“Yes,” she sighed, “and that’s the worst of it. We came to find husbands – ‘live’ husbands, and we only find – cabbages. The man-hunters. That’s what we called ourselves. It sounded – uncommon, and so we used the expression.” Suddenly she scrambled to her feet in undignified haste, and shook a small, clenched fist in her sister’s direction. “Kate Seton,” she cried, “you’re a fraud. An unmitigated – fraud. Yes, you are. Don’t glare at me. ‘Live’ men! Adventure! Poof! You’re as tame as any village cat, and just as – dozy.”

Kate had risen, too. She was not glaring. She was laughing. Her dark, handsome face was alight with merriment at her sister’s characteristic attack. She loved her irresponsible chatter, just as she loved the loyal heart that beat within the girl’s slight, shapely body. Now she came over and laid a caressing hand upon the girl’s shoulder. In a moment it dropped to the slim waist about which her arm was quickly placed.

“I wish I could get cross with you, Helen,” she said happily. “But I simply – can’t. You know you get very near the mark in your funny fashion – in some things. Say, I wonder. Do you know we have more than our original capital in the bank? Our farm is a flourishing concern. We employ labor. Two creatures that call themselves men, and who possess the characters of – hogs, or tigers, or something pretty dreadful. We can afford to buy our clothes direct from New York or Montreal. Think of that. Isn’t that due to independence? I admit the villagy business. I seem to love Rocky Springs. It’s such a whited sepulcher, and its inhabitants are such blackguards with great big hearts. Yes, I love even the unconventional conventions of the place. But the spirit of adventure. Well, somehow I don’t think that has really gone.”

“Just got mired – among the cabbages,” said Helen, slyly. Then she released herself from her sister’s embrace and stood off at arm’s length, assuming an absurdly accusing air. “But wait a moment, Kate Seton. This is all wrong. I’m making the charge, and you’re doing all the talking. There’s no defense in the case. You’ve – you’ve just got to listen, and – accept the sentence. Guess this isn’t a court of men – just women. Now, we’re man-hunters. That’s how we started, and that’s what I am – still. We’ve been five years at it, with what result? I’ll just tell you. I’ve been proposed to by everything available in trousers in the village – generally when the ‘thing’ is drunk. The only objects that haven’t asked me to marry are our two hired men, Nick and Pete, and that’s only because their wages aren’t sufficient to get them drunk enough. As for you, most of the boys sort of stand in awe of you, wouldn’t dare talk marrying to you even in the height of delirium tremens. The only men who have ever had courage to make any display in that direction are Inspector Fyles, when his duty brings him in the neighborhood of Rocky Springs, and a dyspomaniac rancher and artist, to wit, Charlie Bryant. And how do you take it? You – a man-hunter? Why, you run like a rabbit from Fyles. Courage? Oh, dear. The mention of his name is enough to send you into convulsions of trepidation and maidenly confusion. And all the time you secretly admire him. As for the other, you have turned yourself into a sort of hospital nurse and temperance reformer. You’ve taken him up as a sort of hobby, until, in his lucid intervals, he takes advantage of your reforming process to acquire the added disease of love, which has reduced him to a condition of imbecile infatuation with your charming self.”

Kate was about to break in with a laughing protest, but Helen stayed her with a gesture of denial.

“Wait,” she cried, grandly. “Hear the whole charge. Look at your village life, which you plead guilty to. You, a high-spirited woman of independence and daring. You are no better than a sort of hired cleaner to a Meeting House you have adopted, and which is otherwise run by a lot of cut-throats and pirates, whose wives and offspring are no better than themselves. You attend the village social functions with as much appreciation of them as any village mother with an unwashed but growing family. You gossip with them and scandalize as badly as any of them, and, in your friendliness and charity toward them, I verily believe, for two cents, you’d go among the said

unwashed offspring with a scrub-brush. What – what is coming to you, Kate? You – a man-hunter? No – no,” she went on, with a hopeless shake of her pretty head, “’tis no use talking. The big, big spirit of early womanhood has somehow failed you. It’s failed us both. We are no longer man-hunters. The soaring Kate, bearing her less brave sister in her arms, has fallen. They have both tumbled to the ground. The early seed, so full of promise, has germinated and grown – but it’s come up cabbages. And – and they’re getting old. There you are, I can’t help it. I’ve tripped over the agricultural furrow we’ve ploughed, and – . There!”

She flung out an arm dramatically, pointing down at the slight figure of a man coming toward them, slowly toiling up the slope of the valley.

“There he is,” she cried. “Your artist-patient. Your dypsomaniac rancher. A symbol, a symbol of the bonds which are crushing the brave spirits of our – ahem! – young hearts.”

But Kate ignored the approaching man. She had eyes only for the bright face before her.

“You’re a great child,” she declared warmly. “I ought to be angry. I ought to be just mad with you. I believe I really am. But – but the cabbage business has broken up the storm of my feelings. Cabbage? Oh, dear.” She laughed softly. “You, with your soft, wavy hair, dressed as though we had a New York hairdresser in the village. You, with your great gray eyes, your charming little nose and cupid mouth. You, with your beautiful new frock, only arrived from New York two days ago, and which, by the way, I don’t think you ought to wear sprawling upon dusty ground. You – a cabbage! It just robs all you’ve said of, I won’t say truth, but – sense. There, child, you’ve said your say. But you needn’t worry about me. I’m not changed – really. Maybe I do many things that seem strange to you, but – but – I know what I’m doing. Poor old Charlie. Look at him. I often wonder what’ll be the end of him.”

Kate Seton sighed. It seemed as though there were a great depth of motherly tenderness in her heart, and just now that tenderness was directed toward the man approaching them.

But the lighter-minded Helen was less easily stirred. She smiled amusedly in her sister’s direction. Then her bright eyes glanced swiftly down at the man.

“If all we hear is true, his end will be the penitentiary,” she declared with decision.

Kate glanced round quickly, and her eyes suddenly became quite hard.

“Penitentiary?” she questioned sharply.

Helen shrugged.

“Everybody says he’s the biggest whisky smuggler in the country, and – and his habits don’t make things look much – different. Say, Kate, O’Brien told me the other day that the police had him marked down. They were only waiting to get him – red-handed.”

The hardness abruptly died out of Kate’s eyes. A faint sigh, perhaps of relief, escaped her.

“They’ll never do that,” she declared firmly. “Everybody’s making a mistake about Charlie. I’m – sure. With all his failings Charlie’s no whisky-runner. He’s too gentle. He’s too – too honest to descend to such a traffic.”

Suddenly her eyes lit. She came close to Helen, and one firm hand grasped the soft flesh of the girl’s arm, and closed tightly upon it.

“Say, child,” she went on, in a deep, thrilling tone, “do you know what these whisky-runners risk? Do you? No. Of course you don’t. They risk life as well as liberty. They’re threatened every moment of their lives. The penalty is heavy, and when a man becomes a whisky-runner he has no intention of being taken – alive. Think of all that, and see where your imagination carries you. Then think of Charlie – as we know him. An artist. A warm-hearted, gentle creature, whose only sins are – against himself.”

But the younger girl’s face displayed skepticism.

“Yes – as we know him,” she replied quickly. “I’ve thought of it while he’s been giving me lessons in painting, when I’ve watched him with you, with that wonderful look of dog-like devotion in his eyes, while hanging on every word you uttered. I’ve thought of it all. And always running

through my mind was the title of a book I once read – ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.’ You are sure, and I – I only wonder.”

Kate’s hand relaxed its hold upon her sister’s arm. Her whole expression changed with a suddenness which, had she observed it, must have startled the other. Her eyes were cold, very cold, as she surveyed the sister to whom she was so devoted, and who could find it in her heart to think so harshly of one whom she regarded as a sick and ailing creature, needing the utmost support from natures morally stronger than his own.

“You must think as you will, Helen,” she said coldly. “I know. I know Charlie. I understand the gentle heart that guides his every action, and I warn you you are wrong – utterly wrong. Everybody is wrong, the police – everybody.”

She turned away and moved a few steps down the slope toward the approaching figure.

CHAPTER VII

CHARLIE BRYANT

As Kate stood out from the shadow of the trees, the man approaching, looking up, beheld her, and his dark eyes gladdened with a smile of delight. His greeting came up to her on the still air in a tone thrilling with warmth and deep feeling.

“Ho, Kate,” he cried, in his deeply musical voice. “I saw you and Helen making this way, and guessed I’d just get around.”

He was breathing hard as he came up the hill, his slight figure was bending forward with the effort of his climb. Kate watched him, much as an anxious mother might watch, with doubtful eyes, some effort of her ailing child. He reached her level and stood breathing heavily before her.

“I was around watching the boys at work down there on the new church,” he went on. His handsome boyish face was flushing. The delicate, smooth, whiskerless skin was almost womanish in its texture, and betrayed almost every emotion stirring behind it. “Allan Dy came along with my mail. When I’d read it I felt I had to come and tell you the news right away. You see, I had to tell someone, and wanted you – two to be the first to hear it.”

Kate’s eyes were full of a smiling tender amusement at the ingenuousness of the man. Helen was looking on with less tenderness than amusement. He had not come to tell her the news – only Kate. The Kate whom she knew he worshipped, and who was the only rival in his life to his passionate craving for drink.

She surveyed the man now with searching eyes. What was it that inspired in her such mixed feeling? She knew she had a dislike and liking for him, all in the same moment. There was something fascinating about him. Yes, there certainly was. He was darkly handsome. Unusually so. He had big, soft, almost womanish eyes, full of passionate possibilities. The delicate moulding of his features was certainly beautiful. They were too delicate. Ah, that was it. They were womanish. Yes, he was womanish, and nothing womanish in a man could ever appeal to the essentially feminine heart of Helen. His figure was slight, but perfectly proportioned, and quite lacking in any suggestion of mannish strength. Again the thought of it brought Helen a feeling of repugnance. She hated effeminacy in a man. And yet, how could she associate effeminacy with a man of his known character? Was he not the most lawless of this lawless village? Then there was his outward seeming of gentleness. Yes, she had never known him otherwise, even in his moments of dreadful drunkenness, and she had witnessed those frequently enough during the past few years.

The whole personality of the man was an enigma to her. Nor was it altogether a pleasant enigma. She felt that somehow there was an ugly streak in him which her sister had utterly missed, and she only half guessed at. Furthermore, somehow in the back of her mind, she knew that she was not without fear of him.

In spite of Kate’s denial, when the man came under discussion between them, her conviction always remained. She knew she liked him, and she knew she disliked him. She knew she despised him, and she knew she feared him. And through it all she looked on with eyes of amusement at the absurd, dog-like devotion he yielded to her strong, reliant, big-hearted, handsome sister.

“What’s your news, Charlie?” she demanded, as Kate remained silent, waiting for him to continue. “Good, I’ll bet five dollars, or you wouldn’t come rushing to us.”

The man turned to her as though it were an effort to withdraw his gaze from the face of the woman he loved.

“Good? Why, yes,” he said quickly. “I’d surely hate to bring you two anything but good news.” Then a shadow of doubt crossed his smiling features. “Maybe it won’t be of much account to you, though,” he went on, almost apologetically. “You see, it’s just my brother. My big brother

Bill. He's coming along out here to – to join me. He – he wants to ranch, so – he's coming here, and going to put all his money into my ranch, and suggests we run it together." Then he laughed shortly. "He says I've got experience and he's got dollars, and between us we ought to make things hum. He's a hustler, is Bill. Say, he's as much sense as a two-year-old bull, and just about as much strength. He can't see the difference between a sharp and a saint. They're all the same to him. He just loves everybody to death, till they kick him on the shins, then he hits out, and something's going to break. He's just the bulliest feller this side of life."

Kate was still smiling at the man's enthusiasm, but she had no answer for him. It was Helen who did the talking now, as she generally did, while Kate listened.

"Oh, Charlie," Helen cried impulsively, "you will let me see him, won't you? He's big – and – and manly? Is he good looking? But then he must be if he's your – I'm just dying to see this Big Brother Bill," she added hastily.

Charlie shook his head, laughing in his silent fashion.

"Oh, you'll see him all right. This village'll just be filled right up with him." Then his dark eyes became serious, and a hopeless shadow crept into them. "I'm glad he's coming," he went on, adding simply, "maybe he'll keep me straight."

Kate's smile died out in an instant. "Don't talk like that Charlie," she cried almost sharply. "Do you know what your words imply? Oh, it's too dreadful, and – and I won't have it. You don't need anybody's support. You can fight yourself. You can conquer yourself. I know it."

The man's eyes came back to the face he loved, and, for a moment, they looked into it as though he would read all that which lay hidden behind.

"You think so?" he questioned presently.

"I'm sure; sure as – as Fate," Kate cried impulsively.

"You think that all – all weakness can be conquered?"

Kate nodded. "If the desire to conquer lies behind it."

"Ah, yes."

The man's eyes had become even more thoughtful. There was a look in them which suggested to Helen that he was not wholly thinking of the thing Kate had in her mind.

"If the desire to conquer is there," he went on, "I suppose the habits – diseases of years, even – could be beaten. But – but –"

"But what?" Kate's demand came almost roughly.

Charlie shrugged his slim shoulders. "Nothing," he said. "I – I was just thinking. That's all."

"But it isn't all," cried Kate, in real distress.

Helen saw Charlie smile in a half-hearted fashion. For some moments his patience remained. Then, as Kate still waited for him to speak, his eyes abruptly lit with the deep fire of passion.

"Why? Why?" he cried suddenly. "Why must we conquer and fight with ourselves? Why beat down the nature given to us by a power beyond our control? Why not indulge the senses that demand indulgence, when, in such indulgence, we injure no one else? Oh, I argue it all with myself, and I try to reason, too. I try to see it all from the wholesome point of view from which you look at it, Kate. And I can't see it. I just can't see it. All I know is that the only thing that makes me attempt to deny myself is that I want your good opinion. Did I not want that I should slide down the road to hell, which I am told I am on, with all the delight of a child on a toboggan slide. Yes, I would. I surely would, Kate. I'm a drunkard, I know. A drunkard by nature. I have not the smallest desire to be otherwise, from any moral scruple. It's you that makes me want to straighten up, and you only. When I'm sober I'd be glad if I weren't. And when I'm not sober I'd hate being otherwise. Why should I be sober, when in such moments I suffer agonies of craving? Is it worth it? What does it matter if drink eases the craving, and lends me moments of peace which I am otherwise denied? These are the things I think all the time, and these are the thoughts which send me tumbling

headlong – sometimes. But I know – yes, I know I am all wrong. I know that I would rather suffer all the tortures of hell than forfeit your – good will.”

Kate sighed. She had no answer. She knew all that lay behind the man’s passionate appeal. She knew, too, that he spoke the truth. She knew that the only reason he made any effort at all was because his devotion to herself was something just a shade stronger than this awful disease with which he was afflicted.

The hopelessness of the position for a moment almost overwhelmed her. She knew that she had no love – love such as he required – to give him in return. And when that finally became patent to him away would go the last vestige of self-restraint, and his fall would be headlong.

She knew his early story, and it was a pitiful one. She knew he was born of good parents, rich parents, in New York, that he was well educated. He had been brought up to become an artist, and therein had lain the secret of his fall. In Paris, and Rome, and other European cities, he had first tasted the dregs of youthful debauchery, and disaster had promptly set in. Then, after his student days, had come the final break. His parents abandoned him as a ne’er-do-well, and, setting him up as a rancher in a small way, had sent him out west, another victim of that over-indulgence which helps to populate the fringes of civilization.

The moment was a painful one, and Helen was quick to perceive her sister’s distress. She came to her rescue with an effort at lightness. But her pretty eyes had become very gentle.

She turned to the man who had just taken a letter from his pocket.

“Tell us some more about Big Brother Bill,” she said, with the pretense of a sigh. Then, with a little daring in her manner: “Do you think he’ll like me? Because if he don’t I’ll sure go into mourning, and order my coffin, and bury me on the hillside with my face to the beautiful east – where I come from.”

The man’s moment of passionate discontent had passed, and he smiled into the girl’s questioning eyes in his gentle fashion.

“He’ll just be crazy about you, Helen,” he said. “Say, when he gets his big, silly blue eyes on to you in that swell suit, why, he’ll just hustle you right off to the parson, and you’ll be married before you get a notion there’s such a whirlwind around Rocky Springs.”

“Is he – such a whirlwind?” the girl demanded with appreciation.

“He surely is,” the man asserted definitely.

Helen sighed with relief. “I’m glad,” she said. “You see, a whirlwind’s a sort of summer storm. All sunshine – and – and well, a whirlwind don’t suggest the cold, vicious, stormy gales of the folks in this village, nor the dozy summer zephyrs of the women in this valley. Yes, I’d like a whirlwind. His eyes are blue, and – silly?”

Charlie smiled more broadly as he nodded again. “His eyes are blue. And big. The other’s a sort of term of endearment. You see, he’s my big brother Bill, and I’m kind of fond of him.”

Helen laughed joyously. “I’m real glad he’s not silly,” she cried. “Let’s see. He’s big. He’s got blue eyes. He’s good looking. He’s – he’s like a whirlwind. He’s got lots of money.” She counted the attractions off on her fingers. “Guess I’ll sure have to marry him,” she finished up with a little nod of finality.

Kate turned a flushed face in her direction.

“For goodness sake, Helen!” she cried in horror.

Helen’s gray eyes opened to their fullest extent.

“Why, whatever’s the matter, Kate?” she exclaimed. “Of course, I’ll have to marry Big Brother Bill. Why, his very name appeals to me. May I, Charlie?” she went on, turning to the smiling man. “Would you like me for – a – a sister? I’m not a bad sort, am I, Kate?” she appealed mischievously. “I can sew, and cook, and – and darn. No, I don’t mean curse words. I leave that to Kate’s hired men. They’re just dreadful. Really, I wasn’t thinking of anything worse than Big

Brother Bill's socks. When'll he be getting around? Oh, dear, I hope it won't be long. 'Specially if he's a – whirlwind."

Charlie was scanning the open pages of his letter.

"No. Guess he won't be long," he said, amusedly. "He says he'll be right along here the 16th. That's the day after to-morrow."

Helen ran to her sister's side, and shook her by the arm.

"Say, Kate," she cried, her eyes sparkling with pretended excitement. "Isn't that just great? Big Brother Bill's coming along day after to-morrow. Isn't it lucky I've just got my new suits? They'll last me three months, and by the time I have to get my fall suits he'll have to marry me." Then the dancing light in her eyes sobered. "Now, where shall we live?" she went on, with a pretense of deep consideration. "Shall we go east, or – or shall we live at Charlie's ranch? Oh, dear. It's so important not to make any mistake. And yet – you see, Charlie's ranch wants some one *capable* to look after it, doesn't it? It's kind of mousy. Big Brother Bill is sure to be particular – coming from the east."

Her audience were smiling broadly. Kate understood now that her irresponsible sister was simply letting her bubbling spirits overflow. Charlie had no other feelings than frank amusement at the girl's gaiety.

"Oh, he's most particular," he said readily. "You see, he's accustomed to Broadway restaurants."

Helen pulled a long face.

"I'm afraid your shack wouldn't make much of a Broadway restaurant." She shook her head with quaint solemnity. "Guess I never could get you right. Here you run a ranch, and make quite big with it, yet you never eat off a china plate, or spread your table with anything better than a newspaper. True, Charlie, you've got me beaten to death. Why, how you manage to run a ranch and make it pay is a riddle that 'ud put the poor old Sphinx's nose plump out of joint. I – "

Kate suddenly turned a pair of darkly frowning eyes upon her sister.

"You're talking a whole heap of nonsense," she declared severely. "What has the care of a home to do with making a ranch pay?"

Helen's eyes opened wide with mischief.

"Say, Kate," she cried with a great air of patronage, "you have a whole heap to learn. Big Brother Bill's coming right along from Broadway, with money and – notions. He's just bursting with them. Charlie's a prosperous rancher. What does B. B. B. expect? Why, he'll get around with fancy clothes and suitcases and trunks. He'll dream of rides over the boundless plains, of cow-punchers with guns and things. He'll have visions of big shoots, and any old sport, of a well-appointed ranch house, with proper fixings, and baths, and swell dinners and servants. But they're all visions. He'll blow in to Rocky Springs – he's a whirlwind, mind – and he'll find a prosperous rancher living in a tumbled-down shanty that hasn't been swept this side of five years, a blanket-covered bunk, and a table made of packing cases with the remains of last week's meals on it. That's what he'll find. Prosperous rancher, indeed. Say, Charlie," she finished up with fine scorn, "you know as much about living as Kate's two hired men, and dear knows they only exist." Suddenly she broke out into a rippling laugh. "And this is what my future husband is coming to. It's – it's an insult to me."

The girl paused, looking from one to the other with dancing eyes. But the more sober-minded Kate slipped her arm about her waist and began to move down the hill.

"Come along, dear," she said. "I must get right on down to the Meeting House. I – have work to do. You would chatter on all day if I let you."

In a moment Helen was all indignant protest.

"I like that. Say, did you hear, Charlie? She's accusing me, and all the time it's you doing the talking. But there, I'm always misjudged – always. She'll accuse me of trying to trap your brother

– next. Anyway, I’ve got work to do, too. I’ve got to be at Mrs. John’s for the new church meeting. So Kate isn’t everybody. Come along.”

Helen’s laughter was good to hear as she dashed off in an attempt to drag her elder sister down the hill at a run. The man looked on happily as he kept pace with them. Helen was always privileged. Her sister adored her, and the whole village of Rocky Springs yielded her a measure of popularity which made her its greatest favorite. Even the women had nothing but smiles for her merry irresponsibility, and, as for the men, there was not one who would not willingly have sacrificed even his crooked ways for her smile.

Halfway down to the village Charlie again reverted to his news.

“Helen put the rest of it out of my head,” he said, and his manner of speaking had lost the enjoyment of his earlier announcement. “It’s about the police. They’re going to set a station here. A corporal and two men. Fyles is coming, too. Inspector Fyles.” His eyes were studying Kate’s face as he made the announcement. Helen, too, was looking at her with quizzical eyes. “It’s over that whisky-running a week ago. They’re going to clean the place up. Fyles has sworn to do it. O’Brien told me this morning.”

For some moments after his announcement neither of the women spoke. Kate was thinking deeply. Nor, from her expression, would it have been possible to have guessed the trend of her thoughts.

Helen, watching her, was far more expressive. She was thinking of her sister’s admiration for the officer. She was speculating as to what might happen with Fyles stationed here in Rocky Springs. Would her beautiful sister finally yield to his very evident admiration, or would she still keep that barrier of aloofness against him? She wondered. And, wondering, there came the memory of what Fyles’s coming would mean to Charlie Bryant.

To her mind there was no doubt but that the law would quickly direct its energies against him. But she was also wondering what would happen to him should time, and a man’s persistence, finally succeed in breaking down the barrier Kate had set up against the officer. Quite suddenly this belated news assumed proportions far more significant than the coming of Big Brother Bill.

Her tongue could not remain silent for long, however. Something of her doubt had to find an outlet.

“I knew it would come sooner or later,” she declared hopelessly.

She glanced quickly at Charlie, across her sister, beside whom he was walking. The man was staring out down at the village with gloomy eyes. She read into his expression a great dread of this officer’s coming to Rocky Springs. She knew she was witnessing the outward signs of a guilty conscience. Suddenly she made up her mind.

“What – ever is to be done?” she cried, half eagerly, half fearfully. “Say, I just can’t bear to think of it. All these men, men we’ve known, men we’ve got accustomed to, even – men we like, to be herded to the penitentiary. It’s awful. There’s some I shouldn’t be sorry to see put away. They’re scallywags, anyway. They aren’t clean, and they chew tobacco, and – and curse like railroaders. But they aren’t all like – that – are they, Kate?” She paused. Then, in a desperate appeal, “Kate, I’d fire your two boys, Nick and Pete. They’re mixed up in whisky-running, I know. When Stanley Fyles gets around they’ll be corralled, sure, and I’d hate him to think we employed such men. Don’t you think that, Charlie?” she demanded, turning sharply and looking into the man’s serious face.

Then, quite suddenly, she changed her tone and relapsed into her less responsible manner, and laughed as though something humorous had presented itself to her cheerful fancy.

“Guess I’d have to laugh seeing those two boys doing the chores around a penitentiary for – five years. They’d be cleaner then. Guess they get bathed once a week. Then the funny striped clothes they wear. Can’t you see Nick, with his long black hair all cut short, and his vulture neck sticking out of the top end of his clothes, like – like a thread of sewing cotton in a darning needle? Wouldn’t he look queer? And the work, too! Say, it would just break his heart. My, but they get

most killed by the warders. And then for drink. Five years without tasting a drop of liquor. No – they'd go mad. Anybody would. And all for the sake of making a few odd dollars against the law. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it, not if I'd got to starve – else."

The man made no answer. His eyes remained upon the village below, and their expression had become lost to the anxious Helen. She was talking at him. But she was thinking not of him so much as her sister. She knew how much it would mean to Kate if Charlie Bryant were brought into direct conflict with the police. So she was offering her warning.

Kate turned to her quietly. She ignored the reference to her hired men. She knew at whom her sister's remarks were directed. She shook her head.

"Why worry about things, Sis?" she said, in her deliberate fashion. "Lawbreakers need to be cleverer folks than those who live within the law. I guess there won't be much whisky run into Rocky Springs with Fyles around, and the police can do nothing unless they catch the boys at it. You're too nervous about things." She laughed quietly. "Why, the sight of a red coat scares you worse than getting chased by a mouse."

The sound of Kate's voice seemed to rouse Charlie from his gloomy contemplation of the village. He turned his eyes on the woman at his side – and encountered the half-satirical smile of hers – which were as dark as his own.

"Maybe Helen's right, though," he said. "Maybe you'd do well to fire your boys." He spoke deliberately, but with a shade of anxiety in his voice. "They're known whisky-runners."

Kate drew Helen to her side as though for moral support. "And what of the other folks who are known – or believed – to be whisky-runners – with whom we associate. Are they to be turned down, too? No, Charlie," she went on determinedly, "I stand by my boys. I'll stand by my friends, too. Maybe they'll need all the help I can give them. Then it's up to me to give it them. Fyles must do his duty as he sees it. Our duty is by our friends here, in Rocky Springs. Whatever happens in the crusade against this place, I am against Fyles. I'm only a woman, and, maybe, women don't count much with the police," she said, with a confident smile, "but such as I am, I am loyal to all those who have helped me in my life here in Rocky Springs, and to my – friends."

The man drew a deep breath. Nor was it easy to fathom its meaning.

Helen, eyeing her well-loved sister, could have thrown her young arms about her neck in enthusiasm. This was the bold sister whom she had so willingly followed to the western wilds. This was the spirit she had deplored the waning of. All her apprehensions for Charlie Bryant vanished, merged in a newly awakened confidence, since her brave sister was ready to help and defend him.

She felt that Fyles's coming to Rocky Springs was no longer to be feared. Only was it a source of excitement and interest. She felt that though, perhaps, he might never have met his match during the long years of his duties as a police officer, he had yet to pit himself against Rocky Springs – with her wonderful sister living in the village.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SOUL-SAVERS

Helen parted from her sister at the little old Meeting House. But first she characteristically admonished her for offering herself a sacrifice on the altar of the moral welfare of a village which reveled in every form of iniquity within its reach. Furthermore, she threw in a brief homily on the subject of the outrageous absurdity of turning herself into a sort of “hired woman” in the interests of a sepulcher whose whitewash was so obviously besmirched.

With the departure of the easy-going Kate, Charlie Bryant suddenly awoke to the claims of the work at his ranch. He must return at once, or disaster would surely follow.

Helen smiled at his sudden access of zeal, and welcomed his going without protest. Truth to tell, she never failed to experience a measure of relief at the avoidance of being alone with him.

Left to herself she moved on down toward the village without haste. Her enthusiasm for the new church meeting at the house of Mrs. John Day, who was the leading woman in the village, and, incidentally, the wife of its chief citizen, who also owned a small lumber yard, was of a lukewarm character. She had much more interest in the building itself, and the motley collection of individuals in whose hands its practical construction lay.

She possessed none of her sister’s interest in Rocky Springs. Her humor denied her serious contemplation of anything in it but the opposite sex. And even here it frequently trapped her into pitfalls which demanded the utmost exercise of her ready wit to extricate her from. No, serious contemplation of her surroundings would have certainly bored her, had it been possible to shadow her sunny nature. Fortunately, the latter was beyond the reach of the sordid life in the midst of which she found herself, and she never failed to laugh her merry way to those plains of delight belonging to an essentially happy disposition.

As she walked down the narrow trail, with the depths of green woods lining it upon either hand, she remembered how beautiful the valley really was. Of course, it was beautiful. She knew it. Was she not always being told it? She was never allowed to forget it. Sometimes she wished she could.

Down the trail a perfect vista of riotous foliage opened out before her eyes. There, too, in the distance, peeping through the trees, were scattered profiles of oddly designed houses, possessing a wonderful picturesqueness to which they had no real claims. They borrowed their beauty from the wealth of the valley, she told herself. Like the people who lived in them, they had no claims to anything bordering on the refinements or virtues of life. No, they were mockeries, just as was the pretense of virtue which inspired the building of the new church by a gathering of men and women, who, if they had their deserts, would be attending divine service within the four walls of the penitentiary.

She laughed. Really it was absurdly laughable. Life in this wonderful valley was something in the nature of a tragic farce. The worst thing was that the farce of it all could only be detected by the looker-on. There was no real farce in these people, only tragedy – a very painful and hideous tragedy.

On her way down she passed the great pine which for years had served as a beacon marking the village. It was higher up on the slope of the valley, but its vast trunk and towering crest would not be denied.

Helen gazed up at it, wondering, as many times she had gazed and wondered before. It was a marvelous survival of primæval life. It was so vast, so forbidding. Its torn crown, so sparse and weary looking, its barren trunk, too, dark and forbidding against the dwarfed surroundings of green,

were they not a fit beacon for the village below? It suggested to her imagination a giant, mouldering skeleton of some dreadfully evil creature. How could virtue maintain in its vicinity?

She laughed again as she thought. She knew there was some weird old legend associated with it, some old Indian folklore. But that left no impression of awe upon her laughter-loving nature.

Farther on the new church came into view. It was in the course of construction, and at once her attention became absorbed. Here was a scene which thoroughly appealed to her. Here was movement, and – life. Here was food for her most appreciative observation.

It was a Church. Not a Meeting House. Not even a Chapel. She felt quite sure, had the villagers had their way, it would have been called a Cathedral. There was nothing half-hearted about these people. They recognized the necessity of giving their souls a lift up, with a view to an after life, and they meant to do it thoroughly.

They had no intention of mending their ways. They had no thought of abandoning any of their pursuits or pleasures, be they never so deplorable. But they felt that something had better be done toward assurance of their futures. A Meeting House suggested something too inadequate to meet their special case. It was right enough as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough. They realized the journey might be very long and the ultimate destination uncertain. A Chapel had its claims in their minds, but Church seemed much stronger, bigger, more powerful to help them in those realms of darkness to which they must all eventually descend. Of course, Cathedral would have been *the* thing. With a cathedral in Rocky Springs they would have felt certain of their hereafter. But the difficulties of laying hands on a bishop, and claiming him for their own, seemed too overwhelming. So they accepted Church as being the best they could do under the circumstances.

Quite a number of men were standing idly around the structure, watching others at work. It was a weakness of the citizens of Rocky Springs to watch others work. They had no desire to help. They rarely were beset with any desire to help anybody. They simply clustered together in small groups, chewing tobacco, or smoking, and, to a man, their hands were indolently thrust into the tops of their trousers, which, in every case, were girdled with a well-laden ammunition belt, from which was suspended at least one considerable revolver.

There was no doubt in Helen's mind but that these weapons were loaded in every chamber, and the thought set her merry eyes dancing again.

These men wanted a church, and were there to see they had it. Woe betide – but, was there ever such a gathering of unclean, unholy humanity? She thought not.

Helen knew that every man and woman in the village had had some voice in the erection of the new church. There was not a citizen – they all possessed the courtesy title of “citizens” – in Rocky Springs, who had not contributed something toward it. Those who had wherewithal to give in money or kind, had given. Those who had nothing else to give gave their labor. She guessed the present onlookers had already done their share of giving, and were now there to see that their less fortunate brethren did not attempt to shirk their responsibilities.

For a moment, as the girl drew near, she abandoned her study of the men for a rapid survey of the building itself, and, in a way, it held her flattering attention. As yet there was no roof on it, but the walls were up, and the picturesqueness of the design of the building was fully apparent. Then she remembered that Charlie Bryant had designed the building, and somehow the thought lessened her interest.

The whole thing was constructed of lateral, raw pine logs, carefully dovetailed, with the ends protruding at the angles. There was no great originality of design, merely the delightful picturesqueness which unstripped logs never fail to yield. She knew that every detail of the building was to be carried out in the same way. The roof, the spire, the porches, even the fence which was ultimately to enclose the churchyard.

Then the inside was to be lined throughout with polished red pine. There was not a brick or stone to be used in the whole construction, except in the granite foundations, which did not appear

above ground. The lumber was hewn in the valley and milled in John Day's yard. The entire labor of hauling and building was to be done by the citizens of Rocky Springs. The draperies, necessary for the interior, would be made by the busy needles of the women of the village, and the materials would be supplied by Billy Unguin, the dry goods storekeeper. As for the stipend of the officiating parson, that would be scrambled together in cash and kind from similar sources.

The church was to be a monument, a tribute to a holy zeal, which the methods of life in Rocky Springs denied. Its erection was an attempt to steal absolution for the sins of its citizens. It was the pouring of a flood of oil upon the turbulent waters of an after life which Rocky Springs knew was waiting to engulf its little craft laden with tattered souls. It was a practical bribe to the Deity its people had so long outraged, were still outraging, and had every intention of continuing to outrage.

Helen's merry eyes glanced from group to group of the men, until they finally came to rest upon an individual standing apart from the rest.

She walked on toward him.

He was a forbidding-looking creature, with a hard face, divided in its expression between evil thoughts and a malicious humor. His general appearance was much that of the rest of the men, with the exception that he made no display of offensive weapons. It was not this, however, that drew Helen in his direction, for she well enough knew that, in fact, he was a perfect gunpark of concealed firearms. She liked him because he never failed to amuse her.

"Good morning, Dirty," she greeted him cheerfully, as she came up, smiling into his bearded face.

Dirty O'Brien turned. In a moment his wicked eyes were smiling. With an adept twist of the tongue his chew of tobacco ceased to bulge one cheek, and promptly distended the other.

"Howdy," he retorted, with as much amiability as it was possible for him to display.

The girl nodded in the direction of the other onlookers.

"It's wonderful the interest you all take in the building of this church."

"Int'rest?" The man's eyes opened wide. Then a gleam of scorn replaced the surprise in them. "Guess you'd be mighty int'rested if you was sittin' on a roof with the house afire under you, an' you just got a peek of a ladder wagon comin' along, an' was guessin' if it 'ud get around in time."

Helen's eyes twinkled.

"I s'pose I should," she admitted.

"S'pose nuthin'." The saloonkeeper laughed a short, hard laugh. "It's dead sure. But most of them boys are feelin' mighty good. You see, the ladders mostly fixed for 'em. I'd say they reckon that fire's as good as out."

The interest of the onlookers was purely passive. They displayed none of the enthusiasm one might have expected in men who considered that the safety of their souls was assured. Helen remarked upon the fact.

"Their enthusiasm's wonderful," she declared, with a satirical laugh. "Do you think they'll ever be able to use swear words again?"

Dirty O'Brien grinned till his discolored teeth parted the hair upon his face.

"Say, I don't reckon to set myself up as a prophet at most things," he replied, "but I'd like to say right here, the fixin' of that all-fired chu'ch is jest about the limit fer the morals of this doggone city. Standin' right here I seem to sort o' see a vision o' things comin' on like a pernicious fever. I seem to see all them boys – good boys, mind you, as far as they go – only they don't travel more'n 'bout an inch – lyin', an' slanderin', an' thievin', an' shootin', an' – an' committin' every blamed sin ever invented since Pharo's daughter got busy makin' up fairy yarns 'bout them bulrushes –"

"I don't think you ought to talk like that," Helen protested hastily. "There's no necessity to make –"

But Dirty O'Brien was not to be denied. He promptly cut her short without the least scruple.

“No necessity?” he cried, with a sarcasm that left the girl speechless. “How in hell would you have me talk standin’ around a swell chu’ch like that? I tell you what, Miss Helen, you ain’t got this thing right. Within a month this durned city’ll all be that mussed up with itself an’ religion, the folks’ll grow a crop o’ wings enough to stock a chicken farm, an’ the boys’ll get scratchin’ around for worms, same as any other feathered fowl. They’ll get that out o’ hand with their own glory, they’ll get shootin’ up creation in the name of religion by way o’ pastime, and robbin’ the stages an’ smugglin’ liquor fer the fun o’ gettin’ around this blamed church an’ braggin’ of it to the parson. Say, if I know anything o’ the boys, in a week they’ll be shootin’ craps with the parson fer his wages, an’, in a month, they’ll set up tables around in the body o’ the chu’ch so they ken play ‘draw’ while the old man argues the shortest cut to everlastin’ glory. You ain’t got the boys in this city right, miss. Indeed, you ain’t. Chu’ch? Why they got as much notion how to act around a chu’ch as an unborn babe has of shellin’ peanuts. Folks needs eddicatin’ to a chu’ch like that. Eddicatin’? An’ that’s a word as ain’t a cuss word, and as the boys of this yer city ain’t wise to.”

“It seems rather hopeless, doesn’t it?” said Helen, stifling a violent inclination to laugh outright.

Dirty O’Brien was less scrupulous. He laughed with a vicious snort.

“Hopeless? – well, say, hopeless ain’t a circumstance. Guess you’ve never seen a ‘Jonah-man’ buckin’ a faro bank run by a Chinaman sharp?”

Helen shook her head while the saloonkeeper spat out his chew of tobacco with all the violence of his outraged feelings.

“He surely is a gilt-edged winner beside it,” he finally admitted impressively, before clipping off a fresh chew from his plug with his strong teeth.

Helen turned away, partly to hide the laugh that would no longer be denied, and partly to watch the approach of a team of horses hauling a load of logs. In a moment swift anger shone in her pretty eyes.

“Why!” she cried, pointing at them. “Look, Dirty! That’s our team; and Pete Clancy is driving it.”

The man followed the direction in which she was pointing.

“Sure,” he agreed indifferently.

“Sure? Of course it’s sure,” retorted Helen sharply; “but what – what – impertinence!”

Dirty O’Brien saw nothing remarkable in the matter, and his face displayed a waning interest.

“Don’t he most gener’ly drive your team?” he inquired without enthusiasm.

“Of course he does. But he’s s’posed to be right out in the hay sloughs – cutting. I heard Kate tell him this morning.”

O’Brien’s eyes twinkled, and a deep chuckle came from somewhere in the depths of his beard.

“Ken you beat it?” he inquired, with cordial appreciation. “Do you get his play?”

“Play?” The girl turned a pair of angry, bewildered eyes upon her companion. “Impertinence!”

The man nodded significantly.

“Sure. Them two scallywags of yours ain’t got nothin’ to give to the building of the chu’ch. Which means they’ll need to get busy workin’ on it. Guess work never did come welcome to Mister Peter Clancy and Nick. They hate work worse’n washin’ – an’ that’s some. Guess they borrowed your team to do a bit o’ haulin’, which – kind o’ squares their account. They’re bright boys.”

“Bright? They’re impertinent rascals and – and – oh!”

Helen’s exasperation left her almost speechless.

“Which is mighty nigh a compliment to them,” observed the man.

But Helen’s sense of humor utterly failed her now.

“It’s – too bad, Dirty,” she cried. “And poor Kate thinks they’re out cutting our winter hay. I begged of her only this morning to ‘fire’ them both. I’m – I’m sure they’re going to get us into

trouble when – when the police come here. I hate the sight of them both. Last time Pete got drunk he – he very nearly asked me to marry him. I believe he would have, only I had a bucket of boiling water in my hand.”

Again came the man’s curious chuckle.

“It won’t be you folks they get into trouble,” he declared enigmatically. “An’ I guess it ain’t goin’ to be ’emselfes, neither. But when the p’lice get hot after ’em, why, they’ll shift the scent – sure.”

Helen’s eyes had suddenly become anxious.

“You mean – Charlie Bryant,” she half whispered.

The man nodded.

“Sure. An’ anybody else, so —*they* get clear.” O’Brien’s eyes hardened as they contemplated the distant teamster. “Say,” he went on, after a brief pause, “there are some low-down bums in this city. There’s Shorty Solon, the Jew boy. He’s wanted across the border fer shootin’ up a bank manager, and gettin’ off with the cash. Ther’s Crank Heufer, the squarehead stage robber, shot up more folks, women, too, in Montana than ’ud populate a full-sized city. Ther’s Kid Blaney, the faro sharp, who broke penitentiary in Dakota twelve months back. Ther’s Macaddo, the train ‘hold-up,’ mighty badly wanted in Minnesota. Ther’s Stormy Longton, full of scalps to his gun, a bad man by nature. Ther’s Holy Dick, over there,” he went on, pointing at a gray-bearded, mild-looking man, sitting on a log beside a small group of lounging spectators. “He owes the States Government seven good years for robbing a church. Ther’s Danny Jarvis and Fighting Mike, both of ’em dodgin’ the law, an’ would shoot their own fathers up fer fi’ cents. It’s a dandy tally of crooks, but they ain’t a circumstance beside them two boys of yours. They’re bred bad ’uns, an’ they couldn’t play even the crook’s game right. I’d sure say they’d be a fortune to Fyles, when he gets busy cleaning up this place. They’d give Satan away if they see things gettin’ busy their way.”

The anxiety deepened in Helen’s eyes as the man denounced the two men who were her sister’s hired help. She knew that all he said of them was true. She had known it for months. Now she was thinking of Charlie Bryant and Kate. If Fyles ever got hold of Charlie it would break poor Kate’s heart.

“You think they’d give – any one away?”

The man shook his head.

“I don’t think. Guess I know.” Then, after a pause, he went on, speaking rapidly and earnestly. “See here, Miss Helen, I don’t hold no brief fer nobody but myself, an’ I guess that brief needs a hell of a piece of studyin’ right. There’s things in it I don’t need to shout about, and anyway I don’t fancy Fyles’s long nose smudging the ink on it. You an’ Miss Kate are jest about two o’ the most wholesome bits o’ women in this township, an’ there ain’t many of us as wouldn’t fix ourselves up clean an’ neat to pay our respec’s to either of you. Wal, Miss Kate’s got a hell of a notion for that drunken bum, Charlie Bryant. That bein’ so, tell her to keep a swift eye on her two boys. They’re in with him, sure, an’ they’ll put him away if it suits ’em. Savee? Tell her I said so – since Fyles is goin’ to butt in around here. I don’t want to see Charlie Bryant in a stripe soot, penitentiary way. I need him. An’ I need the liquor he runs.”

The man turned away abruptly. He had broken the unwritten law of Rocky Springs, where it was understood that no man spoke of another man’s past, or questioned his present doings, or even admitted knowledge of them. But like all the rest of the male portion of Rocky Springs, he possessed a soft spot in his vicious heart for the two sisters, who, in the mire of iniquity which flooded the township, contrived a clean, wholesome living out of the soil, and were womanly enough to find interest, and even pleasure, in their sordid surroundings. Now, he hurried off down to his saloon, much in the manner of a man who fears the consequences of feelings which have been allowed to run away with him.

Left to herself, Helen only remained long enough to pass a few cheery greetings with the rest of the onlookers; then she, too, took her departure.

For some moments she certainly was troubled by the direct warning of a man like Dirty O'Brien. With all the many criminal attainments of the other citizens of Rocky Springs, she knew him to be the shrewdest man in the place. A warning from him was more than significant. What should she do? Tell her sister? Certainly she would do that, but she felt it to be well-nigh useless. Kate was the gentlest soul in the world. She was the essence of kindness, of sympathy, of loyalty to her friends, but she was determined to a degree. She saw always with her own eyes, and would go the way she saw.

Had she not warned her herself before? Had she not endeavored to persuade her a dozen times? It was all quite useless. Kate was something of an enigma, a contradiction. For all her gentleness Helen knew she could be as hard as iron.

Finally, with a sigh, she dismissed the matter from her mind until such time as opportunity served. Meanwhile she must put in an appearance at Mrs. John Day's house. Mrs. John Day was the social pivot of Rocky Springs, and, to disobey her summons, Helen knew would be to risk a displeasure which would find reflection in every woman in the place.

That was a catastrophe she had no desire to face. It was enough for her to remember that she had imprisoned herself in such a place. She had no desire to earn the ill-will of the wardresses.

She laughed to herself. But she really felt that it was very dreadful that her life must be passed among these people. She wanted to be free – to live all these good years of her life. She wanted to attend parties, and – and dances among those people amid whom she had been brought up. She craved for the society of cultured folks – of men. Yes, she admitted it, she wanted all those things which make a young girl's life enjoyable – theatres, dances, skating, hockey and – and, yes, flirtations. Instead of those things what had she – what was she? That was it. What was she? She had been planted in the furrows of life a decorative flower, and some terrible botanical disaster had brought her up a – cabbage.

She laughed outright, and in the midst of her laugh, looking out across the valley, she beheld her sister leaving the Meeting House, which stood almost in the shadow of the great pine, far up on the distant slope.

Her laugh sobered. Her thoughts passed from herself to Kate with a feeling which was almost resentment. Her high-spirited, adventure-loving, handsome sister. What of her? It was terrible. So full of promise, so full of possibilities. Look at her. She was clad in a big gingham apron. No doubt her beautiful, artistic hands were all messed up with the stains of scrubbing out a Meeting House, which, in turn, right back to the miserable Indian days, had served the purposes of saloon, a trader's store, the home of a bloodthirsty badman, and before that goodness knows what. Now it was a house of worship for people, beside whom the scum of the earth was as the froth of whipped cream. It was – outrageous. It was so terrible to her that she felt as if she must cry, or – or laugh.

The issue remained in doubt for some moments. Then, just as she reached the pretentious portals of Mrs. John Day's home, her real nature asserted itself, and a radiant smile lit her pretty face as she passed within.

CHAPTER IX

THE “STRAY”-HUNTER

The real man is nearest the surface after a long period of idle solitude.

So it was with Stanley Fyles, riding over the even, sandy trail of the prairies which stretched away south of the Assiniboine River. His sunburnt face was sternly reposeful, and in his usually keen gray eyes was that open staring light which belongs to the man who gropes his way over Nature's trackless wastes, and whose mind is ever asking the question of direction. But there was no question of such a nature in his mind now. His look was the look of habit, when the call of the trail is heard.

He sat his horse with the easy grace of a man whose life is mostly spent in the saddle. His loose shoulders and powerful frame swayed with that magical rhythm which gives most ease to both horse and rider. His was the seat of a horseman whose poise is the poise of perfect balance rather than the set attitude of the riding school.

The bit hung lightly in the horse's mouth, but lightly as the reins were held in the man's hand there was a firmness and decision in the feeling of them that communicated the necessary confidence between horse and rider.

Stanley Fyles was as nearly a perfect horseman as the prairie could produce.

Just now the man beneath the officer's habit was revealed. His military training was set aside, perhaps all thought of it had been left behind with his uniform, and just the “man” was reassumed with the simple prairie kit he had adopted for the work in hand.

To look at him now he might have been a ranch hand out on the work of the spring round-up. He was dressed in plain leather chapps over his black cloth riding breeches, and, from his waist up, his clothing was a gray flannel shirt, over which he wore an open waistcoat of ordinary civilian make. About his neck was tied a silk handkerchief of modest hue, and about his waist was strapped a revolver belt. The only visible detail that could have marked him as a police officer was the glimpse of military spurs beneath his chapps.

His thoughts and feelings as he covered the dreary miles of grass were of a conflicting nature, and, roaming at will, they centered, as thoughts so roaming will center, chiefly upon those things which concerned his most cherished ambitions.

At first a feeling of something bordering on anxious resentment pretty fully occupied him. There was still in his mind the memory of an interview he had had with his immediate superior, Superintendent Jason, just before the time of his setting out. It had been an uncomfortable half-hour spent listening to the sharp criticisms of his chief, whose mind was saturated with the spirit of his official capacity, almost to the exclusion of common sense.

Superintendent Jason was still angry at the manner in which the great whisky-running coup had been effected, and of the manner in which the perpetrators of it had slipped through the official fingers. He blamed everybody, and particularly Inspector Fyles, in whose hands the case had been placed.

Nor had he been wholly appeased by the inspector's final offer. Goaded by the merciless pinprick of his superior's tongue, Fyles had finally offered to set out for Rocky Springs, the place, both were fully agreed, whence the trouble emanated, and bring all those concerned in the smuggling to book.

At first Jason had been inclined to sneer, nor was it until Fyles unfolded something of his scheme that he began to take it seriously. Finally, however, the younger man had had his way, and the necessary permission was granted. Then the superintendent dealt with the matter as the cold discipline of police methods demanded.

Fyles remembered his words well. They meant far more to him than they expressed. They were full of a cold threat, which, to a man of his experience, could not be mistaken.

The picture remained in his mind for many a long day. It was doubtful if he would ever forget it. It was a moment of crisis in his official life, a crisis when it became necessary to back himself against all odds – or ultimately sacrifice his position.

He was standing beside the superintendent, and both men were bending over one of those secret official charts of the district surrounding Rocky Springs. They were alone in Jason's bare, even mean office. Fyles's long, firm forefinger was pointing along a trail, and his sharp, incisive words were explaining something of his convictions as his finger moved. The other was listening without interruption. At last, as the quiet, confident tones ceased, the superintendent straightened himself up, and his small, quick-moving, dark eyes shot their gleam of cold authority into his companion's.

"It's up to you," he said, with a callous upraising of his shoulders. "You've talked a good deal to me here, and you've made your talk sound right. But talk doesn't put these men in the penitentiary. You've made a mess of this job so far. Guess it's up to you to make good. You've got your chance now. See you don't miss it. The authorities don't stand for two mistakes on one job, not even when they're made by Inspector Fyles. You get me? You've *got* to make good."

Fyles left the office fully aware that sentence had been passed on him, just as surely as though he had stood before the Commissioner, a prisoner.

Thus, at the outset of his journey, his feelings had been scarcely pleasant, but, as the distance between him and headquarters increased, his confidence and sense of responsibility returned, and the shadow of threat retreated into the background. His plans were carefully laid, and all the support he could need was arranged for. This time the work before him was no mere capture of whisky-runners, but to make all whisky-running, as associated with Rocky Springs, impossible, and to break up the gang who had for so long defied the law. Yes, he felt confident in the result, and, as the long miles were put behind him, his thoughts wandered into more pleasant channels.

Rocky Springs certainly offered him inducement. And curiously enough he found himself wondering how much he was influenced by that inducement in accepting the odds against him in cleaning up the place, and dusting the cobwebs of crime from its corners.

Kate Seton. He had not seen her for something running into weeks. The thought that he was to renew an acquaintance, which, though almost slight, still had extraordinary power to hold him, was a delightful one. Sometimes he had found himself wondering at the phenomenon of her attraction for him. But he was incapable of analyzing his feelings closely. His life had been spent on these fringes of civilization so long, and the generality of the women he had come into contact with had been so much a part of the life of the country, that their appeal had been weakened almost to the vanishing point.

Then here, in Rocky Springs, where he might reasonably expect to find only the dregs of society, he suddenly discovered a woman obviously belonging to an utterly different and more cultured life. A woman of uncommon beauty and distinction; a woman, who, to his mind, fulfilled some essentially mannish ideal, an ideal that, in idle moments, had stolen in upon a wholly reposeful mind. A woman who —

But the thread of his pleasant reflections was suddenly broken, and his mechanically watchful eyes warned him that a horseman was riding along the trail ahead of him, and that he was rapidly overtaking this stranger.

In a moment all other interests were forgotten. To the solitary rider of the plains a fellow-creature ever becomes a matter of considerable moment. In Fyles's case he possessed the added interest of a possible giver of information.

As he gently urged his horse to lengthen its stride, his keen eyes took in the details of the man's figure, and the points of the horse he was riding. The man was of unusual stature, so unusual,

in fact, that his horse, although a big raking creature, became dwarfed under him. Even from that distance the officer obtained a suggestion of fair hair beneath the brim of the prairie hat, which was tilted forward at an unusual angle. The great square shoulders of the stranger were clad in a tweed jacket, and, from what he could make out, he wore no chaps.

Just for a moment Fyles guessed he might be some farmer, and the tweed jacket suggested he was out to pay a visit to friends. Then, quite abruptly, he changed his mind, and further increased his pace. He had detected the city-fashioned top-boots the man was wearing.

Without further speculation he pressed on to overtake the stranger, whom, presently, he saw turn round and look back. Evidently he had become aware of the approach. Equally evidently he either welcomed or resented the intrusion upon his solitude. For he reined in his horse, and waited for the officer to come up.

The greeting between the men was widely different. The stranger's face was abeam with smiling good nature. His big blue eyes were wide with frank welcome.

"I've been just bursting with a painful longing for the sight of a living man with two arms and two legs, and anything else that goes to make up a human companion," he said delightedly. "Say, how far do you guess a fellow could ride by himself without needing to be sent into a home to be looked after?"

Fyles's manner was more guarded. The police officer was uppermost in him now, but he smiled a certain cordiality at the other's frankly unconventional greeting.

"That mostly depends on how many things there are chasing around in his brain-box to keep the works busy," he said gently.

The stranger's smile broadened into a laugh.

"That don't offer much hope," he replied dryly. "I've been riding around this eternal grass for nigh a week. God knows where I haven't been during that time. Nobody ever did brag about the ideas I've got in my head, not even my mother, and any I have got have just been chewed right up to death till there isn't a blamed thing left to chew. For the past ten miles I've been reviewing the attractions of every nursing home I've ever heard of, with a view to becoming an inmate. I think I've almost decided on one I know of in Toronto. You see there are a few human beings there."

Fyles's eyes had taken in the stranger from head to foot. Even the horse did not escape his closest attention. He recognized this man as being a stranger in the country. He was obviously direct from some eastern city, though not aggressively so. Furthermore, the beautiful chestnut horse he was riding was no prairie-bred animal, and suggested, in combination with the man's general get-up, the possession of ample means.

"A week riding about – trying to find yourself?"

Fyles's question was one of amused speculation.

"Sure," the man nodded, with a buoyant amusement in his eyes. "That, and finding some forgotten hole of a place called Rocky Springs."

Fyles lifted his reins and his horse moved on.

"We'd best ride together. I'm going to Rocky Springs, and – you've certainly hit the trail at last."

The fair-haired giant jumped at the suggestion, and even his horse seemed to welcome the companionship, for it ambled on in the friendliest manner by the side of the police horse.

"How did you manage to – lose yourself?" Fyles inquired presently. "Did you start out from Amberley?"

The stranger's look of chagrin was almost comical. He shook his head.

"That's where I ought to've started from," he said. Then he shrugged his great shoulders. "Here, I'll tell you. I come from down East, and I'm on my way to join a brother of mine at Rocky Springs. He's a rancher. Sort of artist, too. His name's Charlie Bryant. My name's Bill – Bill Bryant. Well, I ought to have got off at Black Cross, and changed trains for the Amberley branch. Instead

of that I was sleeping peacefully in the car and went right on to a place called Moosemin. Well, some torn fool told me if I got off at Moosemin I would get across country to Amberley, and thus get on to the Rocky Springs road. Maybe he was right enough, if the feller getting off had got any horse sense. But I guess they forgot to hand any out my way. Anyhow, I kind of took to the idea. Guessed I'd make a break that way and get used to the country. So I just bought the best horse I could find in the town from the worst thief that ever dodged penitentiary, and since then have spent seven whole days getting on intimate terms with every blade of grass in the country, and trying to convince various settlers that I wasn't a murderer or horse thief, and didn't want to shoot 'em in their beds, but just needed food and sleep, all of which I was ready to pay for at any fancy prices they liked to ask. How I eventually got here I don't know, and haven't a desire to know, and I'll stake my oath you won't find any two people in the country with the same ideas of direction. And I want to say that I hate grass worse than poison, and as for sun it's an abomination. Horse riding's overrated, and tailors don't know a thing about making pants that are comfortable riding. I could write a book on the subject of boils and saddle chafes, and when I get off this blamed saddle I don't intend to sit down for a week. I think a rancher's life is just the dandiest thing to read about I ever knew, and beans – those things the shape of an immature egg and as hard as rocks – are most nourishing; and I don't think I shall need nourishing ever again. Also the West is the greatest country ever forgotten by God or men, but the remark applies only to its size. The best thing I know of, just now, is a full-sized human being going the same way I am."

Bill Bryant finished up with a great laugh of the happiest good nature, which quite robbed Fyles of his last shadow of aloofness. No one could have looked into the man's humorously smiling eyes, or listened to the frank admissions of his own blundering, and felt it necessary to entertain the least question as to his perfect honesty.

Fyles accepted the introduction in the spirit in which it was made.

"My name's Fyles – Stanley Fyles," he said cordially. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Bryant."

"Bill Bryant," corrected the other, grasping and wringing the policeman's proffered hand with painful cordiality. "That's a good name – Fyles," he went on, releasing the other's hand. "Suggests all sorts of things – nails, chisels – something in the hardware line. Good name for this country, too." Then his big blue eyes scanned the officer's outfit. "Rancher?" he suggested.

Fyles smiled, shaking his head.

"Hardly a – rancher," he deprecated.

"Ah. I know. Cowpuncher. You're dressed that way. I've read about 'em. Chasing cattle. Rounding 'em up. Branding, and all that sort of thing. Fine. Exciting."

Fyles shook his head again.

"My job's not just that, either," he said, his smile broadening. "You see, I just round up 'strays,' and send 'em to their right homes. I'm out after 'strays' now."

Bill nodded with ready understanding.

"I get it," he cried. "They just break out in spring, and go chasing after fancy grass. Then they get lost, or mussed up with ether cattle, and – and need sorting out. Must be a mighty lonesome job – always hunting 'strays.'"

Inspector Fyles's eyes twinkled, but his sunburned face remained serious.

"Yes, I'd say it's lonesome – at times. You see, it isn't easy locating their tracks. And when you do locate 'em maybe you've got a long piece to travel before you come up with 'em. They get mighty wild running loose that way, and, hate being rounded up. Some of 'em show fight, and things get busy. No, it's not dead easy – and it doesn't do making mistakes. Guess a mistake is liable to snuff your light out when you're up against 'strays.'"

A sudden enthusiasm lit Bill Bryant's interested eyes.

"That sounds better than ranching," he said quickly. "You see, I've lived a soft sort of life, and it kind of seems good to get upsides with things. I've got a notion that it's better to hand a feller

a nasty bunch of knuckles, square on the most prominent part of his face, than taking dollars out of him to pay legal chin wagers. That's how I've always felt, but living in luxury in a city makes you act otherwise. I've quit it though, now, and, in consequence, I'm just busting to hand some fellow that bunch of knuckles." He raised one great clenched fist and examined it with a sort of mild enthusiasm. "I'm going to ranch," he went on simply, while the police officer surveyed him as he might some big, boisterous child. "My brother's got a ranch at Rocky Springs. He's done pretty well, I guess – for an artist fellow. He's making money – oh, yes, he's making good money, and seems to like the life.

"The fact is," he went on eagerly, "Charlie was a bit of a bad boy – he's a dandy good fellow, really he is; but I guess he got gay when he was an art student, and the old man got rattled over it and sent him along out here to raise cattle and wheat. Well, when dad died he left me most of his dollars. There were plenty, and it's made me feel sick he forgot Charlie's existence. So I took a big think over things. You see it makes a fellow think, when he finds himself with a lot of dollars that ought to be shared with another fellow.

"Well, I don't often think hard," he went on ingenuously. "But I did that time, and it's queer how easy it is to think right when you really try – hard. Guess you don't need to think much in your work – but maybe sometimes you'll have to, and then you'll find how easy it comes."

He turned abruptly in the saddle and looked straight into the officer's interested face. His eyes were alight, and he emitted a deep-throated guffaw.

"Say," he went on, "it came to me all of a sudden. It was in the middle of the night. I woke up thinking it. I was saying it to myself. Why not go out West? Join Charlie. Put all your money into his ranch. Turn it into a swell affair, and run it together. That way it'll seem as if you were doing it for yourself. That way Charlie'll never know you're handing him a fortune. Can you beat it?" he finished up triumphantly.

Stanley Fyles had not often met men in the course of his sordid work with whom he really wanted to shake hands. But somehow this great, soft-hearted, simple giant made him feel as he had never felt before. He abruptly thrust out a hand, forgetful of the previous handshakes he had endured, and, in a moment, it was seized in a second vice-like grip.

"It's fine," he said. Then as an afterthought: "No, you can't beat it."

The unconscious Bill beamed his satisfaction.

"That's how I thought," he said enthusiastically. "And I'll be mighty useful to him, myself, too – in a way. Don't guess I know much about wheat or cattle, but I can ride anything with hair on it, and I've never seen the feller I couldn't pound to a mush with the gloves on. That's useful, seeing Charlie's sort of small, and – and mild." Suddenly he pointed out ahead. "What's that standing right up there? See, over there. A tree – or – something."

Fyles abruptly awoke to their whereabouts. Bill Bryant was pointing at the great pine marking Rocky Springs.

"That's the landmark of Rocky Springs," he told him. This stranger had so interested and amused him that he had quite lost reckoning of the distance they had ridden together.

"I don't see any town," complained his companion.

"It's in the valley. You see, that tree is on the shoulder of the valley of Leaping Creek."

Bill's eyes widened.

"Oh, that's a valley, eh? And Charlie's ranch is down below. I see."

The man's eyes became thoughtful, and he relapsed into silence as they drew on toward the aged signpost. He was thinking – perhaps hard – of that brother whom he had not seen for years. Maybe, now that the time had come for the meeting, some feeling of nervousness was growing. Perhaps he was wondering if he would be as welcome as he hoped. Had Charlie changed much? Would his coming be deemed an impertinence? Charlie had not answered his letter. He forgot his brother had not had time to answer his impulsive epistle.

As they drew near the valley his eyes lost their enthusiastic light. His great, honest face was grave, almost to the point of anxiety.

Fyles, watching him furtively, observed every change of expression, and the meaning of each was plain enough to him. He, too, was wondering about that meeting. It would have interested him to have witnessed it. He was thinking about that brother in Rocky Springs. He knew him slightly, and knew his reputation better, and, in consequence, the two words “drunkard” and “crook” drifted through his mind, and left him regretfully wondering. Somehow he felt sorry, inexpressibly sorry, for this great big babe of a man whom he found himself unusually glad to have met.

CHAPTER X

THE BROTHERS

The valley of Leaping Creek gaped at Bill Bryant's feet and the man's ready delight bubbled over.

"Say," he demanded of his guide, "and this is where my brother's ranch is? Gee," he went on, while Fyles nodded a smiling affirmative, "it surely is the dandiest ditch this side of creation. It makes me want to holler."

As Fyles offered no further comment they rode on down the hill in silence, while Bill Bryant's shining eyes drank in the beauties which opened out in every direction.

The police officer, by virtue of his knowledge of the valley, led the way. Nor was he altogether sorry to do so. He felt that the moment for answering questions had passed. Any form of cross-examination now might lead him into imparting information that might hurt this stranger, and he had no desire to be the one to cast a shadow upon his introduction to the country he intended to make his home.

However, beyond this first expression of delight, Bill Bryant made no further attempt at speech. Once more doubt had settled upon his mind, and he was thinking – hard.

Ten minutes later the village came into view. Then it was that Bill was abruptly aroused from his somewhat troubled thought. They were just approaching the site of the new church, and sounds of activity broke the sylvan peace of the valley. But these things were of a lesser interest. A pedestrian, evidently leaving the neighborhood of the new building, was coming toward them along the trail. It was a girl – a girl clad in a smart tailored costume, which caught and held the stranger's most ardent attention.

She came on, and as they drew abreast of her, just for one brief instant the girl's smiling gray eyes were raised to the face of the stranger. The smile was probably unconscious, but it was nevertheless pronounced. In a moment, off came Bill's hat in a respectful salute, and only by the greatest effort could he refrain from a verbal greeting. Then, in another moment, as she passed like a ray of April sun, he had drawn up beside his guide.

"Say," he cried, with a deep breath of enthusiasm, "did you get that pretty girl?" Then with a burst of impetuosity: "Are they all like that in – this place? If so, I'm surely up to my neck in the valley of Leaping Creek. Who is she? How did she get here? I'll bet a thousand dollars to a bad nickel this place didn't raise her."

The officer's reply to the volley of questions came with characteristic directness.

"That's Miss Seton, Miss Helen Seton, sister of the one they call – Kate. They're sort of farmers, in a small way. Been here five years."

"Farmers?" Bill's scorn was tremendous. "Why, that girl might have stepped off Broadway, New York, yesterday. Farmers!"

"Nevertheless they *are* farmers," replied Fyles, "and they've been farming here five years."

"Five years! They've been here five years, and that girl – with her pretty face and dandy eyes – not married? Say, the boys of this place need seeing to. They ought to be lynched plumb out of hand."

Fyles smiled as he drew his horse up at the point where the trail merged into the main road of the village.

"Maybe it's not – their fault," he said dryly.

But Bill's indignation was sweeping him on.

"Then I'd like to know whose it is."

Fyles laughed aloud.

“Maybe she’s particular. Maybe she knows them. They surely do need lynching – most of ’em – but not for that. When you know ’em better you’ll understand.”

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed down the trail, away from the village.

“That’s your way,” he went on, “along west. Just keep right along the trail for nearly half a mile till you come to a cattle track on the right, going up the hill again.”

Then he shifted the direction of his pointing finger to a distant house on the hillside, which stood in full view.

“The track’ll take you to that shanty there, with the veranda facing this way. That’s Charlie Bryant’s place, and, unless I’m mistaken, that’s your brother standing right there on the veranda looking out this way. For a rancher – he don’t seem busy. Guess I’m going right on down to the saloon. I’ll see you again some time. So long.”

The police officer swung his horse round, and set off at a sharp canter before Bill could give expression to any of the dozen questions which leaped to his lips. The truth was Fyles had anticipated them, and wished to avoid them.

Charlie Bryant was standing on the veranda of his little house up on the hillside. He was watching with eyes of anxious longing for the sight of a familiar figure emerging from a house, almost as diminutive as his own, standing across the river on the far side of the valley.

There was never any question as to the longing in his dark eyes when they were turned upon the house of Kate Seton, but the anxiety in them now was less understandable.

It was his almost constant habit to watch for her appearance leaving her home each morning. But to-day she had remained invisible. He wondered why. It was her custom to be abroad early, and here it was long past mid-day, and, so far, there had been no sign of her going.

He wondered was she ill. Helen had long since made her appearance. He knew well enough that the new church building, and the many other small activities of the village, usually claimed Helen’s morning. That was the difference, one of the many differences between the sisters. Helen must always be a looker on at life – the village life. Kate – Kate was part of it.

He sighed, and a look of almost desperate worry crossed his dark, good-looking face. His thoughts seemed to disturb him painfully. Ever since he had heard of Inspector Fyles’s coming to the village a sort of depression had settled like a cloud upon him – a depression he could not shake off. Fyles was the last man he wished to see in Rocky Springs – for several reasons.

He was reluctantly about to turn away, and pass on down to his corrals, which were situated on the slope beside the house. There was work to be done there, some repairs, which he had intended to start early that morning. They had been neglected so long, as were many things to do with his ranch.

With this intention he moved toward the end of the veranda, but his progress was abruptly arrested by the sight of two horsemen in the distance making their way down toward the village. For awhile he only caught odd glimpses of them through the trees, but at last they reached the main road of the village, and halted in full, though somewhat distant, view of his house.

In a moment the identity of one of the men became certain in his mind. In spite of the man’s civilian clothing he recognized the easy poise in the saddle of Inspector Fyles. He had seen him so many times at comparatively close range that he was sure he could not be mistaken.

The sight of the police officer banished all his interest in the identity of the second horseman. A dark look of bitter, anxious resentment crept into his eyes, and all the mildness, all the gentleness vanished out of his expressive features. They had suddenly grown hard and cold. He knew that trouble was knocking at the door of Rocky Springs. He knew that his own peace of mind could never be restored so long as the shadow of Stanley Fyles hovered over the village.

Presently he saw the two horsemen part. Fyles rode on down toward the village while the other turned westwards, but the now hot eyes of the watching man followed only the figure of the unwelcome policeman until it was lost to view beyond the intervening bush.

As the officer disappeared the rancher made a gesture of fierce anger.

“Kate, Kate,” he cried, raising his clenched fists as though about to strike the unconscious horseman, “if I lose you through him, I’ll – I’ll kill him.”

Now he hurried away down to the corrals with the air of a man who is endeavoring to escape from himself. He suddenly realized the necessity of a vent for his feelings.

But his work had yet to suffer a further delay. He had scarcely reached the scene of operations when the sound of galloping hoofs caught and held his attention. He had quite forgotten the second horseman in his bitter interest in the policeman. Now he remembered that he had turned westward, which was in the direction of his ranch. The sounds were rapidly approaching up the track toward him. His eyes grew cold and almost vicious as he thought. Was this another of the police force? The force to which Fyles belonged?

He stood waiting at the head of the trail. And the look in his eyes augured ill for the welcome of the newcomer.

The sounds grew louder. Then he heard a voice, a somewhat familiar voice. It was big, and cheerful, and full of a cordial good humor.

“By Judas! he was a thief, and an outrageous robber, but you can go, my four-footed monument to a blasted rogue’s perfidy. Five hundred good dollars – now, at it for a final spurt.”

Charlie Bryant understood. The man was talking to his horse. Had he needed evidence it came forthwith, for, with a rush, at a headlong gallop, a horseman dashed from amid the bushes and drew up with a jolt almost on top of him.

“Charlie!”

“Bill! Good old – Bill!”

The greetings came simultaneously. The next instant Big Brother Bill flung out of the saddle, and stood wringing his brother’s hand with great force.

“Gee! It’s good to see you, Charlie,” he cried joyously.

“Good? Why, it’s great, and – and I took you for one of the damned p’lice.”

Charlie’s face was wreathed in such a smile of welcome and relief, that all Big Brother Bill’s doubts in that direction were flung pell-mell to the winds.

Charlie caught something of the other’s beaming enthusiasm.

“Why, I’ve been expecting you for days, old boy. Thought maybe you’d changed your mind. Say, where’s your baggage? Coming on behind? You haven’t lost it?” he added anxiously, as Bill’s face suddenly fell.

“I forgot. Say, was there ever such a tom-fool trick?” Bill cried, with a great laugh at his own folly. “Why, I left it checked at Moosemin – without instructions.”

Charlie’s smiling eyes suddenly widened.

“Moosemin? What in the name of all that’s – ?”

“I’ll have to tell you about it later,” Bill broke in hastily. “I’ve had one awful journey. If it hadn’t been for a feller I met on the road I don’t know when I’d have landed here.”

Charlie nodded, and the smile died out of his eyes.

“I saw him. You certainly were traveling in good company.”

Bill nodded, towering like some good-natured St. Bernard over a mild-eyed water spaniel.

“Good company’s a specialty with me. But I didn’t come alongside any of it, since I set out to make here ’cross country from Moosemin on the advice of the only bigger fool than myself I’ve ever met, until I ran into him. Say, Charlie, I s’pose its necessary to have a deal of grass around to run a ranch on?”

Charlie’s eyes lit with the warmest amusement. This great brother of his was the brightest landmark in his memory of the world he had said good-bye to years ago.

“You can’t graze cattle on bare ground,” he replied watchfully. “Why?”

Bill’s shoulders went up to the accompaniment of a chuckle.

“Nothing – only I hate grass. I seem to have gone over as much grass in the last week as a boarding-house spring lamb. But for that feller, I surely guess I’d still be chasing over it, like those ‘strays’ he spends his life rounding-up.”

A quick look of inquiry flashed in the rancher’s eyes.

“Strays?” he inquired.

Bill nodded gravely. “Yes, he’s something in the ranching line. Rounds up ‘strays,’ and herds ’em to their right homes. His name’s Fyles – Stanley Fyles.”

Just for an instant Charlie’s face struggled with the more bitter feelings Fyles’s name inspired. Then he gave way to the appeal of a sort of desperate humor, and broke into an uncontrolled fit of laughter.

Bill looked on wondering, his great blue eyes widely open. Then he caught the infection, and began to laugh, too, but without knowing why.

After some moments, however, Charlie sobered and choked back a final gurgle.

“Oh, dear!” he exclaimed. “You’ve done me a heap of good, Bill. That’s the best laugh I’ve had in weeks. That fellow a rancher? Fyles – Stanley Fyles a – rancher? Well, p’raps you’re right. That’s his job all right – rounding up ‘strays,’ and herding ’em to their right homes. But the ‘strays’ are ‘crooks,’ and their homes the penitentiary. That’s Inspector Stanley Fyles, of the Mounted Police, and just about the smartest man in the force. He’s come out here to start his ranching operations on Rocky Springs, which has the reputation of being the busiest hive of crooks in Western Canada. You’re going to see things hum, Bill – you’ve just got around in time.”

CHAPTER XI

THE UNREGENERATE

Later in the afternoon the two brothers found themselves seated on the veranda talking together, as only devoted relationship will permit after years of separation.

They had just returned from a brief inspection of the little ranch for Bill's edification. The big man's enthusiasm had demanded immediate satisfaction. His headlong nature impelled him to the earliest possible digestion of the life he was about to enter. So he had insisted on a tour of inspection.

The inspection was of necessity brief. There was so little to be seen in the way of an outward display of the prosperity his elder brother claimed. In consequence, as it proceeded, the newcomer's spirits fell. His radiant dreams of a rancher's life tumbled about his big unfortunate head, and, for the moment, left him staggered.

His first visit was to the barn, where Kid Blaney, his brother's ranchman, was rubbing down two well saddle-marked cow-ponies, after his morning out on the fences. It was a crazy sort of a shanty, built of sod walls with a still more crazy door frame, and a thatched roof more than a foot thick. It was half a dug-out on the hillside, and suggested as much care as a hog pen. The floor was a mire of accumulations of manure and rotted bedding, and the low roof gave the place a hovelish suggestion such as Bill could never have imagined in the breezy life of a rancher, as he understood it.

There were one or two other buildings of a similar nature. One was used for a few unhealthy looking fowls; another, by the smell and noise that emanated therefrom, housed a number of pigs. Then there was a small grain storehouse. These were the buildings which comprised the ranch. They were just dotted about in the neighborhood of the house, at points most convenient for their primitive construction.

The corrals, further down the slope, offered more hope. There were three of them, all well enough built and roomy. There was one with a branding "pinch," outside which stood a small hand forge and a number of branding irons. At the sight of these things Bill's spirit improved.

When questioned as to pastures and grazing, Charlie led him along a cattle track, through the bush up the slope, to the prairie level above. Here there were three big pastures running into a hundred acres or more, all well fenced, and the wire in perfect order. Bill's improving spirits received a further fillip. The grazing, Charlie told him, lay behind these limits upon the open plains, over which the newcomer had spent so much time riding.

"You see, Bill," he said, half apologetically, "I'm only a very small rancher. The land I own is this on which the house stands, and these pastures, and another pasture or two further up the valley. For grazing, I simply rent rights from the Government. It answers well enough, and I only have to keep one regular boy in consequence. Spring and fall I hire extra hands for round-up. It pays me better that way."

Bill nodded with increasing understanding. His original dreams had received a bad jolt, but he was beginning a readjustment of focus. Besides, his simple mind was already formulating fresh plans, and he began to talk of them with that whole-hearted enthusiasm which seemed to be the foundation of his nature.

"Sure," he said cordially. "And – and you've done a big heap, Charlie. Say, how much did dad start you out with? Five thousand dollars? Yes, I remember, five thousand, and our mother gave you another two thousand five hundred. It was all she had. She'd saved it up in years. It wasn't much to turn bare land into a money-making proposition, specially when you'd had no experience. But we're going to alter all that. We're going to own our grazing, if it can be bought. Yes, sir, we're going to own a lot more, and I've got nearly one hundred thousand dollars to do it with. We're

going to turn these barns into barns, and we're going to run horses as well as cattle. We're going to grow wheat, too. That's the coming game. All the boys say so down East – that is, the real bright boys. We're just going to get busy, you and me, Charlie. We're going to have a deed of partnership drawn up all square and legal, and I'm going to blow my stuff in it against what you've got already, and what you know. That's what I'm here for."

By the aid of his big voice and aggressive bulk Bill strove to conceal his obvious desire to benefit his brother under an exterior of strong business methods. And he felt the result to be all he could desire. He told himself that a man of Charlie's unbusiness-like nature was quite easy to impress. When it came to a proper understanding of business he was much his brother's superior.

Charlie, however, was in no way deceived, but such was his regard for this simple-minded creature that his protest was of the mildest.

"Of course we could do a great deal with your money, Bill, but – but it's all you've got, and –"

His protest was hastily thrust aside.

"See here, Charlie, boy, that's right up to me," Bill cried, with a buoyant laugh. "I'm out here to ranch. That's what I've come for, that's what I've worn my skin to the bone for on the most outrageously uncomfortable saddle I've ever thrown a leg over. That's why I took the trouble to keep on chasing up this place when my brain got plumb addled at the sight of so much grass. That's why I didn't go back to find the feller – and shoot him – for advising me to get off at Moosemin instead of hitting back on my tracks for the right place to change trains. You see, maybe I haven't all the horse sense in some things you have, but I've got my back teeth into the idea of this ranching racket, and my dollars are going to talk all they know. I tell you, when my mind's made up, I can't be budged an inch. It's no use your trying. I know you, Charlie. You're scared to death I'll lose my money – well, I'm ready to lose it, if things go that way. Meanwhile, I've a commercial proposition. I'm out to make good, and I'm looking for you to help me."

Charlie looked into the earnest, good-natured face with eyes that read deep down into the open heart beneath. A great regret lay behind them, a regret which made him hate and despise himself in a way he had never felt before. He was thinking whither his own follies had driven him; he was thinking of his own utter failure as a man, a strong, big-principled man. He was wondering, too, what this kindly soul would think and feel when he realized how little he was changed from the contemptible creature his father had turned out of doors, and when he finally learned of the horrors of degradation his life really concealed.

He had no alternative but to acquiesce before the strong determination of his brother, and though his words were cordial, his fears, his qualms of conscience underlying them, were none the less.

So they came back to the house, and finally foregathered on two uncomfortable, rawhide-seated, home-made chairs, while Bill enlarged upon his plans. It was not until these were completely exhausted that their talk drifted to more personal matters. Then it was that Charlie himself opened up the way, with a bitter reference to the reasons that saved him from completely going under when their father shipped him out to this forlorn spot to regenerate.

He talked earnestly, leaning forward in his chair. His delicate hands were tightly clasped, as his eyes gazed out across the valley at a spot where Kate Seton's house stood beyond the river.

Bill sat listening. He wanted Charlie to talk. He wanted to learn all those little things, sometimes even very big things, which can only be read between the lines when the tongue runs on unguardedly. He knew his brother's many weaknesses, and it was his ardent desire to discover those signs of betterment and strengthening he fondly hoped had taken place in the passing of years.

He lolled back with the luxury of an utterly saddle-weary man. His heavy bent pipe hung loosely from the corner of his mouth. His big blue eyes were steady and earnest.

"Yes," Charlie went on, after a moment's thought, "I'm glad, mighty glad, I came here when I did." He gave a short mirthless laugh. "I doubt if my satisfaction is inspired by any moral scruple,"

he added hastily, as the other nodded. "Say, can you understand how I feel when I say I believe all moral scruple has somehow decayed, rotted, died in me? I don't mean that I don't want to be decent. I do; but that's because decency appeals to me from some sort of artistic feelings which have survived the wreck I made of life years ago. No, moral scruples were killed stone dead when I was chasing through Europe hunting Art, searching for it with eyes too young to gaze upon anything more beautiful than a harsh life of strict discipline.

"Now I have to follow inclinations that have somehow got the better of all the best qualities in me. That's how I'm fixed now. And, queer as it may seem, that's been my salvation – if you can call it salvation. When I first came here I was ready to drift any old way. I did drift into every muck-hole that appealed to me. I didn't care. As I said, moral scruples were dead in me. Then this same self-indulgence did me a good turn. The only good turn it's ever done me."

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