

Cullum Ridgwell

The One-Way Trail: A story of the cattle country



Ridgwell Cullum

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story of the cattle country**

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CHAPTER I

A GENTLEMAN RANKER

Dan McLagan shifted his cigar, and his face lit with a grin of satisfaction.

“Seventy-five per cent, of calves,” he murmured, glancing out at the sunlit yards. “Say, it’s been an elegant round-up.” Then his enthusiasm rose and found expression. “It’s the finest, luckiest ranch in Montana—in the country. Guess I’d be within my rights if I said ‘in the world.’ I can’t say more.”

“No.”

The quiet monosyllable brought the rancher down to earth. He looked round at his companion with an inquiring glance.

“Eh?”

But Jim Thorpe had no further comment to offer.

The two were sitting in the foreman’s cabin, a small but roughly comfortable split-log hut, where elegance and tidiness had place only in the more delicate moments of its occupant’s retrospective imagination. Its furnishing belonged to the fashion of the prevailing industry, and had in its manufacture the utilitarian methods of the Western plains, rather than the more skilled workmanship of the furniture used in civilization. Thus, the bed was a stretcher supported on two packing-cases, the table had four solid legs that had once formed the sides of a third packing-case, while the cupboard, full of cattle medicines, was the reconstructed portions of a fourth packing-case.

The collected art on the walls consisted of two rareties. One was a torn print of a woman’s figure, classically indecent with regard to apparel; and the other was a fly-disfigured portrait of a sweet-faced old lady, whose refinement and dignity of expression suggested surroundings of a far more delicate nature than those in which she now found herself. Besides these, a brace of ivory-butted revolvers served to ornament the wall at the head of the bed. And a stack of five or six repeating rifles littered an adjacent corner.

It was a man’s abode, and the very simplicity of it, the lack of cheap ornamentation, the carelessness of self in it, suggested a great deal of the occupant’s character. Jim Thorpe cared as little for creature comforts as only a healthy-minded, healthy-bodied man, who has tasted of the best and passed the dish—or has had it snatched from him—will sometimes care. His thoughts were of the moment. He dared not look behind him; and ahead?—well, as yet, he had no desire to think too far ahead.

The ranch owner was sitting on the side of the stretcher, and Jim Thorpe, his foreman, stood leaning against the table. McLagan’s Irish face, his squat figure and powerful head were a combination suggesting tremendous energy and determination, rather than any great mental power, and in this he strongly contrasted with the refined, thoughtful face of his foreman.

But then, in almost every characteristic the Irishman differed from his employee. While Jim’s word was never questioned even by the veriest sceptic of the plains, McLagan was notoriously the greatest, most optimistic liar in the state of Montana. A reputation that required some niceness of proficiency to retain.

McLagan's ranch was known as the "AZ's." It was a brand selected to illuminate his opinion of his own undertakings. He said that his ranch must be the beginning and end of all things in the cattle world, and he was proud of the ingenuity in his selection of a brand. The less cultured folk, who, perhaps, had more humor than respect for the Irishman, found his brand tripped much more easily off the tongue by replacing the Z with an S, and invariably using the plural.

"Say, Jim," the rancher went on, buoyed with his own enthusiasm, "it's been a great round-up. Seventy-five per cent. Bully! I'll open out my scheme. Listen. Ther's Donagh's land buttin' on us. Thirty sections. They got stations for 10,000 head of stock. We'll buy 'em right out of business. See? I'm goin' to turn those stations into double. That slice of land will carry me backing right up into the foot-hills, which means shelter for my stock in winter. See? Then I'll rent off a dozen or more homesteads for a supply of grain and hay. You know I hate to blow hot air around, but I say right here I'm going to help myself to a mighty big cinch on Montana, and then—why, I'll lay right on the heels of Congress."

He looked for approval into the bronzed face of his companion. But Thorpe hesitated, while a shadowy smile lurked in his clear, dark eyes.

"That's so," he observed, with a suspicious quietness.

"Sure," added the other, to clinch what he believed to be his companion's approval.

"And then?"

The rancher stirred uneasily. The tone of Thorpe's inquiry suggested doubt.

"And then?" McLagan repeated uncertainly.

"Why, when you've got all this, and you're the biggest producer in the country, the beef folk in Chicago 'll beat you down to their price, and the automobile folk will cut the ground clear from under your horses' feet. You won't hit Congress, because you won't have the dollars to buy your graft with. Then, when you're left with nothing to round-up but a bunch of gophers, the government will come along and have you seen to."

The Irishman's face grew scarlet, and he began to splutter, but Jim Thorpe went on mercilessly.

"Cut it out, boss. We're cattlemen, both of us. You've grown up to cattle, and I—well, I've acquired the habit, I guess. But cut it out, and put your change into automobiles. They aren't things to breed with, I guess. But I'd say they'd raise a dust there's more dollars in than there's beans in our supper hash."

The rancher's swift anger had gone. He shook his head, and his hard, blue eyes stared out through the doorway at the busy life beyond. He could see the lines of buildings packed close together, as though huddling up for companionship in that wide, lonesome world of grass. He could see the acres and acres of corrals, outlying, a rampart to the ranch buildings. Then, beyond that, the barbed wire fencing, miles and miles of it. He could see horsemen moving about, engaged upon their day's work. He could hear the lowing of the cattle in the corrals. As Thorpe had said, he had grown up to cattle. Cattle and horses were his life.

He was rich now. This was all his. He was growing richer every year, and—Thorpe was prophesying the slump, the end. He couldn't believe it, or rather he wouldn't believe it. And he turned with a fierce expression of blind loyalty to his calling.

"To h— with automobiles! It's cattle for me. Cattle or bust!"

Thorpe shook his head.

"There's no alternative, boss. I can see it all coming. Everybody can—if they look. There's nothing between grain farming and—automobiles. The land here is too rich to waste on cattle. There's plenty other land elsewhere that'll feed stock, but wouldn't raise a carrot. Psha! There won't be need for horses to plough, or even haul grain; and you've got 15,000 head. It'll be all automobiles!"

"I'd 'scrap' the lot!" added the Irishman, briefly and feelingly. Then he glanced at his companion out of the tail of his eye. "I s'pose it's your education, boy. That's what's wrong with you. Your head's running wheels. You come into cattle too late. You've got city doings down your backbone, and I guess you need weeding bad. Say, you're a West Point man, ain't you?"

Thorpe seemed to shrink at the question. He turned aside, and his eyes rested for a moment on the portrait nailed upon his wall. It was only for a moment his dark eyes encountered the tender old eyes that looked out at him from the faded picture. Then he looked again at the owner of the "AZ's," and gave him a smiling nod.

"Sure, boss. I intended to go into the engineers."

"Ah—wheels."

"You see, we've all been soldiers, since way back when my folks came over with the first lot from England. Guess I'm the first—backslider."

"Nope. You ain't a backslider, Jim Thorpe. I sure wouldn't say that. Not on my life. Guess you're the victim of a cow-headed government that reckons to make soldiers by arithmetic, an' wastin' ink makin' fool answers to a sight more fool questions. Gee, when I hit Congress, I'll make some one holler 'help.'"

The foreman's smile broadened.

"'Twasn't exams, boss," he said quietly. "I'd got a cinch on them, and they were mostly past cutting any ice with me. It was—well, it don't matter now." He paused, and his eyes settled again on the portrait. The Irishman waited, and presently Jim turned from the picture, and his quizzical smile encountered the hard blue eyes of the other.

"You said just now my head was full of wheels," he began, with a humorous light in his eyes that was yet not without sadness. "Maybe it is—maybe it has reason to be. You see, it was an automobile that finished my career at West Point. My mother came by her death in one. An accident. Automobiles were immature then—and—well, her income died with her, and I had to quit and hustle in a new direction. Curiously enough I went into the works of an automobile enterprise. I—I hated the things, but they fascinated me. I made good there, and got together a fat wad of bills, which was useful seeing I had my young cousin's—you know, young Will Henderson, of Barnriff; he's a trapper now—education on my hands. Just as things were good and dollars were coming plenty the enterprise bust. I was out—plumb out. I hunched up for another kick. I had a dandy patent that was to do big things. I got together a syndicate to run it. I'd got a big car built to demonstrate my patent, and it represented all I had in the world. It was to be on the race-track. Say, she didn't demonstrate worth a cent. My syndicate jibbed, and I—well, here I am, a cattleman—you see cattle haven't the speed of automobiles, but they mostly do what's expected. That's my yarn, boss. You didn't know much of me. It's not a great yarn as life goes. Mostly ordinary. But there's a deal of life in it, in its way. There's a pile of hope busted, and hope busted isn't a pleasant thing. Makes you think a deal. However, Will Henderson and I—we can't kick a lot when you look around. I'm earning a good wage, and I've got a tidy job—that don't look like quitting. And Will—he's netting eighty a month out of his pelts. After all things don't much count, do they? Fifty or sixty years hence our doings won't cut any ice. We're down, out, and nature shuts out memory. That's the best of it. We shan't know anything. We'll have forgotten everything we ever did know. We shan't be haunted by the 'might-have-beens'. We shall have no regrets. It'll just be sleep, a long, long sleep—and forgetfulness. And then—ah, well, boss, I'm yarning a heap, and the boys are out on the fences with no one to see they're not shooting 'craps.'"

The rancher turned to the door.

"I'm going out to the fences meself," he said, shortly. Then he went on: "There's a dozen an' more three-year-olds in the corrals needs bustin'. You best set two o' the boys on 'em. Ther's a black mare among 'em. I'll get you to handle her yourself. I'm goin' to ride her, an' don't want no fool broncho-buster tearing her mouth out."

“Right-ho, boss.” Jim was smiling happily at the man’s broad back as he stood facing out of the door. “But, if you’ve half a minute, I’ve got something else to get through me.”

“Eh?” McLagan turned. His Irish face was alight with sudden interest. “Guess I ain’t busy fer ten minutes.”

“That’s more than enough,” said Jim, readily. “It’s about that land I was speaking to you of the other day. I told you those things about myself—because of that. As I said, you didn’t know much of me, except my work for you.”

McLagan nodded, and chewed the end of his cigar. His keen eyes were studying the other’s face. At last he removed his cigar, and spat out a bit of tobacco leaf.

“I know all I need to,” he said cordially. “The proposition was one hundred and sixty acres for a homestead, with grazin’ rights. You want a lease. Gettin’ married?”

“It might happen that way,” grinned the foreman somewhat sheepishly.

“Found the leddy?”

Jim nodded.

“Marryin’s a fool game anyway.”

“That’s as maybe.”

McLagan shrugged.

“Guess I don’t want wimmin-folk in mine. You’re goin’ to hold your job?”

“Sure. You see, boss—” Jim began to explain.

But McLagan broke in.

“You can have it for rent, boy,” he said. “It suits me, if you don’t mean quittin’.”

“I don’t mean quitting,” said Jim. “I’m going to run it with a hired man. Y’see I’ve got one hundred and fifty stock and a bit saved for building. When I get married my wife’ll see to things some. See the work is done while I’m here.”

McLagan grinned and nodded.

“Guess you didn’t seem like gettin’ married jest now, talkin’ of those things. You kind o’ seemed ‘down’ some.”

Jim’s eyes became thoughtful.

“Makes you feel ‘down’ when you get remembering some things,” he said. “Y’see it makes you wonder what the future feels like doing in the way of kicks. Things are going good about now, and—and I want ’em to keep on going good.”

McLagan laughed boisterously.

“You’ve sure jest got to play hard to-day, let the future worry fer itself. Well, so long. I’ll hand you the papers when you’ve selected the ground, boy. An’ don’t forget the black mare.”

He left the hut and Jim watched him stumping busily away across to the big barn where the saddle horses were kept. His eyes were smiling as he looked after him. He liked Dan McLagan. His volcanic temper; his immoderate manner of expression suggested an open enough disposition, and he liked men to be like that.

But his smile was at the thought that somehow he had managed to make his “boss” think that extreme caution was one of his characteristics. Yes, it made him smile. If such had been the case many things in the past, many disasters might have been averted.

As a matter of fact he had been thinking of the woman he hoped to make his wife. He was wondering if he had a reasonable prospect of helping her to all the comfort in life she deserved. He took an ultra serious view of matrimonial responsibilities. Eve must have a good, ample home. She must have nothing to worry, none of little petty economies to study which make life so burdensome. Yes, they must start with that, and then, with luck, their stock would grow, he would buy more land, and finally she would be able to hold her place with the wives of all the richest ranchers in the district. That was what he wanted for her when they were married.

When they were married. Suddenly he laughed. He had not asked her yet. Still— His eyes grew gloomy. His thoughts turned to another man, his cousin, Will Henderson. He knew that Will liked Eve Marsham. It was the one cloud upon his horizon. Will was younger than he by a good deal. He was handsome, too. Eve liked him. Yes, she liked him, he was sure. But somehow he did not associate marriage with Will. Well,—it was no good seeking trouble.

He pushed his thoughts aside and stood up. But the cloud upon his dark face was not so easily got rid of. How could it be? for Eve Marsham meant the whole world to him.

He moved toward the door, and as he looked out at the sunlit yards he started. A horseman had just come into view round the corner of one of the barns. But though his smile was lacking when the man came up and drew rein at his door, there was no mistaking the kindly cordiality of his greeting as he held out his hand.

“Why, Will,” he cried, “I’m real glad you’ve come along.”

CHAPTER II

A SHOOTING MATCH

In silence the two men sat smoking. Will Henderson, half sitting, half lying on the stretcher-bed, gazed out through the doorway at the distant mountain peaks. His hands were clasped behind his head, and a sullen, preoccupied look was in his eyes. Jim Thorpe was sitting, frog-fashion, on an upturned soap-box, watching him. His eyes were a shade anxious, but full of good feeling.

Jim was nine years his cousin's senior, and Will was twenty-four. They were really almost foster-brothers, for from the younger man's earliest days he had lived with Jim, in the care of the latter's widowed mother. He was an orphan, both his parents having died before he was two years old, and so it was that he had been adopted by Jim's mother, the child's only living relative. For years Jim had lavished on him an elder brother's affection and care. And when his own mother died, and he was left to his own resources, it still made no difference. Will must share in everything. Will's education must be completed adequately, for that was Jim's nature. His duty and inclination lay straight ahead of him, and he carried both out to the end. Perhaps he did more. Perhaps he overindulged and spoiled the youngster of whom he was so fond. Anyway, as in many similar cases, Will accepted all as his right, and gave very little in return. He was selfish, passionate, and his temper was not always a nice one.

In appearance there was a striking resemblance between these two. Not in face, but in figure, in coloring, in general style. A back view of them was identical. In face they differed enormously. They were both extremely handsome, but of utterly different types. Jim was classically regular of feature, while Will possessed all the irregularity and brightness of his Hibernian ancestry. Both were dark; dark hair, dark eyes, dark eyebrows. In fact, so alike were they in general appearance that, in their New York days, they had been known by their intimates as the "twins."

Just now there was something troubling. And that something seemed to be worrying Will Henderson even more than his cousin. At least, to judge by outward appearances. He showed it in his expression, which was somewhat savage. He showed it in his nervous, impatient movements, in the manner in which he smoked. Jim had seen it at once, and understood. And he, too, was troubled.

They had been silent some time, and eventually it was Jim who spoke.

"Come on, lad. Let's have it out," he said, decidedly.

His voice was full and strong, and kindly.

The other stirred, but did not reply.

"This is your busy time, Will," Jim went on. "You didn't come away from those hills yonder to pass the time of day with me. You came because something wouldn't let you rest. I know you, boy; I know you. Something's troubling that mind of yours in a way that makes it hard for you to speak, even now you're here. Shall I try and begin it for you?"

There was infinite kindness in the man's tone. There was a smile in his eyes that might well have drawn a responsive smile from even an angry child.

Will removed his pipe, but the responsive smile was not forthcoming.

"I'll open out, Jim," he said coldly.

The other waited. The smoke of their pipes rolled up on the still, warm air of the room, upsetting the calculations of a few mischievously busy mosquitoes. The sun shone in through the doorway. The ranch was quiet now. All the "hands" had departed to their work, and only the occasional lowing of a solitary milch cow in one of the corrals, and the trampling feet of the horses waiting to be "broken," and the "yeps" of a few mouching dogs, afforded any sign of life outside in the ranch yards.

Jim began to grow restive.

“Well, boy: I’ve some ‘breaking’ to do. Maybe you’ll come along. You can talk as we go.”
He half rose, but Will sat up in a moment.

“Not yet, Jim,” he said, almost roughly. Then his tone changed in a way through which his mercurial disposition spoke. “Look here,” he went on, “whatever happens in the future, I’d like you to understand that all you’ve done for me in the past counts for something.”

“Then it’s real serious, lad?” Jim smiled back at him. But he failed to catch his eye. Then he, too, changed his manner, and there was a sudden coolness in it. “You needn’t recite,” he said. “Anything I’ve done has been a—a pleasure to me. Our ways have lain a bit apart for some months, but it makes no difference to my feelings, except to make me regret it. The fortunes of war, eh? And a fair bit of grist is rolling into our separate mills. Honest grist. We’re good friends, lad—so let’s have it. It’s—it’s a woman?”

At the mention of the word, “woman,” Will seemed to utterly freeze up.

“Yes, it’s—a woman,” he said frigidly.

“Eve Marsham?”

“Yes.”

Jim sighed. He knew there were breakers ahead. Breakers which must be faced, and faced sternly.

“You love her?” There was a dryness in his throat.

“Yes. I—I can’t live without her. She is my whole world. She is more than that. God! How I love her!”

“I love her, too.”

Jim’s darkly brilliant eyes were on the younger man’s face. They compelled his gaze, and the two men looked long at each other, vainly trying to penetrate to that which lay behind. It was Will who turned away at last.

“I knew it,” he said, and there was no longer any pretense of cordiality in his tone.

“Well?”

“Well?”

It was a tense moment for both men; and tremendous in its possibilities. There was no shrinking in either now; no yielding. But, as it ever was, Jim took the lead after a few moments’ silence.

“And—does she love you?” he asked slowly.

His words were little above a whisper, but so tense was his feeling that his voice seemed to cut through the still air of the room. Will hesitated before replying. Perhaps he was reckoning up Jim’s chances as compared with his own. Finally, he was reluctantly compelled to make an admission.

“I don’t know—yet.”

The other sighed audibly. Then he mechanically began to refill his pipe. He wanted to speak, but there seemed to be nothing adequate to say. Two men, virile, thrilling with the ripe, red blood of perfect manhood, friends, and—a woman stood between them.

“It’s no good,” Jim said, preparing to light his pipe. “The position is—impossible.”

“Yes.”

Now both pipes were smoking as under a forced draught.

“I’d give my life for her,” the elder muttered, almost unconsciously.

Will caught at his words.

“My life is hers,” he cried, almost defiantly.

They were no further on.

“Can you—suggest—?”

Will shook his head. The snow on the distant peaks glistened like diamonds in the gorgeous sunlight, and his attention seemed riveted upon it.

“What pay are you making, Will?” Jim inquired presently.

“Eighty dollars a month—why?”

“Ten more than me.” Jim laughed harshly. “You’re the better match. You’re younger, too.”

“She’s got a wad of her own. A thousand dollars,” added Will.

His remark was unpleasing, and Jim’s eyes grew colder.

“That don’t cut any figure. That’s hers,” he said sharply.

“But—it’s useful—”

“To her—maybe.”

The flow of their talk dried up again. They could make no headway in clearing up their dilemma. To Jim each passing moment was making things harder; with each passing moment their friendship was straining under the pressure. Suddenly a thought flashed through his brain. It was a light of hope, where, before, all had been darkness.

“I haven’t asked her yet,” he said. “And you—you haven’t?”

“No.”

“Say, we’re sailing an uncharted sea, and—there’s a fog.”

It was a reluctant nod Jim received in reply.

“We’ll have to ask her,” he went on. “She can’t marry us both. Maybe she’ll marry neither.”

“That’s so.” Jim failed to observe Will’s smile of confidence. “Yes, we’ll both ask her. I’ve got to go through Barnriff on my way to the hills. I’ll call and see her. You can ride in this evening.”

Jim shook his head.

“Guess that’s an elegant plan—for you.”

Quick as a flash Will turned on him. His volcanic anger rose swiftly.

“What d’you mean?”

“Just what I say.” Jim’s response seemed to have less friendliness in it. Then he knocked his pipe out, and rose from his seat. “No, boy,” he said. “We’ll just play the game right here. We’ll take a chance for who goes to her first. If she wants neither of us—well, we’ll have played the game by each other, anyway. And if she chooses either of us then the other must take his medicine like a man. Let’s—be sportsmen.”

“What’s your game?” There was no yielding in Will’s sharp question.

“Just this.”

Jim leaned forward, holding his empty pipe to point his words. There was a glow of excited interest in his eyes as he propounded his idea. With Will it was different. He sat frigidly listening. If through any generosity he lost Eve, he would never forgive himself—he would never forgive Jim. He must have her for his own. His love for her was a far greater thing, he told himself, than the colder Jim’s could ever be. He could not understand that Jim, in offering his plan, merely wanted to be fair, merely wanted to arrange things so that Eve should not come between them, that neither should be able to reproach the other for any advantage taken. He suspected trickery. Nor had he any right to such base suspicion. Jim’s idea was one to make their way easier. Eve would choose whom she pleased—if either of them. He could not, did not want to alter that. Whatever the result of her choice he was ready to accept it.

He pointed at the revolvers hanging on the wall.

“They shall decide who has first speak with her,” he said. “We’ll empty six at a mark, and the one who does the best shooting has—first go in.”

Will shrugged.

“I don’t like it.”

“It’s the best way. We’re a fair match. You’re reckoned the boss shot in the hills, and I don’t guess there’s any one on this ranch handier than I am. We’ve both played with those two guns a heap. It’ll save bad blood between us. What say?”

Will shook his head.

"It's bad. Still—" He looked at the guns. He was thinking swiftly. He knew that he was a wonderful shot with a revolver. He was in constant practice, too. Jim was a good shot, but then his practice was very limited. Yes, the chances were all in his favor.

"Get busy then," he said presently, with apparent reluctance.

He rose and moved toward the guns.

"Whose choice?" he demanded.

Nor did he observe the other's smile as he received his reply.

"It's yours."

While Will chose his weapon with studied care, Jim picked up the soap box and fumbled through his pockets till he found a piece of chalk. With this he drew a bull's-eye on the bottom of the box, and sketched two rough circles around it. Will had made his choice of weapons by the time the target was completed.

"Will it do?" Jim inquired, holding up the box for his inspection.

"It's got to," was the churlish reply.

Jim gave him a quick glance as he moved across the room and possessed himself of the remaining pistol. Then he examined its chambers and silently led the way out of the hut.

They left the ranch buildings and moved out upon the prairie. A spot was selected, and the box set down. Then Jim paced off sixty yards.

"Sixty," he said, as he came to a halt.

"Sixty," agreed Will, who had paced beside him.

"It's your choice. Will you—get busy?"

"All right."

Will stepped on to the mark confidently, raising his gun with the surety of a man who does not know what it means to miss. Yet, before dropping the hammer, he braced himself with unusual care.

"Plonk!" The bullet struck the box. He had found his mark, and in rapid succession the remaining five chambers of his gun were emptied. Each shot found its mark with deadly accuracy, for Will meant to win the contest.

Then they set out to inspect the target. Will led now. He was eager to ascertain the actual result. An exclamation of joy broke from him as he snatched up the box. The bull's-eye was about two inches in diameter; one of his shots had passed through it, three had broken its outer line, while the other two were within a quarter of an inch of the little white patch. All six shots could have been covered by a three-inch circle.

"Good," cried Thorpe. And he turned the box round and drew another target on its side.

The new bull's-eye was a shade smaller. It may have been accident. It may have been that Jim preferred to make his own task more difficult than err on the side of his own advantage. Will said nothing, and they walked back to the firing point.

Jim lifted his gun and fired. His shots rang out like the rattle of a maxim gun, so swiftly did he empty the six chambers. In a few moments they were once more on their way to inspect the target.

Five bullets had passed through the bull's-eye, the sixth had broken its line.

"I shall see Eve to-morrow morning," said Jim quietly. "You can see her later."

Without a word Will turned away, and moved off toward the ranch. Jim followed him. Nor was a word exchanged between them till the hut was reached, and Will had unhitched his horse from the tying-post.

"Going?" inquired Jim, for something to say.

"Yes."

There was no mistaking the younger man's tone, and his friend looked away while he leaped into the saddle.

Jim seemed to have drawn none of the satisfaction which the winning of the match should have afforded him, for he flung the box which he had been carrying aside as though it had offended

him. He wanted to speak, he wanted to say something pleasant. He wanted to banish that surly look from Will's eyes; but somehow he could find nothing to say, nothing to do. He looked on while the other lifted his reins to ride off. Then, in desperation, he came up to the horse's shoulder.

"Shake, Will," he said.

It was the effort of a big heart striving to retain a precious friendship which he felt was slipping away from him.

But Will did not see the outstretched hand. He hustled his horse, and, in moving off, his own right foot struck the waiting man violently. It was almost as though he had kicked him.

Jim watched him go with regretful eyes. Then, as the man disappeared among the ranch buildings, he turned and slowly made his way to the bunk house of the horse-breakers.

CHAPTER III IN BARNRIFF

It has been said that the pretentiousness of a newly carpentered Western American settlement can only be compared to the “side” of a nigger wench, weighted down under the gaudy burden of her Emancipation Day holiday gown. Although, in many cases, the analogy is not without aptness, yet, in frequent instances, it would be a distinct libel. At any rate, Barnriff boasted nothing of pretentiousness. Certainly Barnriff was not newly carpentered. Probably it never had been.

It was one of those places that just grow from a tiny seedling; and, to judge by the anemic result of its effort, that original seedling could have been little better than a “scratching” post on an ill-cared-for farm, or perhaps a storm shelter. Certainly it could not have risen above an implement shed in the ranks of structural art. The general impression was in favor of the “scratching” post, for one expects to grow something better than weeds on a rich loam soil.

The architect of Barnriff—if he ever existed—was probably a drunkard, not an uncommon complaint in that settlement, or a person qualified for the state asylum. The inference is drawn from strong circumstantial evidence, and not from prejudice. As witness, the saloon seemed to have claimed his most serious effort as a piece of finished construction. Here his weakness peeps through in no uncertain manner. The bar occupies at least half of the building, and the fittings of it are large enough to accommodate sufficient alcohol for an average man to swim in. His imagination must have been fully extended in this design, for the result suggested its having been something in the nature of a labor of affection. The other half of the building was divided up into three rooms: a tiny dining-room (obviously the pleasures of the table had no great appeal for him), a small bedroom for the proprietor (who seemed to have been considered least of all), and one vast dormitory, to accommodate those whose misfortunes of the evening made them physically incapable of negotiating the intricacies of the village on their way home.

Of course, this evidence might easily have been nullified, or even have been turned to the architect’s favor, had the rest of the village borne testimony for him. A clever counsel defending would probably have declared that the architect knew the people of the village, and was merely supplying their wants. Of course he knew them, and their wants—he was probably one of them.

However, the rest of the village was all against him. Had he been an abstemious man, there is no doubt but the village market-place would have been a square, or a triangle, an oval, a circle, or—well, some definite shape. As it was, it had no definite shape. It was not even irregular. It was nothing—just a space, with no apparent defining line.

Then there were no definite roads—at least, the roads seemed to have happened, and ran just where the houses permitted them. It was a reversal of ordinary civilized methods, which possibly had its advantages. There were certainly no straight lines for the men-folk to walk after leaving the saloon at night for their homes.

As for the houses which composed the village, they were too uncertain to be described in any but a general view of their design, and their grouping. In the latter, of course, the evidence was all against the designer of the place. Who but a madman or a drunkard would set up a laundry next to the coal yard?

Then another thing. Two churches—they called them “churches” in Barnriff—of different denomination, side by side. On Sundays the discord that went on was painful. The voices of the preachers were in endless conflict through the thin weather-boarding sides, and when the rival harmoniums “got busy” there was nothing left for the confused congregations but to chant their rival hymns to some popular national tune upon which they were mutually agreed beforehand. The incongruities of this sort were so many that even the most optimistic could not pass them unheeded.

As regards the style of the buildings themselves, the less said about them the better. They were buildings, no one could deny that; but even an impressionist painter could claim no beauty for them. Windows and doors, weather-boarding, and shingle roof. One need say no more, except that they were, in the main, weatherproof. But wait. There was one little house that had a verandah and creepers growing around it. It was well painted, too, and stood out amongst its frowzy neighbors a thing approaching beauty.

But Barnriff, as a residential hamlet, was hardly worth considering seriously. It was a topsyturvy sort of place, and its methods were in keeping with its design. It was full of unique combinations of trade. Some of them were hardly justifiable. The doctor of the place was also a horse-dealer, with a side line in the veterinary business. Any tooth extraction needed was forcibly performed by John Rust, the blacksmith. The baker, Jake Wilkes, shod the human foot whenever he was tired of punching his dough. The Methodist lay-preacher, Abe C. Horsley, sold everything to cover up the body, whenever he wasn't concerned with the soul. Then there was Angel Gay, an estimable butcher and a good enough fellow; but it hardly seemed right that he should be in combination with Zac Restless, the carpenter, for the disposal of Barnriff's corpses. However, these things were, and had been accepted by the village folk for so long that it seemed almost a pity to disturb them.

Barnriff, viewed from a distance, was not without a certain picturesqueness; but the distance had to be great enough to lose sight of the uncouthness which a close inspection revealed. Besides, its squalor did not much matter. It did not affect the temper of the folk living within its boundaries. To them the place was a little temporary "homelet," to coin a word. For frontier people are, for the most part, transient. They only pause at such place on their fighting journey through the wilder life. They pass on in time to other spheres, some on an upward grade, others down the long decline, which is the road of the ne'er-do-well. And with each inhabitant that comes and goes, some detail of evolution is achieved by the little hamlet through which they pass, until, in the course of long years, it, too, has fought its way upward to the mathematical precision and bold glory of a modern commercial city, or has joined in the downward march of the ne'er-do-well.

The blazing summer sun burned down upon the unsheltered village. There was no shade anywhere—that is, outside the houses. For the place had grown up on the crests of the bald, green rollers of the Western plains as though its original seedling had been tossed there by the wanton summer breezes, and for no better reason.

Anthony Smallbones, familiarly known to his intimates as "fussy-breeches," because he lived in a dream-fever of commercial enterprise, and believed himself to be a Napoleon of finance—he ran a store, at which he sold a collection of hardware, books, candy, stationery, notions and "delicatessen"—was on his way to the boarding-house for breakfast—there was only one boarding-house in Barnriff, and all the bachelors had their meals there.

He was never leisurely. He believed himself to be too busy for leisure. Just now he was concentrated upon the side issues of a great irrigation scheme that had occupied his small head for at least twenty-four hours, and thus it happened that he ran full tilt into Peter Blunt before he was aware of the giant's presence. He rebounded and came to, and hurled a savage greeting at him.

"Wher' you goin'?" he demanded.

"Don't seem to be your way," the large man vouchsafed, with quiet good-nature.

"No," was the surly response.

"Kind of slack, aren't you?" inquired Peter, his deep-set blue eyes twinkling with humor. "I've eaten two hours back. This lying a-bed is mighty bad for your business schemes."

"Schemes? Gee! I was around at half after five, man! Lying a-bed? Say, you don't know what business means." The little man sniffed scornfully.

"Maybe you're right," Peter responded. He hunched his great loose shoulders to shift the position of a small sack of stuff he was carrying.

He was a man of very large physique and uncertain age. He possessed a burned up face of great strength, and good-nature, but it was so weather-stained, so grizzled, that at first sight it appeared almost harsh. He was an Englishman who had spent years and years of hardy life wandering over the remotenesses of the Western plains of America. Little was known of him, that is to say, little of that life that must once have been his. He was well educated, traveled, and possessed an inexhaustible fund of information on any subject. But beyond the fact that he had once been a soldier, and that a large slice of his life had been lived in such places as Barnriff, no one knew aught of him. And yet it was probable that nobody on the Western prairies was better known than Peter Blunt. East and west, north and south, he was known for a kindly nature, and kindly actions. These things, and for a devotion to prospecting for gold in what were generally considered to be the most unlikely places.

“Right? Why o’ course I’m right. Ef you’s folk jest got busy around here, we’d make Barnriff hum an elegant toon. Say, now I got a dandy scheme fer irrigatin’ that land back there—”

“Yep. You gave me that yesterday. It’s a good scheme.” The giant’s eyes twinkled. “A great scheme. You’re a wonder. But say, all you told me that day has set my slow head busy. I’ve been thinking a heap since on what you said about ‘trusts.’ That’s it, ‘trusts,’ ‘trusts’ and ‘combines.’ That’s the way to get on to millions of dollars. Better than scratching around, eh? Now here’s an idea. I thought I’d like to put it to you, finance and such things being your specialty. There’s Angel Gay. Now he’s running a fine partnership with Restless. Now you take those two as a nucleus. You yourself open a side-line in drugs, and work in with Doc Crombie, and pool the result of the four. The Doc would draw his fees for making folks sick, you’d clear a handsome profit for poisoning them, Gay ’ud rake in his dollars for burying ’em, and Restless?—why Restless ’ud put in white pine for oak, and retire on the profits in five years. Say—”

“What you got in that sack?” inquired Smallbones, blandly ignoring the other’s jest at his expense.

“Well, nothing that’s a heap of interest. I’ve been scratching around at the head waters of the river, back there in the foot-hills.”

“Ah, ‘prospects,’” observed the other, with a malicious shake of the head. “Guess you’re allus prospectin’ around. I see you diggin’ Eve Marsham’s tater patch yesterday. Don’t guess you made much of a ‘strike’ in that layout?”

“No.” Peter shook his head genially. The little man’s drift was obvious. He turned toward the one attractive cottage in the settlement, and saw a woman’s figure standing at the doorway talking to a diminutive boy.

“Guess though you’ll likely strike more profit diggin’ spuds fer folk than you do scratching up loam and loose rocks the way you do,” Smallbones went on sourly.

Peter nodded.

“Sure. You’re a far-seeing little man. There’s a heap of gold about Eve’s home. A big heap; and I tell you, if that was my place, I’d never need to get outside her fences to find all I needed. I’d be a millionaire.”

Smallbones looked up into his face curiously. He was thinking hard. But his imagination was limited. Finally he decided that Peter was laughing at him.

“Guess your humor’s ’bout as elegant as a fun’ral. An’ it ain’t good on an empty stummick. I pass.”

“So long,” cried the giant amiably. “I’ll turn that ‘trust’ racket over in my mind. So long.”

He strode away with great lumbering strides heading straight for his humble, two-roomed shack. Smallbones, as he went on to the boarding-house, was full of angry contempt for the prospector. He was a mean man, and like most mean men he hated to be laughed at. But when his anger smoothed down he found himself pitying any one who spent his life looking for profit, by wasting a glorious energy, delving for gold in places where gold was known to be non-existent.

He ruminated on the matter as he went. And wondered. Then there came to him the memory of vague stories of gold in the vicinity of the Barnriff. Indian stories it is true. But then Indian stories often had a knack of having remarkably truthful foundations. Immediately his busy brain began to construct a syndicate of townspeople to hunt up the legends, with a small capital to carry on operations. He would have the lion's share in the concern, of course, and—yes—they might make Peter Blunt chief operator. And by the time he reached the boarding-house all his irrigation scheme was forgotten in this new toy.

CHAPTER IV

JIM PROPOSES

Eve Marsham was in two minds of hailing Peter Blunt as she saw him pass on his way to his hut. She wanted him. She wanted to ask his advice about something. Like many others who needed a sympathetic adviser she preferred to appeal to Peter Blunt rather than to any of her sex in Barnriff. However, she allowed the opportunity to slip by, and saw him disappear within his doorway. Then she turned again to the boy sitting on the rough bench beside her, and a look of alarm leaped to her soft brown eyes. He was holding out a tiny pup at arm's length, grasping it by one of its little fore paws.

"Elia, how can you?" she cried. "Put him down, instantly."

The boy turned a bland, beautiful face to her. There was seemingly no expression beyond surprise in his pale blue eyes.

"He likes it," he said, while the whimpering pup still wriggled in his grasp.

Eve made a move to take the wretched animal away, but the boy promptly hugged it to his misshapen breast.

"He's mine," he cried. "I can do what I like with him."

There was no anger in his voice, not even protest. It was a simple statement of denial that at the same time had no resistance in it.

"Well, don't you be cruel," Eve exclaimed shortly, and her eyes turned once more in the direction of Peter Blunt's hut.

Her pretty face was very thoughtful. Her sun-tanned cheeks, her tall, rounded body were the picture of health. She looked as fresh and wholesome as any wild prairie flower with her rich coloring of almost tropical splendor. She was neatly dressed, more after town fashion than in the method of such places as Barnriff, and her expressed reason for thus differentiating from her fellow villagers was a matter of mild advertisement. She made her living as a dressmaker. She was Barnriff's leading and only *modiste*.

The boy at her side continued his amusement at the puppy's expense. He held it in his two hands and squeezed its little body until the poor creature gasped and retched. Then he swung it to and fro by its diminutive tail. Then he threw it up in the air, making it turn a somersault, and catching it again clumsily.

All this he did in a mild, emotionless manner. There was no boyish interest or amusement in it. Just a calm, serious immobility that gave one the impression of a painting by one of the old European masters.

Elia was Eve Marsham's crippled brother. He was seven years younger than she, and was just about to turn sixteen. In reality he was more than a cripple. He was a general deformity, a deformity that somehow even reached his brain. By this it must not be imagined that he was an idiot, or lacking in intelligence in any way, but he had some curious mental twists that marked him as something out of the normal. His chief peculiarity lay in his dread of pain to himself. An ache, a trifling bruise, a mere scratch upon himself, would hurl him into a paroxysm of terror which frequently terminated in a fit, or, at least, convulsions of a serious nature. This drove the girl, who was his only living relative, to great pains in her care of him, which, combined with an almost maternal love for him, kept her on a rack of apprehension for his well-being.

He had another strange side to his character, and one of which everybody but Eve was aware. He possessed a morbid love for horror, for the sufferings of others. He had been known to sit for hours with a sick man in the village who was suffering agonies of rheumatism, for the mere

delight of drawing from him details of the pains he was enduring, and reveling in the horror of the description with ghoulish delight.

When Restless, the carpenter, broke his leg the boy was always around. And when the wretched man groaned while they set it, his face was a picture of rapt fascination. To Eve his visits on such occasions were a sign of his sympathetic nature, and she encouraged him because she did not know the real meaning of them. But there were other things she did not know. He used to pay weekly visits to Gay's slaughter yard on killing day, and reveled in the cruel task of skinning and cutting up the carcase of the slaughtered beast. If a fight between two men occurred in the village Elia's instinct led him unerringly to it. It was a curious psychological fact that the pains and sufferings which, for himself, he dreaded with an almost insane abhorrence, he loved and desired in others.

He was a quaint figure, a figure to draw sympathy and pity from the hardiest. He was precisely four feet high. One leg was shorter than the other, and the hip was drawn up in a corresponding manner. His chest was sunken, and his back was hunched, and he carried his head bent sideways on his shoulders, in the inquiring attitude one associates with a bird.

He was his sister's sole charge, left to her, when much younger, by their dying mother. And the girl lavished on him all the wealth of a good woman's sympathy and love. She saw nothing of his faults. She saw only his deplorable physical condition, and his perfect angel-face. His skin and complexion were so transparent that one could almost have counted the veins beneath the surface; the sun had no power to burn that face to the russet which was the general complexion among prairie folk. His mouth had the innocence of a babe's, and formed a perfect Cupid's bow, such as a girl might well be proud of. His eyes were large, inquiring and full of intelligence. His nose might have been chiseled by an old Greek sculptor, while his hair, long and wavy, was of the texture and color of raw silk.

He was certainly the idol of Eve's heart. In him she could see no wrong, no vice. She cherished him, and served him, and worked for him. He was her life. And, as is only natural, he had learned to claim as his right all that which out of her boundless affection it was her joy to bestow.

Suddenly the yelping of the pup brought Eve round on him again. He was once more holding it aloft by its tail. The girl darted to its rescue, and, instantly, Elia released his hold, and the poor creature fell with a squelching sound upon the ground. She gave a little scream, but the boy only looked on in silent fascination. Fortunately the poor pup was only badly shaken and hastily crawled away to safety. Elia was for recovering it, but Eve promptly vetoed his design.

"Certainly not, you cruel boy," she said sharply. "You remain where you are. You can tell me about the chicken killing down at Restless's."

In the interest of the subject on which Eve desired information Elia forgot all about the pup. He offered no protest nor made the least demur, but forthwith began his story.

"Sure I will," he said, with a curious, uncanny laugh. "Old Ma Restless is just raving her fat head off. I was around this morning and heard her. Gee! She was sayin' things. She was cussin' and cussin' like mad. So I jest turned in the yard to see. It was just as funny as a circus. She stood there, her fat sides all of a wabble, an' a reg'lar waterfall pourin' out of her eyes. He! He! But what made me laff most was to see those chickens around her on the ground. There was ten of 'em lying around, and somebody had chopped off all their heads. Say, the blood was tricklin', an'—well, there, you never did see such a mess. It was real comic, an' I—well, to see her wringin' her fat hands, and cussin'. Gee! I wonder she wasn't struck for it, an' her a woman an' all."

He laughed silently, while his sister stared at him in amazement.

Finally she checked his amusement sharply.

"Yes? Well?"

"Well, then she see me, an' she turned on me like a wildcat, an' I was 'most scairt to death. She said, 'What you doin' here, you imp o' Satan? Who's done this? Tell me! Tell me an' I'll lay

for 'em! I'll shoot 'em down like vermin.' I knew she wasn't really talkin' to me, so then I wasn't scairt. She was jest blowin' off steam. Then I got around an' looked close at 'em—the chickens, I mean—and I see just where the knife had cut their necks off. It was an elegant way of killing 'em, and say, how they must have flapped around after they'd got clear of their silly heads." He laughed gleefully again. "I looked up after that and see her watchin' me. Guess her eyes was kind of funny lookin', so I said, 'You don't need to take on, mam,' I said. 'They'll make elegant roasts, an' you can get busy and hatch out some more.' And somehow she got quiet then, and I watched her gather them chickens up, an' take 'em into the house. Then when she came out an' see me again, she says, 'Light you right out o' here, you imp o' Satan! I fair hates the sight o' you.' So I lit out. Say, Eve," he added, after a reflective pause, "why does folks all hate me so much?"

The girl sighed and shook her head. Then she came over to him, and, bending down, kissed his fair waving hair.

"Never mind, dear. I don't hate you," she said. "Perhaps it is you offend folks somehow. You know you do manage to upset folks at times. You seem to say—say queer things to them, and get them mad." She smiled down upon the boy a little wistfully. She knew her brother was disliked by most in the village, and it pained her terribly that it should be so. They tried to be outwardly kind to him, but she always felt that it was solely for her sake and never for his. As Elia had never spoken of it before, she had lived in the hope that he did not understand their dislike. However, it was as well that he should know. If he realized it now, as he grew older he might endeavor to earn their good-will in spite of present prejudice.

"Guess it must be, sis. You see I don't kind of mean to say things," he said almost regretfully. "Only when they're in my head they must come out, or—or I think my head would jest bust," he finished up naively.

The girl was still smiling, and one arm stole round the boy's hunched shoulders.

"Of course you can't help saying those things you know to be true—"

"But they most generally ain't true."

The innocent, inquiring eyes looked straight up into hers.

"No," he went on positively, "they generally ain't. I don't think my head would bust keepin' in the truth. Now, yesterday, Will Henderson was down at the saloon before he came up to see you. He came and sort of spoke nice to me. I know he hates me, and—and I hate him worse'n poison. Well, he spoke nice to me, as I said, an' I wanted to spit at him for it. And I jest set to and tho't and tho't how I could hurt him. And so I said, right out before all the boys, 'Wot for do you allus come hangin' around our shack? Eve's most sick to death with you,' I said; 'it isn't as if she ast you to get around, it's just you buttin' in. If you was Jim Thorpe now—'"

"You never said all that, Elia," cried Eve, sternly. All her woman's pride was outraged, and she felt her fingers itching to box the boy's ears.

"I did sure," Elia went on, in that sober tone of decided self-satisfaction. "And I said a heap more. And didn't the boys jest laff. Will went red as a beet, and the boys laffed more. And I was real glad. I hate Will! Say, he was up here last night. Wot for? He was up here from six to nigh nine. Say, sis, I wish you wouldn't have him around."

Eve did not respond. She was staring out at the rampart of hills beyond, where Will worked. She was thinking of Will, thinking of—but the boy was insistent.

"Say, I'd have been real glad if it had been Jim Thorpe. Only he don't come so often, does he? I like him. Say, Jim's allus good to me. I don't never seem to want to hurt him. No, sure. Jim's good. But Will— Say, sis, Will's a bad lot; he is certain. I know. He's never done nuthing bad, I know, but I can see it in his face, his eyes. It's in his head, too. Do you know I can allus tell when bad's in folks' heads. Now, there's Smallbones. He's a devil. You'll see it, too, some day. Then there's Peter Blunt. Now Peter's that good he'd break his neck if he thought it 'ud help folks. But Will—"

“Elia,” Eve was bending over the boy’s crooked form. Her cheek was resting on his silky hair. She could not face those bland inquiring eyes. “You mustn’t say anything against Will. I like him. He’s not a bad man—really he isn’t, and you mustn’t say he is. Will is just a dear, foolish Irish boy, and when once he has settled down will be—you wait—”

The boy abruptly wriggled out of his sister’s embrace. His eyes sought hers so that she could no longer avoid them.

“I won’t wait for anything to do with Will Henderson—if that’s what you mean. I tell you he’s no good. I hate him! I hate him! And—and I hope some one’ll kill all the chickens he’s left in your care down at that old shack of his.” He scrambled to his feet and hobbled away, vanishing round the corner of the house in a fury of fierce resentment.

He had been roused to one of his dreaded fits of passion, and Eve was alarmed. In a fever of apprehension she was about to follow him up and soothe him, when she saw a horseman galloping toward the house. The figure was unmistakable, besides she knew the horse’s gait and color. It was Jim Thorpe, riding in from the AZ ranch.

In a few moments he drew rein at the gate of her vegetable patch. He flung the reins over his horse’s head and removed the bit from its mouth. Then he let it wander grazing on the tawny grass of the market-place.

Eve waited for him to come up the garden path, and for the moment the boy was forgotten. She welcomed him with the cordiality of old friendship. There was genuine pleasure in her smile, there was hearty welcome in her eyes, and in the soft, warm grip of her strong young hand, but that was all. There was no shyness, no avoiding the honest devotion in his look. The radiant hope shining in his clear, dark eyes was not for her understanding. The unusual care in his dress, the neatly polished boots under his leather chaps, the creamy whiteness of his cotton shirt, the store creases of the new silk handkerchief about his neck, none of these things struck her as being anything out of the ordinary.

And he, blind soul, took courage from the warmth of her welcome. His heart beat high with a hope which no ordinary mundane affairs could have inspired. All the ill-fate behind him was wiped off the slate. The world shone radiant before eyes, which, at such times, are mercifully blinded to realities. An Almighty Providence sees that every man shall live to the full such moments as were his just then. It is in the great balance of things. The greater the joy, the harder— But what matters the other side of the picture!

“Eve,” he exclaimed, “I was hoping to find you—not busy. I’ve ridden right in to yarn with you—’bout things. Say, maybe you’ve got five minutes?”

“I’ve always got five minutes for you, Jim,” the girl responded warmly. “Sit right down here on this seat, and get—going. How’s things with the ‘AZ’s’?”

“Bully! Dan McLagan’s getting big notions of doing things; he’s heaping up the dollars in plenty. And I’m glad, because with him doing well I’m doing well. I’ve already got an elegant bunch of cows and calves up in the foot-hills. You see I make trade with him for my wages. I’ve done more. Yesterday I got him to promise me a lease of grazing, and a big patch for a homestead way up there in the foot-hills. In another two years I mean to be ranching on my own, eh? How’s that?”

The girl’s eyes were bright with responsive enthusiasm. She was smiling with delight at this dear friend’s evident success.

“It’s great, Jim. But how quiet you’ve been over it. You never even hinted before—”

The man shook his head, and for a moment a shadow of regret passed across his handsome face.

“Well, you see I waited until I was sure of that lease. I’ve come so many falls I didn’t guess I wanted to try another by anticipating too much. So I just waited. It’s straight going now,” he went on, with a return to his enthusiasm, “and I’m going to start building.”

“Yes, yes. You’ll get everything ready for leaving the ‘AZ’s’ in—”

“Two years, yes. I’ll put up a three-roomed shack of split logs, a small barn, and branding corrals. That’ll be the first start. You see”—he paused—“I’d like to know about that shack. Now what about the size of the rooms and things? I—I thought I’d ask you—”

“Me?”

The girl turned inquiring eyes upon him. She was searching his face for something, and that something came to her as an unwelcome discovery, for she abruptly turned away again, and her attention was held by those distant hills, where Will Henderson worked.

“I don’t know,” she said seriously. The light of enthusiasm had died out of her eyes, leaving them somehow sad and regretful. “You see, I don’t know a man’s requirements in such things. A woman has ideas, but that is chiefly for herself. You see, she has the care of the house generally.”

“Yes, yes; that’s it,” Jim broke in eagerly. Then he checked himself. Something in Eve’s manner gave him pause. “You see I—I wanted a woman’s ideas. I don’t want the house for a man. I—”

He did not finish what he had to say. Somehow words failed him. It was not that he found it difficult to put what he wanted to say into words. Something in the girl’s manner checked his eagerness and drove him to silence. He, too, suddenly found himself staring out at the hills, where—Will worked.

For one fleeting instant Eve turned her gentle eyes upon the face beside her. She saw the strong features, the steady look of the dark eyes, the clean-cut profile and determined jaw. She saw, too, that he was thinking hard, and her woman’s instinct came to her aid. She felt that she must be the first to speak. And on what she said depended what would follow.

“Why not leave the house until toward the end of the two years? By that time you will have been able to talk it over with—the right person.”

“That’s what I want to do now.”

Jim’s eagerness leaped again. He thought he saw an opening. His eyes had in them the question he wanted to ask. All his soul was behind his words, all his great depth of feeling and love looked out at the rounded oval of her sweet face. He hungrily took in the beauty of her hair, her eyes, her cheeks; the sweet richness of her ripe lips, the chiseled roundness of her beautiful neck. He longed to crush her to his heart where they sat. He longed to tell her that she and she only of all women could ever occupy the hut he intended to build; he longed to pour into her ears his version of the old, old story, and so full was his great, strong heart, so overwhelming was his lover’s madness, that he believed he could tell that story as it had never been told before. But the question never reached his lips. The old story was not for his telling. Nor did he ask himself why. It was as though a power which was all-mastering forbade him to speak further.

“Have you seen Will to-day?” Eve suddenly inquired, with apparent irrelevance. “I half expected to—” And she broke off purposely.

The look in Jim’s eyes hardened to one of acute apprehension.

“You were—expecting him?”

“Well, not exactly, Jim.” She withdrew her gaze from the distant hills, and, gently smiling, turned her eyes upon him. They were full of sympathy and profound kindness. “You see, he came here last night. And, well, I thought he said something about—”

Jim started. A shiver passed through his body. He suddenly felt cold in that blazing sun. His eyes painfully sought the girl’s face. His look was an appeal, an appeal for a denial of what in his heart he feared. For some seconds he did not speak. There was no sound between them, but of his breathing, which had become suddenly heavy.

“Will—Will was here last night?” he said at last.

His voice was husky and unusual. But he dropped his eyes before the innocent look of inquiry in the girl’s.

“Why, yes; he spent the evening with me.”

In lowering his eyes Jim found them staring at the girl's hands, resting in her lap. On one of them he noticed, for the first time, a gold band. It was the inside of a ring. It was on the third finger of the left hand. He had never seen Eve wearing rings before. Suddenly he reached out and caught her hands in his. He turned them over with almost brutal roughness. Eve tried to withdraw them, but he held them fast.

"That ring!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. It was in full view now. "It is Will's. It was my father's signet ring. I gave it to him. Where?—How?—? But no, you needn't tell me, I guess." He almost flung her hands from him. And a wave of sickness swept over him as he thought.

Then in a moment all the passion of his heart rose uppermost in him, and its scorching tide swept through his body, maddening him, driving him. A torrent of words surged to his lips, words of bitterness, cruel words that would hurt the girl, hurt himself, words of hateful intensity, words that might ease his tortured soul at the expense of those who had always occupied foremost place in his heart.

But they were not uttered. He choked them back with a gasp, and seized himself in an iron grip of will. And, for some moments, he held on as a drowning man may cling to the saving hand. He must not hurt the girl, he must not wound her love by betraying his cousin. If Will had not played the game, at any rate he would. Suddenly, he spoke again, and no one would have suspected the storm raging under his calm exterior. Only his voice was hoarse, and his lips were dry, and the usually clear whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

"The boy has asked you, then?" he said slowly. And he waited for the death-knell of all his hopes, his love.

"Yes." Eve's voice was very low. Her gentle woman's heart ached, for her instinct told her of the pain she was causing. "Last night he asked me to be his wife, and I—I love him, Jim, and so I consented."

"Yes, yes." There was weariness in the man's voice now. It sounded almost as though he were physically weary. "I hope you will be happy, dear. Will's—a good boy—"

"Yes, and I asked him if you knew anything about it. And he said, 'No.' He said it would be a little surprise for you— You are not going?" Jim had suddenly started to his feet. "Won't you wait for Will? He's staying in the village. He said he'd be up to see me this morning—before he went out to the hills."

Jim could stand no more.

"I'm glad you told me, Eve," he said, almost harshly. "Will's not good at surprises. No, I won't stay. I'll get right back, after I've done some business in the village." He stood, glancing thoughtfully down at the village for some moments. Then he turned again, and a shadowy smile lit his sombre eyes.

"I've given out a contract for that homestead," he went on. "Well, I'm going to cancel it. Good-bye, little girl."

"Oh, Jim, I—"

But the man shook his head.

"Don't you be sorry. Get all the happiness you can. Maybe Will will be a real good husband to you."

He moved away and strode after his horse. The beast was well out on the market-place, and Eve watched him catch it and clamber into the saddle. Then she turned away with a sigh, and found herself looking into the beautiful face of her brother. He had silently crept up to her side.

"You've hurt him, sis; you've hurt him real bad. Did you see? It was all inside. Inside here;" the boy folded his delicate hands over his hollow breast. "I know it because I feel it here, too. It's as though you'd taken right hold of a bunch of cords here, and were pulling 'em, tearing 'em, an' someway they're fixed right on to your heart. That's the way you've hurt him, an' it hurts me, because I like him—he's good. You don't know what it feels when a man's hurt. I do. It's elegant

pain. Gee!” His calm face was quite unlit by the emotion he described. “It don’t stop at your heart. It gets right through to your muscles, and they tingle and itch to do something, and they mostly want to hurt, same as you’ve been hurt. Then it gets to the head, through the blood. That’s it; the blood gets hot, and it makes the brain hot, an’ when the brain’s hot it thinks hot thoughts, an’ they scorch an’ make you feel violent. You think hurt for some one, see? It’s all over the body alike. It’s when men get hurt like that that they want to kill. Gee! You’ve hurt him.”

The boy paused a little breathlessly. His tense nerves were quivering with some sort of mental strain. It was as though he were watching something that was going on inside himself, and the effort was tremendous, physically and mentally. But, used as Eve was to his vagaries, she saw none of this. She was thinking only of Jim. Thinking of the suffering which her brother had said she had caused him. Woman-like, she felt she must excuse herself. Yet she knew she had nothing to blame herself with.

“I only told him I had promised to marry Will.”

The boy uttered a little cry. It was a strange sound, unlike anything human. He rushed at her, and his thin hands seized upon her wrists, and clutched them violently.

“You’re goin’ to marry Will? You! You! And you’ve hurt him—to marry Will?” Then, with the force of his clutch upon her wrists, he drew her down toward him till her face was near to his, and his placid eyes looked coldly into hers. “You’ve–hurt–me–too,” he hissed into her face, “and I almost–hate you. No, it’s not you—but I hate Will worse’n I ever hated anything in my life.”

CHAPTER V

TO THE RED, DANCING DEVIL

Jim Thorpe dashed the vicious rowels of his Mexican spurs into the flanks of his horse. Such unaccustomed treatment sent the willing beast racing headlong across the market-place, while the guiding hand mechanically directed toward the saloon.

A storm of bitterness wrung the man's heart. A murky pall of depression hung over his brain, deadening his sense of proportion for all those things that matter. For the time, at least, it crushed down in his heart that spirit of striving, which was one of his best characteristics, and utterly quenched the warm fires of his better nature. All thought was buried in a fog of wrath, which left him a prey to instincts utterly foreign to his normal condition. He had left Eve Marsham's presence in a furious state from which no effort seemed able to clear him. Nothing gripped his understanding—nothing save the knowledge of what he had lost, and the conviction of the low-down trick that had been played upon him by one whom he regarded as a dear, younger brother.

He drew rein at the saloon and flung out of the saddle. He mechanically hitched his horse to the tie-post. Then, with unconscious aggressiveness, he strode up to the building and pushed his way through the swing doors.

The bar was empty, an unusual enough circumstance at that time of the day to draw comment from any one who knew the habits of the men of Barnriff; but Thorpe did not notice it. His eyes were on the man behind the counter standing ready to serve him. He strode over to him and flung down a ten-dollar bill, ordering a drink of whiskey, and a bottle of the spirit to take away with him. He was promptly served, and Silas Rocket, the proprietor, civilly passed the time of day. It elicited no responsive greeting, for Jim gulped down his drink, and helped himself to another. The second glass of the fiery spirit he swallowed greedily, while Rocket looked on in amazement. As he proceeded to pour out another the man's astonishment found vent.

"A third?" he said stupidly.

Jim deigned no answer, but drank the liquor down, and set the glass forcefully upon the counter.

The saloon-keeper quickly recovered himself. Nor was he slow to comment.

"Feelin' mean, some?" he observed, with a sympathetic wink. He cared little how his visitor took his remark. He was used to the vagaries of his customers, and cared not a snap of the fingers for them.

Jim's reply came swiftly.

"Yes, mean enough to need your hogwash," he said shortly.

Silas Rocket's eyes snapped. He was never a man to take things sitting down.

"Hogwash it is when a feller o' your manners swills it. Mebbe it'll clear some o' the filth off'n your measly chest. Have one on me; I'd be real glad to help in the cleanin' process."

There was a subtle threat underlying his last words. But Jim cared nothing for what he said.

"I'll pay for all I need," he retorted, turning from the counter, and bearing his bottle away over to the window.

Rocket shrugged and turned to his work of setting some sort of order among his bottles. But, as Jim stood at the window with his back turned, his narrow eyes frequently regarded him and his busy brain speculated as to his humor. The ranchman was well liked in Barnriff, but his present attitude puzzled the worthy host.

However, the object of all this attention was wholly unaware of it. Even if it had been otherwise, it is doubtful if Thorpe would have cared in the least. He was lost in a rushing train of thought. His brain had cleared under the stimulating potions of raw whiskey, and, just as before his

chaotic state had made him unable to grasp things fully, now it was equally chaotic in an opposite direction. His brain was running riot with a clearness and rapidity that showed only too plainly the nervous tension under which he was laboring. He was piecing this latest trick of fortune with the ill-luck which seemed to be ever pursuing him. Under the influence of the burning spirit he seemed to have lost the sting of the actual wrong to himself, and in its place a morbid train of thought had been set working.

It was a persecution that was steadily dogging him. When his early misfortunes had come he had accepted them stoically, believing them to be part of the balance of things, beginning on the wrong side, no doubt, but which would be leveled up later on. Time and again he had received these buffets, and he had merely smiled, a little grimly perhaps, and started to “buck the game” afresh.

Then, when things eventually turned slightly in his favor, very slightly, out here on the prairie amongst the derelicts, the flotsam of the grassy ocean, he had found a brief breathing space. He had begun to think the balance had really turned. Hope dawned, and life offered fresh possibilities. And now—now he had been let down afresh. Before, the attack had been directed against the worldly hopes of a man, such as all see crushed at some time in life, but now it was his spirit that was aimed at. It was that strong, living soul which was the mainspring of his moral existence.

He had lost the woman he loved; that was something he could face, something he could live down. But it was the manner of it. It was the fact of Will’s treachery that had opened the vital wound.

The thought chilled his heart, it crushed him. Yet his anger was not all for the man who had so rankly betrayed his trust, his bitterness was not all for the fact itself. It was the evidence it afforded of the merciless hand of an invisible foe at work against him, and with which he was powerless to contend. The subtlety of it—to his exaggerated thought—was stupendous.

Slowly his bitterness resolved itself to an unutterable pessimism; the acuteness of the stimulant was wearing off. There was an unhealthy streak in his mind somewhere, a streak that was growing under these blows which had been so liberally dealt him. Where was the use in struggling? he began to ask himself. And the poison of the thought acted like a sedative. He grew strangely calm; he almost experienced pleasure and comfort under its influence. Why struggle? Nothing could go right with him. Nothing. He was cursed—cursed with an ill-starred fortune. This sort of thing was his fate. Fate. That was it. Why struggle against it?

He had but this one short life to live. He would live it. He would live it in the way he chose, without regard to the ethics of civilization. What mattered if he shortened it by years, or if he lived to what might be looked upon as an honored old age? And what was there afterward? He even began to doubt if there was anything before—if there was any just— He paused and shivered as the thought came to him. And he was glad he paused. To question the Deity was to rank himself at once with a sect he had always despised as self-centred fools, and pitied them as purblind creatures who were in some degree mentally deficient.

He pulled himself together and returned to the bar.

“Give me another whiskey,” he demanded.

But Silas Rocket had not forgotten; he rarely ever did forget things in the nature of rudeness.

“I’d hate to,” he said quickly; “but I guess I’ll sell you ’most anything.”

Jim accepted the snub silently, drank his whiskey, paid for it, and went out.

Rocket looked after him. His eyes were unfriendly, but then they were generally unfriendly. As the doors swung to behind his customer he turned and looked in through the doorway behind him.

“Ma!” he cried, “Jim Thorpe’s been in. He’s had four drinks o’ whiskey, and took a bottle with him. He’s been thinkin’ a whole heap, too. Guess he’s goin’ on a sky-high drunk.”

And a shrewish voice called back to him in a tone of feminine spleen.

“Guess it’s that Marsham gal,” it said conclusively.

A woman’s instinct is a wonderful thing.

Meanwhile Jim was riding across the market-place. Half-way across he saw Smallbones. He hailed him, and the little man promptly hurried up to his horse's side.

Jim knew that Smallbones disliked him. But just now he was only seeking ordinary information.

"Where'll I find Restless?" he inquired. "Where's he working?"

"Guess I see him over by Peter Blunt's shack. Him an' Peter wus gassin' together, while you wus up ther' seein' Eve Marsham," Smallbones replied meaningly. "I 'lows Peter's mostly nosin' around when—"

"Thanks, I'll ride over."

Jim made as though to ride off. He understood the spiteful nature of this little busybody, and was in no mood to listen to him now. But Smallbones was something of a leech when he chose. He had seen the whiskey bottle sticking out of Jim's coat pocket, and his Barnriff thirst and curiosity were agog, for Jim was at no time a man to waste money in drink.

"Say, givin' a party?" he sneered, pointing at the bottle.

"Yes, a party to a dead friend," replied Jim, with a wintry smile. "It's inexpensive, less trouble, and there's more for myself. So long."

A minute or two later Smallbones was serving Angel Gay in his store. He had just sold him a butcher's knife of inferior quality at double New York prices.

"Say," he observed, in the intimate manner of fellow villagers. "Who's dead? I ain't heard nuthin'. Mebbe you'll know, your bizness kind o' runnin' in that line."

"Ain't heerd tell," the butcher replied, with a solemn shake of his large head. "An' most o' them come my way, too," he added, with thoughtful pride. "Here, wait." He drew out a greasy note-book. "Y'see I kind o' keep re-cords o' likely folks. Mebbe some o' the names'll prompt you. Now ther's M. Wilkes, she's got a swellin', I don't rightly know wher'—ther's folk talks of it bein' toomer—deadly toomer. You ain't heerd if she's gone?" he inquired hopefully, while he thumbed the pages of his book over.

"Nope. I ain't heerd," said Smallbones. "But I don't guess it's a woman. Friend o' Jim Thorpe's."

"Ah," murmured the happy butcher, lifting his eyes to the ceiling for inspiration. "That kind o' simplifies things. Jim Thorpe," he pondered. "He ain't got a heap o' friends, as you might say. Ther's Will Henderson," he turned over the pages of his book. "Um, healthy, drinks a bit. Hasty temper, but good for fifty year 'less he gits into a shootin' racket. 'Tain't him now?" he inquired looking up.

"No, 'tain't him. I see him this mornin'. He was soused some. Kind o' had a heavy night. Wot about McLagan of the 'AZ's'?"

Again the butcher turned over the pages of his note-book. But finished by shaking his head mournfully.

"No luck," he said. "McLagan's 'bout forty, never sick. Only chance 'accident on ranch."

The two men looked blankly at each other.

"Wot set you thinkin'?" inquired the butcher at last.

"Jest nuthin' o' consequence. Thorpe sed as he was givin' a party to a dead friend. He'd got a bottle o' whiskey."

"Ah!" murmured Gay, with an air of relief, returning his note-book to his pocket. "That clears things. He's speakin' metaphoric. I'll git goin', kind o' busy. I ain't sent out the day's meat yet, an' I got to design a grave fixin' fer Restless's last kid. Y'see it's a gratis job, I guess, Restless bein' my pardner, as you might say. So long."

Jim reached Peter Blunt's hut as the carpenter was leaving it. Peter was at the door, and smiled a genial welcome. He and Jim were excellent friends. They were both men who thought. They both

possessed a wide knowledge of things which were beyond the focus of the Barnriff people, and consequently they interested each other.

“Howdy, Jim,” the giant called to him, as he drew up beside the carpenter.

Jim returned his greeting.

“I’ll come along, Peter,” he said. “Guess I need a word with Restless first.”

“Right-ho.”

Jim turned to the man at his side.

“I won’t need those buildings,” he said briefly.

“But I ordered—”

Jim cut him short.

“I’ll pay you anything I owe you. You can let me know how much.”

He passed on to the hut without waiting for a reply. He had no intention of arguing anything concerning his future plans with Restless. If the carpenter stood to lose he would see him right—well, there was nothing more about it that concerned him.

Peter was inside his hut examining a litter of auriferous soil on his table when Jim entered. This man’s home possessed an unique interior. It was such as one would hardly have expected in a bachelor in Barnriff. There were none of the usual impedimenta of a prairie man’s abode, there was no untidiness, no dirt, no makeshift. Yet like the man himself the place was simple and unpretentious.

There were other signs of the man in it, too. There was a large plain wooden bookcase filled to overflowing with a choice collection of reading matter. There were rows of classics in several languages, there was modern fiction of the better kind, there were many volumes of classical verse. In short it was the collection of a student, and might well have been a worthy addition to many a more elaborate library.

There were, besides this, several excellent pictures in water-color on the walls, and the absence of all tawdry decoration was conspicuous. Even the bed, the chair, and the table, plain enough, goodness knows, had an air of belonging to a man of unusual personality.

It would be impossible to describe adequately the manner in which the character of Peter Blunt peeped out at one from every corner of his home, nevertheless it did impress itself upon his every visitor. And its peculiar quality affected all alike. There was a strangely gentle strength about the man that had a way of silencing the most boisterously inclined. He had a quiet humor, too, that was often far too subtle for the cruder minds of Barnriff. But most of all his sympathy was a thing that left no room for self in his thoughts. No one attempted undue familiarity with him; not that he would have been likely to actively resent it, but simply, in his presence nobody had any inclination that way. Nobody could have been more a part of the Barnriff community than Peter Blunt, and yet nobody could have been more apart from it.

Peter did not even look up from his labors when his visitor flung himself into the vacant chair. He silently went on with his examination of first one fragment of quartz and then another. And the man in the chair watched him with moody, introspective eyes. It was a long time before either spoke, and when, at last, the silence was broken, it was by Peter’s deep mellow voice.

“I’m looking for gold in a heap of dirt, Jim,” he said, without lifting his eyes. “It’s hard to find, there’s such a pile of the—dirt.”

“Why don’t you wash it?”

“Yes, I s’pose I ought to,” Peter allowed.

Then he glanced over, and his mild eyes focused themselves on the bottle protruding from Jim’s pocket. For some moments he contemplated it, and then he looked up into his friend’s face.

“How’s the ‘AZ’s’?” he inquired casually.

“Oh, all right.”

“In for a—vacation?”

Jim stirred uneasily. There was a directness about the other's manner that was disconcerting. He laughed mirthlessly, and shifted his position so that his bottle of whiskey was concealed.

"No," he said. "I'm getting back—sometime to-night."

"Ah." Then Peter went on after a pause: "I'm glad things are going well for you. Restless told me he'd got an order from you for some buildings on your *own* land."

Jim turned his eyes in the direction of the doorway and found them gazing upon Eve Marsham's little home beyond it. As Peter offered no further comment he was finally forced to reply.

"I've—I've just canceled that order."

"Eh?"

Jim turned on him irritably.

"Confound it, Peter, you heard what I said. I've canceled that order. Do you get it now?"

The large man nodded. The brains behind his mild eyes were working swiftly, shrewdly.

"Will's in town. Been in since yesterday morning," he said after a while. "Seen him?"

Jim suddenly sprang from his seat, the moody fire of his dark eyes blazing furiously.

"Seen him! Seen him!" he cried, with a sudden letting loose of all the bitterness and smouldering passion which had been so long pent up. "Seen him? I should say I have. I've seen him as he really is. I've seen—"

He broke off and began to pace the room. Peter was still at the table. His hands were still raking at the pile of dirt. His face was quite unmoved at the other's evident passion; only his eyes displayed his interest.

"God! but the thought of him sets me crazy," Jim went on furiously. Then he paused, and stood confronting the other. "Peter, I came in here without knowing why on earth I came. I came because something forced me, I s'pose. Now I know what made me come. I've got to get it off my chest, and you've got to listen to it."

Peter's smile was the gentlest thing imaginable.

"Guess that's easy," he said. "I knew there was something you'd got that wasn't good for you to hold. Sort of fancied you'd like to get rid of it—here."

The calm sincerity of the man was convincing. Jim felt its effect without appreciation, for the hot blood of bitterness still drove him. His wrongs were still heavy upon him, water-logging his better sense, and leaving it rudderless.

He hesitated. It was not that he did not know how to begin. It was not that he had any doubts in his mind. Just for a second he wondered at the strange influence which was forcing his story from him. It puzzled him—it almost angered him. And something of this anger appeared in his manner and tone when he spoke.

"Will Henderson's a damned traitor," he finally burst out.

Peter nodded.

"We're all that," he said gently: "if it's only to ourselves."

"Oh, I don't want your moralizing," the other cried roughly. "Listen, this is the low, mean story of it. You'll have little enough moralizing to do when you've heard it."

Then he told Peter of their meeting the day before, and of the friendly honesty of his purpose in the shooting match. How Will had accepted, shot, and lost. This part he told with a grim setting of his teeth, and it was not until he came to the story of the man's treachery that his manner became intemperate. Then he spoke with all the color of a strongly passionate temperament, when the heart is stirred beyond all reason. And the giant listened to it, silent and attentive. What thoughts the story inspired in the listener it would have been impossible to say. His face was calm. There was no sign of any enthralled attention. There was no light in his eyes beyond the kindness that ever seemed to shine there. And at its conclusion Jim's underlying feeling, that almost subconscious

thought which hitherto had found expression only in bitter feeling and the uncertain activities of his mind, broke out into raving.

“It’s a curse that’s on me, Peter!” he cried. “I tell you it’s a curse! I’ve never had a chance. Everything from the start has been broken just when its completion was almost achieved. When I look back I can see it written all along the path I’ve trodden, in the ruins I’ve left behind me. Why, why, I ask, am I chosen for such persecution? What have I done to deserve it? I’ve played the game. I’ve worked. God knows how I’ve worked. And everything I’ve done has come to nothing, and not because I’ve always made mistakes, or committed foolishnesses. Every smash has been brought about by influences that could not have been humanly foreseen. I’m cursed. Cursed by an evil fate it is beyond my power to fight. God? It almost makes one question. Is there a God? A good God who permits such a fate to pursue a man? Is there an all-powerful God, ruling and guiding every human action? Is there? Is there a God, a merciful, loving God watching over us, such as kiddies are taught to believe in? Is there?”

“Yes.”

Peter’s answer so readily, so firmly spoken was arresting.

“Yes, Jim. There’s a God,” he went on, without any display. “There’s a great big God—just such a God as you and I have knelt to when we were bits of kiddies. Maybe He’s so big that our poor, weak brains can’t understand Him. But He’s there, right up above us, and for every poor mean atom we call ‘man’ He’s set out a trail to walk on. It’s called the One-way Trail. And the One-way Trail is just the trail of Life. It’s chock full of pitfalls and stumbling-blocks, that make us cuss like mad. But it’s good for us to walk over it. There are no turnings or by-paths, and no turning back. And, maybe, when we get to the end something will have been achieved in His scheme of things that our silly brains can’t grasp. Yes, there is a God, Jim, and you’re just hitting the trail He’s set for you.”

But Jim was in no reasonable mood.

“Then where’s the cursed justice—” he began heatedly. But broke off as the other shrugged his great shoulders.

He waited for Peter to speak. He waited, stirred to a mad contentiousness, to tear his friend’s arguments to ribbons, and fling their broken remains back in his face. But no arguments were forthcoming. Peter understood his temper, and saw the uselessness of argument. Besides, he could smell the reek of whiskey.

He thought swiftly with all the wisdom of a great understanding and experience. And finally his manner changed utterly. He suddenly became cordially sympathetic with the other’s angry mood. He even agreed with him.

“Maybe you’re right, though, Jim,” he said. “Things have been mighty hard for you. You’ve had a heap of trouble. I can’t say I wonder at you taking it bad, and thinking things. But—but what are you going to do now? Buck the game afresh?”

Jim did not pause to think. He jumped speedily at the bait held out to him so subtly.

“Yes,” he cried, with a bitter laugh. “But it’ll be a different game. A game most folks out here sure know how to play. We’re most of us life’s derelicts. I’ll buck it, Peter, and set the devil dancing.”

The other nodded.

“I know. I know. He’s always ready to dance if we pay for the tune.”

But Jim was lost in his own wild thoughts.

“Yes, and he’s good company, too, Peter,” he cried. “Devilish good.” He laughed at his own humor. “The harder you play the harder and more merrily he’ll dance. We’ve got one life. The trail’s marked out for us. And, by gum, we’ll live while we can. Why should we sweat and toil, and have it squeezed out of us whenever—they think fit? I’ll spend every dollar I make. I’ll have

all that life can give me. I'll pick the fruit within my reach. I'll do as the devil, or my stomach, guides me. I'll have my time—"

"And then?"

Jim sat down. He was smiling, but the smile was unreal.

"Then? Why, I'll go right down and out, and they can kick my carcase out to the town 'dumps.'"

Peter nodded again.

"Let's begin now," he said, with staggering abruptness. And he pointed at the bottle in Jim's pocket.

"Eh?" the other was startled.

"Let's begin now," Peter said, with his calm smile. "You're good company, Jim. Where you go, I'll travel, too—if it's to hell."

The smile had vanished from Jim's eyes. For a moment he wondered stupidly, and during that moment, as Peter's hand was outstretched for the bottle, he passed it across to him.

The other took it, and looked at the label. It was a well-known brand of rye whiskey. And as he looked he seemed to gather warmth and enthusiasm. It was as though the sight of the whiskey were irresistible to him.

"Rye," he cried. "The juice for oiling the devil's joints." And his lips seemed to smack over the words.

Jim was watching. He didn't understand. Peter's offer to go with him to hell was staggering, and— But the other went on in his own mildly enthusiastic way.

"We'll start right here. I'll get two glasses. We'll drink this up, and then we'll get some more at the saloon, and—we'll paint the town red." He rose and fetched two glasses from a cupboard and set them on the table. Then he took his sheath knife from his belt, and, with a skilful tap, knocked the neck off the bottle.

"No water," he said. "The stuff'll act quicker. We want it to get right up into our heads quick. We want the mad whirl of the devil's dance; we—"

"But why should you—!"

"Tut, man! Your gait's good enough for me. There's room for more fools than one in hell. Here! Here's your medicine."

He rose and passed a glass across to Jim, while the other he held aloft.

"Here, boy," he cried, smiling down into Jim's face "Here, I'll give you a toast." The stormy light in the ranchman's eyes had died out, and in them there lurked a question that had something like fear in it. But his glass was not raised, and Peter urged him. "A toast, lad huyk your glass right up, and we'll drink it standing."

Jim rose obediently but slowly to his feet, and his glass was lifted half-heartedly. There was no responsive enthusiasm in him now; it had gone utterly. Peter's voice suddenly filled the room with a mocking laugh, and his toast rang out in tones of sarcasm the more biting for their very mildness.

"The devil's abroad. Here's to the devil, because there's no God and the devil reigns. Nothing we see in the world is the work of anybody but the devil. The soil that yields us the good grain, the grass that feeds our stock, the warm, beneficent sun that ripens all the world, the beautiful flowers, the magnificent forests, the great hills, the seas, the rivers, the rain; everything in life. All the beautiful world, that thrills with a perfect life, that rolls its way through æons of time held in space by a power that nothing can shake. All the myriads of worlds and universes we see shining in the limitless billions of miles of space at night, everything, everything. It is the arch-fiend's work, for there is no God. Here's to the mad, red, dancing devil, to whom we go!"

Jim's glass crashed to the floor. He seized the bottle of whiskey and served that in the same way.

“Stop it, you mad fool!” he cried in horror. And Peter slowly put his whiskey down untasted.

Then the dark, horror-stricken eyes looked into the smiling blue ones, and in a flash to Jim’s troubled mind came inspiration. There was a long, long pause, during which eye met eye unflinchingly. Then Jim reached out a hand.

“Thanks, Peter,” he said.

Peter shook his grizzled head as he gripped the outstretched hand.

“I’m glad,” he said with a quaint smile, “real glad you came along—and stopped me drinking that toast. Going?”

Jim nodded. He, too, was smiling now, as he moved to the door.

“Well, I suppose you must,” Peter went on. “I’ve got work, too.” He pointed at his pile of dirt on the table. “You see, there’s gold in all that muck, and—I’ve got to find it.”

CHAPTER VI

EVE AND WILL

Elia was staring at his sister with wide, expectant eyes. Suspense was evidently his dominant feeling at the moment. A suspense which gave him a sickly feeling in the pit of the stomach. It was the apprehension of a prisoner awaiting a verdict; the nauseating sensation of one who sees death facing him, with the chances a thousand to one against him. A half-plaited rawhide rope was lying in his lap; the hobby of making these his sister had persuaded him to turn to profitable account. He was expert in their manufacture, and found a ready market for his wares on the neighboring ranches.

Eve was staring out of the window considering, her pretty face seriously cast, her eyes far away. Will Henderson, his boyishly handsome face moodily set, was standing beside the work-table that occupied the centre of the living-room, the fingers of one hand restlessly groping among the litter of dress stuffs lying upon it. He was awaiting her answer to a question of his, awaiting it in suspense, like Elia, but with different feelings.

Nor did the girl seem inclined to hurry. To her mind a lot depended on her answer. Her acquiescence meant the giving up of all the little features that had crept into her struggling years of independence. There was her brother. She must think for his welfare. There was her business, worked up so laboriously. There was the possible removal from Barnriff to the world of hills and valleys, which was Will's world. There were so many things to think of,—yet—yet she knew her answer beforehand. She loved, and she was a woman, worldly-wise, but unworldly.

The evening was drawing in, and the soft shadows were creeping out of the corners of the little room. There was a gentle mellowness in the twilight which softened the darns in the patchwork picture the place presented. This room was before all things her shop; and, in consequence, comfort and the picturesque were sacrificed to utility. Yet there was a pleasant femininity about it. A femininity which never fails to act upon the opposite sex. It carries with it an influence that can best be likened, in a metaphoric sense, to a mental aroma which soothes the jagged edges of the rougher senses. It lulls them to a gentle feeling of seductive delight, a condition which lays men so often open to a bad woman's unscrupulousness, but also to a good woman's influence for bringing out all that is greatest and best in their nature.

The waiting was too long for Will. He was a lover of no great restraint.

"Well, Eve?" he demanded, almost sharply. "Two months to-day. Will you? We can get the parson feller that comes here from Rocky Springs to—marry us."

The dwarf brushed his rope out of his lap, and, rising, hobbled to Eve's side, and stood peering up into her face in his bird-like way. But he offered no word.

Eve's hand caressed his silky head. She nodded, nodded at the distant hills through the window.

"Yes, Will, dear."

The man was at her side in an instant, while Elia slunk away. The youth drew back and turned tail, slinking off as though driven by a cruel lash in the hand of one from whom kindness is expected. He did not return to his seat, but passed out of the house. And the girl and man, in their moment of rapture, forgot him. At that moment their lives, their happiness, their love, were the bounds of their whole thought.

For moments they stood locked in each other's arms, oblivious to all but the hot passion that ran through their veins. They were lost in the dream of love which was theirs. The world was nothing, life was nothing, except that it gave them this power to love. They drank in each other's kisses till the woman lay panting in the fierce embrace of the man, and he—he was devouring her

with eyes which hungered for her, like the eyes of a starving man, while he crushed her in the arms of a man savage with the delicious pain of his passion.

At last it was the woman who stirred to release herself. It is ever the woman who leads where love dominates. She gently but firmly freed herself. She held his hands and looked up into his glowing eyes. She had something to say, something to ask him, and, reluctant though she be, she must abandon for the time the blissful moments when their mutual love was burning to the exclusion of all else. Will's passionate eyes held her, and for some moments she could not speak. Then, with an effort, she released his hands and defensively turned her eyes away.

"I—I want to speak to you about—Jim," she said at last, a little hesitatingly.

And the fire in the man's eyes abruptly died out.

"He was here this morning, and—he was a little strange."

Will propped himself against the table, and his face, strangely pale, was turned to the window. Nor did he see the snow-capped hills which bounded the entire view. Guilty thoughts filled his mind and crowded out everything else.

"Well?" he demanded, as Eve waited for him to speak.

"You are such friends, dear, that I wanted to ask you—Do you know why he came to see me?"

Will shook his head. Then a smile struggled round his clean shaven mouth.

"Maybe the same reason that makes most fellows crowd round a pretty girl."

It was a wistful smile that accompanied the girl's denial.

"I would like to think it was only that," she said. "Do you know I am very, very fond of Jim. No, no, not in the way you mean," she exclaimed hastily, as the man turned on her, hot with the jealousy which was so much a part of his Celtic nature. "I have always been fond of Jim. He's so generous; so kind and self-sacrificing. Do you know, Will, I believe he'd give up anything to you. It is my conviction that his first thought in life is for your welfare and happiness. And somehow, it—it doesn't seem right. No, I don't mean that you don't deserve it, but that—well, don't you think a man should fight every battle in which he finds himself on his own account? Don't you think, you who are so capable, that the struggles that every man must encounter in life demand the whole of his energies to bring them to a successful end? I do. It's not a matter of self exactly, but we are all so full of weaknesses that this unselfish way of dividing our energies is apt to weaken our own defenses. Thus the scheme for our own uplifting, our own purification, rather suffers. You see, I think we are here on this earth for the purpose of bettering ourselves and preparing for that future, which—I know what I am saying sounds selfish, but really, really, I don't think it is. Do you know, Jim came to ask me to marry him? I know he did. I avoided his direct question, and told him that you asked me last night, and that I had given you my promise. Well, he accepted it as though, as though he had no business to want what you wanted. And his only comment was that you were a 'good boy,' and that he thought you'd make me a good husband. Now, don't laugh"—the man showed not the slightest inclination to do so. His face was livid; there was something like horror in his eyes—"but if I'd been a man in his place I should have been just mad. Do you think I'd have said that? No, Will; my thoughts would have been murderous. But with him it was otherwise, I'm sure. Yet he loved me, and he was hurt. I could see it—oh, I could see it. The agony in his eyes nearly broke my heart. Will, I think we owe Jim something. I know we can't ever repay it. But we owe him surely. You do, even more than I. I can't bear to think of his hurt."

The girl ceased speaking. Will had made no attempt to stop her, yet every word she had spoken lashed him to a savage self-defense.

"I—I didn't know he loved you," he lied. Then he stopped with a sickening impulse. But in a moment he went on. He had taken the plunge, and his selfish nature came to his aid. "Poor Jim," he said, with apparent feeling. "It's hard luck—mighty hard luck. But, then, Eve, a feller can't expect a man to stand by where a woman's concerned. Not even a brother. You see, dear, I love you so bad. I'd lose anything but you, yes, even my life." He drew nearer to her, but the girl made no

response. "Jim's got to take his 'medicine.' Same as I'd have taken mine, if you'd loved him. If Jim squeals, he's not—"

"Oh, don't be afraid of that," Eve exclaimed, with some warmth. "Jim won't 'squeal.' It's not in him to 'squeal.' He'll take his 'medicine' with any man. I'm not thinking of that. It's—oh, I don't know—only I think you're lucky to have such a friend, and I—oh, I wish we could do something for him."

Eve did not know how to express all she felt, and Will did not help her. He displayed no sympathy, but seemed absolutely indifferent, and she almost felt angry with him.

"There's nothing to be done." Then something prompted the man, and he went on harshly. "It was a fair fight and no favor. I love you, Eve; God knows how I love you. And I wouldn't give you up or lose you for fifty Jims. If Jim stood in the way between us I'd—I'd—push him out at—any cost."

"Will!" There was horror in the girl's exclamation. Then the woman in her rose at the contemplation of the man's love and passion for her. How could it be otherwise? She came to him, and was hugged in arms that almost set her gasping.

"I love you, Eve. I love you! I love you!"

Their lips met, and the woman clung to him in the rush of her responsive passion.

"Oh, Will," she cried at length. "It's good to be loved as you love. It's so good. Kiss me, dear, kiss me again. I am all yours."

The man needed no bidding. He had wronged his friend; had lied, lied in the worst way a man can lie, to make sure of her. He appreciated the cost, and its value made those moments all the more precious.

But he had no real regret for the wrong he had committed. And this was an unerring index to his nature. He would stand at nothing where his own desires were at stake.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHICKEN-KILLING

An hour later Will left the house. He felt good. He felt that he wanted to shout aloud his good fortune. To a temperament like his there was only one outlet to such feelings. He would go down to the saloon and treat the boys. They should share in his good fortune—to the extent of drink. He cared nothing for them in reality. He cared nothing for anybody but himself. He wanted drink, and to treat the boys served as an excuse.

Since winning Eve he had debated with himself the matter of “straightening up” with regard to drink. It is the usual condition of mind upon such occasions amongst men who live hard. It is an upward moral tendency for the moment, and often the highest inclination of their life’s moral switchback, the one that inevitably precedes the longest and severest drop. At no other time would he have needed an excuse to drink.

He hurried so as not to lose anything of the evening’s entertainment at the saloon, but his way did not take him direct. He had left the bulk of his money secreted in the cupboard in his old hut, a place he still kept in which to sleep when business or pleasure brought him in from the hunting-grounds of the trade which was his.

But the deviation was considerable, nor had he the assistance of any outside influence to keep his mind in focus. Thus he found it drifting whithersoever it chose. It passed from Eve to the saloon, to the money he required to help him pass the evening, to a dozen and one things, and finally settled itself upon the one subject he would rather have avoided. It focused itself upon Jim Thorpe, and, try as he would to break away from this thrall, it clung tenaciously.

He could not get away from Eve’s spoken sympathy for Jim, and every word he recollected stung him poisonously. His regard for Jim was of the frailest texture. He had always regarded him as something inevitable in his life, and that was all. Nor was he to be considered in the least where his own desires were concerned. Yet he cursed that shooting match. He cursed himself for going to see Jim at all. Why had he not gone to Eve in the first place? Then he promptly reassured himself that he had only gone to Jim out of a sense of honor. Yes, it was that shooting match. Jim had forced it on him. That was it. It was wholly Jim’s fault. How was he to know he was going to lose? There was no doubt that Jim was a fine shot, but so was he.

Then through his brain flashed another thought. Maybe it had inspiration in the thought of Jim’s shooting. What would happen when he met Jim, as, sooner or later, he knew he must? What would Jim’s attitude be? He frowned heavily. This had not occurred to him before. Would there be trouble? Well, if there were it might be easier, at least less complicated. On the other hand, what else could Jim do? It was uncomfortably puzzling. His own disposition made it impossible for him to probe the possibilities of such a nature as Jim’s.

He could not answer his question, and it left him with a feeling of apprehension which no prospect of violence could have inspired in him. He told himself he was sorry, regretted the whole occurrence, but there was less truth in his mental apology than in the feelings which his thoughts had inspired. Though in his heart he knew he had done wrong, he had acted with the grossest dishonor toward Jim, he would not admit it; consequently he experienced the nervous apprehension which every wrong-doer, however hardened, always feels at the thought of being confronted with his crime.

By the time he reached his hut he was in a bad mood. He not only rebelled against the worry of his thought, but wanted to vent his feelings. He probably hated Jim just then, and a meeting with him at that moment would undoubtedly have provoked a quarrel.

He was approaching his hut from the back. The place was in darkness, and he groped in his pockets for matches. He had to pass the old hen-roost, which, in their early days in Barnriff, had kept him and Jim supplied with fresh eggs. As he drew abreast of this he suddenly halted and stood listening. There was a commotion going on inside, and it startled him. He could hear the flapping of wings, the scuffling and clucking of the frightened hens.

For the moment he thought of the coyote, that thieving scavenger of the prairie which is ever on the prowl at night. But the next instant he remembered the chicken killing going on in the village. He ran to the door of the roost and flung it wide open. Without waiting for a light he stooped down and made his way in. And that act of stooping probably saved his life. Something whistled over his bent body, splitting the air like a well-swung sword. He knew instinctively it was a knife aimed at him. But the next moment he had grappled with his assailant, and held him fast in his two strong arms.

From that moment there was no further struggle. As he dragged his prisoner out he wondered. Then, in a moment, his wonder passed, as he felt a set of sharp, strong human teeth fasten themselves upon the flesh of his forearm. He dropped his hold and with his free hand seized his captive by the throat and choked him until the teeth released their grip.

To rush his prisoner along before him to the door of the hut and thrust him inside was curiously easy. There was no resistance or struggle for freedom. The captive seemed even anxious to avoid all further effort. Nor was there a word spoken until Will had struck a match and lit the guttered candle stuck in the neck of a whiskey bottle. Then, with the revealing light, he uttered an exclamation of blank astonishment.

Elia, Eve's brother, stood cowering before him with his usually mild eyes filled with such a glare of abject terror that it might well have inspired pity in the hardest heart.

But Will was not given to pity. The boy's terror meant nothing to him. All he remembered was his unutterable dislike of the boy, and his satisfaction at having caught the chicken-killer of Barnriff. And, to judge by the boy's blood-stained hands, in the thick of his fell work.

"So, I've caught you, my lad, have I?" he said, with a cold grin of appreciation. "It's you who spend your time killing the chickens? Well, you're going to pay for it, you—you wretched deformity."

The boy cowered back. His curious mind was filled with hatred, but his fear was all-mastering. Will suddenly reached forward and dragged him further into the feeble rays of the candle-light.

"Come here, you young demon!" he cried. "You're not going to escape punishment because of your sister. You haven't got her here to protect you. You've got a man to deal with. Do you understand, eh? A man."

"A devil," Elia muttered, his eyes gleaming.

"Well, at this moment, perhaps, a devil!" Will retorted, giving the boy's arm a cruel twist. "How's that?" he inquired, as the boy gave one of those curious cries of pain of his, which had so much likeness to an animal's yelp.

"Oh, that's nothing to what you're going to get," his persecutor went on. "We do the same here to boys who kill chickens as we do to those who kill and steal cattle. We hang 'em, Elia, we hang 'em. How would you like to be hanged?"

Will watched the working features. He saw and appreciated the terror he was causing, the suffering. But he could draw no further retort.

As a matter of fact he had no definite idea yet as to what he should do with his captive. He was Eve's brother, but that did not influence him. He probably disliked the boy all the more for it, because one day he would be his brother, and he knew that Elia came before all else in the world in Eve's thoughts. His jealousy and hatred were well blended, and, in a man of his mind, this was a dangerous combination.

He released his hold on his captive and looked at his bleeding arm. The boy's teeth had left an ugly wound, and the blood was flowing freely. He turned his eyes again to Elia's face and a devil lurked in them.

"I've a good mind to thrash you, you piece of deformity!" he cried angrily. And he made a move as though to fulfil his threat.

Then that cruel grin gathered round his lips again.

"That's a good idea," he said. "Thrash you for myself, and hand you over to those others, after."

But his words had not the effect which his physical force had. Perhaps the boy, with that peculiar twist he possessed, was reading the indecision, the uncertainty in his captor's mind. Anyway, the terror in his eyes was becoming less, and a defiant light was taking its place. But Will could see none of this, and he went on.

"I'd hate to be handed over to the boys for hanging—"

Elia suddenly shook his head.

"There's no hangin'!" he cried, "and you know it. You send me to—the others an' see what happens to you. I tell you, sis 'ud see you dead before she married you. Guess you best let me go right quick, an' no more bulldozing."

The boy had suddenly tacked to windward of him, and Will was confronted with an ugly "lee shore." The trap he had fallen into was difficult, and he stood thinking. The dwarf had recovered himself, and his bland look of innocence returned to his eyes.

"I killed 'em nigh all—your chickens," he said earnestly. "I'll kill the rest later, because they're yours. I can't kill you because you are stronger than me, but I hate you. I'm goin' right out of here now, an' you won't stop me."

But the boy had overreached himself. Will was not easy when at bay.

He took a step forward and seized him by his two arms.

"You hate me, eh?" he said cruelly. "I can't hand you over to the boys, eh?" He wrenched the arms with a twist at each question, and, at each twist, the boy uttered that weird cry that was scarcely human. "Well, if I can't," Will went on through his clenched teeth, wrenching his arms as he spoke, "it cuts both ways; you'll get your med'cine here instead, and you daren't speak of it—see, see, see!"

The boy's cries were louder and more prolonged. Terror had again taken its place in his eyes. Yet he seemed to have no power for resistance. He was held in a paralysis of unutterable fear. With each of Will's three final words the lad's arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets, and, as the victim's final cry broke louder than the rest, the door was flung open and the candle set flickering.

"Stop that!" cried a voice, directly behind Will, and the man turned to find the burly form of Peter Blunt filling the doorway.

But Will was beside himself with rage and hatred.

"Eh?" he demanded. "Who says to stop? He's the chicken-killer. I got him red-handed." He held up one of the boy's blood-stained hands.

"I don't care what he is. If you don't loose him instantly I'll throw you out of this shack." The big man's voice was calm, but his eyes were blazing.

Will released the boy, but only to turn fiercely upon the intruder.

"And who in thunder-are you to interfere?" he cried savagely.

Without a moment's hesitation Peter walked straight up to him. For a second he stood towering over him, eye to eye. Then he turned his back, and thrust out one great arm horizontally across the other's body, as though to warn him back while he spoke to Elia. There was nothing blustering in his attitude, nothing even forceful. There was a simplicity, a directness that was strangely compelling. And Will found himself obeying the silent command in spite of his fury.

"Get out, laddie," said Peter gently. "Get out, quick."

And in those moments while Will watched his prey hobbling to freedom, he remembered Eve and what it would mean if the story of his doings reached her.

As the boy vanished through the doorway Peter turned.

“Thanks, Will,” he said, in his amiable way. “You’d far best let him go. When you hurt that boy you hurt Eve—ter’ble.”

Swift protest leaped to Will’s lips.

“But the chickens. He killed ’em. I caught him red-handed.”

“Just so, Will,” responded the big man easily. “He’ll answer for it—somewhere. There’s things we’ve been caught doing ‘red-handed’ by—some one. And we’ll answer for ’em sure—somewhere.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE “BOYS” OF THE VILLAGE

The saloon was well filled, and it was evident from the atmosphere pervading the place that something unusually welcome was afoot.

As a rule evenings spent in the saloon at Barnriff were not gatherings one would readily describe as being “gay.” At least it would require a strong imagination to do so. A slight modification would be best. The Barnriff men were rarely lightsome, and when they disported themselves it was generally with a sombre sort of joy. That was their attitude just now. There was a peculiar earnestness about them, even in the fact of living. They seemed to be actuated by a deadly thoroughness which had a tendency to kill, not so much levity as lightness, and leave them mourning.

To-night such an atmosphere of sombre joy was prevailing. It was a similar attitude to that which they adopted on election day, Independence Day, at a funeral, or a wedding. It was the way anything out of the ordinary always affected them.

The fact of the matter was Doc Crombie, who was doctor, veterinary surgeon, horse dealer, and a sort of self-elected mayor of the place, was going to hold a meeting in the saloon. He was going to make a formal speech, and the speech was the point.

Now, if there was one thing Barnriff bowed the knee to it was the man who could, and would, make a speech. It had all the masses’ love for oratory, and was as easily swayed by it as a crowd of ignorant political voters. Besides, Doc Crombie was a tried orator in Barnriff. He had addressed a meeting once before, and, speaking on behalf of a church mission, and asking for support of the cause, he had created a great impression by his stern denunciation of the ungodly life in Barnriff, and his flowery laudation of those who allowed themselves to respond to the call of “religion.”

On that occasion he said with all the dignity and consequence of his position at the moment—

“It ain’t your dogone dollars we want. It’s your souls. D’you git that? An’ when we’ve sure got ’em wot’ll we do with ’em, you ast? Wal, I don’t guess we’re doin’ a cannibal line o’ business. Nor ain’t we goin’ to stuff ’em an’ set ’em up as objec’s o’ ridicool to the ungodly hogs wot wallers in the swill o’ no adulteratin’ son-of-a-moose of a dealer in liver pizen. No, gents, that ain’t us. We’re goin’ to save ’em. An’ I personal guarantees that savin’ racket goes. Did I hear any mangy son-of-a-coyote guess he didn’t believe no such guarantee? No, an’ I guess he best not. I’m a man of peace, as all knows in this yer city, but I’d hate to try an’ shut out a blizzard in winter by stuffin’ that gopher’s perforated carkis under the doorjamb when I was thro’ with it. I say right here we’re out to save carkises—I mean souls. An’, say, fellers, jest think. Gettin’ your souls saved for a few measly cents. Ain’t that elegant? No argyment, no kickin’. Them souls is jest goin’ to be dipped, an’ they’ll come up white an’ shinin’ out of the waters of righteousness a sight cleaner than you ever got your faces at Christmas, washin’ in Silas Rocket’s hoss trough, even when his hoss soap was plenty. Think of it, fellers, and I speak speshul to you whiskey souses wot ain’t breathed pure air sence you was let loose on the same gent’s bowel picklin’ sperrit. You’ll get right to Meetin’ on Sundays with your boots greased elegant, an’ your pants darned reg’lar by your wimmin-folk wot’s proud of yer, an’ don’t kick when you blow into a natty game o’ ‘draw.’ You’ll have your kids lookin’ up at your fancy iled locks, an’ your bow-tie, an’ in their little minds they’ll wonder an’ wonder how it come your mouths ain’t drippin’ t’baccar juice, an’ how they ain’t got cowhided ’fore the breakfast they mostly have to guess at, an’ how it come you’re leadin’ them, ’stead o’ them leadin’ you, an’ how their little bellies is blown out with grub like a litter o’ prize hogs. Think of it, fellers, an’ pass up your measly cents. It ain’t the coin, it’s the sperrit we want, an’ when

I think of all these yer blessin's I'm *personal* guaranteein' to the flower o' Barnriff's manhood I almost feel as though I was goin' to turn on the hose pipe like a spanked kid."

He talked till he had half of Barnriff's "flower" blubbering, and he had emptied the last cent out of their pockets, and the mission was set on a sound financial basis. But as to his guarantee—well, the doctor was well understood by his fellow citizens, and no one was ever heard to question its fulfilment.

It was wonderful what a power of persuasion he had in Barnriff. But then he was an awe-inspiring figure, with his large luminous eyes and eagle cast of feature. And, too, words flowed from his lips like words from the pen of a yellow journal reporter, and his phraseology was almost as picturesque.

The boys were gathered waiting for him. There was anticipatory pleasure in their hang-dog faces. One of them almost laughed at a light sally from the cheery Gay, but luckily it was nipped in time by the interposition of the mean-minded Smallbones.

"I sez it right here, boys," the latter observed, leaning with his back against the bar, and speaking with the air of having just arrived at a grave decision. "Old Sally Morby hadn't no right to burry her man in oak. Now I ast you, Gay, as man to man, if you'd know'd we was goin' to be ast to ante up fer her grub stake, wot could you ha' done him handsome an' moderate fer?"

Gay squared his fat shoulders. For the moment he was important. Moments of importance are always precious, even in places like Barnriff.

"Wal, I can't rightly give it you down to cents without considerin' Restless some," he replied unctuously. "But we did Toby Randall slap-up in ash fer fifty odd dollars. Then ther' was Sadie O'Brien. We did her elegant in soft pine for twenty-eight odd. It 'ud sure have been twenty-five on'y fer her weight. Y'see the planks under her had to be two inch or she'd ha' fell through."

He produced his note-book and rapidly glanced over the greasy pages.

"Y'see," he observed, pausing at the entry he had been looking for, "Sally paid us a hundred an' forty-seven dollars an' seventy-five cents. I 'lows that's handsome fer buryin' a hop-headed skite like Charlie Morby was. But that wus her order, an' bein' a business man, an' takin' pride in my work, I sez to Restless, I sez, 'It's oak, boy, oak with silver plate trimmin's, an' a real elegant inscription to Charlie on it, tellin' folks o' virtues he didn't never handle when he was livin'.' He sure didn't deserve nothin' better than an apple bar'l, leavin' the head open so he had a chance to dodge the devil when he come along. An' I guess, knowin' Charlie, he'd 'a' given him an elegant run fer it."

"That's it," exclaimed Smallbones, peevishly. "That's it. She goes an' blows in her wad on a buzzock what ought to bin drowned in yaller mud, an' we've got to ante her grub stake. Psha! I ain't givin' a cent."

Lean Wilkes, the baker, was watching the trust schemer with baleful eye, and now his slow tongue evolved a pretty retort.

"No one sed you was—nor thought it likely."

"The duff puncher wakin' up," sneered Smallbones, angrily.

"Guess it's your voice hurtin' my ear drums," replied Jake, ponderously.

At that moment Abe Horsley joined the group. He called for drinks before adding his bit to the talk. He had an axe to grind and wanted a sympathetic audience. While Rocket, observing his customers with shrewd unfriendly eyes, set out the glasses and the accompanying bottles—he never needed to inquire what these men would take; he knew the tipples of every soul in Barnriff by heart—Abe opened out. He was unctuous and careful of his diction. He was Barnriff's lay-preacher, and felt that this attitude was "up to him."

"I do sure agree with the generality of opinion in this yer city," he said largely. "I consider that the largeness of heart for which our brothers in this important town—it has a great future, gentlemen, believe me; I mention this in parenthesis—are held in excellent esteem—" He broke off to nod to Jim

Thorpe who entered the saloon at that moment—"should be—er fostered. I think, brethren—pardon me, 'gentlemen'—that we should give, and give liberally to Sally Morby, but—but I do not see why Doc Crombie should make the occasion the opportunity for a speech. Any of us could do it quite as well. Perhaps, who knows, some of us even better—"

"Smallbones," murmured the dissatisfied Wilkes, drinking his gin at a gulp.

"Yes, even Smallbones," shrugged Abe, sipping his whiskey.

Angel Gay bolted his whiskey and laid a gentle hand firmly on Horsley's shoulder.

"No," he said, "not Smallbones; not even Doc Crombie, both deadgut fellers sure. But you are the man, Abe. For elegance o' langwidge, an' flow—mark you—you—you are a born speaker, sure. Say, I believe that rye of Rocket's was in a gin bottle. It tasted like—like—"

"Have another?" suggested Abe, cordially.

"I won't say 'no,'" Gay promptly acquiesced.

But Rocket was serving drink to Jim Thorpe at one of the little poker tables on the far side of the room, and the butcher had to wait.

"How much are you givin'?" Smallbones inquired cautiously of Gay.

He was still worrying over the forthcoming demand on his charity. Gay Promptly puffed himself up.

"Wal," he said, with some dignity. "Y'see she's got six kiddies, each smaller nor the other. They mustn't starve for sure. Guess I'm givin' twenty-fi' dollars."

"Wot?" almost shrieked the disgusted Smallbones.

"Yes," said the butcher-undertaker coldly. "An' I ain't no trust magnate."

"That's right up to you, Smallbones," remarked Abe, passing his friend Gay his drink. "You'll natcherly give fifty."

But Abe's ponderous levity was too much for Smallbones.

"An' if I did it wouldn't be in answer to the hogwash preachin' you ladle out. Anyways I'll give as it pleases me."

"Then I guess them kiddies'll starve, sure," remarked Wilkes heavily.

How much further the ruffled tempers of these men might have been tried it is impossible to say, but at that moment a diversion was created by the advent of the redoubtable doctor. And it was easy to see at a glance how it was this man was able to sway the Barnriff crowd. He was an aggressive specimen of unyielding force, lean, but powerful of frame, with the light of overwhelming determination in a pair of swift, bright eyes.

He glanced round the vast dingy bar-room. There were two tables of poker going in opposite corners of the room, and a joyous collection of variegated uncleanness "bucking" a bank in another corner. Then there was the flower of Barnriff propping up the bar like a row of daisies in a window box—only they lacked the purity of that simple flower. He stepped at once to the centre of the room.

"Boys," he said in a hoarse, rasping voice, "I'm in a hurry. Guess natur' don't wait fer nuthin' when she gits busy on matters wot interest her; an' seein' Barnriff needs all the population that's comin' to it with so energetic a funeral maker as our friend, Angel Gay, around, I'll git goin'. I'm right here fer dollars fer pore Sally Morby. She's broke, dead broke, an' she's got six kiddies, all with their pore little bellies flappin' in the wind for want of a squar' feed. Say, I ain't hyar to git gassin', I ain't hyar to make flowery talk fer the sake o' them pore kiddies. I'm here to git dollars, an' I'm goin' to git 'em. Cents won't do. Come on. Ther's six pore kiddies, six pore lone little kiddies with their faces gapin' fer food like a nest o' unfledged chicks in the early frosts o' spring. Now every mother's son o' you 'ante' right here. Natur' busy or no natur' busy, I don't quit till you've dipped into your wads. Now you, Smallbones," he cried, fixing the little man with his desperate eyes. "How much?"

Every eye was on the trust manipulator. He hated it. He hated them all, but Doc Crombie most of all. But the tall, lean man was impatient. He knew it was a race between him and a baby in a distant quarter of the village.

“How much?” he threatened the hesitating man.

“A dollar,” Smallbones muttered in the midst of profound silence. Even the chips of the poker players had ceased to rattle.

A faint light of amusement crept into every eye, every eye except the doctor’s.

Suddenly his lean figure pounced forward and stood before the befuddled speaker.

“I said ‘how much?’” he rasped, “’cause Barnriff knows its manners. Wal, the social etiquette o’ Barnriff is satisfied, so I ken talk straight. Say, you an’ me have piled a tidy heap in this yer city, so I guess you’re goin’ to match my hundred dollars right here. An’ I tel you squar’, an’ I’m a man o’ my word, if you don’t you’ll get a bath in Rocket’s hoss-trough which’ll do you till the next Presidential Election—if it pizens every hoss for miles around Barnriff. Guess I’ll take that hundred dollars.”

And he did. The furious Smallbones “weighed out” amid a circle of smiles, which suddenly seemed to light up the entire bar-room. Nor had he a single spoken word of protest. But he yielded himself up to the demands of the masterful doctor only to save himself the ducking he was certain awaited his refusal.

The rest was play to Doc Crombie. As he had pointed out, Barnriff’s social demands had been satisfied by his giving Smallbones the option of stating the amount of his contribution, and, as the result had not come up to requirements, he dispensed with further delicacy, and assessed each man present with the cool arbitrariness of a Socialist Chancellor. But in this case the process was not without justification. He knew just how much each man could afford, and he took not one cent more—or less.

This fact was exemplified when he came to Jim’s table. Jim looked up from his cards. He understood Crombie.

“Well, Doc,” he said, “how much?”

Crombie eyed him with shrewd amusement.

“Wal, Jim, I’ll take on’y ten dollars from you, seein’s your contrac’s out for buildin’, an’ you need ev’rything that’s comin’ your way.”

Jim laughed. It was a boisterous laugh that had little mirth in it.

“Guess I’ll treble that,” he said. “I’ve cut the contract.”

But the laugh had irritated the doctor.

“I’ll take ten from you,” he said, with an incisive clipping of his teeth. “Not a cent more, nor a cent less.”

And Jim yielded to him promptly. The doctor passed on. Neither he nor those around him had understood the bitter humor underlying Jim’s laugh. Only, perhaps, Peter Blunt, who had entered the room with Will Henderson a moment or two before, and whose sympathetic ears had caught the sound, could possibly have interpreted it aright.

The “whip round” was completed, and the doctor read out the total. Five hundred and forty dollars was to be handed over to the widow, to ease the burden Fate had inflicted upon her. And it said something for the big hearts of this prairie folk, that, in the large majority at least, the memory of their charity left them with the departure of the doctor to complete his race with Nature at the far extremity of the village.

The saloon settled down to its evening’s entertainment as though nothing unusual had happened. The majority gathered into various games of “draw,” for which the great room was half filled with small tables. The few that resisted the seductive charms of the national card game continued to support the bar. Of these, Smallbones only remained long enough to air his spleen at the doctor’s expense. But even he found it incumbent upon him to modify his tone. For one thing

he received an unmerciful baiting from his companions, and besides, he knew, if he allowed his tongue to riot too far, how easy it would be for his denunciation to reach the strenuous doctor's ears. Gay and Wilkes left shortly after the trust magnate, and soon Abe Horsley was forced to seek a fresh gossip. He found one in Will Henderson, as soon as Peter Blunt had moved away to watch the games at the tables. Will's mood at the moment suited the lay-preacher. He wanted to drink, and Abe was possessed of a chronic thirst.

So, with the exception of these two, Silas Rocket, ever rapacious for custom, was left free to see that the games did not detract from the men's drinking powers. He had an eye like a hawk for possible custom. Wherever there was a big pot just won his rasping voice was always at the elbow of the winner, with his monotonous "Any drinks, gents?" If a table was slow to require his services he never left it alone. He drove the men at it to drink in self-defense. It was a skilful display—though not as uncommon as one might think, even in the best restaurants in a big metropolis.

So the night wore on. Every man drank. They drank when they won. They drank when they lost. In the former case it was out of the buoyancy of their spirits, in the latter because they wished to elevate them. Whatever excuse they required they found, and when difficulty in that direction arose, there was always Silas Rocket on hand to coax them.

Jim, huddled away in a corner behind the great stove used for heating the place in winter, was busy with his game. He had shown no recognition of Will Henderson's coming. He had probably seen him, because, though hidden from it himself, he had a full view of the bar, and any time he looked up, his eyes must have encountered the two figures now left alone beside it.

He was drinking, and drinking hard. He was also losing. The cards were running consistently against him. But then, he was always an unlucky player. He rarely protested against it, for in reality he had little interest in the play, and to-night less than usual. He played because it saved him thinking or talking, and he wanted to sit there and drink until Silas turned them out. Then he intended returning to the ranch. He meant to have one night's forgetfulness, at least, even if he had to stupefy his senses in bad whiskey.

Abe and Will had reached the confidential stage. They were full of friendliness for each other, and ready to fall on each other's necks. For some time Will had desired an opportunity to open his heart to this man. He would have opened it to anybody. His Celtic temperament was a fire of enthusiasm. He felt that all the world was his, and he wanted to open his arms and embrace it. But so far Abe had given him little opportunity. His own voice pleased the lay-preacher, and he had orated on every subject from politics to street-paving, giving his companion little chance for anything but monosyllabic comments. But finally Will's chance came. Abe had abruptly questioned the propriety of permitting marriage in their village, where the burden of keeping the offspring of the union was likely to fall upon the public shoulders. Will plunged into the midst of the man's oratory, and would not be denied.

"Marriage," he said, "is not for regulation by law. No one has the right," he declared, with an emphatic thump on the bar, "to dictate to the individual on the subject." He went on at high pressure in a heated crescendo for some moments, denouncing any interference by public bodies. Then of a sudden he laid a hand on Abe's shoulder and abruptly dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. His eyes were smiling and shining with the feelings which stirred him. Everything was forgotten except the fact of his engagement to Eve. Jim was obscured from his mental vision by the uplifting spirit vapors which supported his thoughts. Eve, and Eve alone, was in his mind, that—and the fact that she was to be—his.

"Listen to me, Abe," he said, a little thickly. "All this talk of yours don't hold water—no, nor spirit either," he laughed. "Say, I'm goin' to get married, and so I know."

Quite how he knew didn't seem clear; but he paused for the impression. Abe whistled interestedly and edged nearer, turning his ear so as not to miss what the youngster had to say.

"Who?" he demanded.

“A-ah!” Will prolonged the exclamation knowingly, and waited for the man to guess.

“You was allus sweet on Eve Marsham—you and Jim Thorpe.”

Will suddenly ceased to smile. He drank his whiskey at a gulp and banged his glass on the counter.

“By G—!” he exclaimed harshly, while Abe wondered at his changed tone. “Yes, it’s Eve—Eve Marsham; and I’m going to marry her—not Jim. D’you git that? By heaven!—yes. Here, Rocket—!” He lurched round on the bar. “Here, you old Sky-Rocket, get drinks, quick! For everybody! I’ll pay! See, here’s the wad,” and he slammed a thick roll of bills on the counter. “I’ve got money, sure, and I’m—hic—goin’ to burn it. Boys,” he cried, swinging about and facing the tables, supporting himself against the bar, “you’ll drink with me. Si—Silas here’ll take your orders, an’ serve you. You, too, Abe, ole pal.”

Jim looked up from his cards the moment Will addressed the room, and now he watched him swaying against the bar. The light in his dark eyes was peculiar. He seemed to be speculating, and his thoughts were uneasy. Will yawned drunkenly. Peter Blunt, from across the room, was watching Jim, and moved abruptly clear of the tables, but not ostentatiously so.

Will’s eyes watched Silas passing round the drinks. He was smiling in the futile manner of a drunken man, and his fingers were clutching nervously at the moulded edge of the bar. Rocket came back and handed him and Abe their whiskey. The former promptly clutched his glass and raised it aloft, spilling the neat spirit as he did so. Then, with drunken solemnity, he called for order.

“Boys,” he cried, “you’ll—you’ll drink a to—toast. Sure you will. Every one of you’ll drink it. My fu—sher wife, Eve—Eve Marsham. Jim Th—Thorpe thought he’d best—me, but—”

A table was suddenly sent flying in the crowd. A man’s figure leaped out from behind the stove and rushed up to the speaker. It was Jim Thorpe. His eyes were blazing, and a demon of fury glared out upon the drunken man.

“Another word, and I’ll shoot you like a dog! You liar! You thieving—!”

But his sentence was never completed. Peter Blunt stood between them, one of his great hands gripping Jim’s arm like a vice.

“Shut up!” he cried, in a hoarse whisper. “You’ll have the whole story all over the village.”

But the mischief was done. Everybody present was on their feet agog with excitement, and came gathering round to see the only possible finish to the scene, as they understood it. But, quick as lightning, Peter took in the situation. Flinging Jim aside as though he were a baby, he hugged the drunken Will Henderson in his two great arms, and carried him bodily out of the saloon.

The men looked after him wondering. Then some one laughed. It was an odd, dissatisfied laugh, but it had the effect of relieving the tension. And one by one they turned back to Jim, who was standing moodily leaning on the bar; his right hand was still resting on the gun on his hip.

There was a moment of suspense. Then Jim’s hand left the gun, and he straightened himself up. He tried to smile, but the attempt was a failure.

“I’m sorry for upsetting your game, boys,” he said stupidly.

Then Rocket came effectively to the rescue.

“Gents,” he cried, “you’ll all honor me by drinkin’ with the house.”

CHAPTER IX

A WOMAN'S CARE

"He's right now, Eve, dear—right *as* right. He'll sleep till morning, and then he'll wake up, an'—an' forget about being ill."

It was not so much the words as the tone that brought comfort to Eve. She was leaning over her brother's bed watching the beautiful face, so waxen now, and listening to his heavy breathing, which was steadily moderating to a normal ease. The boy was sleeping the result of a dose administered to him by Doc Crombie who had been urgently summoned immediately after winning his race with Nature in another part of the village. Elia had been prostrated with a nervous attack which ended in a terrible fit, and Eve, all unaware of what had gone before between her brother and Will, had been hard put to it, in her grief and anxiety.

When the boy first showed signs of illness she sent for Mrs. Gay to find the doctor, and the bright, busy little woman was still with her. Annie Gay was quite the antithesis of her husband. She was practical, energetic and, above all things, bright. She was quite young and pretty, and Eve and she were considerable friends. She answered the girl's summons without a moment's delay, and, to her utmost distress, when she arrived, she found Elia in a fierce paroxysm of convulsions.

"You think so, Annie?" Eve's eyes lifted hungrily to her friend's face. They were full of almost painful yearning. This boy's welfare meant more to her than any one knew.

Annie took her arm, and gently drew her from the bedside, nodding her pretty head sagely.

"Sure." Then she added with a great assumption of knowledge, "You see those weakly creatures like poor Elia have got a lot o' life in them. You can't kill 'em. Angel allus says that, an' he's sure to know. Elia's body ain't worth two cents as you might say, but he's got—what's the word—vi—vi—"

"Vitality," suggested Eve.

"Yes, sure. That's it. Now he'll just sleep and sleep. And then he'll be bully when he wakes. So come you and sit down while I make you a drop of hot coffee. Pore girl, you're wore out. There's no end to the troubles o' this world for sure," she added cheerfully, as she hustled off to the kitchen to get the promised coffee.

Eve sat down in her workroom. She was comforted in spite of herself. Annie Gay's manner was of an order that few could resist; it was illogical, and, perhaps, foolishly optimistic, yet it had that blessed quality of carrying conviction to all who were fortunate enough to lean on her warm, strong heart. And on Eve she practiced her best efforts.

But Eve's anxiety only lay dormant for the time. It was still there gnawing at her heart. She knew the danger of the fits Elia was subject to and a brooding thought clung to her that one day one of these would prove fatal. The least emotion, the least temper, fear, excitement, brought them on. This one—it was the worst she had known. Supposing he had died—she shuddered. Like a saving angel Annie reëntered with the coffee in time to interrupt her thoughts.

"Now, dear, you drink this at once," she said. Then she went on, in response to a mute inquiry, "Oh, yes, there's plenty here for me. And when I come back I'm going to make some more, and cook a nice light supper, while you watch the boy, and we can sit here together with his door open until morning."

"But you're not going to stop, Annie," Eve protested. "I can't have that. You must get your sleep. It's very kind of you—"

"Now look right here, Eve," the busy woman said decidedly, "you've got nothing to say about it, please. Do you think I could sleep in my bed with you fretting and worrying your poor, simple heart out? What if he woke up in the night an'—an' had another? Who's to go and fetch Doc? Now

wot I says is duty's duty, and Angel Gay can just snore his head off by himself for once, and I'm not sure but what I shall be glad to be shut of the noise."

The genuine sympathy and kindness were quite touching, and Eve responded to it as only a woman can.

"Annie," she said, with a wistful smile, "you are the kindest, dearest thing—"

"Now don't you call me a 'thing,' Eve Marsham," the other broke in with a laugh, "or we'll quarrel. I'm just a plain woman with sense enough to say nothing when Gay gets home with more whiskey aboard than is good for his vitals. And don't you think I'm not putting a good value on myself when I say that. Not that Gay's given to sousing a heap. No, he's a good feller, sure, an' wouldn't swap him for—for your Will-on'y when he snores. So you see it's a kindness to me letting me stop to-night."

"You're a dear," Eve cried warmly,—"and I won't say 'thing.' Where are you going now?"

"Why, I'm going to set Angel's cheese an' pickles, and put his coffee on the stove. If he's to home when I get around, maybe I'll sit with him ten minutes or so, an' then I'll come right along back."

She had reached the door, which stood open, and now she paused, looking back.

"When are you gettin' married, Eve?" she demanded abruptly.

"Two months to-day," the other replied. She was surprised out of herself, and for a moment a warm glow swept over her as she realized that there was something still in the world which made for other than unhappiness.

"Two months," said Annie, thoughtfully. "Two months, eh?" Then she suddenly became mysterious and smiled into the other's face. "That'll be nice time for Gay to think about something that ain't—a coffin."

She hurried out on her mission of duty and affection. Gay was her all, but she had room in her heart for a good deal more than the worthy butcher-undertaker's great, fat image. She had no children of her own yet, but, as she often said, in her cheery, optimistic way, "time enough."

It was her attitude toward all things, and it carried her through life a heaven-sent blessing to all those who could number her amongst their friends. To Eve she had certainly been all this and more, for when a woman, alone in the world, is set the appalling task of facing the struggle for existence which is called Life, without the necessary moral and physical equipment for such a battle, the support of a strong heart generously given surely becomes the very acme of all charity.

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