Spearman Frank Hamilton

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Spearman F.

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Frank H. Spearman
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CHAPTER I
THE WRECKING BOSS

News of the wreck at Smoky Creek reached Medicine Bend from Point of Rocks at five o'clock. Sinclair, in person, was overseeing the making up of his wrecking train, and the yard, usually quiet at that hour of the morning, was alive with the hurry of men and engines. In the trainmaster's room of the weather-beaten headquarters building, nicknamed by railroad men "The Wickiup," early comers–sleepy-faced, keen-eyed trainmen–lounged on the tables and in chairs discussing the reports from Point of Rocks, and among them crew-callers and messengers moved in and out. From the door of the big operators' room, pushed at intervals abruptly open, burst a blaze of light and the current crash of many keys; within, behind glass screens, alert, smooth-faced boys in shirt sleeves rained calls over the wires or bent with flying pens above clips, taking incoming messages. At one end of the room, heedless of the strain on the division, press despatches and cablegrams clicked in monotonous relay over commercial wires; while at the other, operators were taking from the despatchers' room the train orders and the hurried dispositions made for the wreck emergency by Anderson, the assistant superintendent. At a table in the alcove the chief operator was trying to reach the division superintendent, McCloud, at Sleepy Cat; at his elbow, his best man was ringing the insistent calls of the despatcher and clearing the line for Sinclair and the wrecking gang. Two minutes after the wrecking train reported ready they had their orders and were pulling out of the upper yard, with right of way over everything to Point of Rocks.

The wreck had occurred just west of the creek. A fast east-bound freight train, double-headed, had left the track on the long curve around the hill, and when the wrecking train backed through Ten Shed Cut the sun streamed over the heaps of jammed and twisted cars strung all the way from the point of the curve to the foot of Smoky Hill. The crew of the train that lay in the ditch walked slowly up the track to where the wreckers had pulled up, and the freight conductor asked for Sinclair. Men rigging the derrick pointed to the hind car. The conductor, swinging up the caboose steps, made his way inside among the men that were passing out tools. The air within was bluish-thick with tobacco smoke, but through the haze the freightman saw facing him, in the far corner of the den-like interior, a man seated behind an old dining-car table, finishing his breakfast; one glimpse was enough to identify the dark beard of Sinclair, foreman of the bridges and boss of the wrecking gang.

Beside him stood a steaming coffee-tank, and in his right hand he held an enormous tin cup that he was about to raise to his mouth when he saw the freight conductor. With a laugh, Sinclair threw up his left hand and beckoned him over. Then he shook his hair just a little, tossed back his head, opened an unusual mouth, drained the cup at a gulp, and cursing the freightman fraternally, exclaimed, "How many cars have you ditched this time?"

The trainman, a sober-faced fellow, answered dryly, "All I had."

"Running too fast, eh?" glared Sinclair.

With the box cars piled forty feet high on the track, the conductor was too old a hand to begin a controversy. "Our time's fast," was all he said.

Sinclair rose and exclaimed, "Come on!" And the two, leaving the car, started up the track. The wrecking boss paid no attention to his companion as they forged ahead, but where the train had hit the curve he scanned the track as he would a blue print. "They'll have your scalp for this," he declared abruptly.

"I reckon they will."

"What's your name?"

"Stevens."

"Looks like all day for you, doesn't it? No matter; I guess I can help you out."

Where the merchandise cars lay, below the switch, the train crew knew that a tramp had been caught. At intervals they heard groans under the wreckage, which was piled high there. Sinclair stopped at the derrick, and the freight conductor went on to where his brakeman had enlisted two of Sinclair's giants to help get out the tramp. A brake beam had crushed the man's legs, and the pallor of his face showed that he was hurt internally, but he was conscious and moaned softly. The men had started to carry him to the way car when Sinclair came up, asked what they were doing, and ordered them back to the wreck. They hastily laid the tramp down. "But he wants water," protested a brakeman who was walking behind, carrying his arm in a sling.

"Water!" bawled Sinclair. "Have my men got nothing to do but carry a tramp to water? Get ahead there and help unload those refrigerators. He'll find water fast enough. Let the damned hobo crawl down to the creek after it."

The tramp was too far gone for resentment; he had fainted when they laid him down, and his half-glazed eyes, staring at the sky, gave no evidence that he heard anything.

The sun rose hot, for in the Red Desert sky there is rarely a cloud. Sinclair took the little hill nearest the switch to bellow his orders from, running down among the men whenever necessary to help carry them out. Within thirty minutes, though apparently no impression had been made on the great heaps of wrenched and splintered equipment, Sinclair had the job in hand.

Work such as this was the man's genius. In handling a wreck Sinclair was a marvel among mountain men. He was tall but not stout, with flashing brown eyes and a strength always equal to that of the best man in his crew. But his inspiration lay in destruction, and the more complete the better. There were no futile moves under Sinclair's quick eyes, no useless pulling and hauling, no false grappling; but like a raven at a feast, every time his derrick-beak plucked at the wreck he brought something worth while away. Whether he was righting a tender, rerailing an engine, tearing out a car-body, or swinging a set of trucks into the clear, Sinclair, men said, had luck, and no confusion in day or night was great enough to drown his heavy tones or blur his rapid thinking.

Just below where the wrecking boss stood lay the tramp. The sun scorched his drawn face, but he made no effort to turn from it. Sometimes he opened his eyes, but Sinclair was not a promising source of help, and no one that might have helped dared venture within speaking distance of the injured man. When the heat and the pain at last extorted a groan and an appeal, Sinclair turned. "Damn you, ain't you dead yet? What? Water?" He pointed to a butt standing in the shade of a car that had been thrown out near the switch. "There's water; go get it!" The cracking of a box car as the derrick wrenched it from the wreck was engaging the attention of the boss, and as he saw the grapple slip he yelled to his men and pointed to the chains.

The tramp lay still a long time. At last he began to drag himself toward the butt. In the glare of the sun timbers strained and snapped, and men with bars and axes chopped and wrenched at the massive frames and twisted iron on the track. The wrecking gang moved like ants in and out of the shapeless débris, and at intervals, as the sun rose higher, the tramp dragged himself nearer the butt. He lay on the burning sand like a crippled insect, crawling, and waiting for strength to crawl. To him there was no railroad and no wreck, but only the blinding sun, the hot sand, the torture of thirst, and somewhere water, if he could reach it.

The freight conductor, Stevens, afraid of no man, had come up to speak to Sinclair, and Sinclair, with a smile, laid a cordial hand on his shoulder. "Stevens, it's all right. I'll get you out of this. Come here." He led the conductor down the track where they had walked in the morning. He pointed to flange-marks on the ties. "See there–there's where the first wheels left the track, and they left on the inside of the curve; a thin flange under the first refrigerator broke. I've got the

wheel itself back there for evidence. They can't talk fast running against that. Damn a private car-line, anyway! Give me a cigar–haven't got any? Great guns, man, there's a case of Key Wests open up ahead; go fill your pockets and your grip. Don't be bashful; you've got friends on the division if you are Irish, eh?"

"Sure, only I don't smoke," said Stevens, with diplomacy.

"Well, you drink, don't you? There's a barrel of brandy open at the switch."

The brandy-cask stood up-ended near the water-butt, and the men dipped out of both with cups. They were working now half naked at the wreck. The sun hung in a cloudless sky, the air was still, and along the right of way huge wrecking fires added to the scorching heat. Ten feet from the water-butt lay a flattened mass of rags. Crusted in smoke and blood and dirt, crushed by a vise of beams and wheels out of human semblance, and left now an aimless, twitching thing, the tramp clutched at Stevens's foot as he passed. "Water!"

"Hello, old boy, how the devil did you get here?" exclaimed Stevens, retreating in alarm.

"Water!"

Stevens stepped to the butt and filled a cup. The tramp's eyes were closed. Stevens poured the water over his face; then he lifted the man's head and put a cupful to his lips.

"Is that hobo alive yet?" asked Sinclair, coming back smoking a cigar. "What does he want now? Water? Don't waste any time on him."

"It's bad luck refusing water," muttered Stevens, holding the cup.

"He'll be dead in a minute," growled Sinclair.

The sound of his voice roused the failing man to a fury. He opened his bloodshot eyes, and with the dregs of an ebbing vitality cursed Sinclair with a frenzy that made Stevens draw back. If Sinclair was startled he gave no sign. "Go to hell!" he exclaimed harshly.

With a ghastly effort the man made his retort. He held up his blood-soaked fingers. "I'm going all right–I know that," he gasped, with a curse, "but I'll come back for you!"

Sinclair, unshaken, stood his ground. He repeated his imprecation more violently; but Stevens, swallowing, stole out of hearing. As he disappeared, a train whistled in the west.

CHAPTER II
AT SMOKY CREEK

Karg, Sinclair's crew foreman, came running over to him from a pile of merchandise that had been set off the right of way on the wagon-road for loot. "That's the superintendent's car coming, ain't it, Murray?" he cried, looking across the creek at the approaching train.

"What of it?" returned Sinclair.

"Why, we're just loading the team."

The incoming train, an engine with a way car, two flats, and the Bear Dance derrick, slowed up at one end of the wreck while Sinclair and his foreman talked. Three men could be seen getting out of the way car–McCloud and Reed Young, the Scotch roadmaster, and Bill Dancing. A gang of trackmen filed slowly out after them.

The leaders of the party made their way down the curve, and Sinclair, with Karg, met them at the point. McCloud asked questions about the wreck and the chances of getting the track clear, and while they talked Sinclair sent Karg to get the new derrick into action. Sinclair then asked McCloud to walk with him up the track to see where the cars had left the rail. The two men showed in contrast as they stepped along the ties. McCloud was not alone younger and below Sinclair's height: his broad Stetson hat flattened him somewhat. His movement was deliberate beside Sinclair's litheness, and his face, though burned by sun and wind, was boyish, while Sinclair's was strongly lined.

"Just a moment," suggested McCloud mildly, as Sinclair hastened past the goods piled in the wagon-road. "Whose team is that, Sinclair?" The road followed the right of way where they stood, and a four-horse team of heavy mules was pulling a loaded ranch-wagon up the grade when McCloud spoke.

Sinclair answered cordially. "That's my team from over on the Frenchman. I picked them up at Denver. Nice mules, McCloud, ain't they? Give me mules every time for heavy work. If I had just a hundred more of 'em the company could have my job–what?"

"Yes. What's that stuff they are hauling?"

"That's a little stuff mashed up in the merchandise car; there's some tobacco there and a little wine, I guess. The cases are all smashed."

"Let's look at it."

"Oh, there's nothing there that's any good, McCloud."

"Let's look at it."

As Bill Dancing and Young walked behind the two men toward the wagon, Dancing made extraordinary efforts to wink at the roadmaster. "That's a good story about the mules coming from Denver, ain't it?" he muttered. Young, unwilling to commit himself, stopped to light his pipe. When he and Dancing joined Sinclair and McCloud the talk between the superintendent and the wrecking boss had become animated.

"I always do something for my men out of a wreck when I can; that's the way I get the work out of them," Sinclair was saying. "A little stuff like this," he added, nodding toward the wagon, "comes handy for presents, and the company wouldn't get any salvage out of it, anyway. I get the value a dozen times over in quick work. Look there!" Sinclair pointed to where the naked men heaved and wrenched in the sun. "Where could you get white men to work like that if you didn't jolly them along once in a while? What? You haven't been here long, McCloud," smiled Sinclair, laying a hand with heavy affection on the young man's shoulder. "Ask any man on the division who gets the work out of his men–who gets the wrecks cleaned up and the track cleared. Ain't that what you want?"

"Certainly, Sinclair; no man that ever saw you handle a wreck would undertake to do it better."

"Then what's all this fuss about?"

"We've been over all this matter before, as you know. The claim department won't stand for this looting; that's the whole story. Here are ten or twelve cases of champagne on your wagon–soiled a little, but worth a lot of money."

"That was a mistake loading that up; I admit it; it was Karg's carelessness."

"Here is one whole case of cigars and part of another," continued McCloud, climbing from one wheel to another of the wagon. "There is a thousand dollars in this load! I know you've got good men, Sinclair. If they are not getting paid as they should be, give them time and a half or double time, but put it in the pay checks. The freight loss and damage account increased two hundred per cent. last year. No railroad company can keep that rate up and last, Sinclair."

"Hang the company! The claim agents are a pack of thieves," cried Sinclair. "Look here, McCloud, what's a pay check to a man that's sick, compared with a bottle of good wine?"

"When one of your men is sick and needs wine, let me know," returned McCloud; "I'll see that he gets it. Your men don't wear silk dresses, do they?" he asked, pointing to another case of goods under the driver's seat. "Have that stuff all hauled back and loaded into a box car on track."

"Not by a damned sight!" exclaimed Sinclair. He turned to his ranch driver, Barney Rebstock. "You haul that stuff where you were told to haul it, Barney." Then, "you and I may as well have an understanding right here," he said, as McCloud walked to the head of the mules.

"By all means, and I'll begin by countermanding that order right now. Take your load straight back to that car," directed McCloud, pointing up the track. Barney, a ranch hand with a cigarette face looked surlily at McCloud.

Sinclair raised a finger at the boy. "You drive straight ahead where I told you to drive. I don't propose to have my affairs interfered with by you or anybody else, Mr. McCloud. You and I can settle this thing ourselves," he added, walking straight toward the superintendent.

"Get away from those mules!" yelled Barney at the same moment, cracking his whip.

McCloud's dull eyes hardly lightened as he looked at the driver. "Don't swing your whip this way, my boy," he said, laying hold quietly of the near bridle.

"Drop that bridle!" roared Sinclair.

"I'll drop your mules in their tracks if they move one foot forward. Dancing, unhook those traces," said McCloud peremptorily. "Dump the wine out of that wagon-box, Young." Then he turned to Sinclair and pointed to the wreck. "Get back to your work."

The sun marked the five men rooted for an instant on the hillside. Dancing jumped at the traces, Reed Young clambered over the wheel, and Sinclair, livid, faced McCloud. With a bitter denunciation of interlopers, claim agents, and "fresh" railroad men generally, Sinclair swore he would not go back to work, and a case of wine crashing to the ground infuriated him. He turned on his heel and started for the wreck. "Call off the men!" he yelled to Karg at the derrick. The foreman passed the word. The derrickmen, dropping their hooks and chains in some surprise, moved out of the wreckage. The axemen and laborers gathered around the foreman and followed him toward Sinclair.

"Boys," cried Sinclair, "we've got a new superintendent, a college guy. You know what they are; the company has tried 'em before. They draw the salaries and we do the work. This one down here now is making his little kick about the few pickings we get out of our jobs. You can go back to your work or you can stand right here with me till we get our rights. What?"

Half a dozen men began talking at once. The derrickman from below, a hatchet-faced wiper, with the visor of a greasy cap cocked over his ear, stuck his head between the uprights and called out shrilly, "What's er matter, Murray?" and a few men laughed. Barney had deserted the mules. Dancing and Young, with small regard for loss or damage, were emptying the wagon like deckhands, for in a fight such as now appeared imminent, possession of the goods even on the

ground seemed vital to prestige. McCloud waited only long enough to assure the emptying of the wagon, and then followed Sinclair to where he had assembled his men. “Sinclair, put your men back to work.”

“Not till we know just how we stand,” Sinclair answered insolently. He continued to speak, but McCloud turned to the men. “Boys, go back to your work. Your boss and I can settle our own differences. I’ll see that you lose nothing by working hard.”

“And you’ll see we make nothing, won’t you?” suggested Karg.

“I’ll see that every man in the crew gets twice what is coming to him–all except you, Karg. I discharge you now. Sinclair, will you go back to work?”

“No!”

“Then take your time. Any men that want to go back to work may step over to the switch,” added McCloud.

Not a man moved. Sinclair and Karg smiled at each other, and with no apparent embarrassment McCloud himself smiled. “I like to see men loyal to their bosses,” he said good-naturedly. “I wouldn’t give much for a man that wouldn’t stick to his boss if he thought him right. But a question has come up here, boys, that must be settled once for all. This wreck-looting on the mountain division is going to stop–right here–at this particular wreck. On that point there is no room for discussion. Now, any man that agrees with me on that matter may step over here and I’ll discuss with him any other grievance. If what I say about looting is a grievance, it can’t be discussed. Is there any man that wants to come over?” No man stirred.

“Sinclair, you’ve got good men,” continued McCloud, unmoved. “You are leading them into pretty deep water. There’s a chance yet for you to get them out of serious trouble if you think as much of them as they do of you. Will you advise them to go back to work–all except Karg?”

Sinclair glared in high humor. “Oh, I couldn’t do that! I’m discharged!” he protested, bowing low.

“I don’t want to be over-hasty,” returned McCloud. “This is a serious business, as you know better than they do, and there will never be as good a time to fix it up as now. There is a chance for you, I say, Sinclair, to take hold if you want to now.”

“Why, I’ll take hold if you’ll take your nose out of my business and agree to keep it out.”

“Is there *any* man here that wants to go back to work for the company?” continued McCloud evenly. It was one man against thirty; McCloud saw there was not the shadow of a chance to win the strikers over. “This lets all of you out, you understand, boys,” he added; “and you can never work again for the company on this division if you don’t take hold now.”

“Boys,” exclaimed Sinclair, better-humored every moment, “I’ll guarantee you work on this division when all the fresh superintendents are run out of the country, and I’ll lay this matter before Bucks himself, and don’t you forget it!”

“You will have a chilly job of it,” interposed McCloud.

“So will you, my hearty, before you get trains running past here,” retorted the wrecking boss. “Come on, boys.”

The disaffected men drew off. The emptied wagon, its load scattered on the ground, stood deserted on the hillside, and the mules drooped in the heat. Bill Dancing, a giant and a dangerous one, stood lone guard over the loot, and Young had been called over by McCloud. “How many men have you got with you, Reed?”

“Eleven.”

“How long will it take them to clean up this mess with what help we can run in this afternoon?”

Young studied the prospect before replying. “They’re green at this sort of thing, of course; they might be fussing here till to-morrow noon, I’m afraid; perhaps till to-morrow night, Mr. McCloud.”

"That won't do!" The two men stood for a moment in a study. "The merchandise is all unloaded, isn't it?" said McCloud reflectively. "Get your men here and bring a water-bucket with you."

McCloud walked down to the engine of the wrecking train and gave orders to the train and engine crews. The best of the refrigerator cars had been rerailed, and they were pulled to a safe distance from the wreck. Young brought the bucket, and McCloud pointed to the caskful of brandy. "Throw that brandy over the wreckage, Reed."

The roadmaster started. "Burn the whole thing up, eh?"

"Everything on the track."

"Bully! It's a shame to waste the liquor, but it's Sinclair's fault. Here, boys, scatter this stuff where it will catch good, and touch her off. Everything goes–the whole pile. Burn up everything; that's orders. If you can get a few rails here, now, I'll give you a track by sundown, Mr. McCloud, in spite of Sinclair and the devil."

The remains of many cars lay in heaps along the curve, and the trackmen like firebugs ran in and out of them. A tongue of flame leaped from the middle of a pile of stock cars. In five minutes the wreck was burning; in ten minutes the flames were crackling fiercely; then in another instant the wreck burst into a conflagration that rose hissing and seething a hundred feet straight up in the air.

From where they stood, Sinclair's men looked on. They were nonplussed, but their boss had not lost his nerve. He walked back to McCloud. "You're going to send us back to Medicine Bend with the car, I suppose?"

McCloud spoke amiably. "Not on your life. Take your personal stuff out of the car and tell your men to take theirs; then get off the train and off the right of way."

"Going to turn us loose on Red Desert, are you?" asked Sinclair steadily.

"You've turned yourselves loose."

"Wouldn't give a man a tie-pass, would you?"

"Come to my office in Medicine Bend and I'll talk to you about it," returned McCloud impassively.

"Well, boys," roared Sinclair, going back to his followers, "we can't ride on this road now! But I want to tell you there's something to eat for every one of you over at my place on the Crawling Stone, and a place to sleep–and something to drink," he added, cursing McCloud once more.

The superintendent eyed him, but made no response. Sinclair led his men to the wagon, and they piled into it till the box was filled. Barney Rebstock had the reins again, and the mules groaned as the whip cracked. Those that could not climb into the wagon as it moved off straggled along behind, and the air was filled with cheers and curses.

The wreck burned furiously, and the column of black smoke shot straight up. Sinclair, as his cavalcade moved over the hill, followed on foot, grimly. He was the last to cross the divide that shut the scene on the track away from the striking wreckers, and as he reached the crest he paused and looked back, standing for a moment like a statue outlined in the vivid sunshine. For all his bravado, something told him he should never handle another wreck on the mountain division–that he stood a king dethroned. Uninviting enough to many men, this had been his kingdom, and he loved the power it gave him. He had run it like many a reckless potentate, but no one could say he had not been royal in his work as well as in his looting. It was impossible not to admire the man, his tremendous capacity, his extraordinary power as a leader; and no one liked his better traits more than McCloud himself. But Sinclair never loved McCloud. Long afterward he told Whispering Smith that he made his first mistake in a long and desperate game in not killing McCloud when he laid his hand that morning on the bridle of the mules; it would have been easy then. Sinclair might have been thinking of it even as he stood looking back. But he stood only for a moment, then turned and passed over the hill.

CHAPTER III
DICKSIE

The wreckers, drifting in the blaze of the sun across the broad alkali valley, saw the smoke of the wreck-fire behind them. No breath of wind stirred it. With the stillness of a signal column it rose, thin and black, and high in the air spread motionless, like a huge umbrella, above Smoky Creek. Reed Young had gone with an engine to wire reënforcements, and McCloud, active among the trackmen until the conflagration spent itself, had retired to the shade of the hill.

Reclining against a rock with his legs crossed, he had clasped his hands behind his head and sat looking at the iron writhing in the dying heat of the fire. The sound of hoofs aroused him, and looking below he saw a horsewoman reining up near his men at the wreck. She rode an American horse, thin and rangy, and the experienced way in which she checked him drew him back almost to his haunches. But McCloud's eyes were fixed on the slender figure of the rider. He was wholly at a loss to account, at such a time and in such a place, for a visitor in gauntleted gloves and a banded Panama hat. He studied her with growing amazement. Her hair coiled low on her neck supported the very free roll of the hat-brim. Her black riding-skirt clung to her waist to form its own girdle, and her white stock, rolled high on her neck, rose above a heavy shirtwaist of white linen, and gave her an air of confident erectness. The trackmen stopped work to look, but her attitude in their gaze was one of impatience rather than of embarrassment. Her boot flashed in the stirrup while she spoke to the nearest man, and her horse stretched his neck and nosed the brown alkali-grass that spread thinly along the road.

To McCloud she was something like an apparition. He sat spellbound until the trackman indiscreetly pointed him out, and the eyes of the visitor, turning his way, caught him with his hands on the rock in an attitude openly curious. She turned immediately away, but McCloud rose and started down the hill. The horse's head was pulled up, and there were signs of departure. He quickened his steps. Once he saw, or thought he saw, the rider's head so turned that her eyes might have commanded one approaching from his quarter; yet he could catch no further glimpse of her face. A second surprise awaited him. Just as she seemed about to ride away, she dropped lightly from the horse to the ground, and he saw how confident in figure she was. As she began to try her saddle-girths, McCloud attempted a greeting. She could not ignore his hat, held rather high above his head as he approached, but she gave him the slightest nod in return–one that made no attempt to explain why she was there or where she had come from.

"Pardon me," ventured McCloud, "have you lost your way?"

He was immediately conscious that he had said the wrong thing. The expression of her eyes implied that it was foolish to suppose she was lost but she only answered, "I saw the smoke and feared the bridge was on fire."

Something in her voice made him almost sorry he had intervened; if she stood in need of help of any sort it was not apparent, and her gaze was confusing. He became conscious that he was at the worst for an inspection; his face felt streaky with smoke, his hat and shirt had suffered severely in directing the fire, and his hands were black. He said to himself in revenge that she was not pretty, despite the fact that she seemed completely to take away his consequence. He felt, while she inspected him, like a brakeman.

"I presume Mr. Sinclair is here?" she said presently.

"I am sorry to say he is not."

"He usually has charge of the wrecks, I think. What a dreadful fire!" she murmured, looking down the track. She stood beside the horse with one hand resting on her girdle. Around the hand that held the bridle her quirt lay coiled in the folds of her glove, and, though seemingly undecided

as to what to do, her composure did not lessen. As she looked at the wreckage, a breath of wind lifted the hair that curled around her ear. The mountain wind playing on her neck had left it brown, and above, the pulse of her ride rose red in her cheek. “Was it a passenger wreck?” She turned abruptly on McCloud to ask the question. Her eyes were brown, too, he saw, and a doubt assailed him. Was she pretty?

“Only a freight wreck,” he answered.

“I thought if there were passengers hurt I could send help from the ranch. Were you the conductor?”

“Fortunately not.”

“And no one was hurt?”

“Only a tramp. We are burning the wreck to clear the track.”

“From the divide it looked like a mountain on fire. I’m sorry Mr. Sinclair is not here.”

“Why, indeed, yes, so am I.”

“Because I know him. You are one of his men, I presume.”

“Not exactly; but is there anything I can do–”

“Oh, thank you, nothing, except that you might tell him the pretty bay colt he sent over to us has sprung his shoulder.”

“He will be sorry to hear it, I’m sure.”

“But we are doing everything possible for him. He is going to make a perfectly lovely horse.”

“And whom may I say the message is from?” Though disconcerted, McCloud was regaining his wits. He felt perfectly certain there was no danger, if she knew Sinclair and lived in the mountains, but that she would sometime find out he was not a conductor. When he asked his question she appeared slightly surprised and answered easily, “Mr. Sinclair will know it is from Dicksie Dunning.”

McCloud knew her then. Every one knew Dicksie Dunning in the high country. This was Dicksie Dunning of the great Crawling Stone ranch, most widely known of all the mountain ranches. While his stupidity in not guessing her identity before overwhelmed him, he resolved to exhaust the last effort to win her interest.

“I don’t know just when I shall see Mr. Sinclair,” he answered gravely, “but he shall certainly have your message.”

A doubt seemed to steal over Dicksie at the change in McCloud’s manner. “Oh, pardon me– I thought you were working for the company.”

“You are quite right, I am; but Mr. Sinclair is not.”

Her eyebrows rose a little. “I think you are mistaken, aren’t you?”

“It is possible I am; but if he is working for the company, it is pretty certain that I am not,” he continued, heaping mystification on her. “However, that will not prevent my delivering the message. By the way, may I ask which shoulder?”

“Shoulder!”

“Which shoulder is sprung.”

“Oh, of course! The right shoulder, and it is sprung pretty badly, too, Cousin Lance says. How very stupid of me to ride over here for a freight wreck!”

McCloud felt humiliated at having nothing better worth while to offer. “It was a very bad one,” he ventured.

“But not of the kind I can be of any help at, I fear.”

McCloud smiled. “We are certainly short of help.”

Dicksie brought her horse’s head around. She felt again of the girth as she replied, “Not such as I can supply, I’m afraid.” And with the words she stepped away, as if preparing to mount.

McCloud intervened. “I hope you won’t go away without resting your horse. The sun is so hot. Mayn’t I offer you some sort of refreshment?”

Dicksie Dunning thought not.

"The sun is very warm," persisted McCloud.

Dicksie smoothed her gauntlet in the assured manner natural to her. "I am pretty well used to it."

But McCloud held on. "Several cars of fruit were destroyed in the wreck. I can offer you any quantity of grapes–crates of them are spoiling over there–and pears."

"Thank you, I am just from luncheon."

"And I have cooled water in the car. I hope you won't refuse that, so far out in the desert."

Dicksie laughed a little. "Do you call this far? I don't; and I don't call this desert by any means. Thank you ever so much for the water, but I'm not in the least thirsty."

"It was kind of you even to think of extending help. I wish you would let me send some fruit over to your ranch. It is only spoiling here."

Dicksie stroked the neck of her horse. "It is about eighteen miles to the ranch house."

"I don't call that far."

"Oh, it isn't," she returned hastily, professing not to notice the look that went with the words, "except for perishable things!" Then, as if acknowledging her disadvantage, she added, swinging her bridle-rein around, "I am under obligations for the offer, just the same."

"At least, won't you let your horse drink?" McCloud threw the force of an appeal into his words, and Dicksie stopped her preparations and appeared to waver.

"Jim is pretty thirsty, I suppose. Have you plenty of water?"

"A tender full. Had I better lead him down while you wait up on the hill in the shade?"

"Can't I ride him down?"

"It would be pretty rough riding."

"Oh, Jim goes anywhere," she said, with her attractive indifference to situations. "If you don't mind helping me mount."

"With pleasure."

She stood waiting for his hand, and McCloud stood, not knowing just what to do. She glanced at him expectantly. The sun grew intensely hot.

"You will have to show me how," he stammered at last.

"Don't you know?"

He mentally cursed the technical education that left him helpless at such a moment, but it was useless to pretend. "Frankly, I don't!"

"Just give me your hand. Oh, not in that way! But never mind, I'll walk," she suggested, catching up her skirt.

"The rocks will cut your boots all to pieces. Suppose you tell me what to do this once," he said, assuming some confidence. "I'll never forget."

"Why, if you will just give me your hand for my foot, I can manage, you know."

He did not know, but she lifted her skirt graciously, and her crushed boot rested easily for a moment in his hand. She rose in the air above him before he could well comprehend. He felt the quick spring from his supporting hand, and it was an instant of exhilaration. Then she balanced herself with a flushed laugh in the saddle, and he guided her ahead among the loose rocks, the horse nosing at his elbow as they picked their way.

Crossing the track, they gained better ground. As they reached the switch and passed a box car, Jim shied, and Dicksie spoke sharply to him. McCloud turned.

In the shade of the car lay the tramp.

"That man lying there frightened him," explained Dicksie. "Oh," she exclaimed suddenly, "he has been hurt!" She turned away her head. "Is that the man who was in the wreck?"

"Yes."

"Do something for him. He must be suffering terribly."

“The men gave him some water awhile ago, and when we moved him into the shade we thought he was dead.”

“He isn’t dead yet!” Dicksie’s face, still averted, had grown white. “I saw him move. Can’t you do something for him?”

She reined up at a little distance. McCloud bent over the man a moment and spoke to him. When he rose he called to the men on the track. “You are right,” he said, rejoining Dicksie; “he is very much alive. His name is Wickwire; he is a cowboy.”

“A cowboy!”

“A tramp cowboy.”

“What can you do with him?”

“I’ll have the men put him in the caboose and send him to Barnhardt’s hospital at Medicine Bend when the engine comes back. He may live yet. If he does, he can thank you for it.”

CHAPTER IV
GEORGE McCLOUD

McCloud was an exception to every tradition that goes to make up a mountain railroad man. He was from New England, with a mild voice and a hand that roughened very slowly. McCloud was a classmate of Morris Blood's at the Boston "Tech," and the acquaintance begun there continued after the two left school, with a scattering fire of letters between the mountains and New England, as few and as far between as men's letters usually scatter after an ardent school acquaintance.

There were just two boys in the McCloud family–John and George. One had always been intended for the church, the other for science. Somehow the boys got mixed in their cradles, or, what is the same matter, in their assignments, and John got into the church. For George, who ought to have been a clergyman, nothing was left but a long engineering course for which, after he got it, he appeared to have no use. However, it seemed a little late to shift the life alignments. John had the pulpit and appeared disposed to keep it, and George was left, like a New England farm, to wonder what had become of himself.

It is, nevertheless, odd how matters come about. John McCloud, a prosperous young clergyman, stopped on a California trip at Medicine Bend to see brother George's classmate and something of a real Western town. He saw nothing sensational–it was there, but he did not see it–but he found both hospitality and gentlemen, and, if surprised, was too well-bred to admit it. His one-day stop ran on to several days. He was a guest at the Medicine Bend Club, where he found men who had not forgotten the Harvard Greek plays. He rode in private cars and ate antelope steak grilled by Glover's own darky boy, who had roasted buffalo hump for the Grand Duke Alexis as far back as 1871, and still hashed his browned potatoes in ragtime; and with the sun breaking clear over the frosty table-lands, a ravenous appetite, and a day's shooting in prospect, the rhythm had a particularly cheerful sound. John was asked to occupy a Medicine Bend pulpit, and before Sunday the fame of his laugh and his marksmanship had spread so far that Henry Markover, the Yale cowboy, rode in thirty-two miles to hear him preach. In leaving, John McCloud, in a seventh heaven of enthusiasm over the high country, asked Morris Blood why he could not find something for George out there; and Blood, not even knowing the boy wanted to come, wrote for him, and asked Bucks to give him a job. Possibly, being over-solicitous, George was nervous when he talked to Bucks; possibly the impression left by his big, strong, bluff brother John made against the boy; at all events, Bucks, after he talked with George, shook his head. "I could make a first-class railroad man out of the preacher, Morris, but not out of the brother. Yes, I've talked with him. He can't do anything but figure elevations, and, by heaven, we can't feed our own engineers here now." So George found himself stranded in the mountains.

Morris Blood was cut up over it, but George McCloud took it quietly. "I'm no worse off here than I was back there, Morris." Blood, at that, plucked up courage to ask George to take a job in the Cold Springs mines, and George jumped at it. It was impossible to get a white man to live at Cold Springs after he could save money enough to get away, so George was welcomed as assistant superintendent at the Number Eight Mine, with no salary to speak of and all the work.

In one year everybody had forgotten him. Western men, on the average, show a higher heart temperature than Eastern men, but they are tolerably busy people and have their own troubles. "Be patient," Morris Blood had said to him. "Sometime there will be more railroad work in these mountains; then, perhaps, your darned engineering may come into play. I wish you knew how to sell cigars."

Meantime, McCloud stuck to the mine, and insensibly replaced his Eastern tissue with Western. In New England he had been carefully moulded by several generations of gentlemen, but

never baked hard. The mountains put the crust on him. For one thing, the sun and wind, best of all hemlocks, tanned his white skin into a tough all-American leather, seasoned his muscles into rawhide sinews, and, without burdening him with an extra ounce of flesh, sprinkled the red through his blood till, though thin, he looked apoplectic.

Insensibly, too, something else came about. George McCloud developed the rarest of all gifts of temperament, even among men of action–the ability to handle men. In Cold Springs, indeed, it was a case either of handling or of being handled. McCloud got along with his men and, with the tough element among them, usually through persuasion; but he proved, too, that he could inspire confidence even with a club.

One day, coming down "special" from Bear Dance, Gordon Smith, who bore the nickname Whispering Smith, rode with President Bucks in the privacy of his car. The day had been long, and the alkali lay light on the desert. The business in hand had been canvassed, and the troubles put aside for chicken, coffee, and cigars, when Smith, who did not smoke, told the story of something he had seen the day before at Cold Springs that pleased him.

The men in the Number Eight Mine had determined to get rid of some Italians, and after a good deal of rowing had started in to catch one of them and hang him. They had chosen a time when McCloud, the assistant superintendent of the mine, was down with mountain fever. It was he who had put the Italians into the mine. He had already defended them from injury, and would be likely, it was known, to do so again if he were able. On this day a mob had been chasing the Dagos, and had at length captured one. They were running him down street to a telegraph pole when the assistant superintendent appeared in scant attire and stopped them. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, he hustled their victim into the only place of refuge at hand, a billiard hall. The mob rushed the hall. In the farthest corner the unlucky Italian, bleeding like a bullock and insane with fright, knelt, clinging to McCloud's shaky knees. In trying to make the back door the two had been cut off, and the sick boss had got into a corner behind a pool-table to make his stand. In his pocket he had a pistol, knowing that to use it meant death to him as well as to the wretch he was trying to save. Fifty men were yelling in the room. They had rope, hatchets, a sprinkling of guns, and whiskey enough to burn the town, and in the corner behind a pool-table stood the mining boss with mountain fever, the Dago, and a broken billiard-cue.

Bucks took the cigar from his mouth, leaned forward in his chair, and stretched his heavy chin out of his neck as if the situation now promised a story. The leader, Smith continued, was the mine blacksmith, a strapping Welshman, from whom McCloud had taken the Italian in the street. The blacksmith had a revolver, and was crazy with liquor. McCloud singled him out in the crowd, pointed a finger at him, got the attention of the men, and lashed him across the table with his tongue until the blacksmith opened fire on him with his revolver, McCloud all the while shaking his finger at him and abusing him like a pickpocket. "The crowd couldn't believe its eyes," Gordon Smith concluded, "and McCloud was pushing for the blacksmith with his cue when Kennedy and I squirmed through to the front and relieved the tension. McCloud wasn't hit."

"What is that mining man's name?" asked Bucks, reaching for a message clip.

"McCloud."

"First name?" continued Bucks mechanically.

"George."

Bucks looked at his companion in surprise. Then he spoke, and a feeling of self-abasement was reflected in his words. "George McCloud," he echoed. "Did you say George? Why, I must know that man. I turned him down once for a job. He looked so peaceable I thought he was too soft for us." The president laid down his cigar with a gesture of disgust. "And yet there really are people along this line that think I'm clever. I haven't judgment enough to operate a trolley car. It's a shame to take the money they give me for running this system, Gordon. Hanged if I didn't think that fellow was too soft." He called the flagman over. "Tell Whitmyer we will stay at Cold Springs to-night."

"I thought you were going through to Medicine Bend," suggested Smith as the trainman disappeared.

"McCloud," repeated Bucks, taking up his cigar and throwing back his head in a cloud of smoke.

"Yes," assented his companion; "but I am going through to Medicine Bend, Mr. Bucks."

"Do."

"How am I to do it?"

"Take the car and send it back to-morrow on Number Three."

"Thank you, if you won't need it to-night."

"I sha'n't. I am going to stay at Cold Springs to-night and hunt up McCloud."

"But that man is in bed in a very bad way; you can't see him. He is going to die."

"No, he isn't. I am going to hunt him up and have him taken care of."

That night Bucks, in the twilight, was sitting by McCloud's bed, smoking and looking him over. "Don't mind me," he said when he entered the room, lifted the ill-smelling lamp from the table, and, without taking time to blow it out, pitched it through the open window. "I heard you were sick, and just looked in to see how they were taking care of you. Wilcox," he added, turning to the nurse he had brought in–a barber who wanted to be a railroad man, and had agreed to step into the breach and nurse McCloud–"have a box of miner's candles sent up from the roundhouse. We have some down there; if not, buy a box and send me the bill."

McCloud, who after the rioting had crawled back to bed with a temperature of 105 degrees, knew the barber, but felt sure that a lunatic had wandered in with him, and immediately bent his feeble mental energies on plans for getting rid of a dangerous man. When Bucks sat down by him and continued talking at the nurse, McCloud caught nothing of what was said until Bucks turned quietly toward him. "They tell me, McCloud, you have the fever."

The sick man, staring with sunken eyes, rose half on his elbow in astonishment to look again at his visitor, but Bucks eased him back with an admonition to guard his strength. McCloud's temperature had already risen with the excitement of seeing a man throw his lamp out of the window. Bucks, meantime, working carefully to seem unconcerned and incensing McCloud with great clouds of smoke, tried to discuss his case with him as he had already done with the mine surgeon. McCloud, thinking it best to humor a crazy man, responded quietly. "The doctor said yesterday," he explained, "it was mountain fever, and he wants to put me into an ice-pack."

Bucks objected vigorously to the ice-pack.

"The doctor tells me that it is the latest treatment for that class of fevers in the Prussian army," answered McCloud feebly, but getting interested in spite of himself.

"That's a good thing, no doubt, for the Prussian army," replied Bucks, "but, McCloud, in the first place, you are not a Dutchman; in the second, you have not got mountain fever–not in my judgment."

McCloud, confident now that he had an insane man on his hands, held his peace.

"Not a symptom of mountain fever," continued Bucks calmly; "you have what looks to me like gastritis, but the homeopaths," he added, "have a better name for it. Is it stomatitis, McCloud? I forget."

The sick man, confounded by such learning, determined to try one question, and, if he was at fault, to drag his gun from under his pillow and sell his life as dearly as possible. Summoning his waning strength, he looked hard at Bucks. "Just let me ask you one question. I never saw you before. Are you a doctor?"

"No, I'm a railroad man; my name is Bucks." McCloud rose half up in bed with amazement. "They'll kill you if you lie here a week," continued Bucks. "In just a week. Now I'll tell you my plan. I'll take you down in the morning in my car to Medicine Bend; this barber will go with us.

There in the hospital you can get everything you need, and I can make you comfortable. What do you say?"

McCloud looked at his benefactor solemnly, but if hope flickered for an instant in his eyes it soon died. Bucks said afterward that he looked like a cold-storage squab, just pinfeathers and legs. "Shave him clean," said he, "and you could have counted his teeth through his cheeks."

The sick man turned his face to the wall. "It's kind enough," he muttered, "but I guess it's too late."

Bucks did not speak for some time. Twilight had faded above the hills, and only the candle lighted the room. Then the master of mountain men, grizzled and brown, turned his eyes again to the bed. McCloud was staring at the ceiling.

"We have a town of your name down on the plains, McCloud," said Bucks, blowing away the cigar smoke after the long silence. "It is one of our division points, and a good one."

"I know the town," responded McCloud. "It was named after one of our family."

"I guess not."

"It was, though," said McCloud wearily.

"I think," returned Bucks, "you must be mistaken. The man that town was named after belonged to the fighting McClouds."

"That is my family."

"Then where is your fight? When I propose to put you into my car and pull you out of this, why do you say it is too late? It is never too late."

McCloud made no answer, and Bucks ran on: "For a man that worked out as well as you did yesterday in a trial heat with a billiard-cue, I should say you could turn a handspring or two yet if you had to. For that matter, if you don't want to be moved, I can run a spur in here to your door in three hours in the morning. By taking out the side-wall we can back the car right up to the bed. Why not? Or we can stick a few hydraulic jacks under the sills, raise the house, and push your bed right on the observation platform." He got McCloud to laughing, and lighted a fresh cigar. A framed photograph hung on one of the bare walls of the room, and it caught the eye of the railroad man. He walked close to it, disinfected it with smoke, brushed the dust from the glass, and examined the print. "That looks like old Van Dyne College campus, hanged if it doesn't!"

McCloud was watching him. "It is a photograph of the campus."

"McCloud, are you a Van Dyne man?"

"I did my college work there before I went to Boston."

Bucks stood motionless. "Poor little old Van Dyne! Why, my brother Sam taught at Van Dyne. No, you would not have known him; he's dead. Never before west of the Missouri River have I seen a Van Dyne man. You are the first." He shook his head as he sat down again. "It is crowded out now: no money, no prestige, half-starved professors with their elbows out, the president working like a dog all the week and preaching somewhere every Sunday to earn five dollars. But, by Heaven, they turned out men! Did you know Bug Robinson?" he asked suddenly.

"He gave me my degree."

"Old Bug! He was Sam's closest friend, McCloud. It's good to see him getting the recognition he deserves, isn't it? Do you know, I send him an annual every year? Yes, sir! And one year I had the whole blooming faculty out here on a fossil expedition; but, by Heaven, McCloud, some of them looked more like megatheriums than what they dug up did."

"I heard about that expedition."

"I never got to college. I had to hustle. I'll get out of here before I tire you. Wilcox will be here all night, and my China boy is making some broth for you now. You'll feel better in the morning."

Ten weeks later McCloud was sent from Medicine Bend up on the Short Line as trainmaster, and on the Short Line he learned railroading.

"That's how I came here," said George McCloud to Farrell Kennedy a long time afterward, at Medicine Bend. "I had shrivelled and starved three years out there in the desert. I lived with those cattle underground till I had forgotten my own people, my own name, my own face–and Bucks came along one day with Whispering Smith and dragged me out of my coffin. They had it ordered, and it being a small size and 'onhandy,' as the undertaker said, I paid for it and told him to store it for me. Well, do you think I ever could forget either of those men, Farrell?"

McCloud's fortunes thus threw him first into the operating department of the mountain lines, but his heart was in the grades and the curves. To him the interest in the trainwork was the work of the locomotives toiling with the heavy loads up the canyons and across the uneven plateaus and through the deep gorges of the inner range, where the panting exhaust, choked between sheer granite walls, roared in a mighty protest against the burden put by the steep grades on the patient machines.

In all the group of young men then on the mountain division, obscure and unknown at the time, but destined within so few years to be scattered far and wide as constructionists with records made in the rebuilding operations through the Rocky Mountains, none was less likely to attract attention than McCloud. Bucks, who, indeed, could hardly be reckoned so much of the company as its head, was a man of commanding proportions physically. Like Glover, Bucks was a giant in stature, and the two men, when together, could nowhere escape notice; they looked, in a word, their part, fitted to cope with the tremendous undertakings that had fallen to their lot. Callahan, the chess-player on the Overland lines, the man who could hold large combinations of traffic movement constantly in his head and by intuition reach the result of a given problem before other men could work it out, was, like Morris Blood, the master of tonnage, of middle age. But McCloud, when he went to the mountain division, in youthfulness of features was boyish, and when he left he was still a boy, bronzed, but young of face in spite of a lifetime's pressure and worry crowded into three years. He himself counted this physical make-up as a disadvantage. "It has embroiled me in no end of trouble, because I couldn't convince men I was in earnest until I made good in some hard way," he complained once to Whispering Smith. "I never could acquire even a successful habit of swearing, so I had to learn to fight."

When, one day in Boney Street in Medicine Bend, he threw open the door of Marion Sinclair's shop, flung his hat sailing along the showcase with his war-cry, and called to her in the back rooms, she thought he had merely run in to say he was in town.

"How do you do? What do you think? You're going to have an old boarder back," he cried. "I'm coming to Medicine Bend, superintendent of the division!"

"Mr. McCloud!" Marion Sinclair clasped her hands and dropped into a chair. "Have they made you superintendent already?"

"Well, I like that! Do you want them to wait till I'm gray-headed?"

Marion threw her hands to her own head. "Oh, don't say anything about gray hairs. My head won't bear inspection. But I can't get over this promotion coming so soon–this whole big division! Well, I congratulate you very sincerely–"

"Oh, but that isn't it! I suppose anybody will congratulate me. But where am I to board? Have you a cook? You know how I went from bad to worse after you left Cold Springs. May I have my meals here with you as I used to there?"

"Why, I suppose you can, yes, if you can stand the cooking. I have an apprentice, Mr. Dancing's daughter, who does pretty well. She lives here with me, and is learning the business. But I sha'n't take as much as you used to pay me, for I'm doing so much better down here."

"Let me run that end of it, will you? I shall be doing better down here myself."

They laughed as they bantered. Marion Sinclair wore gold spectacles, but they did not hide the delightful good-nature in her eyes. On the third finger of her slender left hand she wore, too, a gold band that explained the gray in her hair at twenty-six.

This was the wife of Murray Sinclair, whom he had brought to the mountains from her far-away Wisconsin home. Within a year he had broken her heart so far as it lay in him to do it, but he could not break her charm nor her spirit. She was too proud to go back, when forced to leave him, and had set about earning her own living in the country to which she had come as a bride. She put on spectacles, she mutilated her heavy brown hair and to escape notice and secure the obscurity that she craved, her name, Marion, became, over the door of her millinery shop and in her business, only "M. Sinclair."

Cold Springs, where Sinclair had first brought her when he had headquarters there as foreman of bridges, had proved a hopeless place for the millinery business–at least, in the way that Marion ran it. The women that had husbands had no money to buy hats with, and the women without husbands wore gaudy headgear, and were of the kind that made Marion's heart creep when they opened the shop door. What was worse, they were inclined to joke with her, as if there must be a community of interest between a deserted woman and women who had deserted womanhood. To this business Marion would not cater, and in consequence her millinery affairs sometimes approached collapse. She could, however, cook extraordinarily well, and, with the aid of a servant-maid, could always provide for a boarder or two–perhaps a railroad man or a mine superintendent to whom she could serve meals, and who, like all mountain men, were more than generous in their accounting with women. Among these standbys of hers was McCloud. McCloud had always been her friend, and when she left Cold Springs and moved to Medicine Bend to set up her little shop in Boney Street near Fort, she had lost him. Yet somehow, to compensate Marion for other cruel things in the mountains, Providence seemed to raise up a new friend for her wherever she went. In Medicine Bend she did not know a soul, but almost the first customer that walked into her shop–and she was a customer worth while–was Dicksie Dunning of the Crawling Stone.

CHAPTER V
THE CRAWLING STONE

Where the mountain chains of North America have been flung up into a continental divide, the country in many of its aspects is still terrible. In extent alone this mountain empire is grandiose. The swiftest transcontinental trains approaching its boundaries at night find night falling again before they have fairly penetrated it. Geologically severe, this region in geological store is the richest of the continent; physically forbidding beyond all other stretches of North America, the Barren Land alone excepted, in this region lie its gentlest valleys. Here the desert is most grotesque, and here are pastoral retreats the most secluded. It is the home of the Archean granite, and its basins are of a fathomless dust. Under its sagebrush wastes the skeletons of earth's hugest mammals lie beside behemoth and the monsters of the deep. The eternal snow, the granite peak, the sandstone butte, the lava-bed, the gray desert, the far horizon are familiar here. With the sunniest and bluest of skies, this is the range of the deadliest storms, and its delightful summers contrast with the dreadest cold.

Here the desert of death simulates a field of cooling snow, green hills lie black in the dazzling light of day, limpid waters run green over arsenic stone, and sunset betricks the fantastic rock with column and capital and dome. Clouds burst here above arid wastes, and where dew is precious the skies are most prodigal in their downpour. If the torrent bed is dry, distrust it.

This vast mountain shed parts rivers whose waters find two oceans, and their valleys are the natural highways up which railroads wind to the crest of the continent. To the mountain engineer the waterway is the sphinx that holds in its silence the riddle of his success; with him lies the problem of providing a railway across ranges which often defy the hoofs of a horse.

The construction engineer studies the course of the mountain water. The water is both his ally and his enemy–ally because it alone has made possible his undertakings; enemy because it fights to destroy his puny work, just as it fights to level the barriers that oppose him. Like acid spread on copperplate, water etches the canyons in the mountain slopes and spreads wide the valleys through the plains. Among these scarcely known ranges of the Rocky Mountain chain the Western rivers have their beginnings. When white men crowded the Indian from the plains he retreated to the mountains, and in their valleys made his final stand against the aggressor. The scroll of this invasion of the mountain West by the white man has been unrolled, read, and put away within a hundred years, and of the agencies that made possible the swiftness of the story transportation overshadows all others. The first railroad put across those mountains cost twenty-five thousand miles of reconnaissances and fifteen thousand miles of instrument surveys. Since the day of that undertaking a generation of men has passed, and in the interval the wilderness that those men penetrated has been transformed. The Indian no longer extorts terms from his foe: he is not.

Where the tepee stood the rodman drives his stakes, and the country of the great Indian rivers, save one, has been opened for years to the railroad. That one is the Crawling Stone. The valley of Crawling Stone River marked for more than a decade the dead line between the Overland Route of the white man and the last country of the Sioux. It was long after the building of the first line before even an engineer's reconnaissance was made in the Crawling Stone country. Then, within ten years, three surveys were made, two on the north side of the river and one on the south side, by interests seeking a coast outlet. Three reports made in this way gave varying estimates of the expense of putting a line up the valley, but the three coincided in this, that the cost would be prohibitive. Engineers of reputation had in this respect agreed, but Glover, who looked after such work for Bucks, remained unconvinced, and before McCloud was put into the operating department on the Short Line he was asked by Glover to run a preliminary up Crawling Stone Valley. Before the date of his report the conclusions reached by other engineers had stood unchallenged.

The valley was not unknown to McCloud. His first year in the mountains, in which, fitted as thoroughly as he could fit himself for his profession, he had come West and found himself unable to get work, had been spent hunting, fishing, and wandering, often cold and often hungry, in the upper Crawling Stone country. The valley in itself offers to a constructionist no insuperable obstacles; the difficulty is presented in the canyon where the river bursts through the Elbow Mountains. South of this canyon, McCloud, one day on a hunting trip, found himself with two Indians pocketed in the rough country, and was planning how to escape passing a night away from camp when his companions led him past a vertical wall of rock a thousand feet high, split into a narrow defile down which they rode, as it broadened out, for miles. They emerged upon an open country that led without a break into the valley of the Crawling Stone below the canyon. Afterward, when he had become a railroad man, McCloud, sitting at a camp-fire with Glover and Morris Blood, heard them discussing the coveted and impossible line up the valley. He had been taken into the circle of constructionists and was told of the earlier reports against the line. He thought he knew something about the Elbow Mountains, and disputed the findings, offering in two days' ride to take the men before him to the pass called by the Indians The Box, and to take them through it. Glover called it a find, and a big one, and though more immediate matters in the strategy of territorial control then came before him, the preliminary was ordered and McCloud's findings were approved. McCloud himself was soon afterward engrossed in the problems of operating the mountain division; but the dream of his life was to build the Crawling Stone Line with a maximum grade of eight tenths through The Box.

The prettiest stretch of Crawling Stone Valley lies within twenty miles of Medicine Bend. There it lies widest, and has the pick of water and grass between Medicine Bend and the Mission Mountains. Cattlemen went into the Crawling Stone country before the Indians had wholly left it. The first house in the valley was the Stone Ranch, built by Richard Dunning, and it still stands overlooking the town of Dunning at the junction of the Frenchman Creek with the Crawling Stone. The Frenchman is fed by unfailing springs, and when by summer sun and wind every smaller stream in the middle basin has been licked dry, the Frenchman runs cold and swift between its russet hills. Richard Dunning, being on the border of the Indian country, built for his ranch-house a rambling stone fortress. He had chosen, it afterward proved, the choice spot in the valley, and he stocked it with cattle when yearlings could be picked up in Medicine Bend at ten dollars a head. He got together a great body of valley land when it could be had for the asking, and became the rich man of the Long Range.

The Dunnings were Kentuckians. Richard was a bridge engineer and builder, and under Brodie built some of the first bridges on the mountain division, notably the great wooden bridge at Smoky Creek. Richard brought out his nephew, Lance Dunning. He taught Lance bridge-building, and Murray Sinclair, who began as a cowboy on the Stone Ranch, learned bridge-building from Richard Dunning. The Dunnings both came West, though at different times, as young men and unmarried, and, as far as Western women were concerned, might always have remained so. But a Kentucky cousin, Betty, one of the Fairfield Dunnings, related to Richard within the sixth or eighth degree, came to the mountains for her health. Betty's mother had brought Richard up as a boy, and Betty, when he left Fairfield, was a baby. But Dick–as they knew him at home–and the mother wrote back and forth, and he persuaded her to send Betty out for a trip, promising he would send her back in a year a well woman.

Betty came with only her colored maid, old Puss Dunning, who had taken her from the nurse's arms when she was born and taken care of her ever since. The two–the tall Kentucky girl and the bent mammy–arrived at the Stone Ranch one day in June, and Richard, done then with bridges and looking after his ranch interests, had already fallen violently in love with Betty. She was delicate, but, if those in Medicine Bend who remembered her said true, a lovely creature. Remaining in the mountains was the last thing Betty had ever thought of, but no one, man or woman, could withstand

Dick Dunning. She fell quite in love with him the first time she set eyes on him in Medicine Bend, for he was very handsome in the saddle, and Betty was fairly wild about horses. So Dick Dunning wooed a fond mistress and married her and buried her, and all within hardly more than a year.

But in that year they were very happy, never two happier, and when she slept away her suffering she left him, as a legacy, a tiny baby girl. Puss brought the mite of a creature in its swaddling-clothes to the sick mother,–very, very sick then,–and poor Betty turned her dark eyes on it, kissed it, looked at her husband and whispered "Dicksie," and died. Dicksie had been Betty's pet name for her mountain lover, so the father said the child's name should be Dicksie and nothing else; and his heart broke and soon he died. Nothing else, storm or flood, death or disaster, had ever moved Dick Dunning; then a single blow killed him. He rode once in a while over the ranch, a great tract by that time of twenty thousand acres, all in one body, all under fence, up and down both sides of the big river, in part irrigated, swarming with cattle–none of it stirred Dick! and with little Dicksie in his arms he slept away his suffering.

So Dicksie was left, as her mother had been, to Puss, while Lance looked after the ranch, swore at the price of cattle, and played cards at Medicine Bend. At ten, Dicksie, as thoroughly spoiled as a pet baby could be by a fool mammy, a fond cousin, and a galaxy of devoted cowboys, was sent, in spite of crying and flinging, to a far-away convent–her father had planned everything–where in many tears she learned that there were other things in the world besides cattle and mountains and sunshine and tall, broad-hatted horsemen to swing from their stirrups and pick her hat from the ground–just to see little Dicksie laugh–when they swooped past the house to the corrals. When she came back from Kentucky, her grandmother dead and her schooldays finished, all the land she could see in the valley was hers, and all the living creatures in the fields. It seemed perfectly natural, because since childhood even the distant mountains and their snows had been Dicksie's.

CHAPTER VI
THE FINAL APPEAL

Sinclair's discharge was a matter of comment for the whole country, from the ranch-houses to the ranges. For a time Sinclair himself refused utterly to believe that McCloud could keep him off the division. His determination to get back led him to carry his appeal to the highest quarters, to Glover and to Bucks himself. But Sinclair, able as he was, had passed the limit of endurance and had long been marked for an accounting. He had been a railroad man to whom the West spelled license, and, while a valuable man, had long been a source of demoralization to the forces of the division. In the railroad life clearly defined plans are often too deeply laid to fathom, and it was impossible for even so acute a man as Sinclair to realize that he was not the victim of an accident, but that he must look to his own record for the real explanation of his undoing. He was not the only man to suffer in the shake-out that took place under the new superintendent; but he seemed the only one unable to realize that Bucks, patient and long-suffering, had put McCloud into the mountain saddle expressly to deal with cases such as his. In the West sympathy is quick but not always discerning. Medicine Bend took Sinclair's grievance as its own. No other man in the service had Sinclair's following, and within a week petitions were being circulated through the town not asking merely but calling for his reinstatement. The sporting element of the community to a man were behind Sinclair because he was a sport; the range men were with him because his growing ranch on the Frenchman made him one of them; his own men were with him because he was a far-seeing pirate and divided liberally. Among the railroad men, too, he had much sympathy. Sinclair had always been lavish with presents; brides were remembered by Sinclair, and babies were not forgotten. He could sit up all night with a railroad man that had been hurt, and he could play poker all night with one that was not afraid of getting hurt. In his way, he was a division autocrat, whose vices were varnished by virtues such as these. His hold on the people was so strong that they could not believe the company would not reinstate him. In spite of the appointment of his successor, Phil Hailey, a mountain boy and the son of an old-time bridge foreman, rumor assigned again and again definite dates for Sinclair's return to work; but the dates never materialized. The bridge machinery of the big division moved on in even rhythm. A final and determined appeal from the deposed autocrat for a hearing at last brought Glover and Morris Blood, the general manager, to Medicine Bend for a final conference. Callahan too was there with his pipe, and they talked quietly with Sinclair–reminded him of how often he had been warned, showed him how complete a record they had of his plundering, and Glover gave to him Bucks's final word that he could never again work on the mountain division.

A pride grown monstrous with prestige long undisputed broke under the final blow. The big fellow put his face in his hands and burst into tears, and the men before him sat confused and uncomfortable at his outburst of feeling. It was only for a moment. Sinclair raised his hand, shook his long hair, and swore an oath against the company and the men that curled the very smoke in Callahan's pipe, Callahan, outraged at the insolence, sprang to his feet, resenting Sinclair's fury. Choking with anger he warned him not to go too far. The two were ready to spring at each other's throat when Farrell Kennedy stepped between them. Sinclair, drunk with rage, called for McCloud; but he submitted quietly to Kennedy's reproof, and with a semblance of self-control begged that McCloud be sent for. Kennedy, without complying, gradually pushed Sinclair out of the room and, without seeming officious, walked with him down the hall and quite out of the building.

CHAPTER VII
IN MARION'S SHOP

In Boney Street, Medicine Bend, stands an early-day row of one-story buildings; they once made up a prosperous block, which has long since fallen into the decay of paintless days. There is in Boney Street a livery stable, a second-hand store, a laundry, a bakery, a moribund grocery, and a bicycle shop, and at the time of this story there was also Marion Sinclair's millinery shop; but the better class of Medicine Bend business, such as the gambling houses, saloons, pawnshops, restaurants, barber shops, and those sensitive, clean-shaven, and alert establishments known as "gents' stores," had deserted Boney Street for many years. Bats fly in the dark of Boney Street while Front Street at the same hour is a blaze of electricity and frontier hilarity. The millinery store stood next to the corner of Fort Street. The lot lay in an "L," and at the rear of the store the first owner had built a small connecting cottage to live in. This faced on Fort Street, so that Marion had her shop and living-rooms communicating, and yet apart. The store building is still pointed out as the former shop of Marion Sinclair, where George McCloud boarded when the Crawling Stone Line was built, where Whispering Smith might often have been seen, where Sinclair himself was last seen alive in Medicine Bend, where Dicksie Dunning's horse dragged her senseless one wild mountain night, and where, indeed, for a time the affairs of the whole mountain division seemed to tangle in very hard knots.

As to the millinery business, it was never, after Marion bought the shop, more than moderately successful. The demand that existed in Medicine Bend for red hats of the picture sort Marion declined to recognize. For customers who sought these she turned out hats of sombre coloring calculated to inspire gloom rather than revelry, and she naturally failed to hold what might be termed the miscellaneous business. But after Dicksie Dunning of the Stone Ranch, fresh from the convent, rode into the shop, or if not into it nearly so, and, gliding through the door, ordered a hat out of hand, Marion always had some business. All Medicine Bend knew Dicksie Dunning, who dressed stunningly, rode famously, and was so winningly democratic that half the town never called her anything, at a distance, but Dicksie.

The first hat was a small affair but haughty. The materials were unheard of in Marion's stock and had to be sent for. Marion's arrangements with the jobbing houses always had a C. O. D. complexion; the jobbers maintained that this saved book-keeping, and Marion, who of course never knew any better, paid the double express charges like a lamb. She acted, too, as banker for the other impecunious tradespeople in the block, and as this included nearly all of them she was often pressed for funds herself. McCloud undertook sometimes to intervene and straighten out her millinery affairs. One evening he went so far as to attempt an inventory of her stock and some schedule of her accounts; but Marion, with the front-shop curtains closely drawn and McCloud perspiring on a step-ladder, inspecting boxes of feathers and asking stern questions, would look so pathetically sweet and helpless when she tried to recall what things cost that McCloud could not be angry with her; indeed, the pretty eyes behind the patient spectacles would disarm any one. In the end he took inventory on the basis of the retail prices, dividing it afterward by five, as Marion estimated the average profit in the business at five hundred per cent.–this being what the woman she bought out had told her.

How then, McCloud asked himself, could Marion be normally hard pressed for money? He talked to her learnedly about fixed charges, but even these seemed difficult to arrive at. There was no rent, because the building belonged to the railroad company, and when the real-estate and tax man came around and talked to McCloud about rent for the Boney Street property, McCloud told him to chase himself. There was no insurance, because no one would dream of insuring Marion's

stock boxes; there were no bills payable, because no travelling man would advise a line of credit to an inexperienced and, what was worse, an unpractical milliner. Marion did her own trimming, so there were no salaries except to Katie Dancing. It puzzled McCloud to find the leak. How could he know that Marion was keeping nearly all the block supplied with funds? So McCloud continued to raise the price of his table-board, and, though Marion insisted he was paying her too much, held that he must be eating her out of house and home.

In her dining-room, which connected through a curtained door with the shop, McCloud sat one day alone eating his dinner. Marion was in front serving a customer. McCloud heard voices in the shop, but gave no heed till a man walked through the curtained doorway and he saw Murray Sinclair standing before him. The stormy interview with Callahan and Blood at the Wickiup had taken place just a week before, and McCloud, after what Sinclair had then threatened, though not prepared, felt as he saw him that anything might occur. McCloud being in possession of the little room, however, the initiative fell on Sinclair, who, looking his best, snatched his hat from his head and bowed ironically. "My mistake," he said blandly.

"Come right in," returned McCloud, not knowing whether Marion had a possible hand in her husband's unexpected appearance. "Do you want to see me?"

"I don't," smiled Sinclair; "and to be perfectly frank," he added with studied consideration, "I wish to God I never had seen you. Well–you've thrown me, McCloud."

"You've thrown yourself, haven't you, Murray?"

"From your point of view, of course. But, McCloud, this is a small country for two points of view. Do you want to get out of it, or do you want me to?"

"The country suits me, Sinclair."

"No man that has ever played me dirt can stay here while I stay." Sinclair, with a hand on the portière, was moving from the doorway into the room. McCloud in a leisurely way rose, though with a slightly flushed face, and at that juncture Marion ran into the room and spoke abruptly. "Here is the silk, Mr. Sinclair," she exclaimed, handing to him a package she had not finished wrapping. "I meant you to wait in the other room."

"It was an accidental intrusion," returned Sinclair, maintaining his irony. "I have apologized, and Mr. McCloud and I understand one another better than ever."

"Please say to Miss Dunning," continued Marion, nervous and insistent, "that the band for her riding-hat hasn't come yet, but it should be here to-morrow."

As she spoke McCloud leaned across the table, resolved to take advantage of the opening, if it cost him his life. "And by the way, Mr. Sinclair, Miss Dunning wished me to say to you that the lovely bay colt you sent her had sprung his shoulder badly, the hind shoulder, I think, but they are doing everything possible for it and they think it will make a great horse."

Sinclair's snort at the information was a marvel of indecision. Was he being made fun of? Should he draw and end it? But Marion faced him resolutely as he stood, and talking in the most business-like way she backed him out of the room and to the shop door. Balked of his opportunity, he retreated stubbornly but with the utmost politeness, and left with a grin, lashing his tail, so to speak.

Coming back, Marion tried to hide her uneasiness under even tones to McCloud. "I'm sorry he disturbed you. I was attending to a customer and had to ask him to wait a moment."

"Don't apologize for having a customer."

"He lives over beyond the Stone Ranch, you know, and is taking some things out for the Dunnings to-day. He likes an excuse to come in here because it annoys me. Finish your dinner, Mr. McCloud."

"Thank you, I'm done."

"But you haven't eaten anything. Isn't your steak right?"

“It’s fine, but that man–well, you know how I like him and how he likes me. I’ll content myself with digesting my temper.”

CHAPTER VIII
SMOKY CREEK BRIDGE

It was not alone that a defiance makes a bad dinner sauce: there was more than this for McCloud to feed on. He was forced to confess to himself as he walked back to the Wickiup that the most annoying feature of the incident was the least important, namely, that his only enemy in the country should be intrusted with commissions from the Stone Ranch and be carrying packages for Dicksie Dunning. It was Sinclair's trick to do things for people, and to make himself so useful that they must like first his obligingness and afterward himself. Sinclair, McCloud knew, was close in many ways to Lance Dunning. It was said to have been his influence that won Dunning's consent to sell a right of way across the ranch for the new Crawling Stone Line. But McCloud felt it useless to disguise the fact to himself that he now had a second keen interest in the Crawling Stone country–not alone a dream of a line, but a dream of a girl. Sitting moodily in his office, with his feet on the desk, a few nights after his encounter with Sinclair, he recalled her nod as she said good-by. It had seemed the least bit encouraging, and he meditated anew on the only twenty minutes of real pleasurable excitement he had ever felt in his life, the twenty minutes with Dicksie Dunning at Smoky Creek. Her intimates, he had heard, called her Dicksie, and he was vaguely envying her intimates when the night despatcher, Rooney Lee, opened the door and disturbed his reflections.

"How is Number One, Rooney?" called McCloud, as if nothing but the thought of a train movement ever entered his head.

Rooney Lee paused. In his hand he held a message. Rooney's cheeks were hollow and his sunken eyes were large. His face, which was singularly a night face, would shock a stranger, but any man on the division would have given his life for Rooney. The simple fellow had but two living interests–his train-sheets and his chewing tobacco. Sometimes I think that every railroad man earns his salary–even the president. But Rooney was a Past Worthy Master in that unnumbered lodge of railroad slaves who do killing work and have left, when they die, only a little tobacco to show for it. It was on Rooney's account that McCloud's order banishing cuspidors from his office had been rescinded. A few evenings of agony on the despatcher's part when in consultation with his chief, the mournful wandering of his uncomplaining eyes, his struggle to raise an obstinate window before he could answer a question, would have moved a heart harder than McCloud's. The cuspidor had been restored to one corner of the large room, and to this corner Rooney, like a man with a jaw full of birdshot, always walked first. When he turned back to face his chief his face had lost its haunted expression, and he answered with solemn cheer, "On time," or "Fourteen minutes late," as the case might be. This night his face showed something out of the ordinary, and he faced McCloud with evident uneasiness. "Holy smoke, Mr. McCloud, here's a ripper! We've lost Smoky Creek Bridge."

"Lost Smoky Creek Bridge?" echoed McCloud, rising in amazement.

"Burned to-night. Seventy-seven was flagged by the man at the pump station."

"That's a tie-up for your life!" exclaimed McCloud, reaching for the message. "How could it catch fire? Is it burned up?"

"I can't get anything on that yet; this came from Canby. I'll have a good wire in a few minutes and get it all for you."

"Have Phil Hailey and Hyde notified, Rooney, and Reed and Brill Young, and get up a train. Smoky Creek Bridge! By heavens, we are ripped up the back now! What can we do there, Rooney?" He was talking to himself. "There isn't a thing for it on God's earth but switchbacks and five-per-cent. grades down to the bottom of the creek and cribbing across it till the new line is ready. Wire Callahan and Morris Blood, and get everything you can for me before we start."

Ten hours later and many hundreds of miles from the mountain division, President Bucks and a companion were riding in the peace of a June morning down the beautiful Mohawk Valley with an earlier and illustrious railroad man, William C. Brown. The three men were at breakfast in Brown's car. A message was brought in for Bucks. He read it and passed it to his companion, Whispering Smith, who sat at Brown's left hand. The message was from Callahan with the news of the burning of Smoky Creek Bridge. Details were few, because no one on the West End could suggest a plausible cause for the fire.

"What do you think of it, Gordon?" demanded Bucks bluntly.

Whispering Smith seemed at all times bordering on good-natured surprise, and in that normal condition he read Callahan's message. Everything surprised Whispering Smith, even his salary; but an important consequence was that nothing excited him. He seemed to accommodate himself to the unexpected through habitual surprise. It showed markedly in his eyes, which were bright and quite wide open, and, save for his eyes, no feature about him would fix itself in the memory. His round, pleasant face, his heavy brown mustache, the medium build that concealed under its commonplace symmetry an unusual strength, his slightly rounding shoulders bespeaking a not too serious estimate of himself–every characteristic, even to his unobtrusive suit and black hat, made him distinctly an ordinary man–one to be met in the street to-day and passed, and forgotten to-morrow.

He was laughing under Bucks's scrutiny when he handed the message back. "Why, I don't know a thing about it, not a thing; but taking a long shot and speaking by and far, I should say it looks something like first blood for Sinclair," he suggested, and to change the subject lifted his cup of coffee.

"Then it looks like you for the mountains to-night instead of for Weber and Fields's," retorted Bucks, reaching for a cigar. "Brown, why have you never learned to smoke?"

CHAPTER IX
THE MISUNDERSTANDING

No attempt was made to minimize the truth that the blow to the division was a staggering one. The loss of Smoky Creek Bridge put almost a thousand miles of the mountain division out of business. Perishable freight and time freight were diverted to other lines. Passengers were transferred; lunches were served to them in the deep valley, and they were supplied by an ingenuous advertising department with pictures of the historic bridge as it had long stood, and their addresses were taken with the promise of a picture of the ruins. Smoky Creek Bridge had long been famous in mountain song and story. For one generation of Western railroad men it had stood as a monument to the earliest effort to conquer the Rockies with a railroad. Built long before the days of steel, this high and slender link in the first transcontinental line had for thirty years served faithfully at its danger-post, only to fall in the end at the hands of a bridge assassin; nor has the mystery of its fate ever completely been solved, though it is believed to lie with Murray Sinclair in the Frenchman hills. The engineering department and the operating department united in a tremendous effort to bring about a resumption of traffic. Glover's men, pulled off construction, were sent forward in trainloads. Dancing's linemen strung arc-lights along the creek until the canyon twinkled at night like a mountain village, and men in three shifts worked elbow to elbow unceasingly to run the switchbacks down to the creek-bed. There, by cribbing across the bottom, they got in a temporary line.

Train movement was thrown into a spectacle of confusion. Upon the incessant and well-ordered activities of the road the burning of the bridge fell like the heel of a heavy boot on an ant-hill; but the railroad men like ants rose to the emergency, and, where the possible failed, achieved the impossible.

McCloud spent his days at the creek and his nights at Medicine Bend with his assistant and his chief despatcher, advising, counselling, studying out trouble reports, and steadying wherever he could the weakened lines of his operating forces. He was getting his first taste of the trials of the hardest-worked and poorest-paid man in the operating department of a railroad–the division superintendent.

To these were added personal annoyances. A trainload of Duck Bar steers, shipped by Lance Dunning from the Crawling Stone Ranch, had been caught west of the bridge the very night of the fire. They had been loaded at Tipton and shipped to catch a good market, and under extravagant promises from the live-stock agent of a quick run to Chicago. When Lance Dunning learned that his cattle had been caught west of the break and would have to be unloaded, he swore up a horse in hot haste and started for Medicine Bend. McCloud, who had not closed his eyes for sixty hours, had just got into Medicine Bend from Smoky Creek and was sitting at his desk buried in a mass of papers, but he ordered the cattleman admitted. He was, in fact, eager to meet the manager of the big ranch and the cousin of Dicksie. Lance Dunning stood above six feet in height, and was a handsome man, in spite of the hard lines around his eyes, as he walked in; but neither his manner nor his expression was amiable.

"Are you Mr. McCloud? I've been here three times this afternoon to see you," said he, ignoring McCloud's answer and a proffered chair. "This is your office, isn't it?"

McCloud, a little surprised, answered again and civilly: "It certainly is; but I have been at Smoky Creek for two or three days."

"What have you done with my cattle?"

"The Duck Bar train was run back to Point of Rocks and the cattle were unloaded at the yard."

Lance Dunning spoke with increasing harshness: “By whose order was that done? Why wasn’t I notified? Have they had feed or water?”

“All the stock caught west of the bridge was sent back for feed and water by my orders. It has all been taken care of. You should have been notified, certainly; it is the business of the stock agent to see to that. Let me inquire about it while you are here, Mr. Dunning,” suggested McCloud, ringing for his clerk.

Dunning lost no time in expressing himself. “I don’t want my cattle held at Point of Rocks!” he said angrily. “Your Point of Rocks yards are infected. My cattle shouldn’t have been sent there.”

“Oh, no! The old yards where they had a touch of fever were burned off the face of the earth a year ago. The new yards are perfectly sanitary. The loss of the bridge has crippled us, you know. Your cattle are being well cared for, Mr. Dunning, and if you doubt it you may go up and give our men any orders you like in the matter at our expense.”

“You’re taking altogether too much on yourself when you run my stock over the country in this way,” exclaimed Dunning, refusing to be placated.

“How am I to get to Point of Rocks–walk there?”

“Not at all,” returned McCloud, ringing up his clerk and asking for a pass, which was brought back in a moment and handed to Dunning. “The cattle,” continued McCloud, “can be run down, unloaded, and driven around the break to-morrow–with the loss of only two days.”

“And in the meantime I lose my market.”

“It is too bad, certainly, but I suppose it will be several days before we can get a line across Smoky Creek.”

“Why weren’t the cattle sent through that way yesterday? What have they been held at Point of Rocks for? I call the thing badly managed.”

“We couldn’t get the empty cars up from Piedmont for the transfer until to-day; empties are very scarce everywhere now.”

“There always have been empties here when they were wanted until lately. There’s been no head or tail to anything on this division for six months.”

“I’m sorry that you have that impression.”

“That impression is very general,” declared the stockman, with an oath, “and if you keep on discharging the only men on this division that are competent to handle a break like this, it is likely to continue!”

“Just a moment!” McCloud’s finger rose pointedly. “My failure to please you in caring for your stock in an emergency may be properly a matter for comment; your opinion as to the way I am running this division is, of course, your own: but don’t attempt to criticise the retention or discharge of any man on my payroll!”

Dunning strode toward him. “I’m a shipper on this line; when it suits me to criticise you or your methods, or anybody else’s, I expect to do so,” he retorted in high tones.

“But you cannot tell me how to run my business!” thundered McCloud, leaning over the table in front of him.

As the two men glared at each other Rooney Lee opened the door. His surprise at the situation amounted to consternation. He shuffled to the corner of the room, and while McCloud and Dunning engaged hotly again, Rooney, from the corner, threw a shot of his own into the quarrel. “On time!” he roared.

The angry men turned. “What’s on time?” asked McCloud curtly.

“Number One; she’s in and changing engines. I told them you were going West,” declared Rooney in so deep tones that his fiction would never have been suspected. If his cue had been, “My lord, the conductor waits,” it could not have been rung in more opportunely.

Dunning, to emphasize, without a further word, his disgust for the situation and his contempt for the management, tore into scraps the pass that had been given him, threw the scraps on the floor, took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it; insolence could do no more.

McCloud looked over at the despatcher. “No, I am not going West, Rooney. But if you will be good enough to stay here and find out from this man just how this railroad ought to be run, I will go to bed. He can tell you; the microbe seems to be working in his mind right now,” said McCloud, slamming down the roll-top of his desk. And with Lance Dunning glaring at him, somewhat speechless, he put on his hat and walked out of the room.

It was but one of many disagreeable incidents due to the loss of the bridge. Complications arising from the tie-up followed him at every turn. It seemed as if he could not get away from trouble following trouble. After forty hours further of toil, relieved by four hours of sleep, McCloud found himself, rather dead than alive, back at Medicine Bend and in the little dining-room at Marion’s. Coming in at the cottage door on Fort Street, he dropped into a chair. The cottage rooms were empty. He heard Marion’s voice in the front shop; she was engaged with a customer. Putting his head on the table to wait a moment, nature asserted itself and McCloud fell asleep. He woke hearing a voice that he had heard in dreams. Perhaps no other voice could have wakened him, for he slept for a few minutes a death-like sleep. At all events, Dicksie Dunning was in the front room and McCloud heard her. She was talking with Marion about the burning of Smoky Creek Bridge.

“Every one is talking about it yet,” Dicksie was saying. “If I had lost my best friend I couldn’t have felt worse; you know, my father built it. I rode over there the day of the fire, and down into the creek, so I could look up where it stood. I never realized before how high and how long it was; and when I remembered how proud father always was of his work there–Cousin Lance has often told me–I sat down right on the ground and cried. Really, the ruins were the most pathetic thing you ever saw, Marion, with great clouds of smoke rolling up from the canyon that day; the place looked so lonely when I rode away that every time I turned to look back my eyes filled with tears. Poor daddy! I am almost glad he didn’t live to see it. How times have changed in railroading, haven’t they? Mr. Sinclair was over just the other night, and he said if they kept using this new coal in the engines they would burn up everything on the division. Do you know, I have been waiting in town three or four hours now for Cousin Lance? I feel almost like a tramp. He is coming from the West with the stock train. It was due here hours ago, but they never seem to know when anything is to get here the way things are run on the railroad now. I want to give Cousin Lance some mail before he goes through.”

“The passenger trains crossed the creek over the switchbacks hours ago, and they say the emergency grades are first-rate,” said Marion Sinclair, on the defensive. “The stock trains must have followed right along. Your cousin is sure to be here pretty soon. Probably Mr. McCloud will know which train he is on, and Mr. Lee telephoned that Mr. McCloud would be over here at three o’clock for his dinner. He ought to be here now.”

“Oh, dear, then I must go!”

“But he can probably tell you just when your cousin will be in.”

“I wouldn’t meet him for worlds!”

“You wouldn’t? Why, Mr. McCloud is delightful.”

“Oh, not for worlds, Marion! You know he is discharging all the best of the older men, the men that have made the road everything it is, and of course we can’t help sympathizing with them over our way. For my part, I think it is terrible, after a man has given all of his life to building up a railroad, that he should be thrown out to starve in that way by new managers, Marion.”

McCloud felt himself shrinking within his weary clothes. Resentment seemed to have died. He felt too exhausted to undertake controversy, even if it were to be thought of, and it was not.

Nothing further was needed to complete his humiliation. He picked up his hat and with the thought of getting out as quietly as he had come in. In rising he swept a tumbler at his elbow from

the table. The glass broke on the floor, and Marion exclaimed, “What is that?” and started for the dining-room.

It was too late to get away. McCloud stepped to the portières of the trimming-room door and pushed them aside. Marion stood with a hat in her hand, and Dicksie, sitting at the table, was looking directly at the intruder as he appeared in the doorway. She saw in him her pleasant acquaintance of the wreck at Smoky Creek, whose name she had not learned. In her surprise she rose to her feet, and Marion spoke quickly: “Oh, Mr. McCloud, is it you? I did not hear you come in.”

Dicksie’s face, which had lighted, became a spectacle of confusion after she heard the name. McCloud, conscious of the awkwardness of his position and the disorder of his garb, said the worst thing at once: “I fear I am inadvertently overhearing your conversation.”

He looked at Dicksie as he spoke, chiefly because he could not help it, and this made matters hopeless.

She flushed more deeply. “I cannot conceive why our conversation should invite a listener.”

Her words did not, of course, help to steady him. “I tried to get away,” he stammered, “when I realized I was a part of it.”

“In any event,” she exclaimed hastily, “if you are Mr. McCloud I think it unpardonable to do anything like that!”

“I am Mr. McCloud, though I should rather be anybody else; and I am sorry that I was unable to help hearing what was said; I–”

“Marion, will you be kind enough to give me my gloves?” said Dicksie, holding out her hand.

Marion, having tried once or twice to intervene, stood between the firing-lines in helpless amazement. Her exclamations were lost; the two before her gave no heed to ordinary intervention.

McCloud flushed at being cut off, but he bowed. “Of course,” he said, “if you will listen to no explanation I can only withdraw.”

He went back, dinnerless, to work all night; but the switchbacks were doing capitally, and all night long, trains were rolling through Medicine Bend from the West in an endless string. In the morning the yard was nearly cleared of westbound tonnage. Moreover, the mail in the morning brought compensation. A letter came from Glover telling him not to worry himself to death over the tie-up, and one came from Bucks telling him to make ready for the building of the Crawling Stone Line.

McCloud told Rooney Lee that if anybody asked for him to report him dead, and going to bed slept twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER X
SWEEPING ORDERS

The burning of Smoky Creek Bridge was hardly off the minds of the mountain men when a disaster of a different sort befell the division. In the Rat Valley east of Sleepy Cat the main line springs between two ranges of hills with a dip and a long supported grade in each direction. At the point of the dip there is a switch from which a spur runs to a granite quarry. The track for two miles is straight and the switch-target and lights are seen easily from either direction save at one particular moment of the day–a moment which is in the valley neither quite day nor quite night. Even this disadvantage occurs to trains east-bound only, because due to unusual circumstances. When the sun in a burst of dawning glory shows itself above the crest of the eastern range an engineman, east-bound, may be so blinded by the rays streaming from the rising sun that he cannot see the switch at the foot of the grade. For these few moments he is helpless should anything be wrong with the quarry switch. Down this grade, a few weeks after the Smoky Creek fire, came a double-headed stock train from the Short Line with forty cars of steers. The switch stood open; this much was afterward abundantly proved. The train came down the grade very fast to gain speed for the hill ahead of it. The head engineman, too late, saw the open target. He applied the emergency air, threw his engine over, and whistled the alarm. The mightiest efforts of a dozen engines would have been powerless to check the heavy train. On the quarry track stood three flat cars loaded with granite blocks for the abutment of the new Smoky Creek Bridge. On a sanded track, rolling at thirty miles an hour and screaming in the clutches of the burning brakes, the heavy engines struck the switch like an avalanche, reared upon the granite-laden flats, and with forty loads of cattle plunged into the canyon below; not a car remained on the rails. The head brakeman, riding in the second cab, was instantly killed, and the engine crews, who jumped, were badly hurt.

The whole operating department of the road was stirred. What made the affair more dreadful was that it had occurred on the time of Number Six, the east-bound passenger train, held that morning at Sleepy Cat by an engine failure. Glover came to look into the matter. The testimony of all tended to one conclusion–that the quarry switch had been thrown at some time between four-thirty and five o'clock that morning. Inferences were many: tramps during the early summer had been unusually troublesome and many of them had been rigorously handled by trainmen; robbery might have been a motive, as the express cars on train Number Six carried heavy specie shipments from the coast.

Yet a means so horrible as well as so awkward and ineffective seemed unlike mountain outlaws. Strange men from headquarters were on the ground as soon as they could reach the wreck, men from the special-service department, and a stock inspector who greatly resembled Whispering Smith was on the ground looking into the brands of the wrecked cattle. Glover was much in consultation with him, and there were two or three of the division men, such as Anderson, Young, McCloud, and Lee, who knew him but could answer no inquiries concerning his long stay at the wreck.

A third and more exciting event soon put the quarry wreck into the background. Ten days afterward an east-bound passenger train was flagged in the night at Sugar Buttes, twelve miles west of Sleepy Cat. When the heavy train slowed up, two men boarded the engine and with pistols compelled the engineman to cut off the express cars and pull them to the water-tank a mile east of the station. Three men there in waiting forced the express car, blew open the safe, and the gang rode away half an hour later loaded with gold coin and currency.

Had a stick of dynamite been exploded under the Wickiup there could not have been more excitement at Medicine Bend. Within three hours after the news reached the town a posse under

Sheriff Van Horn, with a carload of horseflesh and fourteen guns, was started for Sugar Buttes. The trail led north and the pursuers rode until nearly nightfall. They crossed Dutch Flat and rode single file into a wooded canyon, where they came upon traces of a camp-fire. Van Horn, leading, jumped from his horse and thrust his hand into the ashes; they were still warm, and he shouted to his men to ride up. As he called out, a rifle cracked from the box-elder trees ahead of him. The sheriff fell, shot through the head, and a deputy springing from his saddle to pick him up was shot in precisely the same way, through the head. The riderless horses bolted; the posse, thrown into a panic, did not fire a shot, and for an hour dared not ride back for the bodies. After dark they got the two dead men and at midnight rode with them into Sleepy Cat.

When the news reached McCloud he was talking with Bucks over the wires. Bucks had got into headquarters at the river late that night, and was getting details from McCloud of the Sugar Buttes robbery when the superintendent sent him the news of the killing of Van Horn and the deputy. In the answer that Bucks sent came a name new to the wires of the mountain division and rarely seen even in special correspondence, but Hughie Morrison, who took the message, never forgot that name; indeed, it was soon to be thrown sharply into the spotlight of the mountain railroad stage. Hughie repeated the message to get it letter-perfect; to handle stuff at the Wickiup signed "J. S. B." was like handling diamonds on a jeweller's tongs or arteries on a surgeon's hook; and, in truth, Bucks's words were the arteries and pulse-beat of the mountain division. Hughie handed the message to McCloud and stood by while the superintendent read:

> Whispering Smith is due in Cheyenne to-morrow. Meet him at the Wickiup Sunday morning; he has full authority. I have told him to get these fellows, if it takes all the money in the treasury, and not to stop till he cleans them out of the Rocky Mountains. J. S. B.

CHAPTER XI
AT THE THREE HORSES

"Clean them out of the Rocky Mountains; that is a pretty good contract," mused the man in McCloud's office on Sunday morning. He sat opposite McCloud in Bucks's old easy chair and held in his hand Bucks's telegram. As he spoke he raised his eyebrows and settled back, but the unusual depth of the chair and the shortness of his legs left his chin helpless in his black tie, so that he was really no better off except that he had changed one position of discomfort for another. "I wonder, now," he mused, sitting forward again as McCloud watched him, "I wonder–you know, George, the Andes are, strictly speaking, a part of the great North American chain–whether Bucks meant to include the South American ranges in that message?" and a look of mildly good-natured anticipation overspread his face.

"Suppose you wire him and find out," suggested McCloud.

"No, George, no! Bucks never was accurate in geographical expressions. Besides, he is shifty and would probably cover his tracks by telling me to report progress when I got to Panama."

A clerk opened the outer office door. "Mr. Dancing asks if he can see you, Mr. McCloud."

"Tell him I am busy."

Bill Dancing, close on the clerk's heels, spoke for himself. "I know it, Mr. McCloud, I know it!" he interposed urgently, "but let me speak to you just a moment." Hat in hand, Bill, because no one would knock him down to keep him out, pushed into the room. "I've got a plan," he urged, "in regards to getting these hold-ups."

"How are you, Bill?" exclaimed the man in the easy chair, jumping hastily to his feet and shaking Dancing's hand. Then quite as hastily he sat down, crossed his knees violently, stared at the giant lineman, and exclaimed, "Let's have it!"

Dancing looked at him in silence and with some contempt. The trainmaster had broken in on the superintendent for a moment and the two were conferring in an undertone. "What might your name be, mister?" growled Dancing, addressing with some condescension the man in the easy chair.

The man waved his hand as if it were immaterial and answered with a single word: "Forgotten!"

"How's that?"

"Forgotten!"

"That's a blamed queer name–"

"On the contrary, it's a very common name and that is just the trouble: it's forgotten."

"What do you want, Bill?" demanded McCloud, turning to the lineman.

"Is this man all right?" asked Dancing, jerking his thumb toward the easy chair.

"I can't say; you'll have to ask him."

"I'll save you that trouble, Bill, by saying that if it's for the good of the division I am all right. Death to its enemies, damme, say I. Now go on, William, and give us your plan in regards to getting these hold-ups–yes."

Dancing looked from one man to the other, but McCloud appeared preoccupied and his visitor seemed wholly serious. "I don't want to take too much on myself–" Bill began, speaking to McCloud.

"You look as if you could carry a fair-sized load, William, provided it bore the right label," suggested the visitor, entirely amiable.

"–But nobody has felt worse over this thing and recent things–"

"Recent things," echoed the easy chair.

"–happening to the division that I have. Now I know there's been trouble on the division–"

"I think you are putting it too strong there, Bill, but let it pass."

"–there's been differences; misunderstandings and differences. So I says to myself maybe something might be done to get everybody together and bury the differences, like this: Murray Sinclair is in town; he feels bad over this thing, like any railroad man would. He's a mountain man, quick as the quickest with a gun, a good trailer, rides like a fiend, and can catch a streak of sunshine travelling on a pass. Why not put him at the head of a party to run 'em down?"

"Run 'em down," nodded the stranger.

"Differences such as be or may be–"

"May be–"

"Being discussed when he brings 'em in dead or alive, and not before. That's what I said to Murray Sinclair, and Murray Sinclair is ready for to take hold this minute and do what he can if he's asked. I told him plain I could promise no promises; that, I says, lays with George McCloud. Was I right, was I wrong? If I was wrong, right me; if I was right, say so. All I want is harmony."

The new man nodded approval. "Bully, Bill!" he exclaimed heartily.

"Mister," protested the lineman, with simple dignity, "I'd just a little rather you wouldn't bully me nor Bill me."

"All in good part, Bill, as you shall see; all in good part. Now before Mr. McCloud gives you his decision I want to be allowed a word. Your idea looks good to me. At first I may say it didn't. I am candid; I say it didn't. It looked like setting a dog to catch his own tail. Mind you, I don't say it can't be done. A dog *can* catch his own tail; *they do do it*," proclaimed the stranger in a low and emphatic undertone. "But," he added, moderating his utterance, "when they succeed–who gets anything out of it but the dog?" Bill Dancing, somewhat clouded and not deeming it well to be drawn into any damaging admissions, looked around for a cigar, and not seeing one, looked solemnly at the new Solomon and stroked his beard. "That is how it looked to me at first," concluded the orator; "*but*, I say now it looks good to me, and as a stranger I may say I favor it."

Dancing tried to look unconcerned and seemed disposed to be friendly. "What might be your line of business?"

"Real estate. I am from Chicago. I sold everything that was for sale in Chicago and came out here to stake out the Spanish Sinks and the Great Salt Lake–yes. It's drying up and there's an immense opportunity for claims along the shore. I've been looking into it."

"Into the claims or into the lake?" asked McCloud.

"Into both; and, Mr. McCloud, I want to say I favor Mr. Dancing's idea, that's all. Right wrongs no man. Let Bill see Sinclair and see what they can figure out." And having spoken, the stranger sank back and tried to look comfortable.

"I'll talk with you later about it, Bill," said McCloud briefly.

"Meantime, Bill, see Sinclair and report," suggested the stranger.

"It's as good as done," announced Dancing, taking up his hat, "and, Mr. McCloud, might I have a little advance for cigars and things?"

"Cigars and ammunition–of course. See Sykes, William, see Sykes; if the office is closed go to his house–and see what will happen to you–" added the visitor in an aside, "and tell him to telephone up to Mr. McCloud for instruction," he concluded unceremoniously.

"Now why do you want to start Bill on a fool business like that?" asked McCloud, as Bill Dancing took long steps from the room toward the office of Sykes, the cashier.

"He didn't know me to-day, but he will to-morrow," said the stranger reflectively. "Gods, what I've seen that man go through in the days of the giants! Why, George, this will keep the boys talking, and they have to do something. Spend the money; the company is making it too fast anyway; they moved twenty-two thousand cars one day last week. Personally I'm glad to have a little fun out of it; it will be hell pure and undefiled long before we get through. This will be an easy

way of letting Sinclair know I am here. Bill will report me confidentially to him as a suspicious personage."

To the astonishment of Sykes, the superintendent confirmed over the telephone Dancing's statement that he was to draw some expense money. Bill asked for twenty-five dollars. Sykes offered him two, and Bill with some indignation accepted five. He spent all of this in trying to find Sinclair, and on the strength of his story to the boys borrowed five dollars more to prosecute the search. At ten o'clock that night he ran into Sinclair playing cards in the big room above the Three Horses.

The Three Horses still rears its hospitable two-story front in Fort Street, the only one of the Medicine Bend gambling houses that goes back to the days of '67; and it is the boast of its owners that since the key was thrown away, thirty-nine years ago, its doors have never been closed, night or day, except once for two hours during the funeral of Dave Hawk. Bill Dancing drew Sinclair from his game and told him of the talk with McCloud, touching it up with natural enthusiasm. The bridgeman took the news in high good humor and slapped Dancing on the back. "Did you see him alone, Bill?" asked Sinclair, with interest. "Come over here, come along. I want you to meet a good friend. Here, Harvey, shake hands with Bill Dancing. Bill, this is old Harvey Du Sang, meanest man in the mountains to his enemies and the whitest to his friends–eh, Harvey?"

Harvey seemed uncommunicative. Studying his hand, he asked in a sour way whether it was a jackpot, and upon being told that it was not, pushed forward some chips and looked stupidly up–though Harvey was by no means stupid. "Proud to know you, sir," said Bill, bending frankly as he put out his hand. "Proud to know any friend of Murray Sinclair's. What might be your business?"

Again Du Sang appeared abstracted. He looked up at the giant lineman, who, in spite of his own size and strength, could have crushed him between his fingers, and hitched his chair a little, but got no further toward an answer and paid no attention whatever to Bill's extended hand.

"Cow business, Bill," interposed Sinclair. "Where? Why, up near the park, Bill, up near the park. Bill is an old friend of mine, Harvey. Shake hands with George Seagrue, Bill, and you know Henry Karg–and old Stormy Gorman–well, I guess you know him too," exclaimed Sinclair, introducing the other players. "Look here a minute, Harvey."

Harvey, much against his inclination, was drawn from the table and retired with Sinclair and Dancing to an empty corner, where Dancing told his story again. At the conclusion of it Harvey rather snorted. Sinclair asked questions. "Was anybody else there when you saw McCloud, Bill?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.