

MASON OF BAR X RANCH

Henry Bennett
1920

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MASON OF BAR X RANCH ***

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MASON OF BAR X RANCH

By

HENRY BENNETT

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TO

MY BROTHER

IN MEMORY OF A VACATION SPENT IN THE ADIRONDACKS

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MASON OF BAR X RANCH

CHAPTER I—A HARD PROPOSITION

Jack Mason, a young man of twenty-one years, was intently watching a billiard game in progress at a fashionable club in New York City. It was a hot sultry day in June and he was wondering how people could enjoy knocking a bunch of balls around a table and getting all heated up. He had about decided to take a run in his motor when a messenger boy handed him a message. It was from his father bidding him to come at once to his office. His father was president of a bank in New York and independently rich. Mason thrust the message in his pocket, musing as he did so.

“I’m in for a call from Dad, he’s probably read about the scrape the bunch and I got into last week.”

Calling one of the club members aside he demanded: “Say, Smithy, how did the story of my automobile accident leak out in the papers?”

“Don’t know, Jack,” his friend replied; “you know as much about that as I do.”

“Thought I had that automobile affair hushed up,” grumbled Mason. “What gets me,” he continued, “is how my part in the club boxing match got in the papers. I just received a message from the old man and expect he has heard all about it.”

“This won’t be the first time you have been bawled out by the old man,” replied Smithy with a broad grin.

“No, but I expect something serious this time,” declared Mason gravely. “Damn those meddling reporters!” he burst out savagely. “You know, Smithy, I have been in worse scrapes before, but always managed to patch them up some way. Now, this story gets in the papers, and that prize fight—well, I suppose the quicker I get this matter settled with Dad, the sooner I will know my fate.” He finished, starting for his car.

“Wish you luck, old man,” called Smithy as Mason started his motor, “give my best regards to your father.” This his parting shot, but Mason was out of hearing and speeding to his father’s office in his favorite racing car.

Arriving at the bank he went immediately to the private office. His father was busy reading a paper on his desk, and Mason sank indolently into a chair and waited for him to speak. After a period of waiting he got impatient and remarked:

“Well, Dad, let’s hear the fireworks.”

“Huh,” snorted his father, “you took your time getting here.”

“I started for the bank shortly after receiving your message, Dad,” he answered quietly.

“What devilry have you got into now?” the elder man demanded sternly, pointing to a newspaper on his desk. “Here’s an account of you in the paper of going into the ring at your club and fighting six rounds, a choice bit of scandal for the society column. Not being satisfied with that you had to take a party of chorus girls out joy-riding and have a smash-up.”

“There’s no use getting excited about it, Dad. I know how you and mother feel about this affair.”

“You’re a disgrace to the family,” thundered his father. “I was going to disinherit you, Sir, but I talked the matter over with your mother, and I am going to make you a proposition.”

Mason was all attention now, he remembered once before when his father threatened to cut him off.

“Well, let me hear the proposition, Dad,” he said, his face showing grave concern.

“You know, Jack,” his father continued, “I have done better by you than you deserve. You won’t work in the bank or try to make a man of yourself. I’m through paying out good money on you for gambling debts and to spend for drink. I’ll give you one more chance and if you fail to make good I wash my hands of you. Early this morning I got in touch with a friend of mine who owns a ranch in Nevada. You go out there and after one year come to me and show me you have made a man of yourself. Then I’ll start you in business.”

“I can’t see for the life of me, Dad, how my going out there will benefit me,” he declared soberly.

“Son, I know it is a rough life, but if you come through as you should it will make a man of you. You have a good college education, and you can come back East fitted to tackle any business enterprise.”

“Well, Dad, I’m game to try it,” agreed Mason after calm deliberation.

“Here’s your letter of introduction,” said his father, handing him a letter.

The younger man, glancing at the envelope, read:

Tom Walters
Bar X Ranch, Nevada.

Noting his son’s look of surprise he explained:

“The nearest town is called Trader’s Post, and it is about four hours’ ride on horseback. I got in touch with Tom at Trader’s Post by wire.”

“Whew,” whistled Mason, “I suppose I will have to make that trip on horseback. You know, Dad, I’m soft for that sort of thing, having had all my joy rides in a high powered car.”

“Very true,” admitted his father, “you have been living a life of ease and luxury, and your health is none too good. Now, I want you to get out of this rut. You will have a lot of hard work to do on the ranch, and the quicker you get used to it the better.”

“You’re right, Dad, but tell me more about this man Walters.”

“I knew him years ago,” his father began. “Tom made a deal in stocks here, married and took his wife to Nevada. He invested his money in land and a few cattle, and now owns one of the finest ranches in Nevada. I remember that they have a girl, but I can’t recall just how old she is; I should judge about sixteen or eighteen.”

“This promises to be interesting,” commented Mason. “Do they know I’m coming?”

The elder man smiled. “You don’t need to worry about that. I received a wire from Tom.

“I am sending two men with a shipment of cattle to the Post, and with orders to remain until your son arrives.””

“Tom certainly showed speed,” said Mason, looking at his watch. “Great Scott!” he exclaimed, rising to his feet. “Four P. M. I must be going if I start in the morning as I have a lot of things to see to. Good-bye, Dad; see you at dinner.”

Hurrying from the office he started his car and drove rapidly home. Going at once to his mother’s room he told her how he had come to an agreement with his

father.

“Yes, I know, Jack,” she said, “your father and I talked it over this morning. Perhaps it will be best for you, but it is hard to have our only boy leave us. Do be careful for my sake. Your sister has been in tears since I told her you are going away.”

“Don’t worry, mother. I’ll see Ethel and explain matters to her.”

In the summer garden he found his sister reading in a hammock.

“Oh, Jack,” she cried, “is it true you are going away?”

“Yes, sis, I leave in the morning.”

Ethel was two years younger than Jack and very fond of him.

“Listen, sis,” he said earnestly, “I want you to comfort mother while I am away, and I’ll make you a promise. After I have been on this ranch long enough to get the run of things I’ll see that you and mother pay me a visit. Won’t that be great?”

“Yes, I want to visit you,” she agreed, “but I will be so lonesome until you send for us.”

“Why, sis, you have your girl friends, and let’s see, who is that young fellow you have been going with quite steadily?” he asked, smiling down at her.

“Now, you are trying to tease me,” she answered, “that young fellow you speak of, his name is George Burk, and you know I don’t care for him.”

“Sis, you’re hard to suit, maybe you can find some one in the West to marry.”

“I don’t know, Jack, just now I’m not worrying about getting married. I hope you like it out there and make good. Mother told me that father wrote to the man who owns the ranch about your coming, and also wired him. Wish I were going with you now,” she added wistfully.

“Never mind, sis, it won’t be long before I’ll send for you and mother. Be a good girl now, and help me pack.”

Going into the house, they were soon busy packing and thinking of the future.

The next morning Mason bid his parents goodbye and started on his trip West.

After long and tiresome travel on hot and dusty trains Mason alighted at a small

station on the Union & Pacific where he was to take the stage that met all trains for Trader's Post. Walking around the small platform of the depot he spied a dilapidated stage and a scraggy looking pair of horses. The driver was busily engaged filling a black clay pipe while talking with the telegraph operator. "Starting soon?" queried Mason pleasantly. The driver turned and looking Mason over, drawled:

"Thought I was going back empty, train stopped to let off some mail, but I didn't see you get off. Be you the man the Bar X boys are expecting?"

"Guess I am," said Mason, smiling.

"The boys are at the Grand Hotel," explained the driver. "Jump in, we'll be there in about an hour."

"It's four miles to the Post," he added.

It was seven A. M. and Mason was anxious to get started on the long ride to the ranch. The driver kept up a running fire of talk as the stage rattled over the rough road.

"Yep," he was saying, "old man Walters sent two men with a shipment of cattle to the Post. They have been there two days now, and one of them is hitting up old John Barleycorn right hard."

Having delivered this bit of news he started the team at a faster pace.

"What sort of men are they at the ranch?" queried Mason. "Does Walters allow them to drink?"

The driver shook his head.

"No, he don't allow them to drink on the ranch, but the assistant foreman sent Scotty Campbell and Red Sullivan to meet you and Scotty had to celebrate, but a better pair of cow punchers never stepped in boots. Let me tell you one thing, young fellow."

The driver leaned over confidentially.

"If those punchers take to you, you will have two good friends."

They were now in sight of the town, and Mason looked it over with interest.

Trader's Post boasted of one hotel and dance hall, a general store, and a few scattered houses. As they drew near the hotel they heard a succession of whoops that would have put an Indian to shame. Mason looked at the driver inquiringly.

“That’s Scotty,” he explained.

“Well, he’s got a good pair of lungs,” laughed Mason.

The driver tied his team and Mason followed him into the hotel. As they entered, two men at the bar turned and looked Mason over. One, a good-natured looking Irishman, seemed satisfied and asked: “Are you the man that’s going to Bar X ranch?”

“Yes,” he replied, offering his hand. “I’m Jack Mason.”

Red shook hands and roared:

“Scotty, shake hands with our new recruit.”

Scotty looked Mason over from head to foot.

“Glad to meet you, laddie,” he said slowly, as he lurched heavily against the bar. “Don’t mind me, I had to have a little fun, don’t come to the Post very often.”

Red was grinning from ear to ear.

“If you don’t get called down by Miss Josephine when we get back to the ranch, I’ll buy you the best horse on the range.”

Scotty turned and looked at Mason.

“Laddie, don’t pay any attention to Red, let’s all have a drink on me.”

“I’m not drinking, Scotty, but I’ll take a cigar with you.”

“Well, Jack, we start in half an hour,” announced Red. “I’ll strap your luggage on my horse and send the supply wagon after the rest of your stuff.”

Going out on the hotel porch, Mason watched the scene with interest.

Scotty was leading two tough and wiry looking horses. He appeared so unsteady on his feet that Red started to help him.

“Steady there!” he called out sharply.

Scotty stiffened and glared at him.

“Don’t think I’m all in,” he growled, frowning at his partner.

With a flying leap he was in the saddle and dashed up to Mason leading a spare horse.

“What kind of a horseman are you, laddie?” he asked.

“Well, I never took any medals for fancy riding,” he confessed.

Scotty grinned. "We have a nice little ride ahead of us," he said, as he turned and watched Red coming up.

Mason mounted his horse and the party started. Scotty was leading and singing snatches of Scotch songs. Mason lapsed into a moody silence and Red looked at him curiously as they rode along. The Easterner was thinking of the girl Red had mentioned and wondered if she was the girl his father had spoken of. Turning to Red he asked:

"Who is this Miss Josephine you spoke to Scotty about?"

"That's old man Walters' girl," answered Red, as he rode his mount closer to Mason's horse.

"She's the idol of the ranch," he continued, "and the boys would fight for her at the drop of the hat. With the exception of one or two," he added with an oath.

"How's that?" queried Mason in surprise.

"Well," grumbled Red, "there's two cursed onery punchers on our range that I don't trust no more then I would a rattlesnake."

Mason glancing ahead, noticed that Scotty had pulled his horse in and was listening with jaws tightly set. "Red, why don't Walters get rid of these men?" queried the Easterner, coming back to the subject.

"Oh, they are good men on the range, and the old man hates to let them go," replied Red with a vicious look. "Ain't I right, Scotty?"

"Good, hell," the Scot snarled, "if I had my way I would have cleaned up for them long ago."

"Well," declared Red with a grin, "he's got that out of his system. Scotty and those two punchers get along just like two strange bulldogs."

Mason was getting decidedly interested. "What particular thing have you got against these men?" he asked.

The face of the cowboy took on a grim look.

"I have a suspicion they are running our cattle, and the foreman thinks so, too," he explained, "but they are slick about it and we can't get anything on them yet. Our foreman is sheriff of this county, and if he ever gets any evidence he will push them to the limit, for he is a bad man when he gets started. You see, Jack," Red continued, "there's a ranch up the valley from us run by a man named Ricker. His boundary line touches ours and these two men used to work for him.

Ricker is as crooked as they make them and we think these two men are spotting our cattle for Ricker and helping him run them over the line.”

“It begins to look as if I am going to have an interesting time out here,” mused Mason to himself.

“Do you know, Red, I think I am going to like this life; that is, if I can get used to this rough riding,” he finished tersely, as he squirmed in the saddle.

Red laughed.

“You’ll soon get used to hard riding if you stick with us,” he said.

“Yes,” chimed in Scotty with a grin, “but don’t let that redhead try to show you how to do any trick riding.”

Sullivan had a shock of red hair, but he didn’t like to be reminded of the fact.

“Why you grinning idiot,” he said with withering sarcasm, “I can stop you on any stunt you want to try with a horse.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” flared Scotty; “there’s going to be games at the ranch next month, and if you can beat me on trick riding, you can pick out the best Stetson hat at the Post that money will buy.”

“That bet goes,” agreed Red, shaking hands with him.

Mason looked on with an amused smile as he listened to the two friends wrangle.

“Scotty thinks he’s the only thing that ever stepped in boots when it comes to riding a horse,” declared Red testily.

“I don’t see why those two men you speak of should have anything against Miss Josephine,” said Mason, breaking a long silence.

“I can explain that,” replied Red with a chuckle, “one of these men goes by the name of Tom Powers. He came from the East, and is well educated. He had the nerve to try to make love to her, and one day he became offensive. Then she turned him down cold and he got sore on her. The other cuss is a half-breed Mexican, and goes by the name of Pete Carlo. He went to work with Powers for the Bar X outfit.”

“The only thing Pete can do well is to throw the reata,” broke in Scotty.

“Yes, he’s a fiend at that stunt,” assented Red. “Buck Miller is the only man on the range that’s got a chance with Pete. They had a contest a short time ago, and

Buck got an even break with him. I expect——”

Red broke off suddenly and stared hard to the right. Mason following his gaze saw a girl on horseback. She was too far off for him to make out her features, but he could see that she sat her horse with perfect ease, and was riding at a moderate pace.

Scotty saw her at the same instant, and pulled his horse sharply to the right as he whistled shrilly to her. The girl looked around and raised her hand in recognition, then bending low in the saddle she urged her horse at a breakneck pace.

“Miss Josephine herself,” exclaimed Red with a broad grin. “She’s spotted us and wants to beat us in.”

Scotty had accepted the challenge and the race was on. Soon both riders were lost to vision in a cloud of dust.

“It’s two miles from here to the ranch, and Scotty ain’t got a chance to overtake her,” Red said at last. Mason heaved a sigh of relief when Red soon after pointed out the ranch to him. It was a large roomy building with a wide porch and immense cottonwood trees for shade. Mason dismounted and followed Red who was leading his horse to the corral.

CHAPTER II—THE GIRL

Red Sullivan, having secured both horses, started with Mason to the house. As they neared the porch they heard the girl talking in a tone of reproof to Scotty. He was twirling his hat like an awkward school boy. Red stopped Mason and whispered:

“Jack, if you want to hear a man get called down right and proper, listen. That’s her father on the porch,” he added.

Mason drew back and watched the scene with keen amusement.

“Scotty!” the girl was saying, “you have been drinking, I’m ashamed of you, and of all times when you should have kept sober. What will this gentleman from New York think of us?” she demanded imperiously.

Suddenly catching sight of Mason she turned swiftly and entered the house. Red was fairly exploding with laughter at Scotty’s discomfiture.

“Come on, Jack,” he said with a grin. “I’ll make you acquainted with Mr. Walters.”

Scotty had started for the corral. As he was passing them Red could not restrain from a sly dig.

“Guess I was right on that call down stuff, eh?”

Scotty scowled and strode past him without a word.

Red introduced Mason to the owner of the ranch. Mr. Walters was a tall and powerfully built man with a face tanned and wrinkled from long exposure to sun and wind.

“So, you are Mason’s boy, eh?” he said, shaking hands with a vise-like grip. “Glad to meet you. Used to know your dad years ago back East. Hope you will like this country, great air and will do you all kinds of good.”

Mason took to him on the instant, for all of his bluff ways.

“Jack, come into the house; no, wait a minute and I’ll make you acquainted with my daughter. Josephine,” he called in a stentorian voice.

“Yes, coming, Daddy,” came the answer in bell-like tones. Suddenly the girl appeared at the door. Mason gave a start of surprise. When he first saw her on the porch with her father she was dressed in riding habit, but now she wore a dress of some fluffy creation such as the girls of his acquaintance wore back East. It was a delicate shade of blue and matched her hair which was a golden brown. Her eyes were of a grayish blue.

Taken by surprise, he could only stammer through the introduction which her father made. The girl was quick to see his distress and said:

“Daddy, you show Mr. Mason to his room while mother and I see about supper.”

“You must be about famished,” she added, turning to Mason with an arch smile.

He had recovered his composure to some extent by this time, saying, “I am somewhat hungry, Miss Walters, and accept your invitation to supper with pleasure.”

The girl hastily withdrew to help her mother in the kitchen.

“She’s a thoroughbred,” declared her father, gazing after her fondly.

While being conducted to his room, Mason attempted to show Mr. Walters the letter of introduction which his father had given him, but the ranch owner wouldn’t consider it.

“Guess I know your father well enough to recognize his son.”

After a wash and a change of clothes, Mason felt refreshed. Making his way downstairs he was presented to Mrs. Walters. It was a merry party that gathered around the supper table. Red, having been invited, told some stories with such droll wit that he kept Mason laughing throughout the meal. The girl was an interested listener and occasionally put in a word. She appeared anxious to make the Easterner feel at home. After supper the party sat on the porch while the ranch owner entertained his guest with tales of life on the range.

A little later the ranch owner excused himself, saying he was getting old and must retire early to bed. The girl coaxed her mother to remain up a little longer and soon the three were talking on general subjects. The open-hearted hospitality of these Western people was pleasing to Mason, and that night after retiring to his room, he confessed to himself that he was beginning to look upon his new career with growing favor.

The next morning he awoke to find the sun streaming in his window, and hearing sounds of activity below, he dressed hastily. Going downstairs he was greeted with a cheery good morning from Mrs. Walters who was busily preparing the morning meal.

“Breakfast will be ready in about half an hour, and you can look around a bit if you wish,” she announced.

“Josephine is outdoors somewhere,” she added.

Mason nodded pleasantly and started for a walk to the corral. As he turned the corner of the house he came across a sight that filled him with amusement. It was the girl; she was romping with a great St. Bernard dog.

Quickening his pace, he soon came up to her.

“Good morning, Miss Walters,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

The girl looked up quickly, exclaiming,

“Oh, it’s you, Sir New Yorker. Well, I wish to make a bargain with you. You may call me Josephine and I’ll call you Jack.”

“That goes,” he agreed, falling in with her humor.

The girl was fondling her dog again and Mason murmured softly,

“Love me, love my dog.”

“What did you say?” the girl asked, looking up brightly.

He smiled and shook his head.

“Well, it was something about a dog,” she declared.

“You must be great friends with my dog. His name is Rover. Shake hands with the gentleman, Rover.”

The dog offered a huge paw, which Mason shook in solemn friendship.

“There,” declared the girl gaily, “you now have a friend for life.”

“What I would like to know,” he questioned, “is where all the cowboys keep themselves?”

“Oh,” the girl answered. “I supposed that Red or Scotty had shown you the bunk-house. It is that building you see just beyond the corral. All the boys sleep there. Come, let’s go in to breakfast.”

After the meal the girl motioned for Mason to follow her. When they were outside she said:

“Daddy is down to the bunk-house. I have ordered Scotty to saddle Fleet and a horse for you; then we are going to see Dad, and I’ll have him introduce you to the boys.”

“Did you beat Scotty in yesterday?” he asked.

“Did I?” Josephine tossed her head proudly. “Outside of Bud Anderson’s horse, there isn’t one on the range that can overtake Fleet.”

“Who is Bud Anderson?” he queried, getting interested.

“Why, didn’t you know?” she asked in surprise. “Bud Anderson! he’s the foreman of our ranch, and Sheriff of this County. He taught me how to shoot and ride. I have known him ever since I can remember.”

“I do remember of Red telling about a foreman and Sheriff but he didn’t mention his name,” he answered vaguely.

“Here comes Scotty with our horses,” the girl cried, clapping her hands with glee.

Mason was a little stiff from being in the saddle the day before.

“I’m afraid I’ll prove a poor rider if I have to keep up with you, Miss Josephine,” he said dismally.

The girl gave him a swift look.

“We are going to have a nice little ride and I am going to teach you how to ride fast and shoot,” she declared with fine assurance.

Mason noticed for the first time that she carried in her belt a small Colt’s revolver. Scotty had come up with the horses and after greeting him they mounted and rode slowly to the bunk-house.

“Some of the boys are riding the range, Jack,” she explained as they dismounted at the door.

Putting a whistle to her lips she blew a long shrill note.

“Coming,” called a voice from within.

The door flew open and the ranch owner appeared.

“Daddy,” the girl began before he could speak, “I would like you to make Jack

acquainted with the boys.”

“Jack, eh,” he said with a grin, winking at Mason.

The girl blushed and glanced reprovingly at her father.

The ranch owner stepped inside and called briskly,

“Tumble out here, boys, I want to make you acquainted with a friend of mine from New York.”

The men were soon lined up, and the ranch owner starting with the largest one of the lot, said, “Jack, this is my assistant foreman, Joe Turner.”

Then he named them in turn. Mason shook hands heartily with them all, but when he came to Carlo and Powers he took an instant dislike to them. Carlo had squinting eyes and his hand had a cold snaky feeling. Mason drew back in disgust and could hardly repress a shiver down his back.

The girl broke the tension by saying,

“Daddy, Jack and I are going to take a little ride.”

“Don’t make him tired of you the first day,” he warned her, nudging Mason in the ribs.

“That’s not nice of you, Daddy,” she called back to him as they rode off.

Mason noticed that Powers had a sneer on his face as Josephine rode past him, and it increased his dislike for the man. They had gotten well out of sight of the ranch buildings when the girl again spoke, “Jack, I am going to take you over some of our range land and in return you must tell me about New York and your folks. Also, may I ask, why did you get so confused when Daddy introduced me last night?”

“Why,” he countered, “did you rush into the house when you caught sight of me?”

“I didn’t want you to hear me calling Scotty down,” she replied demurely, “but you have not answered my question.”

“I was surprised to see you in such a pretty dress.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, her eyes opening wide, “do you think we are barbarians out here and don’t know how to dress?”

“No,” he answered lamely, “but I was pleasantly surprised with you.”

Josephine rode in silence.

“I don’t know if I am to take that for a compliment or not,” she said at last.

“I am sure I meant it for a compliment,” he interposed hastily.

“You have a ready tongue,” she laughed, “but be careful you don’t slip up.”

“How is it that I didn’t see this Bud Anderson you tell about?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, he’s away on business for Dad; we expect him back most any time now.”

They were riding at an easy canter and had covered about fifteen miles. Mason was gradually getting over his lameness of the day before. The air was bracing and spicy with the smell of sage brush. Far off down the valley he could see cattle grazing. It was his first view of a large herd. In the distance he could see the mountains with their lofty peaks looming up in majestic splendor. The grandeur of it all filled him with awe.

Josephine broke his reverie by saying, “Oh, I hope you will like it out here. Look! off there to the West is Devil’s Gap.”

“Devil’s Gap,” he repeated.

“Yes, come, we’ll ride out that way and I’ll tell you about it.”

Putting the spurs to his horse he tried to keep up with her.

“I am afraid you’re going too fast for me,” he called after her ruefully.

A silvery laugh floated back to him as she checked her horse to a slower pace. Her eyes were sparkling with mischief as he rode up to her.

“Forgive me, Sir Jack,” she said. “I forgot you are not used to the saddle.”

He looked keenly at her.

“I must appear an awful big dub in your eyes,” he said slowly.

He was thinking of the poor comparison he would make if Bud Anderson was along. A severe look came into Josephine’s face.

“If you think I feel that way,” she said gravely, “we’ll go back to the ranch.”

He laughed boyishly.

“Let’s not quarrel, you said we would ride out to this Devil’s Gap and you promised to tell me the story of it.”

“Please set the pace, but not too fast,” he added with mock seriousness.

“I said we would ride out that way,” Josephine corrected him. She was smiling now.

“Here’s a girl I can’t fathom,” admitted Mason to himself.

“I am waiting to hear that story, Josephine,” he said, coming back to the subject.

“Devil’s Gap,” she began, “is an opening in that ridge of mountains you see ahead of us. It leads up a winding trail to a plateau that joins another ridge. About a year ago a band of lawless outlaws and ex-cowboys had been operating around these parts. They were led by a desperado named Banty Hayes; he’s a cousin to the man who owns the Ricker ranch. It touches our boundary line where you saw our cattle grazing——”

“Yes,” cut in Mason, “Red told me about this man Ricker. He says your foreman thinks he is running your cattle over the line. He also spoke about Powers trying to get fresh with you.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Powers to steal Dad’s cattle,” the girl resumed, “and as for Tom Powers, he is a sneak. But I am getting away from my story. This gang numbered about six members and they had been terrorizing the miners and ranch owners for miles around. The last hold-up they pulled off was at the little station four miles south of Trader’s Post. They held up the midnight through train, and ordered the express messenger to open the safe. He refused and they shot and killed him. It caused great excitement among the cattlemen, and the Railroad Company offered a large reward for their capture.

“A posse was hastily organized with Big Joe Turner leading them. Bud Anderson was away on business at the time. Daddy wired him to come home at once. When he arrived, Buck Miller had just ridden in with the news that they had trailed the gang to Devil’s Gap.

“Bud buckled on his guns and with Miller they beat it for the Gap. When they arrived at the foothills, Scotty and Red had received bullet wounds and were in a killing mood.

“Banty Hayes had always boasted that he and his men could hold off a regiment of men, once they had gained the plateau. They had made it a sort of a rendezvous in the past, but no one had been able to round them up.

“Bud led Scotty and Red with the rest of the posse up the Gap trail. It was a hot fight while it lasted. They forced the outlaws to the top where they made a stand.

Bud and Red and Scotty charged them, their guns spitting a stream of lead. Banty Hayes was down with a bullet through his head.

“The rest of the gang seeing their leader fall, surrendered. One of the band told Joe Turner that they had intended to hold the posse off until night and make their escape.

“Most all of Bud’s men had been hit, but Joe said the outlaws were nervous for they never dreamed that Bud would dare to follow them up to the plateau. So that is the reason there is bad blood between Bud Anderson and Ricker,” the girl concluded.

They had turned and were riding the back trail. On the way home Mason told the girl about New York and his sister Ethel.

Josephine was all attention when he explained why he came to leave home, and how his father had made him a proposition to stay a year on her father’s ranch.

“Do you think you can be good out here?” the girl asked mischievously.

“Yes, I think I can, with you for company,” he replied, smiling.

The girl looked him straight in the eyes.

“We are going to be great friends,” she said with a rare smile. “You must invite your mother and sister out here.”

“I certainly will, and I am going to send for my ninety horse-power car.”

“Oh, that will be fine,” the girl cried with enthusiasm. “I am just crazy about riding fast. You must teach me how to drive. We will have great fun with it. We have a negro cook and the boys call him Smoke, he is so black. Bud took him on a trip to Chicago last summer and to show Smoke a good time he hired a high powered car and told the chauffeur to drive the limit.

“Well, Smoke never got over raving about that ride. Bud said his eyes fairly popped out of his head and he was scared stiff. When he got back home he told the boys in the mess room that Bud would never ‘get him in one of them go-devils again’!”

Mason laughed heartily at her narrative.

The girl touched him on the shoulder and pointed in the direction where he had seen the cattle grazing. He made out a horseman coming their way.

“That’s Tex,” she said, “one of our boys, I can tell by the way he rides.”

The rider halted and waited for them to come up. Mason noticed the cowboy took his hat off when the girl spoke to him.

“Tex, this is Jack Mason from New York,” she said, introducing the Easterner.

“How de do?” he jerked out in an offhand manner, “just rode in from the boundary line. Sort of keeping an eye on the Ricker gang,” he added, addressing his conversation to the girl.

“What’s the matter, Tex, have they been kicking up any trouble?” she queried in an anxious voice.

“Don’t exactly know,” he snapped out, “they have been acting mighty queer since them two punchers joined our outfit. Joe gave me orders to keep watch of them.”

Tex was a tall lanky cowboy and extremely nervous. He had a peculiar habit of pulling his belt up to the last notch and letting it out again while talking. Mason sized him up as a hard man to handle at close quarters.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“I know who you mean, Tex,” the girl said, “Powers and Carlo.”

He nodded grimly.

“Never mind, Tex. I guess Bud can take care of them. You ride in with us, we will tire Jack out with all our troubles.”

“I reckon I could take care of them if I get half a chance,” declared Tex with a grunt.

He had hitched his belt up until it seemed to Mason that his waist was small as a bean pole, started ahead, riding his horse like one born to the saddle.

The girl rode close to Mason, keeping up an easy conversation. He was surprised at her knowledge of all things in general.

“Some day,” she was saying, “we will ride out to the boundary line and I will show you the Ricker ranch. It is a fine place and they have as much range as Daddy has. They have a girl working for them, too. She is Spanish and a beauty, that is, if you like a brunette.” Josephine was half laughing, and watching him out of the corner of her eyes.

“I can tell better after I have seen her,” he replied, evasively.

CHAPTER III—MASON MEETS THE SHERIFF

They had arrived at the bunk-house and Tex was talking to a man in a dusty khaki suit. The girl saw him and with a bound was out of the saddle and shaking hands with him. Mason knew that this man was Bud Anderson whom the girl had talked so much about.

Tex had gone on ahead to the corral. Mason paused, and was slowly stroking his horse's mane when Josephine suddenly turned and motioned to him.

"Tex tells me the Ricker gang are acting suspicious," he overheard her saying in a strained voice as he rode up.

The man in the dusty khaki suit muttered something under his breath. Josephine was plainly ill at ease.

"Mr. Mason, I want to make you acquainted with Bud Anderson, our sheriff," she said in a low voice.

Mason shook hands and winced. Anderson had a grip of steel. He was built on the lines of an athlete with powerful shoulders and an easy carriage that denoted quickness of action. He had sharp, piercing gray eyes that seemed to read one's innermost thought. Standing close on to six feet, he was a magnificent specimen of manhood.

"Mr. Mason, you have come at just the right time if you like excitement," he said, looking the Easterner over sharply.

"That's my middle name," returned Mason easily.

Anderson nodded approval.

"We are going to have some stormy times around these parts," he declared. "I understand that Miss Josephine has told you about some of our bad neighbors, the Ricker outfit.

"Well," he went on, "I just discovered today that four more men joined forces with them, and I took the trouble to look up their names. They are the same

bunch I rounded up in that shooting scrape five years ago,” he concluded.

“Oh, I remember,” the girl cried in evident distress, “they wrote you from prison that they would get you when their term was up.”

They had turned their horses into the corral and were walking slowly to the house. Anderson shut up like a clam and refused to say anything further on the subject. Mason figured it was on account of the nervousness of the girl. That night Anderson told Mason all the ins and outs of the affair.

The trouble had occurred in a small town called Atwater, situated a few miles from Trader’s Post. Anderson having business to attend to there had stumbled on to the case shortly after it happened.

An old retired silver miner living alone in a cabin had been set upon and robbed by four men. He was found bound and gagged, with a bullet wound in his shoulder.

Anderson took the trail and followed it untiringly for a week until he landed his men. After being convicted and sentenced to five years in prison they had friends write the sheriff a letter swearing vengeance after their term expired.

Two weeks passed by and nothing of importance had occurred in the actions of the Ricker faction to verify the suspicions of Tex. Mason took long rides each day and got so he could keep up with the best riders. His face had taken on a deep tan, his wind was good and his muscles were like iron.

“If I felt any better I couldn’t stand it, I’d be in the hospital,” he declared one day to the ranch owner, in answer to a query as to his health.

His thoughts often turned to home and at times he had to fight hard to overcome a fierce longing to chuck up the whole thing and return East to his old haunts and habits.

“But I won’t,” he gritted to himself, “I told Dad I’d be game, and I’ll stick. When I get that racing car of mine out here I’ll make the natives gasp.”

Then he remembered he had promised the girl he would teach her how to drive, and his thoughts grew tender, for he admitted to himself that he was growing in love with her each day. Then he thought of her deep friendship for Anderson and his face clouded.

Mason had started out alone this morning and was riding a horse given him by the ranch owner. He had determined to see the Ricker ranch and pay her owners a visit.

“If ever I get in a scrap with Bud it will be over Josephine,” he said aloud to his horse. “Still, he has always used me white, eh, Sport, old boy?”

The horse raised his ears as though in sympathy with his master.

Mason had been covering ground at a good clip while voicing expression to his thoughts. An hour later the dim outline of the Ricker ranch came into view. He intended to make a short stay at the ranch and then make for Trader’s Post. He wanted to send a hurry order home for his car which he had ordered the week before.

Mason slowed his horse down to a walk as he came up to the ranch and was eagerly scanning the premises for signs of life. A moment later he dismounted and tied his horse to a post of a low porch that ran the entire length of the ranch building. About the center of the porch there was a door leading into a spacious room filled with saddles, boots and other cowboy paraphernalia.

He boldly tried the door and found it unlocked.

A spirit of adventure seized him and he flung the door open and entered the room. As he did so, he failed to notice a misshapen creature, who had watched him with bright, gleaming eyes, disappear with lightning rapidity through a door at the end of the building.

The place seemed deserted, but what impressed Mason most was the fact that the boots, spurs and other trappings were richly studded and embossed.

“Hum,” mused Mason softly, “pretty swell outfit for a bunch of low down cattle thieves as Bud seems to think they are.”

He had about made up his mind to make a tour of all the rooms and had started towards a door leading into a hall when he heard a noise behind him.

“Move, and I shoot!” the command was fairly barked at him.

Quickly he raised his hands above his head, glancing over his shoulder as he did so.

Through a hole in the wall a bony hand produced, grasping a long blue-barreled Colt aimed directly at his head. Mason heard his captor fumbling with a lock and slowly a door swung outward revealing to his astonished gaze the most hideous-looking object he had ever set eyes upon. It was a hunchback with massive frame and great powerful arms that reached to his knees.

He advanced slowly towards Mason with a horrible leer on his lips, eyes

twitching and bright with rage. Mason's thoughts flew swiftly as he watched the hunchback close in on him.

He had come away from the ranch unarmed as he never had cared for the use of firearms. Now, he wished most heartily that he had taken Josephine's advice when one day she had urged him to carry a gun.

"Guess I've got maw's fool in a fuss," he said grimly to himself as he braced his body for a struggle. "This thing is dippy or I'm foolish."

When within a few feet of Mason the hunchback suddenly dropped his revolver and grappled with him.

Mason met the onslaught with a terrific swing to the dwarf's jaw. Hard as the blow was, it did not seem to have any effect. Mason felt the bony hands of his assailant close about his throat with crushing force. Bright lights flashed before his eyes and he could hear the hunchback's breath come and go in a sharp whistle. Mason realized the hunchback had him at a disadvantage, and allowing his body to become limp, he sank slowly to his knees. The ruse worked, for the hunchback released the strangle hold about his neck.

Like a flash Mason straightened up and throwing his left arm around his assailant's neck he seized his right arm and exerting tremendous pressure forced it sharply up between his shoulder blades. It was the hammerlock and he soon had the hunchback begging for mercy.

Mason was thoroughly angered by this time and threw the loathsome creature into the corner, a groveling mass.

Picking up the gun he slipped it into his pocket.

"Why did you wish to take my life?" he demanded, gazing down at his fallen foe.

"I know you," the dwarf grated in a cracked voice. "Your name is Mason, the new man at Walters' ranch, and I got orders to watch you."

"Why watch me?" Mason asked, his curiosity aroused.

"That's for you to find out," the dwarf answered, a crafty look coming into his eyes.

Mason suddenly whipped the gun out of his pocket and leveled it at the dwarf.

"Tell me the truth," he commanded sternly.

"I thought you was trying to steal something, and there was nobody about and I

was left to guard the place,” the dwarf whined.

“That’s a lie and you know it,” Mason retorted, his ire rising once more. “You claim you were told to watch me, who gave you those orders?”

Great beads of sweat stood out on the dwarf’s ugly face, and his claw-like fingers were working like the talons of some great bird.

“Ricker gave me orders to watch you. He has spies everywhere, he knows you and your father and hates you both. If you want to save your hide you had better clear out of these parts,” he snarled at last.

Mason was astounded. That Ricker should know his father and have set this half-witted dwarf to watching his son was a puzzle. He was inclined to doubt the dwarf’s sanity. So far as he knew his father had no enemies in the world. He determined to sound the dwarf thoroughly.

“Stand up,” he commanded him sternly, holding the gun into the pit of the dwarf’s stomach. “I am going to get at the bottom of this thing. What do you mean by saying that Ricker hates my father?” The dwarf rose in abject terror and started to mumble through chattering teeth.

“Cut that out and talk like a man,” Mason commanded him sharply.

“Ricker claims that your father did him an injury long ago while they were in the lumber business in the East. He says it is in his power to ruin him now and he will ruin you, too,” the dwarf snarled, glaring savagely at him.

Mason smiled grimly.

“I’ve found out what I wanted to know and will act accordingly if it is true,” he said, backing slowly out of the room.

“Tell your precious master I will keep this little toy,” tapping the gun he was holding, “to remember him by, and also tell him I said the Masons are hard to drive.”

Reaching the door he dropped the gun in his pocket and mounting his horse rode slowly towards Trader’s Post. He breathed a sigh of relief when well out of sight of the ranch buildings.

“Well, this is a rum go,” he said softly to himself. “What will Josephine say when I tell her of my adventure. She’ll say right off quick that I need a guardian, and bawl me out for not waiting for her to take me to the ranch as she promised.”

Still, he was troubled over what he had heard, and made up his mind that if he

didn't get a letter from his father soon he would write him all about it, or better still, take a trip East to warn him that Ricker was a desperate character.

He was fast getting on to the ways of the West, and feeling the red blood flowing swiftly through his veins, he felt like getting into action on any trouble that might involve his father in peril.

He meant to take Josephine into his confidence as soon as he got home, and Scotty, too, whom he felt sure he could trust. Thus musing to himself he was covering ground at a slow canter.

Again his thoughts would travel Eastward to his old friends, and the hope of getting his car soon raised his spirits high. Then he remembered Roy Purvis to whom he had said good-bye just before he had started for the West.

Roy had been a keen and enthusiastic automobile racer along with Mason, and had just gone in for aviation. He had several bad spills in learning, but was keener for flying than he ever had been for automobile racing. He had laughingly made the remark to Mason that he might expect a birdman to visit him in his chosen god-forsaken country.

"Just the thing," he said aloud to Sport, who was so startled that he broke into a swift run. "Steady, old boy," he called softly, slowing him down. "When I get to Trader's Post I will telegraph for Roy to come on, and send in a hurry order for my car at the same time."

It was an ideal day with a gentle wind blowing, and Mason drank in deep breaths of the pure air for his brain was still whirling with the adventures of the past hour. He could not connect his father's past with Ricker's life, try as he would. Then he remembered his father never had taken him into his confidence to any great extent, for he was a man of few words.

Mason knew that he held vast holdings in coal, and in the iron industry, besides holding the controlling interest in his New York bank. As for himself, he never had questioned his father on business affairs, being content to follow his own usual mad pursuits.

Now, he wished he had taken more interest in his father's affairs, as he was getting old. The two weeks he had been away from home had given him time to think over some of his own mad enterprises of the past, and he mentally resolved he would square himself with his father and prove he was a chip of the old block.

The Masons came of good fighting stock, his father was born in Virginia and

served through the Civil War. Mason's eyes were taking in the surrounding country with keen delight as his thoughts ran in this channel. Like most rich Americans, he had toured the principal cities of Europe and seen little of his own country.

"America for mine," he said aloud, his eyes aglow with health.

He was but a few miles from Trader's Post now, and he wondered if he would meet any of the boys from the ranch there. A few minutes later he entered the town and was giving his horse over to the care of a hostler with instructions to feed him well, along with a generous tip, when he heard a woman scream.

Running out into the hotel inclosure he beheld a sight that made his blood boil.

It was a girl struggling in the arms of Pete Carlo, the halfbreed. With a bound, Mason was by her side and tearing the Mexican away from her, he promptly knocked him down.

"Great work," called a voice from the hotel porch.

Mason turned and saw Bud and Scotty grinning at him. In the same instant, Bud's hand flashed from his hip, followed by a sharp report.

He heard a cry of pain behind him, and bewildered, he turned again to see the halfbreed nursing a pair of bleeding knuckles.

Bud and Scotty strode toward them with burning wrath in their eyes.

"The dirty skunk," Scotty was saying, as he kicked a gun out of the halfbreed's reach. "He tried to bore you. Never turn your back on a greaser."

"He's drunk," cut in Bud, "but that don't excuse him. Get up, you whelp, and make tracks out of here, you'll lose your job for this."

Bud took his gun and the halfbreed slunk away with muttered threats. Mason looked at the girl. She had recovered from her fright and was regarding him with large dark eyes filled with gratitude, and suspiciously close to the point of tears.

He saw at a glance that she was a Spanish girl of unusual beauty. Taking off his hat he made her a bow and in return he was rewarded with a dainty curtesy.

Turning to Bud he shook his hand warmly and said,

"Thanks, old man, you saved my life."

"That's all right, Jack," the big fellow returned heartily. "You have to watch them greasers. Come, Scotty, let's play a game of cards. Coming in soon?" he

questioned of Mason.

The latter nodded. He had turned his attention again to the girl.

“Do you know that brute of a half breed?” he asked kindly.

“Yes,” she answered in a low musical voice.

He was surprised at her command of grammar. She spoke almost pure English.

“He used to work on the Ricker ranch where I work,” she added.

Mason was surprised. So this was the Spanish girl that Josephine had spoken to him about. He remembered she had said the girl was pretty. He remembered, also, his non-committal answer when she had asked him if he liked brunette beauty.

The girl had stood silently while he was turning these thoughts over in his mind. Suddenly with a quick impulse she extended her hand to him, her great eyes filled with deep pathos.

“I wish to thank you for defending me against that beast. Oh, how I hate him,” she said with a shudder. “He made life miserable for me while he was at the ranch, and you disposed of him so easily.”

Her great eyes swept his stalwart build in silent admiration.

“Please don’t mention it. I am very glad to have been of some assistance to you,” he said, a trifle embarrassed.

“May I ask whom I am indebted to?” she questioned, as he turned to leave.

“Certainly,” he answered with a smile, “my name is Jack Mason.”

The girl gave a sudden start, and he fancied her face had turned pale.

“My name is Waneda, good-bye,” she said, and was gone quickly.

“Now, why in the deuce did she turn pale at the mention of my name?” he asked himself, as he started to join Bud and Scotty.

Making his way to the card room he found only Scotty waiting for him.

“Bud has gone on ahead,” explained Scotty, “said he had almost forgotten a package that he wanted to get to the old man as soon as possible.”

“All right, Scotty, old top,” Mason replied cheerfully, “come over with me to that little dump of a telegraph station we have here. I want to send a message.”

The dispatch sent, they made quick time home to the ranch, and Mason told Scotty all about his adventure at the Ricker ranch.

They arrived home about dusk and put their horses up. Mason went at once to the house. On the porch he found Bud and Josephine talking earnestly.

“Good evening, Miss,” he greeted her as he came up to the porch. “I suppose that Bud has told you all about me getting in Dutch at the Post and how I came near getting shot only for Bud here.”

“I heard all about it, sir,” she said with icy coolness. “And also about the girl,” she added as a parting shot, disappearing in the house.

Mason was taken completely by surprise.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said weakly to himself.

CHAPTER IV—A NEW ARRIVAL

The few remaining days of June passed swiftly and it was nearing the time set for the annual games at the ranch, which were to be held on the Fourth of July. Mason had received word that his car had arrived, and starting out early one morning for Trader's Post with Scotty and Buck Miller, he drove the machine back to the ranch, giving Scotty the ride of his life.

Buck Miller was left behind with orders to bring the horses in, a job he accepted with relief when he saw Mason and Scotty flash by him at express speed.

"Don't want to ride in any contraption like that," he growled to himself as he watched the car disappear in a cloud of dust.

There still remained two days for the men to get ready for the various sports, and they were hard at it when Mason drove his racer into the midst of them with Scotty clinging on for dear life.

Mason said afterwards that he left his finger prints on the car door. The boys crowded about the machine, making various comments and kidding Scotty who was trying to catch his breath.

"Well, boys, what do you think of her?" queried Mason as he stood off and looked his racer over.

"A hoss is plenty good enough for me," spoke up Joe Turner with a drawl. "What do you think about it?"

He turned to Scotty with a grin.

"That's not a fair question for Scotty to answer on his first ride." Mason interposed, with a hearty laugh. "We burned the wind some in getting here and Scotty was up in the air most of the time."

Josephine and her father had now joined the group and Mason noticed the eyes of the girl sparkle as she stood close and admired the trim lines of the racer.

He had not found a chance to talk with her since the Trader's Post incident. It

appeared to him that she had deliberately tried to avoid him, a fact which puzzled him not a little bit.

He had learned on inquiry that the incident at the Post had been settled by the ranch owner. He had learned the particulars from his foreman and was for discharging the halfbreed on the spot, but Josephine had interceded with such good results that her father had relented and promised to give the roan another chance. The ranch owner had warned him to go straight in the future or he would be kicked off the ranch.

The girl's manner was a puzzle to Mason and he determined to meet her coolness with unconcern. He had befriended the Spanish girl as any man would have done under similar circumstances.

He was turning these thoughts over in his mind when he happened to look up and saw the girl smiling at him. His resolution vanished in thin air when she requested him to show her the fine points of the racer.

Josephine proved an apt pupil and was listening eagerly to his explanation of the workings of the car when they were interrupted by an exclamation from Tex.

"Here comes Buck riding like he was mad," he was saying, as he gave his belt an extra hitch and shaded his eyes with his hand.

Mason looked up and made out a horseman coming towards them leading two horses. It was Buck Miller, and as Tex said, he had been riding his horse until it was almost winded. He seemed to be in a surly mood and it was some time before he answered the ranch owner's question as to why he had ridden so fast.

"Well, I've just come from the Post, and had a run-in with the damnedest freak of a man that it's ever been my misfortune to see," he exploded at last.

The ranch owner breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't see why that reason should call for a cowboy to run his horse to death and told Buck as much in plain words.

"Must have been some man to get you riled up that way," Scotty cut in, smiling broadly.

Buck silenced him with a withering glance.

"Wait until I tell you how I come to meet up with this nut," Buck retorted, addressing the ranch owner. "And see if you wouldn't have got all het up same as I did."

The boys gathered around him and at a nod from the ranch owner he continued.

“After Mr. Mason and Scotty left in the machine, I figured I would go into the hotel, have a few drinks and play a game of pool.

“I had the drinks all right and had lit a cigar and was waiting for some one to turn up that could play pool, when the door opened and the freshest duck in loud clothes I had ever set eyes on came strolling in, walked up to me, calmly took my cigar out of my mouth, lit a cheap stogie with it, and in a voice like a girl, said:

“‘Lovely morning, isn’t it?’

“I don’t know why I didn’t kill him on the spot. He plumb took my breath away. When I got my wind back I pulled my gun and covered him.

“‘Stranger,’ I said in a hard voice, ‘I’ve killed men for less than that.’

“‘Oh, but these are not worth it, you know. I buy them in thousand lots,’ he said in his woman’s voice, referring to his stogie and smiling at me sweetly.

“Then, before I could answer, he asked me if I knew where the Bar X ranch was located, said he was coming out to Mr. Walters’ ranch for a long stay as his health was bad.

“I answered him by saying his health wouldn’t survive his nerve if I had anything to do with it. He wanted me to show him the way out here, and I told him to find his own way.

“As I left, he called after me that I could expect him out here as soon as he could find a horse.

“He’s crazy, or I’m a fool,” growled Buck in conclusion, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

The ranch owner’s face wore an amused smile as he listened to the expressions of indignation that arose from the men at Buck’s recital. Some were for giving the stranger a warm reception when he arrived, while others insisted that he was probably a harmless lunatic.

“Well, boys,” said the ranch owner, breaking in on their conversation, “we won’t worry about Buck’s *find* until he gets here, and when he comes I want you men to refer him to me before you start any rough work. You may knock off training for the day.”

This advice was taken as a command by the men and they silently made their

way to the corral. Mason drove his racer to the shed where he intended to give the engine a general inspection.

That night he had a long talk with Bud Anderson. He gave the latter a minute description of his encounter with the hunchback at the Ricker ranch. He also told him of the hunchback's revelation that Ricker had known Mason's father in the past and harbored a deadly hatred for his son. When Mason came to this part of his narrative, Bud whistled and looked keenly at him.

"So, Ricker has got you mixed up in his crooked designs, too," he said at last, a steely look coming into his gray eyes. "What do you make of it?"

"I don't know what to make of it," Mason confessed.

"I wrote home to father telling him of the incident, and expect an answer soon, which I hope will clear the mystery up. I didn't know that my father had an enemy in the world."

"All big and successful men have," Bud replied kindly, as he noticed a troubled look in the other's face, "cheer up, Jack, and we'll run this thing to earth together."

The two men shook hands in sincere friendship and talked far into the night. Mason told Bud of the rich trimmings of cowboy paraphernalia he had discovered at the Ricker ranch and his own impressions of the general air of mystery that surrounded the place. The news threw Bud into a deep study. Mason was more than ever impressed with the strong personality of the foreman and sheriff.

The day set for the games broke bright and cheerful. A group of cowboys had gathered around the corral. They were laughing and jesting, and it seemed to Mason they were just like a lot of schoolboys, all good-natured and jolly. He had taken a position close to the corral with Josephine and her father where they were waiting for the first event of the day to be pulled off. It was to be a horse race between Red Sullivan and Scotty. It promised to be an exciting contest, and they were exchanging good-natured raillery while they sat in their saddles waiting for the signal to start.

Bud Anderson was master of ceremonies and raising his gun in the air, sang out:

"Ready! Go!"

The words and the report blended together and the racers were off.

Mason witnessed some of the finest riding it had ever been his fortune to see.

The men were to race over a given course, picking up objects off the ground tied up in handkerchiefs, wheel, and continue their run to the corral.

The yelling of the cowboys broke into a roar as it was seen that Red Sullivan had taken the lead. Mason's blood tingled with excitement as the men cheered their respective favorites. The ranch owner's face was wreathed in smiles while Josephine was clapping her hands and cheering for Scotty, as he had always been a favorite of hers.

As the riders made the turn and started on the home stretch it was seen that Scotty had pulled slightly into the lead. It was a straight race now with nothing to pick up, and the riders urged their mounts to the limit, with both horses again running neck and neck.

When almost to the goal, Scotty threw his horse forward in a last heroic effort, flashing by the judge, the winner by a few feet.

A cheer went up from the cowboys as they crowded around Scotty to shake his hand.

"Guess I win that Stetson hat, don't I, Red?" he called out to his late opponent, his eyes twinkling.

"You sure do," answered Red, his manner a trifle piqued, "but this thing ain't settled for good. I mean to have another go with you and it won't be so close next time."

"Any time or place will suit me," answered Scotty cheerfully.

The next contest was to be a roping duel between Buck Miller and Pete Carlo the halfbreed. Buck had protested against having anything to do with the greaser, as he had named him in contempt, but Bud's reasoning had prevailed and Buck finally agreed to go on with him.

Bud Anderson, acting as the judge, was explaining the rules for the expert ropers to observe, when a commotion was heard from some of the cowboys at the far end of the corral.

"Here comes Buck's friend," yelled a cowboy from this group.

All looked, and sure enough, it was the stranger that Buck had told them about. Buck muttered something suspiciously like an oath, and glanced at Mason. The latter was intently watching the newcomer. All sport came to a standstill, and eyes were turned towards the stranger. He was near enough for them to see that he rode a small horse, or else he was a very tall man for his feet just cleared the

ground. He was riding at a snail's pace and fanning himself with a wide rimmed hat. A suit that fairly groaned with loud checks graced his tall and angular form.

Silence fell upon the group of cowboys as they watched the apparition dismount in front of them.

Dismount is not the word, for he simply stuck his feet on the ground and let the horse walk out from under him, after which he turned and faced the cowboys.

"Somebody dead?" he questioned, gazing solemnly at the group, and bowing blandly to each one.

"I take it, this is the Bar X ranch," he rattled on, before anyone could speak.

"Yes, you've hit it," came quietly from the ranch owner. He was trying to figure out if this stranger was a freak or a fool.

"Met one of your men the other day, nice pleasant fellow," the freak began again, in his small piping voice.

He smiled serenely at Buck Miller. That worthy's face turned black with anger.

"My name is Ed. MacNutt, at your service," the stranger rambled on. "I inquired at the hotel for a good place to recruit up, as the doctor says one of my lungs is affected. From the hotel man's description, I take it you're the proprietor of this outfit, and I ask you to let me put up here until I feel strong again."

The request seemed fair enough, and after a short talk with his wife the ranch owner told MacNutt he could stay with them, after first warning him against the fresh way he talked to the cowboys.

It was arranged for him to have quarters at the bunk house. On account of the delay caused by MacNutt, the match was called off between the halfbreed and Buck Miller, much to the latter's satisfaction.

The next event was to be a wrestling match. Tom Powers, the man that Mason disliked, was one of the contestants. He soon proved himself a superior wrestler, throwing all his opponents in rapid succession, and boasting loudly that he could throw any three men on the range within an hour's time.

Mason had been observing Powers' methods closely, and remarked to Bud, who stood close by, that the wrestler appeared muscle bound.

He had spoken in a low voice, but Powers overheard him and a sneer came into his face.

"Perhaps the dude would like to try me out!" he said insolently, motioning

towards Mason, the sneer curling the corners of his mouth.

Mason felt the hot blood rush to his face. Quickly throwing off a light sweater which he wore, he stepped towards Powers. Anderson and the ranch owner caught him by the arm, telling him it would be madness to wrestle Powers, as he was regarded as the champion for miles around.

“Oh, let him come on, and I’ll show him up,” sneered Powers.

Mason laughed in his face.

“I’ll go on with him,” he said briskly to Anderson.

Walking up to Powers he said, “I am going to warn you, Powers, that I’ve wrestled before, so be on your guard. I don’t wish to take any unfair advantage of you.”

“Bluff,” sneered Powers, glaring at him.

MacNutt was apparently enjoying himself to the fullest extent. He was here, there, and all over, talking to each and every person as if he had known them all his life. Ambling up to Josephine, he whispered:

“Young feller’s got it all over the other guy,” pointing to Powers.

The girl nodded. She wasn’t sure if she liked this stranger or not, and just now, she was worried for fear the Easterner would get hurt.

The wrestlers were circling about each other looking for an opening. Suddenly they came together with Mason underneath. Powers tried several holds which he broke with ease. There were surprised remarks from the men, who had expected to see the Easterner crushed. The girl was staring with wide open eyes expecting every minute the life would be crushed from his body.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said a voice in her ear, and turning she beheld the stranger again.

“Oh,” she cried with a shudder. “Do you really think the young fellow has a chance?”

“Sure thing,” he answered in his high pitched voice. “The young lad is merely playing with him.”

The girl rewarded his assurance with a grateful smile and turned her attention again to the two men. Mason had broken every hold his opponent had tried and had the fellow pretty nearly winded.

Baffled at every turn, Powers resorted to dirty work. He fouled Mason again and again, until the latter worked to his feet and cautioned him against fouling. As he was protesting, Powers rushed in and securing a body hold, lifted Mason off his feet. As he felt himself falling he twisted his body in the air, bringing Powers underneath him and pinned both his shoulders to the ground, scoring a clean fall.

There was a burst of applause from the men, the girl joining in, her face radiant with smiles.

All present had thought sure that Mason would lose the first fall when they had seen him lifted off his feet. This was scientific wrestling, and the men began to appreciate it. Powers was furious over his defeat and swore the fall was a trick. The black nature of the man had Mason fighting mad by this time, and when the next bout was called, he darted in on Powers.

What followed brought a cry of wonder from the crowd. Powers' heels had described an arc in the air; and he fell with such force that he lay stunned. Mason had secured a hold called *the flying mare* and had used it with telling effect.

CHAPTER V—THE ABDUCTION OF JOSEPHINE

A quiver ran through the form of the man on the ground. After two vain attempts, he rose slowly to his feet, his face contorted with rage.

Unobserved, the halfbreed had edged up close to the circle formed by the men and drawing his gun, fired point blank at Mason, who fell to the ground with a low moan. The assassin, not waiting to see the effect of his shot, sprang with a bound into the saddle of the nearest horse. Sinking his spurs deep into the animal's flank he was away before anyone thought to stop him. It all happened so quickly the men stood dazed.

Bud was the first to rouse them to action. Emptying his gun after the fugitive he called out sharp orders to the men.

There was a scramble for horses as the cowboys responded. A cry of dismay went up from the men when it was discovered that the halfbreed had taken the fastest horse of the lot, Josephine's famous Fleet.

As Mason fell, the girl had rushed to his side and partly caught him in her arms.

She was supporting his head and trying to stop the flow of blood that trickled from a wound in his right temple. The girl was deathly pale and watched the stricken man anxiously, as with tender care she loosened his shirt at the front. Bud's face was set tense as he bent over and examined the wound.

"Bullet just creased him," he announced briefly, his face lighting up. "He will be all right in an hour or two."

Josephine's heart leaped at the words. She had a deep admiration for this Easterner who had come among them to fight life's battle anew. She shuddered as she realized how close the bullet had struck. Then a wave of reaction seized her and she trembled violently.

Bud had noticed her agitation and said kindly,

"Come, girl, this is no place for you. I will take you to the house."

On his return, Mason had partly recovered and was talking with the ranch owner, who had bound up his wound. Mason smiled feebly as Bud came up to them.

“Fool stunt of mine to topple over the way I did,” he said, feeling of the bandage gingerly.

“Not so,” Bud protested quickly, while admiring the other’s iron nerve. “That was a close call you had, son. Lucky for you the halfbreed’s aim was bad.”

“I seem to get in bad all around,” Mason answered ruefully.

“The ranch owner tells me that Powers has cleared out, too,” he added.

“Glad of it,” Bud growled, “hope my men run that greaser down, but they ain’t got much of a chance, with him on Josephine’s horse.”

Late that night the men came trooping in. They had been thrown off the trail when darkness set in, but all vowed they would get the halfbreed if it took them all summer. They were overjoyed when told that Mason would be all right in a day or two. He had won them all by his exhibition of strength and nerve, and they would fight for him to the last man. Bud questioned the cowboys about their hunt for the halfbreed, and Buck Miller, acting as spokesman, gave his opinion that when they lost the halfbreed’s trail he was making for Devil’s Gap and would circle back to the Ricker ranch.

“We’ll pay Mr. Ricker a visit,” Bud said grimly, his gray eyes flashing.

“This is the halfbreed’s revenge for your knocking him down that day at Trader’s Post, Jack,” he added.

The following day as the cowboys were starting out to track the halfbreed down, Scotty, who had made an early trip to the Post, thrust a letter in Mason’s hand. It was from his father, and hastily tearing it open he read the contents.

The letter read:

My dear Son:

In reply to your letter I will say that I am greatly concerned about you after reading its contents, and believe you to be in great danger. In brief, this man Ricker you mention in your letter was an old schoolmate of mine. In my early days I was engaged in the lumber business and took Ricker in as my bookkeeper. I had always believed him to be honest, until one day I happened to be looking over the books and discovered evidence that false entries had been made. I had other clerks in my employ and they all came

under my suspicion. I then hired a detective and had them watched. The thefts in money ran into the thousands and were traced directly to Ricker. He was a married man and the detective found that he had been spending money lavishly and far beyond his means. I had the matter hushed up as his wife was sickly, and instead of pressing the charge against him, I discharged him from my employ.

The shock of his exposure killed his wife, and he became morbid and several times threatened my life. He finally disappeared after warning me in a letter that in the future he would live only for revenge on me. It has been ten years since I last heard of him, and I had hoped that he was dead.

My son, be on your guard as I believe Ricker will try to strike me through you.

The best news I can send is that your mother and sister are making preparations to visit you soon.

I hear good news of you from Mr. Walters and I'm proud of you, my son.

Your father,

John Mason

Mason glanced up from his letter to find MacNutt regarding him with a curious expression in his eyes.

The strange man had taken a great liking to Mason, and the latter found himself in his company a good bit of his time. Mason had come to think that MacNutt wasn't such a fool as most people seemed to take him for.

The leaders of the searching party were far in advance by this time and, as Mason intended to take part in the hunt, he pocketed his letter and called to MacNutt and Scotty. As they rode he explained the letter to them in detail.

"You have got to get this Ricker or he'll get you," Scotty said, after a long silence.

"But I haven't even seen the man yet," Mason protested.

"I heard Bud say this morning that we are going to call on that delightful gentleman," MacNutt chirped up.

Scotty favored him with a warning scowl.

"You'll have a chance to see him to-day, but I'm going to watch him sharp for he's the quickest man in these parts with a gun," Scotty declared, still keeping

his eyes on MacNutt and frowning darkly.

The latter, not one bit abashed, was whistling gaily, and opened his eyes in child-like wonder at Scotty's words. The cowboy mentally put him down as cracked. There was a stiff wind blowing and the sky was overcast with ominous looking clouds. The cowboy was casting an anxious eye on the horizon.

"We are going to get a hard storm before night," he said uneasily.

"Do you get very hard storms in these parts?" queried MacNutt timidly.

"Well, rather," drawled Scotty with a grin.

They were riding fast now, and had begun to overtake the party in front.

"We don't want to be too far in the rear when they get to the ranch," the Scot explained, as he urged his horse faster.

The rest of the ride was made in silence, Mason turning over in his mind the news from his father.

Soon they were approaching the outbuildings of the ranch, and Mason's blood tingled as he remembered his first experience on this ranch. The cowboys ahead had halted and were waiting for Mason and his party to come up.

"I am going right up and call Ricker out," Bud said as they came within hearing distance, "and don't none of you men pull a gun unless you see Ricker start to draw." The men agreed, but there were sullen mutterings among them, and there was a doubt in Mason's mind whether they would control themselves if the halfbreed showed himself.

Bud and the ranch owner with Scotty and Red Sullivan rode up to the house and knocked.

"What's wanted?" a gruff voice called from within.

"I want to talk with you, Ricker," Bud answered, recognizing the owner of the voice.

"Does it take a small army to come here and talk to me?" the same voice said with a snarl.

The door was flung violently open, and Ricker stood in the doorway with his arms folded across a brawny chest. There was a sarcastic smile on the man's face as he sneered at Bud.

"Never mind the army," Bud answered curtly, his eyes keenly watching for any

move the other might make.

“I’m here to find out if that halfbreed Mexican you used to have working for you has showed up here in the last twenty-four hours.”

“How should I know anything about the greaser?” Ricker questioned with an oath. “Your employer hired him to work for the Bar X, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and a precious rascal he was,” the ranch owner replied bitterly.

“He shot at my guest, Mr. Mason here, and stole my daughter’s favorite horse. He’s a man after your own heart, Ricker.”

Ricker shot a hard look at Mason when the ranch owner mentioned his name. Bud was growing impatient.

“You haven’t answered my question, Ricker,” he said in an even voice.

“No, and I’ll be damned if I will,” the man burst out in sudden fury, “and I don’t want any damn sheriff nosing around my place.”

As he spoke, five men from within silently took their places alongside of him.

The lines on Bud’s face tightened. There was a stir among his men and a stiffening of muscles. It seemed to Mason as if the air was suddenly charged with electricity, so tense was the situation.

“I’m watching you, Ricker!” the word came from Bud like a crack of a pistol. “I see that you and your men are itching for a fight. Steady! Take your hand away from your hip, Ricker, or I’ll bore you!”

Bud sat his horse facing Ricker. Both his hands were carelessly toying with his scarf knot, about breast high where the butt of a six-shooter protruded. It was a position feared by all his enemies.

Ricker laughed mirthlessly.

“Oh, well,” he said in a changed tone, “take a look around, but you won’t find the greaser here.”

Mason breathed a sigh of relief. The danger point seemed past for the moment. Bud left half of his men on guard in front of the house and made a careful search of the premises, but found no trace of the halfbreed.

“I suppose you are satisfied now,” Ricker sneered, as Bud gave the command for his men to leave.

“No, I’m not satisfied,” Bud answered him sharply. “I am certain the Mexican

has visited you since yesterday. My men trailed him to Devil's Gap and he was swinging in a circle towards your place when they lost his trail. That's all I've got to say, but you'll hear from me again."

Bud gave a signal and the cowboys set a fast pace for home as the storm showed signs of breaking on them at any moment. Mason rode with Bud, and they kept up a conversation with difficulty amid flashes of lightning and the crash of thunder.

"Gee, this is some storm," gasped Mason after an unusually bright flash of lightning, followed by a deluge of rain.

"Yes," Bud roared in his ear to make himself heard, "we get them like this out here, but what I am sore about is that we didn't get that greaser."

Mason started to answer, but his words were drowned by the thunder. When the party finally arrived at the Bar X corral it was dark and lights were flashing in and out of the ranch house.

"Something must be wrong at the house," Bud muttered as they hastily put their horses up.

As Bud and Mason started for the house, some one came towards them with a lantern. It proved to be Mrs. Walters, and she seemed to be in great distress.

"Oh, I am so frightened," she cried, as she caught sight of them. "Josephine has disappeared. She went for a ride soon after you men left, and here it is nine o'clock and she hasn't returned. I fear something has happened to her."

Mason was shocked to think of Josephine out alone and in the storm.

"For God's sake, Bud," he cried in anguish, "get the men together and let's find her."

Bud blew a whistle and the cowboys rallied around him.

"Boys," he said sternly, "there's been hellish doings on this ranch lately. Josephine has disappeared and it's up to us to find her. I lay this to that halfbreed's work. Mount your horses and take lanterns along with you and see if you can't pick up her trail before the rain washes all traces of it away."

The cowboys obeyed with alacrity and muttered deep threats against the halfbreed. It would fare hard with him if he fell into their hands this night; his punishment would be swift and sure.

Mrs. Walters gave the men the direction that Josephine had taken and they

started off with a rush.

Buck Miller was leading the way as he was the best trailer among them. He could follow a trail equal to an Indian. Aided by an occasional flash of lightning, the men picked their way slowly. The rain had ceased, but the wind was blowing almost a gale.

Buck had picked up Josephine's trail about a hundred yards from the corral. After following it for about an hour they found it led towards Devil's Gap, a favorite ride of Josephine's when she wished to be alone. According to her mother, the girl had taken a horse from the corral that had been used as a pack horse to bring provisions from Trader's Post.

The ranch owner had insisted on joining them in the search, and it seemed to Mason as if he had grown years older in the last hour. His manner was pitiful as the shock of his daughter's possible fate showed in his eyes. The trail was very difficult to follow on account of the hard fall of rain. The men were proceeding with caution for fear of losing it altogether.

In this manner they rode for two hours when there came a cry from Buck who was far in advance of them. There was an answering yell from the cowboys as they pressed their horses hard and rode up to him.

"Buck, what have you discovered?" Mason demanded anxiously.

Buck motioned for them to keep back before he answered. He had dismounted and was eagerly scanning the ground. Bud joined them at this juncture and repeated Mason's question. Buck for an answer held up a piece of cloth.

"Other horses' tracks join here," he said sagely, pointing to the ground. "The girl was held up here, for there is evidence of a struggle."

Bud examined the piece of cloth and handed it to the ranch owner.

"It's from Josephine's dress," the unhappy father declared with a groan.

"The girl put up a fight here," Buck continued, "and it looks as if there were two or more persons that waylaid her."

The ranch owner was nearly frantic and it was with difficulty that the men restrained him from plunging blindly alone on the trail.

"Keep cool," Bud advised him. "Buck tells me the trail divides here. They have one lead horse and one carrying double. I am going to send one of my men home with you as you are in no condition to go on. Besides, your wife needs your

counsel just now. I am going to divide my forces and we will stay on the trail night and day until we find her, then God help them if they have harmed her in any way.”

Bud choked at the last sentence, his emotions overcoming him. After a short argument with the heartbroken father, Bud’s advice prevailed and the party set out on their quest.

CHAPTER VI—JOSEPHINE'S PERIL

After the men had left for the Ricker ranch, Josephine felt lonesome and, telling her mother she was going for a short ride, she hastily slipped into a khaki riding dress, for the air felt like rain. Her mother tried to persuade her not to go, as the halfbreed and Powers were at large and might do her harm if she should happen to run across them.

"You know, dear," she said as a final argument, "Powers hasn't liked you since you refused to let him pay you court, and it would be just like him to take up with that Mexican."

"I know he hates Mr. Mason and would do him an injury if he got a chance," she added.

"I guess the shoe pinches the other foot," the girl answered with a happy laugh. "From what I have seen of Mr. Mason, Powers had better keep away from him. He seems perfectly able to take care of himself."

The fond mother looked keenly at her daughter. Was it possible she was in love with this New Yorker? The question she asked herself struck home with heavy force. It had seemed only yesterday that she was carrying her in her arms. Now, as she looked, she realized her daughter was fast growing into womanhood.

Josephine was watching her mother in amusement.

"Cheer up, mother," she cried with a laugh, throwing her arms around her neck and kissing her. "You look as though you had been to a funeral. I'm not going to elope or run away, I'm only going for a short ride, and just think of the old plug of a horse I've got to take. All the best ones are in use; darn that old Mexican, anyway, I hope Bud gets Fleet back for me," she wound up, angrily stamping her foot.

"Bud will get him back for you if possible; run along now dear if you must go, and get home early as I think we are going to have a storm," her mother said, smiling at her daughter's outburst of anger.

Josephine kissed her again and tripped lightly to the corral. On her way she passed Mason's car in the shed. "Wish I knew how to run the rig-ama-jig," she mused to herself as her eyes caught sight of it. Arriving at the corral she soon had a saddle and bridle on the horse she had spoken so lightly to her mother about, and rode leisurely off in the direction of Devil's Gap. The beast had seemed surprised to feel a saddle and rider on its back, and started to cut all sorts of capers. The animal had been discarded for some time as a range horse, and was now used for pack carrying. Josephine was pleased at the ginger it displayed, but felt sad and blue again when she thought of how her own fast horse, Fleet, had been stolen from her. She allowed the animal to set its own pace as her thoughts traveled back over the events of the past twenty-four hours. The cowboys had been gone about four hours when she started on her ride, and she figured she would go towards Devil's Gap and return home about the same time they would arrive.

Josephine had ridden about ten miles when the first flash of lightning warned her that she would have to change her plans and start back. Just ahead, the trail branched off towards the Ricker ranch. At this point there was a large cottonwood tree on a slight elevation, where she could command a view of the surrounding country. The girl determined to ride to the cottonwood, then turn back for home, as she thought she could make it before the storm broke. As she drew up to the cottonwood she dismounted to stretch her limbs as the ride had tired her, for she was more used to riding her own horse.

She climbed the slight rise and stood leaning against the tree taking in the view when she heard a step behind her. The girl turned in sudden terror, to find herself confronted by Powers. She realized instantly that he must have been hiding behind the tree and had watched her approach. She hated the man intensely, and as he stood there before her smiling, her dislike increased. She drew herself up and coldly waited for him to speak. "Did I scare you, my proud little maid?" he put the question suddenly, his eyes drinking in her girlish beauty.

"What were you hiding here for, Powers?" Josephine questioned, her anger rising. "The men are looking for the halfbreed, and if they run into you, you won't fare any better than he will, for they will string him up." The man's eyes glittered.

"They won't find me or the halfbreed," he said with a savage oath. "So, you have joined forces with the Mexican," the girl spoke with cutting emphasis. "I thought as much, he's just about your speed, Powers." The man saw his slip and winced. Josephine saw she had hit the truth and regarded him scornfully. Her

words had seemed to raise a fury in the man, and the girl began to fear him, though she tried hard to appear natural.

“Don’t come any of your high-toned airs on me,” he cried, his voice thick with passion. “Since that New Yorker come here you’ve been too nice for common folks. I know you’re dead stuck on him, but you’ll never marry him, I’ll kill him first.”

Josephine faced him pale and resolute. “You, you beast,” her words rang out with withering scorn. “You’re not fit to breathe the same air he does. I’ll tell Bud about your threat and he will run you out of the country.” At the last words the girl started to leap on her horse. “No, you don’t,” the man grated, darting swiftly after her and grabbing her brusquely by the arm. Josephine swung around, something bright glistening in her hand; it was a small Colt revolver she always carried.

“Take your hands off me, you brute,” she cried, leveling the weapon at him. Her voice was trembling between fear and hate. “Stand back, or so help me God, I’ll shoot!” Powers recoiled. He could see that the girl was in deadly earnest, and sought to modify his tone. “Now, you know, Josephine, I didn’t mean you any harm,” he began in a wheedling voice. “I’m taking no chances with you,” the girl answered sharply. “I’m going to hold you here until some of the boys show up, if I have to keep you here all night. There’s the dead line, cross it at your peril.” She pointed to an imaginary line halfway between them. Powers’ eyes glowed and a crafty look came into them. “There comes one of your friends, now,” he cried suddenly, pointing behind her.

Not suspecting a ruse Josephine turned and looked over her shoulder, her weapon half lowered. Too late she saw her mistake as she heard a hiss above her.

A lariat thrown by the skillful hand of the halfbreed had settled about her waist, pinning her arms helplessly to her side.

The girl realized with a sinking heart that the halfbreed had been hiding in the tree all the time, and along with Powers he had watched her movements from the start.

She struggled desperately to free herself, but the tough lariat only cut deeper into her arms.

Powers watched her frantic efforts with a gloating smile.

“We could have captured you long ago,” he said with his sneering laugh, as the halfbreed slid down out of the tree at his feet. “Only we wanted to hear which

you had to say about that gang of fools that are trailing the halfbreed.”

The Mexican leered at her.

“I fool them quick,” he boasted.

Josephine gave him a look of contempt.

“What did you want to capture me for?” she asked, looking Powers straight in the eye. “Bud Anderson will kill you both if you harm me.”

Once more her words threw the man into a furious passion.

“I’m going to lay for him and that upstart Mason, and I’ll get them both,” he ground out the words with an oath. “And as for you, my proud beauty, I am going to make you my wife, or mistress, just as you choose.”

“Are you mad?” Josephine gasped in terror, shrinking away from him.

Powers had turned his back to her and was talking in a low voice to the Mexican. Josephine shivered. It was getting dark and had started to rain hard. Her heart sank lower as she realized she was completely in the power of these outlaws.

“Oh, if some of the cowboys would only show up,” she wailed to herself.

After a short consultation between the two men, the halfbreed left on some mission.

“Pull yourself together,” Powers ordered her roughly. “The halfbreed has gone for our horses just over the knoll, and we will be a good many miles from here by morning.”

“You mean that he has gone to get my horse,” Josephine flared up at him indignantly. Powers chuckled maliciously.

“The Mexican wouldn’t trade your horse, Fleet, for any horse in the country,” he said shortly.

Josephine lapsed into silence. The halfbreed was returning with the horses.

“Jump up behind the Mexican on your own horse. We can make better time that way until we reach the foothills, then you’ve got to ride this old nag again,” Powers commanded her roughly, giving her a lift.

The girl obeyed. It gave her some courage to find herself on her own horse once more, and there was always the chance, she thought, that she might outwit them and escape. In this manner they rode, Powers bringing up the rear and leading the spare horse. The rain fell in torrents, drenching the poor girl to the skin. To

her great relief it ceased raining a half hour later and she knew their trail would show clear again.

The men were talking earnestly as though in a difference of opinion as they rode along as fast as possible with one horse carrying double. To her great dismay they conversed in Spanish, but from an occasional lapse into English, she understood that they feared their trail would be picked up by Bud and his men. She heard Buck Miller's name spoken and knew they feared his wonderful ability to follow almost any trail.

Josephine felt more resigned now, for when Bud's men returned from Ricker's and found her missing, she was sure they would lose no time in picking up her trail, as the rain had ceased just in time. Even if the rain had washed all traces of it away early in the evening, they would be sure to pick up the fresh trail after the rain, she reasoned. Listening closely to the outlaw's talk from the words dropped in English, she made out that the halfbreed had been hotly pressed by Bud's men the day before, but by his superior knowledge of the mountains he had at last baffled them. The halfbreed had circled the foothills and made for Ricker's just as Bud's men thought he would.

On arriving there, he encountered Powers, who had made directly for the same place after Mason had been wounded. At the ranch, Powers had informed the halfbreed that Mason had escaped serious injury at his hands, and proposed a scheme to get Josephine in their power. The Mexican at once agreed to the plot and they had worked out their plans accordingly. Powers, who was the brains of the two, figured that Bud would visit Ricker with the hope of getting trace of the halfbreed, and proposed that they leave the ranch at once.

The halfbreed assented, and Powers after cautioning Ricker to keep silent about their visit, the two conspirators left hurriedly, taking a roundabout way to the Bar X ranch. It was their plan to ride boldly to the ranch and take Josephine away by force, as they counted on Bud's men being on their way to Ricker's. The scheme worked out better than they had expected, for the halfbreed had keen eyes and had seen Josephine in the distance in time for them to make a dash for the cottonwood tree. There they concealed themselves and waited for the girl to come up, as has been related. The outlaws rode hard with their captive and made the foothills just as the first streak of dawn appeared. Here, the captive was compelled to ride the horse she had ridden when captured, Powers explaining that the mountain trail was too dangerous and he didn't dare risk having one horse carrying double.

The girl was nearly exhausted and begged to rest a while, but Powers harshly told her she was only trying to hold them up to gain time.

“We’ve got a retreat in the mountains that only myself and the Mexican know about,” he explained to her, watching closely to note the effect of his words. “And when your friends come looking for you, we will have a surprise waiting for them.”

For an answer the girl gave him a look of hate.

“I’ll break that haughty spirit of yours,” he threatened, his face dark with anger.

“You coward!” Josephine cried, her eyes blazing, “and you call yourself a man.”

Powers grinned. He secretly admired her spirit.

Two hours later they were high in the mountains and when Powers finally called a halt, the place seemed to Josephine like a natural fortress. The retreat lay in a small plateau and was reached only through a narrow defile. It commanded a view for miles around, and as familiar as the girl was with the mountains she never had seen this place. It was a more perfect retreat than Devil’s Gap, and Josephine’s heart sank when she remembered that Powers had said that only he and the halfbreed knew of the place.

Powers was watching her expression of despair as she thought of her slim chances of escaping unaided from the place, and her helplessness seemed to amuse the man.

“How do you like your cage, my pretty bird? Welcome to my home,” he said with an attempt at levity.

“You devil,” Josephine answered hotly, “don’t imagine that you can keep me here; the boys will find this place and your life won’t be worth as much as a snake’s.”

Powers laughed contemptuously and left her. The girl threw herself down on the ground completely exhausted. She lay there trying to keep back a burst of tears while she could hear the men moving about her. There was a sort of a shanty near a wall that rose on all sides of the plateau and she knew the men were preparing a meal. The smell of coffee and bacon cooking made her hungry. It was the first thought of hunger since she had started on her fateful ride.

Finally Powers came and brought her a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of bacon.

“Come, girl,” he said, with an attempt at kindness, “you must try to eat something.”

Josephine accepted the food. She knew if she was to keep up her strength she must eat, and she was almost starved. When she had finished eating, Powers pointed to the shanty.

“You are to sleep in there,” he told her briefly, “and I advise you to get some sleep now. There is a fine bunk in there, and don’t worry, I’ll keep my eye on the halfbreed and see that he don’t bother you.”

“Who will watch you?” Josephine answered, eyeing him coldly.

“Oh, come, Josephine, and be sensible, I will give you all kinds of time to learn to like me,” he answered, trying to appear humble.

“Small chance of me ever liking you after what you have done,” she replied bitterly, turning from him in loathsome disgust.

Josephine was dead tired and went to the shanty to rest, but not to sleep, as she felt she couldn’t trust the man. She lay there forming plan after plan to escape, only to cast them aside as useless.

The day passed rapidly, and towards night she wandered about looking her prison over and trying to find a means of escape. She knew the men were watching her movements closely. They were sitting out near a fire as the night was chilly. Later they started to play cards and gamble, but she knew they were still watching her closely.

Seeing no possible way of escape she went back to the shanty and threw herself down on the bunk in despair. As she lay there looking through a crack in the roof at the stars, she could hear the men swearing and still at their card game. Suddenly she sat bolt upright. The men were talking in English now, and she caught a word that caused her to listen breathlessly.

She heard the name of Mason and Bud spoken, and the conversation that followed caused her blood to run cold. It was a diabolical plot that they were planning to run Bud and his men into a trap carefully set for them. All of a sudden the talking ceased, and she heard one of the outlaws glide stealthily up to her shanty. Josephine’s heart almost stopped beating as she feigned sleep. The footsteps halted and she was conscious of eyes looking in on her through the one small window. After a brief moment, that seemed ages to the frightened girl, the footsteps softly retreated.

“She’s asleep,” she heard Powers say, after which they resumed their conversation.

The plot had been formed by Powers, and as he unfolded it word for word to the Mexican, Josephine could hardly keep herself from screaming. The plan was for Powers to take her away and force her to marry him. The halfbreed was to go with them, and as the two had a little money saved, they were to strike some town near the coast and start a gambling house.

First, Powers was to write a decoy note and the halfbreed was to take it to Ricker’s and get the Spanish girl Waneda to deliver it.

The note was to be addressed to Mason and worded in such a way as to make him think it was written by the Spanish girl herself. The note was to state that Waneda had discovered Josephine’s captors’ place of concealment, and wishing to repay him for his kindness to her when he had protected her from the halfbreed, she had hastened to him at once with the information. It was to be a clever forgery by Powers, using Waneda as the innocent tool.

Powers figured by the time that Waneda got the note to Bar X ranch, the cowboys would have become frantic in their failure to find Josephine, and would fall easy prey to the trap set for them.

Waneda after delivering the note was to ride back at once to Ricker’s.

Waneda was to be especially instructed not to deliver the note to Mason, but to give it to one of the cowboys, the plan being to let her get away before Mason could question her. The note was to state that Bud and his men were to go to Devil’s Gap and they could surprise Josephine’s captors and rescue her.

The halfbreed was to bring back some men from Ricker’s and all make for Devil’s Gap to lie in wait for Bud’s men and wipe them out.

The plot was cold-blooded and as Josephine listened as it was unfolded to the halfbreed her blood boiled. She thought only of Bud and his brave men running into certain death. There was a stir outside and Josephine knew that the halfbreed had departed on his mission of evil. The girl lay quiet and wide awake until almost morning, racking her brains for some way of warning Bud. She had heard the halfbreed return two hours before. He knew the mountains like a book and the shortest way through them. Hot and cold flashes passed through her body as she at last broke down and began to cry piteously. All was silent outside and she tried to stifle her sobs. She wondered what would become of herself if Bud’s men were all killed.

Powers was sure to carry out his threat and marry her. She resolved to kill herself before that. Death would be far better, she reasoned, than to let herself fall into this fiend's power. The man was more of a devil than she had pictured him.

It was still dark inside the shanty, but she knew it must be getting close to the break of day.

Suddenly she sat up straight, her nerves rigid, while her blood almost froze in her veins.

She had heard a rustling near her, and something cold was pressed against her arm.

With all her command of will power she kept herself from screaming. The rustling continued and a low whine caused her to open her eyes wide in astonishment. It was her pet dog Rover by her side and it was the cold muzzle of his nose which had caused her fright. He stood beside her, his tail wagging and with a look of devotion in his fine eyes. He had found his mistress. Josephine threw her arms around him, her heart pounding wildly. She was overjoyed, and as she looked at him a sudden idea flashed into her mind.

"Dear old Rover," the girl spoke in a soft whisper. "You must be very quiet now. I am in great danger. Listen, Rover, I want you to go right home, do you understand? Go right home at once, and I am going to tie a message to your collar."

The intelligent creature wagged its tail as though he were trying to understand her.

Luckily, Josephine had a stump of a pencil in her riding habit, and finding a piece of an old newspaper in the dim light, she twisted the bit of paper in her handkerchief and fastened it to Rover's collar.

The missive ran:

The note you received from the Spanish girl is a decoy. For God's sake turn back Bud and his men. Powers and the halfbreed with his men are waiting at Devil's Gap to wipe them out. I am held a captive by Powers in the mountains about three miles east from Devil's Gap. The place is like a fortress. Come quick if you would save me.

Josephine.

"Go home, Rover, home," the girl breathed softly, pushing the dog gently from

her.

She had to repeat the words sharply, and finally with a low whine he gave a bound and vanished in the gray mist of dawn. One of the men was astir, and the faint noise made by the dog caused him to send a shot whistling into the bushes. Powers had fired the shot, for Josephine heard the halfbreed call to him and ask what he was shooting at.

“I don’t know,” she heard him answer in alarm. “I thought I heard something move out there and took a snap shot.”

He came swiftly over and looked in on Josephine.

“Are you all right?” he called loudly to her.

“Yes,” she answered sleepily, though her heart was beating wildly. “I thought I heard someone shoot.”

Powers made no reply to this. Josephine’s mind was in an agony of torment as she heard the men beating the bushes and searching the rocks. Soon she heard them returning.

“Whatever it was I made a hit,” she heard Powers say. “I found a drop of blood on the rocks out there. I’m sure it was an animal of some kind.”

Josephine listened, and her heart grew heavy. Then she thought that if Rover had been hit and was able to get away, she reasoned that he would be sure to make for home all the faster. The thought gave her courage, and she rose quickly and washed. She tried to eat a little breakfast which the men offered her, but the food seemed to choke her. The outlaws were making preparations to leave. Josephine knew what their dastardly mission was, and she felt sick and dizzy.

She saw Powers coming towards her with a piece of tough rawhide in his hand.

“I am going to tie you up so you can’t run away. You can holler all you want to, but there won’t anybody hear you,” he said with a grin.

Josephine threw herself down wearily on the bunk in the shanty. The outlaw had tied her hands securely behind her back. She worked frantically trying to free her hands, but gave it up as useless for the tough rawhide cut her wrists until they bled. She turned her face to the wall with a heavy sob and a prayer on her lips that her dog would arrive home in time to save Bud and his men from certain death. Her only hope was to wait patiently and pray that some of the cowboys would be able to break through the cordon of outlaws lying in wait for them.

CHAPTER VII—THE RESCUE

After the ranch owner had been sent back to Bar X the men under Bud's command rode until they reached the foothills. Dawn was breaking when the cowboys separated, each group going in an opposite direction. The plan was to make a wide detour and beat the mountains thoroughly. The leader of each party swore he would bring the halfbreed in dead or alive. They were all convinced that he had stolen Josephine away and that he had possibly been joined by Powers in the outrage.

Bud led one group of cowboys with Big Joe Turner in command of the other group. It fell to Mason's lot to go with Turner, and he had as company Tex, Scotty and MacNutt, with a few others he was not so well acquainted with. Big Joe's command was ordered to circle the mountains and search all available hiding places. Then they were to ride with all possible speed to Ricker's and make inquiry there if they failed to pick up a clue in the mountains.

Both parties were to report at the Bar X ranch by nightfall and hold a consultation.

Bud had with him Buck Miller, Red Sullivan and the rest of the cowboys. The two parties numbered twelve picked men and they were all good fighters. Big Joe and his men rode all that day beating in and out of the mountains without a halt. MacNutt had kept up with them with amazing endurance, and even Scotty had begun to treat him with a little more respect. Mason was firmly convinced that the man had come among them with some secret purpose, and he determined to question him at the first favorable opportunity. There were times when MacNutt, thinking himself unobserved, would drop the mask of frivolous gayety, and a hard look would come into his eyes while he appeared to be thinking deeply. It was these sudden changes in the man that had caused Mason to regard him with suspicion.

None of the other cowboys of the ranch had noticed anything peculiar about the man outside of his levity, and Mason resolved to watch him more closely in the future.

It was an exhausted group of men that halted in the mountains that night to confer as to their next move. They had failed miserably to pick up any clue of the whereabouts of Josephine and her captors.

The cowboys were in an ugly mood by this time. On their hunt they had seen nothing of Bud and his men.

Mason's strength had seemed superhuman as he untiringly urged the men on to greater efforts.

The shock caused by the halfbreed's bullet had left him, and except for a faint scar on his temple he showed no signs of his close call from death.

Scotty was in a fretful mood and urged them to make Ricker's at once in the hope of picking up some information.

"I'll tell you what we had better do," he spoke up eagerly. "We'll go to Ricker's and stand watch all night. We can stay just far enough away so they won't get on to us, and maybe the half breed will try to sneak through our line. What do you think of the idea, Joe?"

Big Joe Turner did some quick thinking.

"Sounds good to me," he said at last. "Bud wanted us to meet him to-night at Bar X, but if Powers is with the halfbreed, and I am convinced he is, we can do no better than to watch Ricker's all night."

"And there is a chance that one of them may try to sneak back there for supplies or something, and we will stand a chance of catching one of them," cut in Tex, giving his belt an extra hitch.

The plan was agreed to at once, and they pressed their tired horses hard to get to the ranch before it became too dark. Scotty was delighted that his plan had been accepted, and listened eagerly as Big Joe explained the methods they were to employ.

"We will ride up to within fifty yards or so of the ranch," he was saying, "and we will surround the house and keep watch all night. If nothing develops we will draw off in the morning and make for home to hear what Bud has to report."

A set of signals was then carefully prepared and understood by all. By the time they reached Ricker's it was quite dark, but the stars snowed plainly.

Big Joe placed his men and they all settled down for an all-night vigil.

Their horses had been picketed far enough away so that if any of them should

whinny they could not be heard at the ranch. To Mason, who lay prone on the ground staring into the inky darkness, for the stars had disappeared and a faint breeze had sprung up, this watching was dull business. He was stationed next to Tex, and after catching himself on the verge of falling asleep, he gave a signal that Tex understood and wormed his way cautiously towards him.

“I nearly fell asleep, Tex,” he said in a low whisper as he made out the form of his fellow sentinel.

“This is new business for you, lad,” the other returned in a like whisper. “You looked about done up to-day, man.”

It was a fact and Mason admitted it to himself. What with the terrific riding and his constant worry about their failure to find any trace of Josephine, it all had raised havoc with his nerves. He realized at last that he was in love with her and the thought that she cared for Bud brought a groan of anguish from him. Tex, who had been searching his pockets, held a flask towards him.

“Here, Jack, take a drink of this brandy and brace up,” he said in a kindly whisper.

Mason hesitated. He had gotten over the notion of taking any strong drink, but he knew if he was to keep up his strength he must have some stimulant.

“Don’t be foolish, man,” Tex said in a curt whisper. “I know you need it, and we can’t have any one lag on us now; the boys are prepared to follow that devil of a halfbreed for weeks if they have to.”

Mason knew that Tex was right, and took a drink of the brandy. It proved to be just what he needed and he felt his strength returning. There would be no occasion for anybody to accuse him of lagging behind while Josephine was in danger, he resolved, gritting his teeth. He started to return to his former post, but Tex insisted that they keep watch together. Mason agreed, and they conversed in low whispers as the night wore slowly away. Once, during their vigil, Tex grasped Mason firmly by the arm, and he could feel that the cowboy’s muscles were set rigid.

“What is it, Tex?” he questioned with set lips.

“I’m sure I heard something move up there near the house,” the cowboy answered in a scarcely audible whisper. “I’m going to give the signal to find out if the boys heard anything.”

Tex imitated the call of the whippoorwill. The answering signal came back to

them in the negative. The cowboy swore softly.

“I’m sure something moved up there near the house, but the boys didn’t hear or see anything, so all we can do is to watch,” he confided to Mason in a disgruntled voice.

The halfbreed had slipped by the cowboys on his mission to Waneda without being seen by them!

Shortly after this incident a light appeared in one of the rooms.

“Something doing now,” Tex muttered tersely.

A minute later a door opened on their side of the house and to the watchers’ astonishment Waneda, the Spanish girl, appeared carrying a lighted lantern.

“Now, what in thunder is she up to this time of night?” growled Tex, as he gave the recall signal.

The cowboys grouped around him in answer to the signal. Big Joe pushed forward.

“I saw the light and the girl,” he said guardedly, addressing Tex. “What do you suppose it means?”

“I can’t figure it out,” the cowboy replied with a puzzled air. “Unless some one is sick in the house and she’s going to the Post for medicine. Didn’t any one of you hear a noise just before I gave this last signal?”

They all protested that they had not heard a sound or seen anything move during their watch.

“What did you imagine you heard, Tex?” queried Scotty.

“I didn’t imagine it, I know I heard something move up there near the house, and it sounded like a scuffling noise,” Tex retorted angrily. “I’m watching that light now. The girl is leading a horse from the corral. Shall we hold her up when she gets a few miles away?”

“No, let her go,” Big Joe answered shortly. “Go back to your stations men, it lacks but a few hours before daylight, and keep a closer watch than ever. If you hear any noise that sounds suspicious again, Tex, give the signal and we will close in on the place and force an entrance.”

By this time both light and girl had vanished. Tex, who had been watching the corral, gave a snort of disgust.

“I think we made a mistake by not holding the girl up,” he said in a peeved voice to Mason.

“Oh, I think Waneda is too fine a girl to be up to anything crooked,” he answered in her defence.

The lanky cowboy stared hard at him.

“Then you don’t know the breed,” he said with a drawl. “Spanish or Mexican, all are greasers to me. Ain’t getting sweet on her be you? I remember now, that you saved her from the halfbreed one day.”

Mason’s face reddened.

“You jump at conclusions, Tex,” he said sharply. “No offense meant, Jack,” he returned earnestly, “only I wish we had stopped the girl.”

Nothing more was said between them, and they kept silent watch until the first streak of dawn appeared. Big Joe gave the recall signal. When the cowboys had assembled he gave the order to mount and make a quick trip home. The big fellow rode with Mason.

“Jack, I am anxious to hear if Bud had any luck,” he confided to him as they pushed their horses into a fast run.

Mason nodded.

“We’ve just got to find Josephine to-day if Bud hasn’t already found her,” he answered grimly.

They reached Bar X ranch at noontime by hard riding. There they heard good news, the first good news since Josephine’s disappearance. The ranch owner called Big Joe and Mason to the house immediately on their arrival.

“The Spanish girl from Ricker’s came here with a message for Mason this morning,” he burst out excitedly before they got fairly within hearing distance. “I called Bud and he told her Mason was away. She seemed disappointed at the news, but after saying she would leave the message in Bud’s hands, she left. It was addressed to Mr. Mason. After waiting a reasonable length of time, for he didn’t know when you were coming home, Bud opened the message. Well, he almost jumped out of his boots when he read it. The message told him where to find Josephine and how to capture her abductors. They have been gone about an hour now,” he concluded.

“Yes,” cut in his wife, beaming on Mason, “it seems according to the message

that this Spanish girl wants to repay Mr. Mason for his kindness to her when she was attacked by the halfbreed. She got hold of information of the place where Josephine is held a captive, and hastened here at once with the information.”

“Sounds reasonable,” commented Big Joe.

“Wish we had stopped her now,” he added to Mason.

Josephine’s mother was almost beside herself with joy at the thought of the safe recovery of her daughter.

“Her dog Rover whined around the house for her,” the ranch owner was saying, “but soon he disappeared and hasn’t showed up since.”

“Where did the message direct them to go and find her?” Big Joe questioned. “They may need help.”

“Devil’s Gap,” the ranch owner answered.

“Devil’s Gap,” Big Joe repeated in wonder. “Why, we were through there three times yesterday, wasn’t we, Jack?”

“There’s something wrong about this,” Mason declared, his brows knitting.

“Bud said that the message read about Josephine’ captors moving about from place to place,” ranch owner explained.

Big Joe was getting impatient.

“Come on, Jack. We’ll go and talk it over with the boys,” he said, turning on his heel with an impatient frown.

Mason followed him. At the bunkhouse they made the cowboys acquainted with this new phase of the hunt.

"I told you so." Tex cried in a matter-of-fact tone after Big Joe had finished speaking. "We had ought to have held the girl up as I wanted to. Somebody broke through our line last night, and the girl left the ranch soon after I heard that scuffling noise. We don't know if that message is crooked or not."

Big Joe was plainly impressed by Tex's serious manner. Mason was leaning against the bunkhouse door listening wearily to their talk.

"I think we had better get together and make for the Gap. Bud may need help, Joe," he said from the doorway.

Suddenly he straightened up and looked keenly down the trail. His eyes had caught sight of an object moving slowly towards the bunkhouse.

"Josephine's dog," he said aloud.

"What did you say, Jack?" Big Joe called from within.

"Josephine's dog is coming down the trail and is limping badly," he answered excitedly.

"Limping, you say, Jack?" Big Joe asked as he came out of the bunkhouse, the cowboys at his back.

"Yes," Mason answered, "he must have got hurt some way."

"Come here, old fellow," he called, for the dog was almost up to them now.

The dog gave a whine of delight as he limped up to Mason and crouched at his feet.

"Poor fellow, his foot is bleeding," he said as he bent over to examine the injured member. "Why, what's this?" His eye had caught sight of something white tied to the dog's collar.

He hastily unfastened the white object and was holding it up for the others to see, when a piece of paper fell to the ground.

"Josephine's handkerchief and a note!" he cried, aghast, staring hard at the white missive.

Quickly snatching it up he read its contents.

"For God's sake, boys," he cried, his face blanching white.

“This note is from Josephine herself. She fastened it to Rover’s collar and sent him home. That message the Spanish girl brought is a decoy, and is leading Bud and his men into an ambush!”

Exclamations of fury broke from the men at his words. Big Joe instantly began giving orders to the cowboys after Mason had read the contents of the note to them.

“Into your saddles, boys,” the big cowboy thundered, his face pale and resolute. “I know a short cut to the Gap, and we’ll be in at the death if we can’t head Bud off. Ride, men, as you never rode before.”

The cowboys were in their saddles in a twinkling, and bending low on their horses’ necks they rode like demons in a race against odds.

Mason wanted to get his automobile out and join in the race against death, but Big Joe wouldn’t listen to his plan.

“It wouldn’t be of any use to us the way we are going into the mountains,” he said, gritting his teeth.

Pomp, the dusky cook, had been dispatched to the house with the note so the ranch owner would know why they had left in such a hurry. Scotty, who had the fastest horse among the cowboys, was drawing gradually away from them.

“Take the short cut, Scotty,” Big Joe ordered him. “When you make the Gap if you hear heavy firing, don’t join Bud, but start blazing away at the halfbreed’s gang and draw their fire. When we get there we’ll open fire on them from a different direction and hem them in if we ain’t too late. Do you get me, Scotty?” he yelled after him.

“I sure do,” the answer floated back to them. Scotty was riding low in the saddle, jockey style. He was making the ride of his life.

Mason was in a fever of suspense. His horse seemed to be only crawling along.

“Do you think we will be able to head Bud off in time?” There was a catch to his voice as he put the question to Big Joe, who was riding near him.

“Bud has only got about an hour’s start on us, and with the short cut we’re taking I have hope of saving him. If Scotty follows my instructions, everything will go all right, but I am afraid he will attempt to join Bud and get wiped out along with the rest of them. He’s such a hot-headed chump that if he runs into the halfbreed’s gang before Bud’s men do, it would be just like him to tackle them singlehanded,” came the unpromising answer.

The cowboys had turned off the main trail and had struck into the first range of foothills. Here, the climbing was extremely difficult, and a false step or a loose stone would send man and beast to certain death.

They were following a trail leading up into the mountains on the brink of a deep gorge.

Once, Mason's horse stumbled and he gave himself up for lost with a prayer on his lips, but the faithful animal caught a secure footing again, although he could feel the horse quiver under him.

"Close call, old top," he said cheerfully to his horse, as he patted him on the neck.

After an age, as it had seemed to Mason, of this kind of travel they reached a small plateau high in the mountains. Big Joe, who was in advance, called a halt, and raised a warning hand.

"Keep quiet as possible, men," he said as the cowboys dismounted and crowded around him.

"There is Devil's Gap just to the right of us a within good rifle shot. Scotty must be close by, too. Now, if the halfbreed and Powers are waiting there for Bud, they will keep under cover until he and his men show themselves through the pass. What we have got to do is to pick off the halfbreed's men before they can get in their deadly work. I figure that they will show themselves just as soon as Bud gets through the pass. We won't be able to see Bud's men from here, but them devils will have to show themselves to us, and it's up to you men to get them first."

The men silently unslung their saddle guns. They each carried a thirty-thirty Remington repeater. Lying prone on the ground, they covered the plateau of Devil's Gap while the minutes passed slowly. It was a range of about four hundred yards.

From a point of rock which they had their eyes glued upon, they saw the form of a man rise up with a leveled rifle in his hands.

"Bud must be coming through the pass, get that fellow!" Big Joe cried in a hoarse whisper.

Before the words had died from his mouth a shot rang out and the man with the gun pitched forward.

The shot that laid him low had come from somewhere on their left.

“That’s Scotty getting in some of his fine work,” Big Joe said with a chuckle.

Instantly five other men sprang from behind the rock and the firing became general. At the first shot Bud and his men had charged through the pass and taken to cover. Scotty’s shot had warned Bud that something was amiss and had put him on his guard. The firing had become too hot for the halfbreed and his cut-throats, and they had dropped back behind the rock again.

What they had intended for an ambush had been turned into a siege and they were the besieged.

The one who first rose up from behind the rock still lay where he had fallen. Big Joe commenced signaling to Bud to let him know of their presence.

“There were six men in the halfbreed’s gang, wonder where he got them all?” pondered Mason.

“The fellow that dropped first is one of them four men that joined Ricker’s lately. They are the men that Bud rounded up and sent to prison five years ago,” answered Tex.

“I believe you’re right,” agreed Big Joe. “It would be an easy matter for the halfbreed to get them to join him if they thought they had a chance to get Bud.”

A long silence followed, to be broken by a shot still farther off to their left. The firing increased to a volley of shots.

“Scotty is making it warm for them again,” said with a grin. “He is working around rear of them.”

“They can’t stand that hot fire much longer,” declared Big Joe. “Get ready for the men, they will make a charge soon.”

Five minutes later the halfbreed and his men broke cover and charged into the open, intending to fight their way through. Bud and his men advanced to meet them, and the rifle fire grew so hot that Powers and the halfbreed broke and ran. The men that Bud had sent to prison held firm, and walked straight into his fire with curses on their lips. Bud had been slightly wounded, and with bullets kicking up the earth all around him, it was a wonder he was not killed outright. Bud and Red Sullivan had dropped to their knees and were pumping a hail of bullets into the survivors of the halfbreed’s gang. Slowly they crumpled up and the fight was over.

“Get after Powers and the halfbreed, they are trying to escape,” Bud called to Big Joe.

Mason, who had been trying to get a shot at the ringleaders, saw them break and run like the cowards they were. He immediately set out after them in the hope that they would lead him to Josephine, and he intended to pick up Scotty, who had worked around in the direction of the fleers.

Big Joe had seen Mason mount his horse and start. He shouted something after him, but Mason was too far away to hear. Mason had determined to capture the halfbreed and Powers, and rescue Josephine, if it cost him his life. He kept a sharp lookout for Scotty, but could see no sign of him. Just ahead of him was a break in the mountains, and as he swung through it his keen eyes caught sight of his game. Powers and the halfbreed were only a short distance ahead of him.

They had seen him at the same instant. Mason's eyes glittered. He pulled a heavy Colt revolver, emptying its chambers after them. A yell of defiance was flung back at him. The halfbreed was riding Josephine's horse and, pulling sharply around, returned his shots.

The bullets sang uncomfortably close to his ears. His horse was behaving badly and he suddenly determined on a ruse. Powers had halted and was taking careful aim at him. Mason abruptly checked his horse and flung himself to the ground, pulling his saddle gun with him, just as Powers commenced firing.

His horse had been hit and let out an agonizing cry. The outlaws gave a cry of exultation when they saw him fall, thinking he had been killed. Mason had dropped near a large rock and kept a firm grip on his gun. Lying on his shoulder, he drew the rifle to his cheek and taking steady aim, fired.

The halfbreed reeled in the saddle and toppled off. A yell of surprise came from Powers, which quickly changed to alarm as one of Mason's bullets nipped his face. He wheeled his horse and was off in a flash. It was Mason's turn to be in an exultant mood. Running swiftly to where the halfbreed had fallen, he caught Josephine's horse and sprang into the saddle.

The halfbreed cursed him as he mounted. He paid no attention to the cut-throat's blasphemies as he urged Fleet to top speed.

"Now, Powers, we're on something like equal terms," he gritted to himself.

He began to rapidly overhaul the outlaw. The fugitive was getting desperate, and fired back at him several times, but his aim was poor. His grim pursuer was fast cutting down the distance between them.

Powers had his eyes set on a pass to a canyon just ahead of him and was making frantic efforts to reach it ahead of his pursuer. Mason saw his purpose, and spoke

encouraging words to his panting horse.

“Faster, Fleet, faster, old boy, we’re going to save your mistress!”

The noble beast responded with a fresh burst of speed. Powers had reached the pass, and abandoning his horse took to his heels, disappearing through the pass. Mason quickly made the pass, dismounted, and looking to his weapons, plunged after him. He could hear his man from an occasional stone he dislodged. He was climbing the steep side of the gorge. Soon, the faint sounds from the outlaw ceased. Mason was puzzled and afraid the fugitive would give him the slip, but he determined to keep on climbing the steep side of the gorge, while running a chance of getting shot from ambush.

After a laborious climb he reached a small plateau where he beheld a sight that brought a cry of rage from his lips. It was Josephine struggling in the arms of the outlaw!

Mason instantly threw his rifle to his shoulder.

“Hands up! Powers, or I’ll fire,” he called sharply.

Powers looked up startled, and with bloodshot eyes.

“Shoot!” he cried savagely, swinging Josephine in front of him as a shield.

Mason lowered his gun in dismay.

“Why don’t you shoot?” Powers taunted him, still holding the girl in front of him.

“You coward!” Mason flung the words at him, his eyes blazing with fury. “Drop the girl and fight me like a man. I’ll fight you empty handed.” Suiting the action to his words, he threw his rifle and revolver on the ground.

Powers sneered.

“If you value this girl’s life, don’t move from your tracks,” he said, with a brutal oath, holding a knife up to Mason’s horrified eyes. “I’ll kill her with this knife if you don’t leave your guns here. Go back down the gorge and give me thirty minutes’ start and you can save her life. I am going to the coast with her and we’ll get married.”

“Powers, you’re crazy,” Mason answered to gain time. “If you harm that girl, I’ll hound you to your grave.”

Josephine had given a cry of delight when Mason first had borne down on Powers. Now, she had ceased struggling and was watching Mason with

imploring eyes.

Powers showed signs of uneasiness. He was in fear his other pursuers would show up any minute.

“Come, give me thirty minutes’ start or the girl dies!” he threatened.

Great beads of sweat started on Mason’s forehead. He had about made up his mind to obey the fiend’s demand and take a chance of rescuing the girl later, when the sharp crack of a rifle broke the awful stillness, followed by a yell from above them.

Powers clapped his hand to his side and pitched forward on his face. Mason looked up to see where the yell and shot had come from, and saw Scotty standing on a huge boulder holding a smoking rifle in his hands and waving his hat at them. The girl stood looking down at Powers as though in a daze.

Mason leaped quickly to her side.

“Oh, Jack,” Josephine cried, her eyes swimming with tears, and collapsed in his arms.

CHAPTER VIII—THE MEXICAN ESCAPES

Mason's heart beat violently as he held the dead weight of the girl in his arms. Tenderly he laid her down and hastily made a pillow of his coat to support her head. There was a spring close by and he filled his hat with the cool water and bathed her temples. His efforts were rewarded by a flutter of her eyelids just as Scotty came up and joined them. With a little gasp the girl rose weakly to her feet and stared with dilated eyes at Powers. He was lying on the ground with both hands clutched to his side and groaning.

"Is he dying?" The girl motioned the question to them with dry lips.

"He's turned his last trick," Scotty answered, grimly. "The bullet struck him in a vital spot. I had him covered for over five minutes, but didn't dare fire for fear of hitting you."

Josephine gave him a grateful look.

"I want to thank you both for saving my life," she said in a voice deep with emotion.

Scotty mumbled something under his breath and seemed pleased at her praise, while Mason silently pressed her offered hand, his voice too full for words.

"Come, take me home," she requested with a shudder, after glancing again at Powers.

The outlaw breathed his last just as they were taking their departure. They planned to send Bud and his men back to look after the removal of his body.

"Powers got his just desert," was Scotty's comment, as they made their way down the gorge.

Josephine gradually threw off the feeling of depression which had seized her. When they reached the trail leading out of the gorge, she saw her own favorite horse, Fleet. He was quietly grazing where Mason had left him. With a glad cry the girl ran up to him, and throwing her arms around his neck gave him a regular bear hug.

Fleet seemed equally pleased to see his mistress and voiced his appreciation with a low whinny of delight. Scotty insisted on having Mason ride his horse while the Scot rode the horse that Josephine had ridden at the time of her capture by the outlaws.

The girl was in high spirits again by this time, and lightly springing into the saddle started Fleet towards home. She rode slowly while she related her experiences with the outlaws from the time of her capture.

Scotty, in turn, explained how he came to arrive in time to put an end to the outlaw's career.

He had miscalculated his horse's speed and in making a wide detour had got far in the outlaw's rear. Hearing only faint sounds of firing he determined to search for Josephine while waiting for the cowboys to come up. He had left his horse at the bottom of a deep gorge and started to climb a trail that led to a high plateau where he hoped to get a better view of the locality. He had made the summit and climbed up on a huge boulder when his startled eyes took in the scene already described.

"My finger itched when I drew down on that cutthroat, but he had you swung in front of him and I had to wait my chance," Scotty concluded, addressing Josephine.

Mason told Scotty of his part in the chase, and as they were now nearing the spot where the Mexican had fallen the two men rode in advance as there was a chance of the halfbreed showing fight if he had not been wounded seriously. Mason had no idea how badly he had been hurt, for he had paid little attention to him in his mad dash after Powers. Mason pointed out the spot to Scotty where the Mexican had fallen, but they could see no trace of him.

Josephine, who had drawn up to the group while they were discussing the possible escape of the halfbreed, suddenly remarked:

"Here comes Bud with Joe and the rest of the cowboys."

The cowboys saw them at about the same time and with a rush and roar, bore swiftly down upon them.

There was an excited clamor of voices as the cowboys dismounted and rushed up to Josephine to shake her hand, each man with hat off and expressing his pleasure at her safe return in his own characteristic way.

Mason and Scotty came in for a generous round of hand-shaking and glory from

the cowboys when Josephine told them of their part in her rescue.

Mason walked away from the group of cowboys and sought out Bud, to whom Josephine had immediately gone after greeting the cowboys.

Bud had been wounded in the shoulder and the girl was giving him a scolding for not having gone home at once to have his wound attended to. She was adjusting a crude bandage for him and it gave Mason a sharp pang as he realized that she was gravely concerned over Bud's welfare. Mason briefly outlined the result of his chase to him, and of the possible escape of the halfbreed. Bud listened quietly until he had finished, then his jaws came together with a snap.

"You and Scotty take the girl home, and the men will stay here with me while we clean up and look into the matter of the halfbreed," he directed Mason.

Josephine uttered a cry of protest.

"You're not coming with us?" she asked in a pained voice.

"No," Bud answered with an air of finality. "We have got some work to do here before we go and I want to see it through."

Mason admired the grit of the man, for he reasoned that he must be suffering tortures from his wound by this time. The girl gave a sigh as Bud stalked off to give orders to his men, and Mason, watching her, felt convinced that she was in love with her father's foreman. Soon, Scotty rode toward them on a fresh horse and they set a fast pace for home with Josephine leading and having little to say.

They arrived at the ranch in due time, and Mason had to turn his head away at the touching scene, when the girl burst into the house and into her mother's arms. They were laughing and crying in the same breath, and the father had his arms around the two, wife and daughter.

The next minute the girl was romping with her dog Rover, and calling him endearing names. A tear glistened on the ranch owner's cheek as he silently wrung Mason's hand when Josephine told of his part in her rescue.

That night when Bud and his men returned, they reported that they could find no trace of the halfbreed. They believed that the Mexican with his wide knowledge of the mountains had probably escaped to some retreat.

A few days of rest and quiet were indulged in by the men who had followed the trail of the outlaws so determinedly.

One fine morning, Mason, who had found a shady spot on the porch and had

lazily stretched himself out for a nap, found his plans rudely shattered by the mistress of the ranch herself. She came running out of the house and stood surveying him with an air of severity.

“I would like to know, Sir Jack, if you are in the habit of breaking your promises,” she demanded, trying to keep her look of severity while pointing an accusing finger at him.

Mason looked up at her in astonishment. “Why, Josephine, I don’t know what you are driving at,” he answered with a blank look. He thought he had never seen her look as pretty as she did this morning. She stood before him, her eyes fairly dancing with fun.

“Then, Sir, I will refresh your memory,” she began with increasing severity. “Did you or did you not promise me long, long ago to take me for a ride in that fast racing car of yours?”

Mason sprang to his feet.

“What a dunce I’ve been, Josephine,” he exclaimed. “We’ll go for a ride this very morning. What do you say?”

“I’ll say, I’ll go,” she answered with a happy laugh and ran to tell her mother.

Mason backed the trim racer out of the shed and had the motor running smoothly by the time Josephine rejoined him.

“My, but you make a lot of smoke and noise,” she cried, putting her fingers to her ears.

“Just racing the engine a little,” he explained, as the girl bent over to watch him adjust the gas mixture. “Jump in, we’ve picked as fine a morning as you’ll find in these parts,” he added gaily, as he lifted her into the seat with strong arms.

It was an ideal morning with a cool and gentle breeze blowing. Mason let the car out at high speed for several miles, then slowing down a little he turned and looked curiously at the girl beside him. She had not uttered a sound, but sat with parted lips smiling in contentment. Her golden hair blown and tumbled by the wind, and her blue-gray eyes sparkling with the joy of life and health, made her a most bewitching picture.

If she only knew how well he loved her, but with the thought came the image of Anderson who had first claim on her. He gripped the wheel savagely, a frown on his face. The girl was snuggled deep in the cushions.

“Oh, but this ride is fine,” she said in a low voice. Then noticing his frown she added quickly:

“What is the trouble, Sir Jack, didn’t your breakfast set well this morning?”

“Breakfast is the least of my troubles,” he answered, forcing a smile as he slowed the car down to about fifteen miles per hour.

He had much to say to her this morning, and had determined to tell her of his love. Josephine was rearranging her tumbled hair with deft fingers while watching him with an amused smile.

“There,” she said, putting the finishing touches to a rebellious curl. “I hope I look more presentable. You drove like a regular savage, Sir Jack, and you looked like a fiend a minute ago. Now, I can’t see why you should have any troubles, you are getting along fine out here. Perhaps you are worrying about that letter your father wrote to you about Ricker.”

She was regarding him with troubled eyes now, and he thought he detected a tender light in them. He longed to take her in his arms and cover her face with kisses, but crushed the thought out of his mind with a groan.

“Yes, that is one thing that bothers me, and by the way, I received a letter from mother; she and my sister will be out here in a few days,” his voice was steady and sure now.

“Oh, won’t that be grand?” she cried in delight. “I am very anxious to meet your mother and sister, Sir Jack.”

“Sis is a good kid, and I think you will like her. She is about your age, Josephine.”

“Oh, I know I will like your mother and sister just from what you have told me of them. Now, what other troubles have you got, if you can call your mother and sister a trouble?” She was leaning slightly toward him with a half smile mingled with a look of severity on her face.

He shifted uneasily in his seat.

“You have a regular lawyer’s way of pinning a man down to a question,” he said at last.

“Does the truth hurt?”

He had driven the car to one side of the trail and stopped the engine.

“Josephine!” Mason turned and faced her.

“Little girl,” he began and imprisoned both her hands. “It is you that is troubling me. Before I came out here I had been leading a fast life, and had seen bad girls and nice girls, but I never cared for any of them. I know, now, that I love you, Josephine, and I will tell you how I came to know the truth. I admired you from the first time we met, but it took another man to awaken me to the truth; I guess you know who I mean, his name is Anderson and I know you care for him. Please tell me, dear, if I have a chance.”

“I—I—don’t—just know,” Josephine faltered faintly. “I will think it over.”

“You give me a little hope, then?” he cried eagerly. “I won’t bother you about it again to-day, but may I have your permission to tell you how much I love you, some other time?”

“Yes,” she answered gently, “but come, Sir Jack, it’s not nice of you to keep me here all day; we started for Trader’s Post, you know.”

“Really, I had almost forgotten,” he said with a happy boyish laugh, “but we’re nearly there now. Sit tight and I’ll have you there in a jiffy, and then we will take the long road back.”

“But not quite so fast as you drove before, besides you promised to teach me how to drive,” she demurred, smiling at him naïvely.

Mason let the car out at a reasonable road speed and soon the outbuildings of Trader’s Post came into view. A moment later he drove up to the general store where Josephine wished to do some trading.

“This is the place where you rescued the fair Waneda,” she reminded him.

His face reddened.

“I still think the Spanish girl was made an innocent tool by Ricker’s gang and didn’t know what her message contained,” he answered in defence.

Josephine had one foot on the running board and flashed a tantalizing smile up at him.

“See if you can keep out of trouble, Sir Jack, while I am in the store. I will try to be quick,” and with a wave of her hand she disappeared inside.

Mason grinned broadly.

“If she is like most women when they go shopping, I will have some wait,” he mused to himself.

Swinging around in his seat he took to watching the four corners or common,

which was all Trader's Post could boast of.

There were a few people in sight, mostly cowboys, and as he looked, the only hotel in the place came under his observation. Suddenly he sat up stiff and straight, staring hard at the hotel porch. He had made out the figure of MacNutt and he was staggering with locked arms around another cowboy, who was maudlin drunk, and the other cowboy was from Ricker's ranch!

A low whistle escaped his lips. All his former distrust for this man who called himself MacNutt came back to him with double force. He resolved to denounce MacNutt to the owner of Bar X when he got back to the ranch. He was interrupted in his meditations by Josephine. She came hurrying out of the store with her arms full of bundles and deposited them at his feet with a sigh of relief.

"I didn't keep you waiting very long, did I?" she asked a little anxiously.

"Yes, I mean no," he replied absently, still keeping his eyes on the two men.

"What are you staring at?" she questioned.

"Jump in and I will explain to you when we get under way," he said, starting the car in motion.

"It's about that man MacNutt," he confided to her. "While you were in the store I happened to look over to the hotel, and there was MacNutt talking with one of the cowboys from the Ricker ranch. I never quite trusted the fellow from the start, and it looks mighty suspicious to see him mixing with that bunch."

"It does look peculiar," Josephine answered gravely. "He knows the Ricker crowd are enemies of my father. I don't see what MacNutt would want of them."

"Well, don't worry your pretty head about it, and I will take the matter up with your father when we get back to the ranch. We are out on a pleasure trip to-day and I am going to teach you how to run this car before we get home."

"You talk very confidently."

"Is my confidence misplaced?"

She laughed easily.

"I never met a man like you before."

"Nor have I ever met a girl like you before," he returned instantly.

"Oh, come now, you will be trying to make love to me in another minute, and you promised to be good for the rest of the day. What is that thing-ama-jig on the

dashboard?”

“That’s the instrument board,” he corrected her, “and what you are pointing at is the speedometer.”

Then he explained the various workings of the instruments to her. They had reached a part of the country that was clear and level for miles, and Mason let the trim racer dart ahead in a fresh burst of speed. Josephine had her eyes glued on the dial indicator and as the hand crept slowly up she saw that they had attained a speed of over fifty miles per hour.

“Slow down,” she managed to gasp, “I can’t talk to you when you drive so fast.”

He obediently slowed the car down.

“I can promise you some exciting times when my friend Roy Purvis gets here,” he said after a long silence.

“Roy Purvis,” she repeated after him, “I never heard you mention that name before.”

“He is an old friend of mine and we used to race together before he went in for aviation. He promised me just before I left New York that he would visit me out here.”

Little did they know what a thrilling part Roy Purvis and his airplane was to play in their future lives.

The girl was deeply interested in what Mason had told her.

“That will be jolly fun,” her eyes were keenly enthusiastic. “I have never seen an airplane, I hope he comes soon.”

Mason nodded.

“Roy is very eccentric, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see him out here any time.”

On the way home he stopped the car and let Josephine take his seat while he instructed her in driving. Soon she was driving the racer almost as skillfully as he.

After about an hour she became tired and he relieved her at the wheel.

“You have accomplished wonders with your first lesson,” he told her with honest conviction in his voice. “I am truly proud of you.”

“I am very glad you think so, and if you will take me out again some time, I

think I can do still better.” He fancied there was just the suspicion of an appeal in her voice.

“The pleasure will be all mine,” he answered gallantly.

They were nearing the ranch now, and just as they rode past the corral they were surprised to see MacNutt throwing a blanket over his sweat-reeked horse.

Apparently he had ridden faster and by taking a shorter route had arrived just ahead of them.

CHAPTER IX—MYSTERIOUS MACNUTT

The following morning, and before anybody was astir at Bar X ranch, the form of a man emerged from the bunkhouse and looking cautiously around to make sure that no one was watching him, stealing silently to the corral, he quickly roped and saddled one of the horses. It was MacNutt, and had any of the cowboys seen his face at that moment they would have been amazed. All trace of the half-wit smile had vanished, and in place of the drooping shoulders and shambling gait that had been characteristic of the man, he now moved with the cunning and quickness of a panther.

As his supple body shot into the saddle a pair of revolver butts were exposed to view for an instant. Whatever MacNutt's mission was, the man was going heavily armed. He rode leisurely as though fearful the noise of his horse's hoofbeats might strike the ears of some early prowler of the ranch.

When well clear of the outbuildings of the ranch he gave his horse free rein, riding with all the ease and grace of a cowboy. Ten miles from Bar X ranch the trail divided. One trail led to Trader's Post and the other to Ricker's ranch.

When MacNutt came to this point, he chose the trail leading to the Ricker ranch!

A grim smile spread over the man's face.

"I don't suppose it was necessary for me to sneak out in this fashion," he spoke softly to his horse, "none of the Bar X outfit take me seriously, only young Mason. I will have to watch out for him, he's liable to spoil my plans."

His face grew dark and ominous at the thought. Having a fresh mount he pressed the horse on relentlessly as though to reach the ranch in time to keep an appointment. Time and distance passed swiftly beneath his horse's pounding hoofs, and when within a few miles of Ricker's ranch he carefully examined his guns to see if they were in good working order.

As he drew near Ricker's ranch his tense muscles relaxed, the half-wit smile appeared and with it the awkward poise and drooping shoulders of the man

MacNutt. Although he did not know it, his movements had been watched by a guard placed by Ricker.

This man swept the plains with field glasses and word was quickly sent to Ricker by the guard for instructions. He was promptly ordered to hold the rider up at any cost. Since the last time Ricker had been visited by the cowboys of the Bar X ranch, he swore an oath that no more of them should pass farther than a given spot and that was where he had placed the guard.

Ricker had picked a good man for the job, for when he was in a quandary as to who should hold the post, his eyes fell on one of his cowboys, Tug Conners by name, and he was placed about a hundred yards from the ranch where he could command a view of the plains in all directions.

Tug Conners was a daredevil and desperado who would shoot first and ask questions afterwards, and it was to this man that MacNutt would have to pass muster. The guard set himself and studied the rider through his glasses. The watcher swore softly. The slow gait of the horse and its rider's awkward position in the saddle had him puzzled.

Twice he raised the rifle at his side and covered the stranger, only to lower it each time in disgust. Seizing the glasses again he tried to make out who the stranger was. An exclamation burst from his lips, for this time he had a close view of the rider.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he swore furiously, "I remember that freak, he was with the sheriff when they made that call on Ricker. He looks like a damn fool and acts the part. Wonder what the tenderfoot can want here?"

Tug was bitterly disappointed as he had hoped the rider would prove to be one of the sheriff's cowboys, and he would have started trouble with any of them at the slightest provocation. He hated them all intensely, but with this fellow it was different.

Tug couldn't bring himself to pick trouble with a half-wit, so he determined to throw a scare into him and run him off the ranch.

He was crouched behind a small mound and as MacNutt came abreast his place of concealment he sprang up and covered him with his rifle.

"Stretch your arms!" Tug commanded him, his eyes glittering savagely, "I reckon this is about your limit. Who let you out, anyway?"

MacNutt's hands went up with alacrity, and such a look of dismay spread over

his features that he brought a grin to Tug's face.

"Get down off that horse," he next commanded him, keeping the rifle on a line with his heart.

"Don't keep that cannon pointed at me, it makes me nervous," protested MacNutt in a trembling voice as he laboriously dismounted.

"Oh, the gun makes you nervous, does it, tenderfoot?" Tug sneered with bitter sarcasm. "Well, it will go off mighty sudden if you don't answer my questions right smart. You're from Bar X, ain't you? Who sent you here, and what do you want?"

MacNutt had apparently found his nerve again, the foolish smile appearing on his face.

"You fire your questions too fast," he protested in his droll voice, and started to lower his hands.

"Keep 'em up!" his captor snarled, raising his gun threateningly.

MacNutt smiled at Tug blandly, his hands held high in the air.

"I rode over from the ranch to see one of Ricker's men," he explained with childlike simplicity. "Met him at the Post yesterday. He ain't got no more use for the Bar X outfit than I have, and I agreed to put him wise to some things I know about them."

Tug stared at him incredulously.

"What is the name of the cowboy you met yesterday?" he questioned, suspicion in his voice.

"I can't remember his name," MacNutt replied readily. "We were slopped up a little, but I can describe him." This he proceeded to do, and evidently to Tug's satisfaction.

"You mean Jean Barry," he said in a modified tone when MacNutt had finished his description. "Come, and I'll take you to him."

A curious gleam shone in MacNutt's eyes for an instant, as he was ordered by Tug to keep six paces in advance of him. On the way to the ranch house, a close observer would have noticed that not a single item of the plans of the buildings or out-houses of the ranch had escaped MacNutt's notice. Although his eyes held their dull sleepy look, they sought out every object of importance. A group of cowboys were watching the approach and one of them walked out rapidly to

meet them. He proved to be Ricker.

“What have we here, Tug?” he demanded, with a suspicious look at MacNutt.

“Claims he knows Jean Barry and wants to see him,” Tug answered tersely.

Ricker scowled darkly.

“Jean is down to the corral. Go get him and see if he knows this fellow,” he ordered Tug, while watching MacNutt sharply.

Tug soon returned in company with a cowboy.

“Jean, do you know this man?” Ricker question with a wave of his hand toward MacNutt.

“Shore, I know him, he’s all right,” the man Jean answered without an instant’s hesitation.

Ricker looked immensely relieved.

“All right, take him to the ranch and make him acquainted with the boys. I’ll hold you responsible for him. We are going to have rifle and revolver practice in a few minutes, maybe your friend would like to join us,” he said, addressing Jean and giving MacNutt another sharp look.

Just a fleeting gleam came into MacNutt’s eyes as he readily consented to join them. He was conducted to the ranch by Jean, Tug having gone back to his post. At the ranch he was presented to Waneda the Spanish girl and to the cook, an old Negress. It was his first opportunity to see Waneda at close range, and he studied her face intently although seemingly interested in what Jean was telling him about the target practice.

Finally Jean left him alone with the two women after saying he was going to help set up targets, and would let him know when they were ready.

MacNutt immediately drew the girl into a conversation after making sure he had nothing to fear from the old Negress, she being quite deaf. MacNutt had again thrown off his assumed role of a half-wit and was alert and thinking rapidly. The girl had noticed the change, and shrank back against the wall staring at him dumbly.

“I know you are a good girl, Waneda,” he was saying rapidly and in a low voice, “I can generally size a person up at first glance, and you have a good face. Now, I wish to clear my mind on one point: did you know the contents of the note you delivered to the Bar X ranch that sent the cowboys into the mountains after

Powers and the half-breed?"

"No," she answered guardedly, her eyes searching his face, eager to read his thoughts.

His face grew stern.

"I was almost sure of it, but your answer proves that point," he said kindly, "still, that very note came near getting some good men killed. You like young Mason, don't you?"

A startled cry escaped her lips. With a quick move she seized him by the arm.

"I love him! Is he in danger? Speak quick!"

MacNutt gently released her hold and placed a chair for her.

"Steady, girl," he warned her; "no, he's not in danger just now, but you are. This is no place for you, and I am going to get you out of here, but before that time comes you must help also, and in doing that you will be helping Mason, too.

"There's going to be hell brewing around here before long. What do you suppose Ricker has that guard out there for? And this target shoot is for a purpose, too. I think I can trust you not to betray me, and you also will be able to prove your loyalty to Mason and wipe out the damage you caused by carrying that note."

The girl was thoroughly aroused now.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her breath coming in quick gasps. "If Ricker finds out that you are against him, your life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel!"

Jean Barry hurriedly entered the room at this moment and interrupted his talk with the girl. A lightning glance of understanding passed between the two men.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes and join the men at the shoot," MacNutt said rapidly in answer to an inquiring look from his friend.

Jean nodded, and was gone in the same hurried manner that he had entered the room.

MacNutt turned and looked gravely at the girl.

"Who are you?" she repeated impatiently.

"Your friend," he answered earnestly; "that is all I can tell you at present, but you must trust me implicitly. Just go on here as before, and if Jean Barry tells you to leave this place at a certain time you must obey him, for he is working

with me. If Jean comes to you for any information, give it to him if you can without causing suspicion. You will be helping me and Mason. I can trust you in this, can't I?"

"You are a strange man," she answered slowly, "but somehow I have confidence in you. I feel that this ranch is uncanny, and things are not as they should be. At night I hear strange sounds and men come and go at all hours. I am afraid of the men and especially of Ricker; he wants me to marry him and I hate him. The old Negress here has protected me from him many a time when he had been drinking. I wanted to leave here long ago, but I am afraid to leave for Ricker would find me again, and then even the Negress couldn't save me. He is terrible when he is in a rage and the cowboys fear him too, for he is a dead shot and none of them would have a chance with him. I'll trust you and do as you say."

She had crept close to him while talking and her face was deathly pale.

Something like an oath escaped from MacNutt's lips.

"Be brave," he said, speaking earnestly. "It won't be but a few weeks now before I will have you out of here, and maybe in a few days. Ricker is engaged in some lawless business besides mere cattle raising. He has a collection of the worst crooks in the country about him, and I mean to get to the bottom of his game."

After saying a few more words of comfort to the girl, MacNutt strolled leisurely out and joined the party near the targets.

He had again assumed his slouching gait and halfwit smile. He was greeted indifferently by the cowboys, save by Ricker, who was again regarding him sharply. MacNutt returned the stare with his usual good-natured grin, while engaging Jean Barry in conversation.

"Watch sharp!" Jean Barry cautioned him.

"Ricker seems to suspect you for some reason and may put you to a severe test."

MacNutt nodded and inclined his head slightly, as he noticed Ricker call one of his cowboys over to him. The man called by Ricker was his foreman, Jim Haley, the most expert shot on the ranch with the exception of Ricker himself. A low conversation took place between the two men.

"Jim, how long has Jean Barry been with us?" Ricker demanded of his foreman.

Tall and muscular, with deep cruel lines written on his face, Jim Haley the foreman turned and looked at the man in question.

“Oh, about a month, I reckon,” he replied, glancing quizzically at his chief.

The answer set Ricker’s brows to knitting.

“Jim, I want you to watch Jean Barry,” he said sharply, as though coming to a sudden decision. “He’s the last man we took on and hasn’t been with us long enough to be trusted too far. As for this man MacNutt, keep your eye on him also. He claimed to the guard that he isn’t friendly with the Bar X outfit and has a grievance against them. I can’t just make him out, and I want you to trail him after he leaves here and find out just what his standing is at Bar X. Jean took up with him mighty sudden, and I don’t like the looks of it. Look sharp now, and make your report to me in the morning.”

At the curt dismissal Jim Haley moved off while his chief mingled with the men and directed the rules of the target practice. MacNutt was ignorant of what had taken place and was calmly looking his guns over.

Jean Barry pressed close to him at this moment.

“Watch out for Jim Haley, the man that Ricker was just talking to,” he hissed in his ear.

MacNutt made no answer to his friend’s warning as the shoot had now commenced. The first contestants were leading off with revolver practice. The targets were set at seventy-five yards and each man was to fire six shots apiece. The men fired in turn, each scoring fair hits, until Ricker and Jim Haley’s turn came. When they had fired six shots apiece it was seen that they had each scored bull’s-eyes, and both had one shot on the extreme edge of the bull’s-eye. Ricker looked at his foreman.

“Guess we’ve got to shoot this one over, Jim,” he called, a trifle nettled.

He was conceded the best shot on the ranch, and it bothered his vanity to have his mark equalled. The marker was closely examining the targets.

“A tie,” he finally announced.

“Put up fresh targets, Jim, and I will shoot off the tie,” Ricker ordered briskly, “and put up another one; we’ll have our friend MacNutt here try his skill with us.”

Ricker and Jim shot their tie off, the former winning this time by a large margin.

Ricker smiled sarcastically at MacNutt as the latter stepped up in his awkward way to take a position. A titter ran through the group of cowboys as they

watched his odd movements. He was likely to prove a source of amusement for them after all.

Ricker suddenly stepped forward.

“Come on, Jim, you and I will set a high record for him. We’ll show him some shooting that will make him go some,” he boasted.

Jim Haley led off, scoring almost the same hits as before.

“You must have your shooting eye with you today, Jim,” Ricker remarked as he took his position.

Then he put six bullets in the bull’s-eye, firing with a precision that was perfect.

“I’ll bet none of the Bar X outfit can equal that,” he boasted to MacNutt with a cynical smile.

MacNutt still wore his good-natured grin.

“Maybe not,” he drawled, “but I ain’t shot yet.”

A howl of derision went up from the cowboys.

“Go ahead and shoot, you tenderfoot,” one of them yelled.

Suddenly MacNutt’s hand went up, and he fired six shots in rapid succession; so rapid was the fire that the reports blended together. All the cowboys were grinning broadly, for it looked as though MacNutt had fired at random. Their faces took on a look of wonder, however, when it was seen that the marker was examining the target with extreme care.

“All bull’s-eyes!” he announced as though completely mystified.

Ricker swore roughly.

“Come on, Jim,” he called out impatiently, “that marker’s eyes must be off.”

There was a general rush for the targets, and an exclamation of admiration went up from the cowboys when it was seen that MacNutt’s bullets were grouped closer to the center of the bull’s-eye than were Ricker’s.

“He’s a freak,” Jim Haley spoke up sullenly.

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Ricker questioned MacNutt sharply.

“Can you do as well with a rifle at two hundred yards?”

MacNutt grinned modestly.

“I reckon I can,” he drawled slowly. “I’ve shot a revolver and rifle ever since I was a kid.”

A rifle shoot was next in progress, but MacNutt declined to wait for that event. Soon, he took his leave after saying a few words in an undertone to his friend Jean Barry. The cowboys watched him depart with keen interest. He had risen several points in their estimation by his accurate shooting.

As he drew near the place where Tug Conners had held him up, he saw the guard leaning on his rifle, watching him approach.

“Guess I can pass you through quicker next time you visit us,” Tug called after him as he rode past. “If you see one of our men at the Post, tell him to hurry up for I sent him to bring me some tobacco.” “I sure will,” he answered cheerfully. “I am going back that way and if I see your man I’ll hustle him along.”

“Yes, you certainly will pass me through quicker when I call on you next time, my friend,” he added grimly to himself as he rode steadily on.

In due time he arrived at the Post, where he spent about two hours looking after some private business and making a few necessary purchases. As he mounted his horse for the run to Bar X he was surprised to see Jim Haley lounging on the hotel veranda.

“He must have followed me,” he mused, a grin playing over his features. “The play is on in earnest.”

He looked around to see if the cowboy’s horse was in sight. Seeing no signs of the animal he decided that the cowboy had put his horse in the hotel corral.

MacNutt soon forgot the incident and riding fast he arrived at Bar X before nightfall.

The first person he encountered after putting his horse up was Mason.

Mason looked at him with accusing eyes.

“MacNutt,” he began, “I want to have a quiet little talk with you. I haven’t as yet said anything to anybody else, but it looks to me as if you are trying to play a double game. Yesterday, I saw you talking in very friendly terms with one of the cowboys from the Ricker ranch. Several other little things have happened since you came here that have made me suspicious of you. You know these are troublesome times. I want to ask you point blank, are you with us, or do you stand with the Ricker faction?”

MacNutt had listened passively while Mason was talking. He seemed deeply moved.

“I know these are troublesome times as you say,” he replied earnestly, “but I want you to trust me a little longer and then I will show you something that will surprise you. I am here for a good purpose and am working for the interest of the Bar X people and you in particular. I take you to be a man of sound judgment and give you my word of honor that I am working here for a good cause. In due time I will explain everything that appears mysterious to you just now, and I want you to have faith in me. Is that satisfactory to you?”

“I suppose it will have to be,” Mason answered, completely mystified.

CHAPTER X—WELCOME VISITORS

Two days later unusual scenes of activity took place at Bar X ranch. There was a general brightening and cleaning up about the place. Cowboys were industriously cleaning horses and polishing saddle accoutrements. The ranch-house was being vigorously cleaned and aired. The reason for all this extra work was a telegram that Mason was reading for perhaps the hundredth time. He whistled gaily as he thrust the telegram back in his pocket and started to tune up his racing car.

The day before, Scotty had ridden in from the Post with a telegram for Mason. When he read its contents he gave a cry of delight. It was from his sister and stated that she was coming with his mother to pay him a visit and they were bringing along a friend of the family for company. The telegram had been dispatched from a town where the party had a stopover and Mason hastily consulting a time-table found that they would arrive at the Post the next day.

The good news had banished all thoughts of MacNutt and his strange actions from his mind.

Scotty had immediately been sent back to the Post to await their arrival.

Mason had broken the news to Josephine and they planned to drive the car to Trader's Post early the next morning. The girl's face was all aglow at the prospect of meeting his folks. She had assumed command of the ranch, making the cook brighten up about the bunk-house and mess-room while giving orders to the cowboys about their general unclean appearance that made them gasp in wonder. Mason had come in for his share of the cleaning-up process and after seeing the entire ranch force set in motion, he meekly submitted.

So the next morning after an almost sleepless night found him hard at work on his racing car. He was so deeply interested in his work that he didn't hear a light step near him until a subdued ripple of laughter caused him to look up in surprise. The mistress of the ranch stood before him and was regarding him with a look of approval. He made her a profound bow.

“Oh, most charming slave-driver, does my work please the little Princess?” he questioned her with mock humility.

Her eyes held him with a smile.

“The machine certainly looks more presentable,” she returned in the same light vein.

She gave the car another sharp appraising look, and glanced at him.

“And you look as though you had tried to clean it, from the appearance of your face and those dirty overalls,” she added.

The smile had cropped out again and with it the appearance of the pretty dimples he secretly adored.

“I confess I do look like a coal heaver,” he said, starting up briskly, “but I’ve had the engine running like a top and it is in fine shape. I will have these duds off and be cleaned up in about a minute. Please run along now, Josephine, and get ready. I will drive right up to the house for you.”

Josephine had already started for the house.

“I will be ready and waiting for you, Sir Jack,” she called back to him as he stood watching her trim figure until she disappeared in the house.

Five minutes later Mason was speeding along the trail with Josephine beside him in the low seat of his powerful racer. She was in high spirits as usual, but seemed to be in a meditative mood. He stole a glance at her to find her eyes searching his face with an odd expression in them.

“I am puzzled and curious to see that third party my sister is bringing with her,” he said, breaking a long silence.

She nodded.

“I was thinking of about the same thing. I hope your mother and sister will like me,” she said wistfully.

He laughed outright.

“So, that is what you are worrying your pretty head about. Well, I will answer for mother, and as for sis, she will take to you like a duck does to water.”

“Do you really think so?” there was a little catch to her voice.

“I know so.” There was a positive ring to his voice.

Josephine looked pleased.

“I am glad to hear you say that. I was afraid your sister would be such a fine lady and wear such grand clothes that I would appear like a savage to her, and you know we are kind of wild and woolly out here.”

“Well, you will get the surprise of your young life, then,” he declared. “Sis is athletic, and plays tennis and baseball just the same as I do, and I know you two will be chums from the minute you meet.”

Josephine was silent in thought, but he could see there was a pleased look on her face. They had been making fast time, and already the outbuildings of Trader’s Post were plainly visible.

A few minutes later Mason drove into the town and stopping at the hotel inquired for Scotty. He was informed that Scotty had left an hour ago for the small station four miles distant, as the train was about due. Scotty had put up at the hotel over night and naturally would be fresh for the long trip back to the ranch. His wagon would accommodate four people, and the plan was to have Mason’s mother and the mysterious third party ride to the ranch with Scotty while Mason was to take his sister and Josephine in his car. Mason broke all speed limits for the four miles, and when they drove up to the small station in a cloud of dust, Scotty waved at them from the platform. He was grinning broadly, and Mason was keenly amused when Josephine hastened over and surveyed him critically. There was a pleased smile on her face.

“Scotty, I see that you have obeyed my instructions and haven’t drunk anything,” she said kindly, while shaking his hand.

“Nope,” he answered, beaming on her. “I reckon a man would be plumb crazy that didn’t try to please you.”

“You won’t lose anything by doing as I want you to, Scotty. Oh, I hear the whistle of the train!”

She seized Mason by the arm and they took a position on the platform. There was the same old stage that had carried him to Trader’s Post, and the same talkative driver. Mason peered anxiously as the train came to a stop with a shrieking and grinding of brakes, and as the passengers began to get off, he strode forward eagerly as he made out the familiar face of his sister Ethel. She caught sight of him at the same instant.

“Jack!” she gasped, as he nearly swung her off her feet.

“Where is mother?” he demanded, holding her at arm’s length.

“Right behind you, stupid,” she managed to say when she had got her breath back. “And allow me to introduce Mr. Percy Vanderpool.”

Mason kissed his mother and turned to acknowledge the introduction. Percy Vanderpool. Then his eyes twinkled and he had to force back a laugh of merriment.

So this was the third party. Percy was a fop, but he came from a very aristocratic family. Mason had known of him through some of the New York clubs which he held membership in. He had nothing against the fellow, only his fondness to ape English ways and wear loud clothes.

Percy was dressed in a loud checkered suit and Mason grinned in his face as he shook hands. His hand had a decided feminine touch and Mason chuckled as he thought of the amusement he would provide for the cowboys. Josephine had held back, but now Mason caught her hand and drew her into the group.

“Mother, I wish to introduce you and sis to a real Western girl, Miss Josephine Walters,” he said.

Ethel put her arms around Josephine and kissed her. “I feel that I have known you for a long time, dear,” she said sweetly. “Jack has written home about you in all his letters and urged me to visit you.”

Josephine’s face was radiant, while she could only stammer a few words as she was introduced to Mason’s mother and Percy Vanderpool. Mason took the situation in hand by rounding up Scotty and introducing him to his folks. The cowboy stood fingering his hat while his face grew red with embarrassment.

He shifted his feet awkwardly as Mason introduced him to Percy Vanderpool and Mason tried hard to keep back a smile when he noticed a blank look spread over the cowboy’s face as he sized Percy up.

Ethel soon put the cowboy at ease by chatting with him in her friendly way, and won his eternal friendship by praising up Nevada climate and the healthy condition of her brother Jack.

“Break away, you two,” Mason cut in with a laugh. “Sis, you will have Scotty hypnotized in another minute. I have arranged to have you ride to the ranch with Josephine and myself, while Percy and mother will ride with Scotty. I know that mother doesn’t like to ride fast, and I can easily take you in my car. Will that plan suit you, mother?”

“You know it will, son,” she answered.

“Yes,” Ethel said in a bantering tone, “you know that mother never could get used to your reckless driving, but I’m willing to risk my neck, and if anything happens you will have two victims to haunt you.”

“Oh, come now, sis, I’m not as reckless a driver as that,” he protested, grinning broadly as he noticed a long look on the cowboy’s face.

Scotty had evidently expected Ethel to ride with him for his face showed disappointment.

“It seems a shame,” Josephine spoke up, “to go on and leave Mrs. Mason. Scotty won’t get to the ranch before nightfall. I’ve a notion to ride with Scotty and keep her company.”

“No, my dear,” Mrs. Mason interposed hastily, “I will enjoy this ride to the ranch. You young folks go ahead in the car. I will sleep better to-night after a long ride in the air, as my head aches from riding in hot, stuffy trains.”

Mason bundled his sister and Josephine into his car.

“You will have plenty of time to reach the ranch before dark, Scotty,” he called back to the cowboy as he started his racer off with a rush.

They passed through Trader’s Post at a more moderate speed, as Mason wanted his sister to get a good look at the town.

“It isn’t much of a place,” Josephine confided to Ethel in an apologetic voice, “but we do about all our trading there.”

“Oh, I think this country is great. I haven’t been away from New York in a long time and this vacation will do me good,” Ethel answered enthusiastically.

She looked curiously at her brother.

“Now, what are you grinning about, Jack?” she demanded.

“I was wondering where you picked it up,” he said, his face now sober as a deacon.

“It, what?” she queried, her eyes wide in astonishment.

“Why, Percy Vanderpool, of course. Did he wish himself on you, or did you invite him out here? I have seen him at the clubs in New York, and he was noted for a brainless wonder although he traveled in the best of society.”

“I was surprised and humiliated by your actions at the station, brother,” she said

reprovingly, “why, you actually laughed in his face.”

“Couldn’t help it,” he confessed ruefully, “Percy is a regular freak, and I wish you would tell me how he came to be with you and mother.”

“Don’t be too hard on the poor fellow, Jack,” his sister retorted, “he was very kind and obliging to us on the trip and we were glad to have his company on the long ride out here.

“You see, it was this way, his father knows Dad well, and hearing we were going to Nevada his father asked Dad if he could take the trip with us. Percy had just recovered from a long illness, and the doctor ordered a change of climate for him.

“Dad asked us if we cared to have Percy go with us, and we gave our consent as it is a long trip for two women to take alone. Percy is really a good fellow, only as you say, he has more money than brains.

“He intends to stay at the hotel after to-night, but he thought it would be a *bally good chance*, as he put it, to see this part of the country.”

Josephine had been an interested listener.

“We couldn’t think of having Mr. Vanderpool stay at the hotel among total strangers,” she said warmly, “there is plenty of room at our ranch, and I think it will be great fun to have him with us.”

“You girls can settle it between yourselves,” Mason ventured with an air of resignation. “If you are satisfied to have him stay at the ranch I guess I can stand his company, but the cowboys sure will have fun with him.”

“Jack, watch where you’re going,” his sister cried, as the car gave a wide lurch and nearly went off the trail.

He pulled the racer back onto the trail with a master hand and cut down his speed a trifle.

“Anyone would think that you were jealous of Percy, the way you talk,” she added, giving Josephine a nudge.

He laughed heartily.

“Come now, sis, don’t accuse me of that; I want something to get jealous over first.”

A general laugh followed his remark, but the girls could see that he was a little nettled over his sister’s teasing. Josephine changed the subject by drawing

Ethel's attention to the nature of the country they were passing through. The city girl was deeply interested in the seemingly never ending chain of mountains in the distance, and expressed her admiration for the beautiful valleys and mountains in glowing terms. Soon, they fell to talking of city society and the prevalent fashions in gowns, while Mason turned his attention to getting more speed out of his motor. A feeling of contentment seized him now that his sister was with him, and he was positive she would be able to explain more fully the enmity that existed between his father and Ricker. It was all a confused muddle to him, and as his thoughts ran in this channel it put a damper on his spirits. They had struck a better stretch of road and he turned his attention once more to the girls at his side. One glance at their smiling faces quickly dispelled all his gloom. They were nearing the ranch now and Josephine was pointing out points of interest to the city girl, who was showing lively interest in everything.

“We are pretty close to home now, girls,” Mason said with a smile, “I trust you have enjoyed the ride, and have no broken bones?”

“You drove fine, Sir Jack,” Josephine spoke up; “drive right up to the house and I’ll make your sister acquainted with my folks while you are putting the car up.”

Mason unloaded his fair passengers at the ranch door after first promising Josephine to make haste in putting the car up as she wanted him to accompany them for a brief walk around the ranch. They were somewhat cramped and lame from the long ride and felt that a walk would do them good. It was still early in the afternoon and they would have time to show his sister about the ranch before Scotty arrived with his passengers. Josephine had asked Ethel as they were entering the house if she was tired, and the prompt answer she received to the contrary was proof of Mason’s assertion that his sister was athletic and strong. Josephine’s heart warmed to the city girl for she admired strength and ruggedness, she herself being practically born in the open air.

Her fondest hopes were realized, for here was a girl after her own heart whom she could make a companion and chum of, and she intended to keep her at the ranch as long as possible.

Mason was longer than he expected in putting the car away and had just started for the house when he saw the girls coming out. He paused in his walk and studied them as they came walking toward him, life and animation in their stride.

“Beauties, both of them,” he muttered half unconsciously to himself, “and fine girls whom a man would fight to the death for.”

Both girls were about the same build, Ethel being a trifle heavier. She was a decided brunette while Josephine was more of the blonde type. For richness of color the Western girl had the advantage over the city girl, but both were good to look at.

“And what were you mooning about, Sir Jack?” Josephine challenged him, when both girls paused in front of him and made a curtsy.

“I’ll never tell you,” he answered, as with a bow he returned their salute. “You both would have swelled heads, and I refuse to have two vain girls on my hands.”

Both girls charged at him and insisted that he tell them at once. He laughingly compromised with them by offering to show them around the ranch in the short time before his mother should arrive.

Mason first conducted them to the corral, his sister being an admirer of fine horses, and as they were starting to leave the corral for an inspection of the bunk-house and mess room, Bud Anderson with a group of mounted cowboys swept past them with a rush.

“Oh, who was that fine looking man at the head of those cowboys?” his sister asked in open admiration.

“That’s Bud Anderson, the sheriff and foreman of this ranch,” he answered, trying to conceal a rising note of vexation that had crept into his voice in spite of himself.

Was it possible his sister would fall in love with Bud, as had Josephine? He put the question to himself as the thought struck him. Bud was a fine fellow, he had to admit, but he felt a sharp pang of jealousy whenever he saw Josephine talking to Bud. Josephine had called to him and he wheeled from the group of cowboys and bringing his plunging horse to a stand, dismounted in front of them.

“What a superb horseman,” was Ethel’s comment after she had been introduced to him.

He had left them after promising Josephine that he would be on hand the next morning with his cowboys to show the visitors some fancy riding. Ethel began to feel a little tired after they had walked around a bit longer, and Josephine suggested that they go into the house and rest up for the next day. This plan was agreed to and on arriving at the house they had chairs placed on the porch, where lunch was served to them by Pomp, the cowboys’ cook, who had been pressed into double service.

Josephine explained that she often had him come to the house to prepare special dishes and that he was a very expert cook who took delight in showing his skill. Josephine soon excused herself, saying she had to see Pomp about a late dinner. Mason seized the opportunity to ask his sister about their father, and what she knew about the long enmity Ricker held against him.

“I don’t understand the matter clearly, Jack,” she began, “but father told me the last thing before I left New York to caution you to be on your guard as Ricker is his bitter enemy and would do you harm out of revenge for a fancied wrong he thinks father did him years ago.”

“Yes, I know that much for Dad wrote me about it in his letter,” he answered impatiently.

“But there is something mysterious back of it all,” she insisted gravely. “Dad

says he has a man working on the case out here and that he would make himself known to you at the proper time.”

He was astonished at this bit of news and stared at her incredulously.

“It’s a fact,” she went on, speaking rapidly, “you know Dad is levelheaded, but stern in his ways, and never does things by halves. Something must have happened since you left home that he is gravely concerned about, for he worries about you continually. You must promise me, Jack, to watch out for Ricker for I know he will do you harm if he gets half a chance. Dad says he has a man out here looking after his interests and that is all I know about it, only you must be careful.”

“It is something new for Dad to worry about me, but I am more puzzled to know who the man is that he has working for him out here. I can’t figure out who it can be,” he said thoughtfully, then his eyes gleamed as though a sudden thought had occurred to him.

“I know that Dad is proud of you and is pleased with the way you have been making good out here,” his sister continued. “He often speaks of you and every time he receives a letter from Mr. Walters he chuckles, and once I heard him say you were a *chip of the old block* and then he blew his nose violently and looked stern again. You know his peculiar ways, Jack, but he thinks the world of you.”

His eyes grew misty as he realized his sister spoke the truth and he was glad he was making good for his father had always been lavish with him as far as money matters went, but he never had dreamed his stern parent cared for him like this.

Josephine had now joined them and the conversation ran to lighter channels much to Mason’s relief as he was beginning to feel blue.

It was about time for Scotty to arrive and Josephine kept looking anxiously down the trail.

“I sent Buck Miller with Tex to act as escort to them, and Tex is to ride back and let me know about what time they will get here so I can have a warm dinner ready for them,” she announced.

Mason suddenly remembered a pair of field glasses that he had brought with him from New York. Going to his room he brought them down and handed them to Josephine with the remark:

“See if you can make out any object with these glasses.”

She took the field glasses and carefully adjusted them to her vision,

“Thank you, these are just the thing,” she said, delighted with the view she obtained with them. “I can make out a rider heading this way and I think it is Tex. Yes, it is Tex, I can tell by the way he rides; I’m going in and hustle Pomp up with the dinner.”

She handed the field glasses to Ethel and disappeared in the house. Tex soon afterward rode up and reported that Scotty would arrive in about an hour. Ethel carried the news to Josephine while Mason went to the corral with Tex to look at a vicious horse the latter was breaking. The time passed rapidly and when Mason started for the house to join the girls, Scotty was driving in with his passengers.

Half an hour later it was a jolly party that sat down at the dinner table to do justice to Pomp’s masterful cooking. After the meal the party sat on the porch until dusk, while Josephine entertained her guests with the thrilling story of her capture and escape from the bandits.

As it had been a hard day for all, the party was preparing to break up for the night, when Josephine’s sharp ears caught the sound of horses’ hoofbeats coming toward the house.

“Wonder who it can be,” she queried, trying to peer into the gloom. “All our cowboys are in the bunk-house by this time.”

A moment later a figure appeared from out of the night and rode slowly toward them.

“Why, it’s Waneda the Spanish girl,” Mason cried in astonishment.

“What brings you here at this time of night?” Josephine asked of her distrustfully.

Waneda timidly placed a note in her hand.

“I was sent here and the note is for Mr. Mason,” she answered simply, in her rich mellow voice.

“What! another decoy note?” Josephine queried suspiciously, handing the note to Mason.

He took the note inside to the light, and after reading its contents his face showed perplexity.

“It is signed by MacNutt and he wants me to use my influence to have you agree to let Waneda stay here at the ranch. He says it is important that the girl should stay here for a few weeks, and he will vouch for her honesty. I think myself, it

will be all right, but you can use your own judgment,” Mason explained, addressing Josephine.

“It is all very queer, but I want to do what is right,” she answered, smiling a little anxiously at Mason. “Certainly, Waneda can stay here, and we will hear her story in the morning.”

CHAPTER XI—RICKER'S WARNING

Mason was up at sunrise the next morning and set out at once for the bunk-house. He had determined to have another talk with MacNutt and have the man clear up a suspicion that was beginning to take shape in his mind. He had been convinced all along that things were not right at the Ricker ranch, and Waneda's late and unexpected arrival the night before had clouded his mind with mystery. MacNutt's strange actions in the last few days and his sister's startling revelations concerning his father had him sorely troubled. In this state of mind he approached the bunk-house and found the cowboys forming in line under Bud Anderson's leadership. They made a fine spectacle as they sat mounted and at attention while Bud was tolling off the ones that were to ride the range this day, and the more fortunate ones that were to remain to entertain the visitors. Mason's sharp glance failed to make out MacNutt among the riders.

"I gave MacNutt leave to go to Trader's Post," Bud called in answer to an inquiry from Mason. The foreman's face wore a broad grin. "He isn't any use to me and as we are going to do some trick riding to-day, I was glad to have him out of the way," the foreman added. Mason thanked him for the information and started for the house. His face wore a grim smile. "No one seems to take that MacNutt person seriously but me," he mused softly, "but if I don't miss my guess, he's fooling them all."

Before he reached the house he met the girls coming his way, and wonder of all wonders, they were being escorted by Percy Vanderpool himself. The fop wore a different suit from the one he had on when he arrived at the ranch and it was even more loud and flashy, but when Mason saw that he also sported a cane, he groaned aloud.

"Why, I wouldn't be in his boots to-day for a million dollars," he told himself, "what the cowboys won't say and do when he appears to them in that rig will be a sin. But oh, a fool for luck, and just see the girls hang on to him."

The girls had spied Mason, but were pretending to be wrapped in Percy's conversation, while he was strutting and bragging outrageously.

Not to carry the farce too far the girls were slowly making their way toward Mason.

“What time did you get up this morning, Sir Jack?” Josephine called to him.

“Just about sunrise,” he answered, quickening his stride to join them.

“But you don’t look very good-natured for such a fine morning,” his sister said in a bantering tone.

“I feel good enough,” he returned shortly, giving her a sharp glance. “It’s a fact that fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

He was looking hard at Percy as he spoke. He never had liked the fellow any too well, and wanted to put a check to his bragging. At any rate the words had no effect on Percy for he strutted and bragged as much as before. Josephine was laughing silently while trying to signal to Mason not to pay any attention to Percy. Finally she drew Mason aside and engaged him in conversation.

“You must not mind the way us girls carry on,” she was saying earnestly, “your sister is out here for a good time and Percy is a curiosity to us. We know he is a harmless creature with more money than brains, for didn’t you say so yourself, Sir Jack?”

He looked a little sheepish.

“Come, now,” she continued, “take us down to see the cowboys, we have a little time before breakfast and your sister is quite interested in Bud Anderson. She thinks he is about right, and I want you to help me in showing her a good time while she stays at the ranch.”

He stirred uneasily.

“Who is the more interested in Bud, you or Ethel?”

He put the question suddenly.

They had drawn a short distance away from Ethel and Percy. Josephine remained silent, her fingers busily toying with her handkerchief.

“You haven’t answered my question,” he continued relentlessly.

“That is for you to find out, Sir Jack,” she answered naively, and broke away from him to join Ethel and Percy.

“Come, Ethel, Sir Jack looks real blue and we’re all going down to the corral,” she said.

Mason fell into step with Josephine and the girl seemed puzzled by his abstracted manner.

“You are looking real gloomy this morning, Sir Jack. Please tell me what is worrying you.”

He saw a look of concern come into her eyes.

“Well, little Princess, I’ll tell you,” he said gravely. “I wanted to see MacNutt this morning to find out about the Spanish girl’s case. MacNutt had gone to Trader’s Post, so I didn’t find out anything from him. Did you question the girl this morning as you intended to?”

“Yes,” Josephine answered, keeping her eyes fixed straight ahead of her. “Waneda didn’t tell me anything more than I found out last night, and I think we will have to look to MacNutt to explain the reason of her coming here.”

“Of course,” she continued, “I am willing that the girl should stay here just as long as she wants to, if I was sure that she is all right. Anyway, you seem to take a great interest in her.”

He looked up at her in surprise.

“What makes you think that?”

“I should think,” she answered, “that after a girl had brought you a decoy note as she did, that you couldn’t trust her.”

“I am still convinced that Waneda didn’t know what that first note contained,” he protested warmly, “and that she had been made a tool by the Ricker faction.”

“Your faith is wonderful.”

There was a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

He felt the sting of it keenly. They were now far in advance of Ethel and Percy. Mason stopped and placed himself in her path.

“Josephine,” he spoke rapidly, “I don’t care for Waneda or any girl, only you.”

She drew herself up haughtily.

“Please let us not continue this subject,” she said, eyeing him coldly, “there is Bud just ahead of us and I wish to talk with him.”

Before he could prevent her she had passed swiftly by him while he stood staring blankly after her.

“Now, what have I said to offend her?” he demanded angrily of himself.

Bitterly condemning himself for having said something out of the way, and racking his brains in vain to think what it was, he made his way to the corral in a disturbed frame of mind.

“Josephine must think I am a clumsy brute, and I don’t know as I blame her. Jack, you always did have a fool way of putting your blundering foot in bad with the women, but this girl, oh hell, but I have made a mess of things.”

Thus harshly denouncing himself, he paused at the corral. Josephine’s favorite horse, Fleet, caught his eye, and leaping the bars he took a lump of sugar from his pocket and held it out temptingly to the animal. Fleet gave a whinny of delight and raced over to him.

“Anyway, I can keep on good terms with you, can’t I, old top?”

The horse munched the sugar and tried to put his soft nose into Mason’s pocket.

“No more, Fleet,” he said gently, “or I will be winning you away from Josephine, and then she would have another chance to get sore at me.”

From where he stood he could see Josephine and his sister; they were talking gaily with Bud, while Percy was staring at the cowboys from a safe distance.

They were gathered in a small group and as Mason watched, one of them started to walk past his comrades, imitating Percy’s walk and mannerisms.

Mason’s good nature returned with a burst of humor.

The cowboy was really a good actor and he imitated Percy’s ways to perfection. Evidently the cowboys had planned on a fake fight for Percy’s benefit. The cowboy paused in his walk and a violent quarrel took place between him and one of the men.

Percy was staring at them with horror in his eyes.

Suddenly one of them pulled his gun and firing from his hip brought the quarrel to an end. The other cowboy sank to the ground as though mortally wounded. Percy gave one look and fled to the house.

The incident caused a hearty laugh from all the men, but Josephine cautioned the cowboy not to repeat the performance. Soon after the breakfast bell rang and Mason joined his sister and Josephine on their way to the house.

“You missed the fun, Sir Jack,” Josephine said, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“No, I didn’t,” he retorted, vaguely wondering at her change of manner. “I was in the corral and saw all that took place, and believe me, it was amusing.”

“I will have to square myself with Percy, he will think we are all roughnecks out here,” she said, a little frown wrinkling her face.

“Nonsense,” he laughed, “I’ll just go right up to Percy and say, ‘What’s the matter, old chappie, don’t let a little thing like that frighten you, old chap. It’s a common occurrence out here, old top, dontcherknow, or don’t you know?’”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Josephine cried, eyeing him severely; “why, you would scare the poor fellow away.”

“Small loss,” he answered, smiling again as he thought of the incident.

Josephine disdained to answer him. There was an appetizing breakfast awaiting them at the house, and for once Mason was as hungry as a wolf. Josephine made all hands wait, however, until she had her mother go to Percy’s room and drag him from his lair. It was evident that she had succeeded for the party could hear him following her downstairs. Percy was soon made to feel at ease for all acted as though the incident was forgotten. In the course of an hour they all assembled near the corral where the cowboys were beginning to show off their various stunts. Ethel was especially struck with the way one cowboy, running his horse at full speed, swept another man off the ground with apparent ease and swung him in front of him, his horse keeping up his terrific rush with scarcely a break. She clapped her hands in admiration at this feat of horsemanship. Percy seemed awestruck at the reckless daring of the riders and when the men passed in review after the sport was over, his eyes were held as fascinated at the sight of the guns sticking out of the cowboys’ belts. Bud Anderson had ordered his men to go armed since the Ricker faction had showed such open hostility of late.

Mason had noticed MacNutt during the cowboy games, but the man did not take part in any of the riding.

“MacNutt didn’t go to Trader’s Post after all,” he mused thoughtfully, “now where did the fellow go?” Happening to look over in Josephine’s direction, Mason saw that she was carrying the field glasses that he had presented to her. The girl evidently took delight in them for she occasionally swept the trail and far off mountains with them. He was walking slowly over to join her when he heard her give a startled exclamation.

“What is it?” he questioned, hastening to her side.

“Riders coming this way, and quite a body of them,” her voice seemed lost in

wonder as she answered him.

“Oh, they are Ricker’s cowboys,” she continued, “run and tell Dad and Bud, quick!”

Mason quickly informed Bud and the ranch owner of Josephine’s discovery.

Bud hastily gathered the cowboys around him.

“Now, boys,” he said in clear, concise tones, “Ricker is coming here and I don’t know for what purpose, but if he and his men are looking for trouble we will give it to them quick enough. Don’t none of you men draw until you see me draw first. Is that clear to you?”

His eyes took on a steely glint as he spoke the last words. There was a murmur of assent from the men, but Tex stepped forward with an air of defiance.

“I don’t allow we’re going to stand by and see you get plugged first by Ricker,” he growled sullenly, “we all know Ricker is the quickest man in this part of the country that ever throwed a gun, and Bud, we don’t aim to stand by and give him a chance to throw his gun first.”

Bud listened calmly, the muscles of his face hardening.

“You will do just as I ordered, Tex.”

The words were spoken so low and without any trace of passion, that Mason could scarcely hear him. Then Bud placed his men after cautioning them again.

Mason could see he held marvelous control over them, and he began to understand why the ranch owner had made him foreman.

Waneda, the Spanish girl, had crept up to Mason while Bud was addressing his men, and she seemed strangely agitated at the news that Ricker and his men were coming.

Mason felt sorry for this poor waif of the plains and wished that Josephine would be more kind to her. It wasn’t Josephine’s nature to be harsh with anybody, he reasoned, but he could see that she seemed to hold a strong dislike for Waneda, and he couldn’t understand the reason for her dislike.

Josephine still had her field glasses trained on the riders. They were near enough now so she could make out Ricker in the lead with about a dozen cowboys.

“I thought at first that they were old man Gaylor’s cowboys instead of these swine,” the ranch owner burst out wrathfully.

In answer to an inquiring look from Mason he explained, "Gaylor owns a ranch just across the valley from here. His place is sixty miles from my ranch and sometimes he and his cowboys pay me a visit. They are right fine people and I thought at first this bunch of riders were his men."

Ricker and his men were now riding up to the corral at top speed. They made a fine appearance, and Mason had to admit they were superb horsemen. When Ricker caught sight of Bud with his men drawn up in back of him, he flung up one hand and his cowboys came to a halt. Two of his men seemed to have trouble in controlling their plunging horses, and Bud watched them narrowly to guard against a trick.

Ricker was the first to speak.

"Anderson, I've come to repay that visit you and your men made at my ranch a short time ago"; his tone was sneering and his face worked with passion as his eyes fell on Waneda and Mason.

"That's nice," Bud answered coolly, "is that all you have on your mind to-day?"

"Not by a damned sight!" Ricker burst out furiously. The sight of Mason seemed to madden him. "I've come for that girl there," pointing to Waneda. "Mason, did you have anything to do with getting her to this ranch, you damned——"

"Better not say it," Mason cut in sharply, while taking a step forward. He turned around and looked at Waneda.

"Do you wish to go back with this man, Waneda?" he questioned her.

"No," the girl gasped in fear.

"That settles it," Mason said grimly, "Ricker, I guess your quarrel is with me. Now, I want to tell you something. Any man that will bulldoze a helpless girl has got a yellow streak, and if you'll get down off your horse I'll prove it. You've threatened my father in the past and I know you're out to get me. Now, I have no weapon about me and I want to know if you are man enough to get down off your horse."

The sudden turn of affairs caused surprise among Ricker's cowboys, while Bud and his men sat staring at Mason in amazement. Ricker was fairly choking with rage as he was put in a bad light before his men, and he could only sit and glare at Mason.

"I will agree to let you take Waneda back with you if I don't prove you have got a yellow streak," Mason continued scornfully; "you came over here to pick a

quarrel with me and you know it.”

“That is fair enough, Ricker,” Bud spoke up suavely. His voice seemed to have almost a purr in it. “The boy has called your turn. I will see that my men behave themselves, if you will promise your men will be good, but remember I’m watching you all.”

Ricker spoke a few sharp words to his men and they fell back leaving him face to face with Mason.

“I’m going to take some of the conceit out of you, you young upstart,” he said with pitying smile as he drew his guns and handed them to Bud. “You’re going up against a full grown man and I’m going to break you.”

Mason knew he would have a tough job on his hands as Ricker was of the brute type and outweighed him by forty pounds. Mason fell back to join his mother and sister as they were calling frantically to him.

They both appealed to him not to fight Ricker, Josephine and the ranch owner joining in with them.

“I intend to get revenge for Dad’s sake,” he told them simply, and they knew it was useless to argue with him further.

Bud went over and had a talk with Ricker. Soon he came back and drew Mason to one side.

“Ricker says he won’t stand for any rules to this fight, lad,” he said kindly, “the best man to win at any style he likes best.”

“That suits me,” Mason answered with a laugh; “I’ll box with him every minute.”

Ricker announced that he was ready, and the two combatants began to circle around, each looking for an opening. Mason held his hands as though to grapple with his opponent, when Ricker, thinking he saw an opportunity to get a hold, suddenly darted in and received a swinging blow to the jaw that dazed him. He fell into a crouch, as the blow had hurt him, and took a lightning uppercut for his pains. As he backed away, Mason could see that he was full of fight and a hog for punishment. The man was a regular giant in stature and the way he recovered from the effect of the blows amazed Mason. He decided to change his tactics. Ricker rushed him furiously, his great brawny arm trying to encircle Mason’s body. Mason easily side-stepped this mad rush and shot a snappy punch to his opponent’s eye, completely closing that member. He followed this blow with a

series of body punches before Ricker could clinch him. Mason worked his arms free and swung a fierce left to Ricker's face cutting a wide gash over his other eye, and causing him to back away cursing. Mason followed up his advantage, swinging short body blows that brought a spasm of pain to Ricker's face. The bully was breaking ground now before Mason's relentless smashes and tried to clinch at every opportunity.

"I knew you had a streak of yellow in you, Ricker," Mason said coolly as he evaded a wild swing. "Why, your efforts are clumsy, stand up like a man and take a licking."

Ricker bellowed like a bull at the taunt and rushed at Mason in a wild attempt to finish his nimble opponent with a single blow. The bully's eyes were nearly closed and his breath came in gasps. His men sat amazed at the easy way Mason was handling him. Some of them nervously fingered their guns, but Bud was watching every move sharply and they didn't dare make any display of force. Mason set himself and met Ricker's bull-like rush with a powerful blow to the jaw. The man's head snapped back while his heels were lifted clear from the ground. Mason had scored a clean knockout, scarcely receiving a scratch himself.

It took some time for Ricker's men to bring him to, and as he climbed weakly on his horse he pointed a shaking finger at Mason.

"You haven't seen the last of me, young fellow," he swore between swollen lips; "I'm going to get you for this, and I want to tell you, too, Anderson, if I catch any of your men on my range, I'm going to make an example of them."

"That is an idle threat, Ricker," Bud retorted calmly; "none of my men will venture on your range unless there is a good reason, and then you may be sure I will come with them."

Ricker frowned darkly at this return to his threat. He gave a command to his men and soon the band were in motion. Josephine watched them in the distance through her field glasses and saw they were taking the fork in the trail toward Trader's Post.

"Well, I hope this is the last we will see of that crowd," the ranch owner said with a sigh of relief. "Mason, you sure did beat up Ricker some."

"I don't know if Josephine has told you the story or not," he answered, "but there had been bitter enmity between Ricker and my dad for years, and he came over here mainly to pick a quarrel with me."

“Josephine did tell me something of the kind,” the ranch owner admitted wonderingly, “but I didn’t pay much attention to her at the moment and it clean slipped my mind.”

That evening, Mason with Bud and the ranch owner’s family were talking over the events of the day and were wondering how far Ricker would go with his threat when they heard a commotion down near the corral. Loud voices reached their ears causing Bud and Mason to spring to their feet. Both rushed out on the porch and at a glance they saw that a tragedy had occurred. Two cowboys were assisting one of their comrades out of his saddle. A third cowboy started on a run for the ranch house. Bud recognized him as Buck Miller.

“What’s the trouble down there, Miller?” Bud called to him.

“One of the Ricker crowd shot up Tex down at the Post!” came the startling answer.

Bud swore softly.

“It’s war to the knife from now on between Ricker and me”; he said the words in the manner of a man registering a vow.

CHAPTER XII—THE RAID

Most of the Bar X riders had been recalled from the range before daybreak. Bud Anderson had them lined up and was explaining the reason of their sudden recall when Mason appeared on the scene.

After a few more terse words to his men, Bud signaled to Mason and they drew off to one side, leaving the cowboys muttering sullen threats against the Ricker faction.

“The men sure are in an ugly frame of mind and want to get at the Ricker crowd,” Bud began in an undertone to Mason. “Tex is a favorite among my cowboys, and I’m going to raid Ricker’s ranch and get the man who did the shooting. Tex got a bullet through his shoulder and close to his lungs, the doctor says. One of our boys was once a surgeon and has been taking care of Tex all right.”

Mason was puzzled over one point; he remembered he had seen Tex just before Ricker’s men rode up.

“How did Tex come to be at the Post when I saw him here when the men lined up behind you?” he queried, “and how did he get in a fight with Ricker’s bunch?”

“There wasn’t any fight,” Bud answered with deadly emphasis to his words. “You remember I had to call Tex down a bit yesterday as I knew he was likely to start something. Well, after that I didn’t pay any more attention to him, and as he is a sensitive cuss, he took a fool notion to wander off down to the Post by himself.

“No one saw him go, and as near as I can make out by his talk, he had drunk a little too much at the hotel and feeling wobbly on his feet he started for the hotel porch to get some air. Just as he opened the door, Ricker’s bunch swung around the corner and one of them took a quick shot at him. The gang never stopped, but made directly for their ranch. Tex says he got a good look at the man that shot him, and I am going after him to-day.

“Tex fell to the floor after he was hit, but he’s as game as a bulldog and ordered the men at the hotel to put him on his horse and he rode for home. The doctor says the long ride is more to blame for his present low condition than the bullet.”

They were interrupted at this point by MacNutt who came hurrying toward them.

“The doctor says that Tex will live,” he said briefly, addressing Bud, and giving Mason a curt nod. MacNutt was standing in his slouching way and regarding Bud with dull eyes.

Bud lit a cigarette and offered one to MacNutt.

“That’s good news,” Bud replied as he watched MacNutt puffing dolefully on the cigarette. “What’s on your mind, man? You act as though you were in a trance.”

MacNutt shifted his feet awkwardly.

“I want to ask a favor of you, Bud,” he said gravely.

“I want you to let me lead your men on this round up of Ricker’s gang.”

It was an amazing request coming from a man of MacNutt’s caliber, and Bud stared hard at him.

“Did I get you right?” he questioned slowly, astonishment in his voice, “Just say that again.”

“I want to lead your men to Ricker’s ranch,” he repeated, turning an appealing glance on Mason.

“Mason, here, knows I can be trusted, and I happen to know the guard at Ricker’s ranch and can take him by surprise so he won’t give the alarm. Then we can surround the ranch, and if we plan to reach there at night we can hold them up before they can pull a gun and you can take your man prisoner.”

It was a long speech for MacNutt to make, but the man had evidently planned the attack out in every detail, while his earnest manner seemed to make a deep impression on Bud.

“I think MacNutt’s plan is a good one at that, Bud,” Mason spoke up, “I think he can be trusted, and as he says he knows the guard at Ricker’s we could make the capture easier. Of course, I can’t figure out how he happens to be on friendly terms with some of Ricker’s men, though,” he went on, giving MacNutt a dubious look, “but perhaps he will explain that to us later. Something tells me he is on the square, but you can use your own judgment, Bud.”

MacNutt gave Mason a grateful look as he finished.

“All right,” Bud said shortly, as though coming to a sudden decision. “I will take a chance on you, MacNutt, but you want to ride straight.”

There was a warning note in his voice.

“We will leave here in order to reach Ricker’s at nightfall. Be sure your guns are well looked after.”

With this parting admonition Bud left them abruptly.

Mason faced around and looked at MacNutt sternly.

“MacNutt!” he said crisply, “I don’t know why I put in a good word for you just now; your actions in the past don’t warrant it, but somehow or other I have faith in you, and now you must make good!”

MacNutt mumbled a few words of thanks as he started for the corral in his odd shambling gait.

“Curious person, that MacNutt,” Mason mused as he gazed absently after him.

Rousing himself with an effort he remembered that Josephine had told him to report on Tex’s condition as the girls intended to pay the cowboy a visit if the doctor would allow it. Waneda had already gone to act as his nurse. He started briskly for the house as there was much to be done by all who were to take part in the raid.

The first person he encountered as he entered the kitchen was Josephine. She at once questioned him about Tex’s condition. He briefly informed her of the cowboy’s chances of recovery and also told her of MacNutt’s strange request of Bud.

Mason noticed that her eyes lighted up at the mention of Bud’s name and his heart felt heavy as he realized that she was deeply interested in anything concerning the sheriff. Josephine was baking cookies this day and as Mason was looking hungrily at a tempting pan of freshly baked cakes, the girl insisted that he should try some and offered him a glass of milk.

“I’ll say these are delicious,” he declared, gazing at her in admiration. He had consumed six cookies and two glasses of milk. “I am afraid I won’t want any supper after all this.”

“If I do say it myself, I can beat Pomp on baking, but he certainly is a wonderful meat cook,” Josephine answered. Her cheeks were flushed from the hot oven and

she made a pretty picture as she stood in the open doorway to get a breath of air.

“That makes me think of something I want to ask you,” he said curiously. “Why is it that the cowboys call your cook Smoke and you call him Pomp?”

“The cowboys nicknamed him Smoke, but his right name is Pomp,” she answered.

He moved over to the door and stood beside her.

Josephine was looking toward the bunk-house where the cowboys were moving about and getting ready for the night raid on the Ricker ranch.

“Sometimes I wish I could be a man and work on Dad’s ranch just like one of his cowboys,” she said with a little sigh; “just think of all the excitement you men will have to-night, but you must be careful, Sir Jack, there will be danger in this raid for you.”

Her face clouded at the thought.

“Do you care so very much about my safety then?” he asked eagerly.

“Of course,” she answered, her eyes opening wide as though surprised at his question. “You know I take a great interest in all our boys.”

He looked disappointed.

“I had hoped that you would take a greater interest in me than any of the rest,” he said dejectedly.

“And so I do,” she admitted, regarding him gravely, “you came from the East and have proven very interesting to me.”

“Well, that is something in my favor at least,” he said with a laugh.

His sister entered the room at this moment and he hastily released Josephine’s hand which he had imprisoned.

“What is this, a lovers’ quarrel?” she demanded, looking searchingly at Mason.

“It is nothing,” Josephine hastily protested, “just merely a little talk between Sir Jack and me. He just told me about Tex’s condition, and what do you think? MacNutt asked Bud to let him lead the men to Ricker’s.”

Ethel was surprised at this bit of news and a little later asked her brother to take them to see Tex.

“Percy has been asking us all the morning when we would be ready to visit Tex,

and I told him we were waiting for you. Now, don't you consider that an honor?"

"Where is Percy?" Josephine asked with a smile of amusement.

"Oh, he's upstairs getting ready to ride a horse that Bud has picked out for him. Why, here he comes now."

Percy came tripping out into the kitchen and at the sight of him Mason laughed heartily, while the girls were fairly bursting with merriment. He wore a tight fitting tailor made suit, the color a brilliant blue. His feet were snugly encased in a pair of shining riding boots, and he wore a pearl handled revolver in a dainty holster strapped to his belt.

"For the love of Pete!" Mason gasped in wonder. "Josephine, do you think this freak imagines he is going with us in the raid?"

"Hush, the poor fellow will hear you," she cautioned him while she struggled hard to keep back her mirth.

Percy strode pompously towards the girls. He did not seem to think that he was making himself ridiculous in their eyes.

"This is as good as any show," Josephine whispered to Ethel, while they waited for this bold bad man to speak.

"I suppose, aw, girls, you are surprised to see me dressed in this fashion," Percy drawled, grandly tapping the tiny revolver in his belt. "But I am going to help chastise these blooming bounders, aw, Ricker's roughnecks, I believe."

"That will be fine of you," Josephine answered, sober as a judge. "I am sure our boys will appreciate your great courage and daring."

Percy drew himself up stiffly at her flattery.

"Bud promised to furnish me with a horse," he continued, "and by Jove, I must be getting out to the corral. One of his men is going to teach me how to ride the brute. I used to be real clever on horseback, don't you know, but this horse looks real vicious; still, I think I can manage the beast. Well, so long, girls, see you later."

When he was out of hearing, Josephine jumped to her feet.

"Now, isn't that rich?" she demanded, facing Mason. "Just imagine poor Percy wanting to go after Ricker's gang. Come, Sir Jack, take us to find Bud. I think he is framing up something on Percy with that horse deal, and I don't want the poor fellow to get his neck broken. Then we will go and see Tex."

They found Bud at the bunk-house. When questioned by Josephine he admitted that he had shown Percy the horse he was to ride, and also that he had picked one that was likely to prove troublesome to Percy. He thought that was the best way to discourage the fellow, and also take some of the conceit out of him. Josephine made him promise to pick out a safe mount for Percy, after which they went in to see Tex.

A portion of the bunk-house had been given over to the injured cowboy. Waneda, the Spanish girl, was in constant attendance, and flitted noiselessly about the room as she placed chairs for Tex's visitors.

"Tex is asleep just now. The doctor says he must not talk or be allowed to become excited. He says he will pull him through, but he must be kept quiet for a few days," she told them softly.

"Then there is no use in staying here any longer," Bud said, starting for the door, "there is a lot of work ahead of me before I start for Ricker's. Anyway, I know the name of the man who shot Tex, and I'm going to get him to-night."

He went out followed by the others. Calling one of the cowboys over to him he gave him some orders to carry out. Then he insisted that Mason should get some rest before the time set for the raid.

"This is going to be a hard night's work, and it is a man's job," he said; "all the men are resting up and I advise you to go to the house and take things easy. We will have about two hours before we start, and I will blow a signal whistle that you may have time to join us."

"That sounds like good advice and I think I will act on it," he agreed.

"What are you going to do about Percy?" Josephine called back to him as they started for the house. Bud grinned.

"Don't worry about your dude friend," he answered, "I will have him so well tired out before we start that he will want to go to bed. Right now I expect he is trying to ride an old razorback horse that I ordered to be saddled for him. You know I can't be bothered with him to-night, but don't worry, he won't come to any harm."

When they arrived at the house, Josephine went to the kitchen, telling Mason she had to see her mother about getting an early dinner.

"For, you see, I can't let you start away on an empty stomach," she added naively.

She was back in a few minutes, however, saying that her mother did not need her help.

“Your mother is resting in her room,” she told him, “and my Dad is away somewhere on the range, so now I can visit with you and Ethel.”

“Then your Dad isn’t going with us to Ricker’s?” he questioned.

“Of course not, silly,” his sister cut in. She had taken an easy chair and was leisurely reading a magazine.

“You don’t suppose that Josephine would let her father go on a dangerous mission like this raid at his age, do you?” she continued.

“Josephine, I ask you to take my part; you see how my sister bawls me out at the slightest opportunity,” he said whimsically, glancing over at his sister.

“Sir Jack, I am sorry that so many terrible things have happened since you have been here,” Josephine said gravely, “and I am afraid your mother and sister will never want to come out this way again.”

“Don’t you ever believe that,” Ethel protested warmly. “Why, we are just having the time of our lives. There is just enough spice in this life to make you feel glad you are living. Am I not right, brother?”

“You’ve said it, sister mine,” he answered gaily.

“Sir Jack,” Josephine was looking at him steadily, “I know you are very reckless, and something tells me you are going into great danger to-night, Please promise me that you will try to be very, very careful.”

“Why, certainly, I can promise you that much,” he answered, a bit startled.

Josephine seemed pleased at his answer.

“Come to dinner now, I can hear mother calling,” she commanded them.

After the meal, Mason went to his room and tried to snatch a few winks of sleep. He had fallen into a heavy slumber with troublesome dreams.

He was fighting once again a desperate battle with the ugly hunchback at Ricker’s ranch, and was feeling the monster’s bony hands clutching his throat, trying to strangle him, when he woke with a start, the cold sweat standing out on his face. Josephine was calling him.

“Sir Jack!” she was saying, “hurry up, Bud sounded the signal whistle five minutes ago, and you haven’t a minute to lose.”

“I will be right down,” he answered.

As he had seen that everything was ready before he had gone to sleep, it took him scarcely a minute to slip on his boots and buckle on his guns. He went down the steps two at a time and flung the door open.

“Don’t forget what I told you about being careful,” Josephine called after him. “Ethel and I are coming out to see the men start after they get lined up.”

“Good for you,” he called back over his shoulder.

He had broken into a run, as he didn’t want to keep Bud waiting. When he reached the corral he found to his relief that the men were not quite ready to start. He quickly saddled his horse while taking note of the men who were picked to go. He noted with satisfaction that they were about the same cowboys that had taken the trail when Josephine was captured. Scotty Campbell, Red Sullivan and also Big Joe Turner were among the men picked. They were hard fighters and he was proud to ride with them.

As he was turning these thoughts over in his mind the men received the order to mount. Bud grouped the men and briefly informed them that at a certain point from Ricker’s ranch he would send a man ahead to surprise the guard. Mason took notice that Bud said nothing about who this man was. He wondered at this, and came to the conclusion that Bud feared the men would balk if he mentioned MacNutt’s name. If this was the true reason, Mason gave Bud credit for sound judgment, as it would be dark before they arrived at the point where Ricker had his guard stationed. Then it would be an easy matter to send MacNutt on ahead, and as none of the cowboys took him seriously, he would not be missed.

This was all conjecture on Mason’s part, but he meant to sound Bud on the subject at the first opportunity. At this point of his reasoning, Bud gave the order to start, and MacNutt was riding with him, a fact that bore out Mason’s keen reasoning. As they started, Mason remembered Josephine’s promise, and looking towards the ranch he saw both girls waving a farewell to him. Mason waved his hat in return and all the cowboys followed suit. As they rode at a fair canter down the trail he was amused to hear the cowboys argue among themselves as to which one of them the girls had waved at. Gradually he pressed ahead until he found himself riding with Bud and MacNutt. Upon questioning Bud he found his reasoning to be correct, for the latter informed him that he intended to send MacNutt ahead at the proper time.

The cowboys rode in silence for over three hours and Mason was glad when at last darkness closed in on them and at a sign from Bud, MacNutt began to draw

ahead.

At a command from Bud the men slowed their horses down to a walk.

“The *all clear* signal from MacNutt is to be two flashes from a small pocket lamp he carries,” he whispered in Mason’s ear, “You see, I am trusting this man on your faith in him. I wish I could feel as sure of him as you seem to,” the sheriff continued.

“Of course, I can’t explain why, but I think MacNutt will prove all right,” Mason answered, keeping his voice low.

At a point farther on Bud halted his men.

“Now, boys,” he said, “we will make the rest the trip on foot. We have about a half mile to cover, and one man will be left behind to guard the horses. I am going to try and close in on Ricker without a shot being fired if possible. I want you men to wait here in silence until I give you the signal to move forward. Then we will surround the house and burst in on them. I want each of you to take particular pains to cover your man, and keep him covered! Is that plain to you?”

“How about Ricker’s guard?” one of the cowboys questioned.

“He will be taken care of,” Bud answered quietly. “Just you men wait for a signal from me to move forward.”

Mason was almost positive that not a single one of the men had missed MacNutt.

The sheriff was keeping his eyes glued on a spot just ahead of them. The moments that followed were anxious ones for Mason. What if MacNutt should fail them? Just as he was getting decidedly nervous, his sharp eyes caught two tiny flashes of light at the point where they were watching. He breathed a sigh of relief as he heard Bud give the command for the men to move forward.

“I thought I saw a light just ahead of us,” one of the cowboys said in a suspicious voice.

“Silence!” Bud whispered sharply.

When they reached the guard’s place, or lookout, no one was there! MacNutt had done some skillful maneuvering to outwit the guard, as he was one of Ricker’s best men.

“You don’t suppose that MacNutt has double crossed us and is in league with the guard?” Bud whispered to Mason. “He may be trying to lead us into a trap. It all looks mighty suspicious to me.”

Mason's faith was still unshaken.

"No, I don't think that," he whispered back, "I think he will show up when we least expect him."

They were stealing cautiously on and were close to the ranch now, and could almost look in the windows where they could see lights burning. Suddenly Mason felt his arm grasped from out of the darkness. He drew back in alarm and was just going to strike a lunging blow in the dark, when he heard his name spoken in a whisper so low he could scarcely hear the words. Another low whisper, and then he knew the person was MacNutt, as he hoped.

Mason quickly made the fact known to Bud, who seemed immensely relieved. One of the cowboys had managed to get a look into one of the windows, and he at once made a report to Bud.

Good luck must have been with them this night, for the men inside were playing cards. They had depended on their sentinel on the lookout, and had placed no guard about the house or at the doors.

Bud massed his men at the two doors, and at signal they were kicked open while the sheriff's men poured into the room covering Ricker's men before they had a chance to draw. Ricker himself was most astonished of all, and most furious.

"We meet again, Ricker," Bud said coolly; "I have come for Nick Cover, over there by you. He shot up Tex, one of my men, and I am going to arrest him. Will you let me take him peacefully, or do you want a little gun play with my men?"

"You've got the drop on me," Ricker snarled, hoarse with rage; "take him and clear yourself and men out of here before I change my mind and take a chance against you for all the odds."

"You had better think twice before you try any rough stuff with me," Bud said coolly.

Stepping quickly over to the man Cover, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. A look of hate glowed in the man's eyes as Bud led him over and put him under the guard of his men.

Mason noticed that MacNutt was watching Ricker closely and Ricker was glowering at MacNutt savagely.

The actions of MacNutt puzzled Mason. The man had thrown off his languid air and was as alert as a panther. His next move was like lightning. An automatic revolver suddenly appeared in each hand and covered Ricker's heart!

“Don’t draw, Ricker! it means death to you if you draw! You were getting suspicious of me and started to draw your gun, didn’t you? Remember how well I shot at your little target range here one day? Yes, you remember now, don’t you? It was a fool stunt on my part, you know, but it’s just a little way I have.”

MacNutt rattled on in this way to the amazement of all in the room. Was this the man that had played the part of a halfwit so successfully at Bar X ranch? Most of the cowboys of Bar X asked themselves this question, while Mason and Bud stared at him in wonder.

“Bud Anderson,” MacNutt continued, “you came here to arrest Nick Cover and you got your man. Well, I came with you for the sole purpose of arresting this man whom I have so nicely covered. My real name is Trent Burton, United States Marshal, at your service. Ricker, I arrest you for a murder you committed back East. Also, for running a counterfeiting den on this ranch!”

Had a bomb suddenly exploded in the room it could not have caused any greater consternation than had the Marshal’s denouncement of Ricker. Then the tension seemed to relax and Mason could fairly hear the men breathe. Ricker’s face had turned ashen while Trent Burton was denouncing him, and now he furtively watched the Marshal as though in sudden fear of this new danger that threatened him. The Marshal kept his guns trained steadily on the chief’s head.

“Ricker,” the Marshal continued grimly, “you have led the life of a mean cur dog. This boy’s father here,” he waved one of his guns at Mason, “was quite a big help to me. He set me straight about you when I was wandering a bit off your track. You stole money from Mr. Mason when he was in the lumber business, and also threatened his life.

“Perhaps it will interest you to learn how I dropped on to your counterfeiting game so easily. Ricker, I am going to make you acquainted with my most able deputy. Jean Barry, step forward!”

“Traitor!” Ricker hissed, as the man Jean Barry stepped over and took a position near the Marshal.

Suddenly a shot rang out, extinguishing the light.

Simultaneous with the report of the gun, Trent Burton’s lithe body shot past Mason. Then from the darkness came blows and curses, followed by a number of shots, as the men fought in the dark.

A bullet seared Mason’s arm like a red hot iron just as Bud shouted a warning for his men to guard the doors.

CHAPTER XIII—THE COUNTERFEITERS

The firing ceased abruptly, each side fearing to hit one of its own men. The next instant Mason was grasped from behind and thrown violently to the floor. His assailant seemed possessed with superhuman strength and ferocity while he breathed with a peculiar whistling sound through his teeth. Mason's brain worked like lightning as the belief flashed through his mind that he was struggling with the demon hunchback dwarf.

The beast's bony hands were at his throat and Mason fought desperately. He realized that he was being slowly strangled. His left arm was wounded and lay useless at his side. As he vainly tried to bring his knee into the pit of the dwarf's stomach his hand touched his own revolver. With his remaining strength he managed to work it free from the holster and brought the butt crashing down on the dwarf's head.

The bony hands relaxed about his throat and he rolled the thing off his body with a shudder. He realized how close he had been to death.

He had stood near one of the windows when he had been attacked, and as he lay there quietly getting his strength back he heard voices whispering outside the window. There was not a sound from inside the room, each man being afraid to move or make a sound for fear of betraying his location to the other.

He listened eagerly to the whispering, and to his joy discovered that it was two of Bud's men trying to figure out how they could thrust a lighted lantern through the window without getting shot.

Evidently they had found a way, for there came a crash of broken glass and the lantern passed rapidly over Mason and stopped close to the center of the room. The cowboys had found a long pole and had tied the lantern to one end of it. At the appearance of the lantern a number of bullets passed over Mason, and he was glad he had not attempted to get on his feet.

The light showed a strange scene. Ricker lay on the floor with his hands and feet shackled.

Trent Burton was bending low over him, the two deadly automatics still in his hands. Scotty and Jim Haley stood facing each other with their guns on a level, but neither dared to fire.

“Stick that gun away, Jim, and be nice,” drawled the Marshal. “I’ve got you covered and so has Bud there near the door.”

Jim’s gun wavered a bit as he half turned his eyes towards the door.

Mason had been watching Scotty and Jim from where he lay on the floor and fired the instant Jim’s gun wavered. Jim’s gun fell to the floor, while he grabbed his wrist with a curse. Mason quickly leveled his gun at the dwarf, who was crawling up on him again.

“If you come one inch farther, you beast, I’ll blow your fool head off. This is the second time you have tried to murder me.”

He was in an ugly fighting mood, and his arm was beginning to give him considerable pain. The rest of Ricker’s gang, seeing Jim Haley put out of action and their leader lying on the floor with his feet and hands shackled, lost heart and surrendered.

Bud sent some of the men scouting around for an extra lamp.

“I wonder who shot the lamp out,” the Marshal queried, “it wasn’t done by anybody in this room.”

“I did,” the dwarf spoke up, grinning exultantly. “I was in the cellar and fired through a hole in the floor. Then while the fight was going on I crawled through the window.”

“And well I know it,” Mason said ruefully, “he crept up on me and had me nearly strangled before I knocked him on the head with my gun. He must have a skull like iron.”

The Marshal after a brief struggle snapped a pair of handcuffs on the dwarf’s wrists.

“You are too dangerous a person to be at large, my most excellent engraver.

“This dwarf,” he continued, “was Ricker’s chief engraver.”

Then, noticing Mason’s wound, he called Jean Barry, his deputy, to examine his arm. Jean made a thorough examination.

“Your arm isn’t broken, luckily; as near as I can tell the bullet just grazed the bone in the elbow,” he announced cheerfully, as Mason had winced as he

handled the injured arm.

“Well, it felt as though it was broken, I can’t raise it up,” Mason said grimly.

The Marshal was keenly interested. He seemed worried about Mason’s injury, and watched Jean as he put a crude bandage around the injured member.

“Bud,” the Marshal spoke up, “I propose we take a general inventory of our men and see how many wounded we have and how bad their injuries are. In the meantime we will send to the Post for a doctor. Who will volunteer to go?”

“I will,” Scotty spoke up eagerly; “young Mason here did me a good turn when he nailed Jim Haley, and I want to return the favor.”

“All right, Scotty, go ahead,” Bud agreed; “isn’t far to the Post, and while you’re gone we’ll look this ranch over.”

As most of the injured had received only slight flesh wounds, the Marshal and Bud undertook to examine the cellar and premises. The Marshal paused as they were about to commence their search and watched Jean Barry, who was dressing the men’s wounds.

“Jean, after you get the men’s wounds dressed, you had better go and bring in Ricker’s guard,” he said reflectively.

“I’ve got Tug Conners bound securely,” he added, “but I had to tap him on the head first, and he may be suffering.”

Ricker had been jerked to his feet none too gently by one of Bud’s men and placed on a table with his back to the wall. The look of fear in his eyes had died out, and he was regarding the Marshal with a look of hate.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?” he burst out savagely. “I’ve seen you before, somewhere in the East.”

The Marshal turned to the counterfeiter with a grim smile.

“Right, you are, my counterfeiting friend,” he answered suavely, “perhaps I can refresh your memory.”

Into his eyes came a look of reminiscence.

“Follow me back ten years,” he said, keeping his eyes fixed on Ricker, “to a little den on the East Side in New York. There had been a gang of counterfeiters shoving the queer, and they were operating around New York and neighboring cities.

“I was called in from another case I had been working on, and after long search succeeded in tracing the counterfeiters to this little den I speak of. In making the capture of the ringleader, part of my disguise was torn off, and that is the reason you remember me. In the excitement of the struggle you escaped, and I sent one of my men after you.”

Ricker was regarding the Marshal sullenly, his face working in violent spasms mingled with fear with hate.

“He trailed you to Baltimore,” the Marshal continued relentlessly, “and as he was attempting your arrest you sent a bullet through his head. After that, you disappeared and all efforts of my men failed to locate you.

“A short time ago, however, and through the efforts of my deputy, Jean Barry, I learned that you had headed for the West. As there has been a quantity of counterfeit money circulating in the East, I sent Jean Barry, who had at one time been a cowboy, out here to look you up.

“In the course of time, Jean Barry had evidence enough against you to warrant my suspicions, so I came out here and worked with him. This is your last attempt at counterfeiting, Ricker, for you will be tried for the murder of my detective.”

“Trent Burton,” Ricker ground out the name with an oath, “I’ll never be tried for that murder, and only for this traitor, Jean Barry, you would never have got the goods on me for this counterfeiting business. Only a few of my own men knew I was making the queer; the rest I kept in ignorance as they are only cattlemen.

“I owe my discovery to Jean Barry’s trickery; he came to me and hired out as a cowboy, and I didn’t suspect him of being a detective, but I’ll promise you this much,” the counterfeiter brought his shackled hands down on his knee with an oath, “there isn’t a jail made that will hold me. I’ll escape and get revenge on Jean Barry, and I’ll get you too, Mason.

“Your father helped to get the evidence against me and I’ll get you if I have to strike you through your sweetheart, Josephine. Ha, that’s a tender spot, isn’t it?”

Mason had jumped to his feet, startled by the counterfeiter’s vehemence. What if the man should make good his threat and do some injury to Josephine? The thought made a chill run through his frame.

“Come, Ricker, stow that kind of talk. You’re not in a position just now to make threats,” the Marshal cautioned him roughly.

The counterfeiter lapsed into a moody silence and further questions by the

Marshal brought no response from him. Bud invited Mason to come with them while they made an inspection of the cellar, after he had first seen that the guards were placed to his satisfaction. In the cellar they found a complete plant for making counterfeit money. They had been there but a few minutes when they heard a commotion above them. They were relieved when they heard Scotty's voice calling down to them. He wanted Mason to come up as he had brought a doctor.

The doctor put a bandage on Mason's arm and soon his wound was feeling much better.

"Scotty, you made good time in getting the doctor here," Mason said gratefully, grasping his hand.

Then a sudden inspiration seized him.

"The Marshal and Bud are in the cellar breaking up the counterfeiting press and apparatus," he told Scotty. "Do you remember how we had our men drawn around this ranch the night that Pete Carlo, the Mexican, slipped through our lines and got back to the mountains without being seen?"

"Shure," Scotty nodded eagerly.

"Well, let's see if we can find out how he got past us. There must be a secret passage leading out of this cellar," Mason cried enthusiastically.

"I'm game," Scotty agreed readily.

They started for the cellar, but had they seen the look of dismay and fear that had come into the counterfeiter's face while they were talking, they would have been puzzled.

Scotty had borrowed the Marshal's flash lamp and took the lead, with Mason following close on his heels. They carried their revolvers ready for instant use, and as they stole cautiously through the darkness they were amazed at the length and width of the cellar. There were numerous casks strewn around and Scotty stumbled over one of them with such force as to bring a muttered oath from his lips.

"Whisky casks," Mason said softly, smiling at Scotty's discomfiture. "Evidently Ricker's men held wild orgies in this cellar-like cave, but we don't seem to be finding the underground passage very fast."

They could still hear the vigorous blows from the Marshal and Bud's hammers as they kept at their work of demolishing the counterfeiter's plant.

“You wait right here, laddie, and I’ll get you a lantern. We will stand a better show of finding the underground passage if we each have a light,” Scotty whispered.

This was good logic and Mason readily agreed to the plan, after cautioning him to hurry.

“Keep your gun handy in case you are attacked, laddie,” the good-natured Scot warned him. “When you see two lights coming this way you will know I am coming back. We were damn fools not to think of another light when we started, but I guess I can get one all right.”

Mason sat down on an empty cask and pressed his hand wearily over his forehead as he listened to Scotty’s retreating footsteps. He was beginning to feel exhausted. The past few hours of excitement had told heavily on his nerves. He caught himself nodding several times and, rose to his feet in disgust.

“This won’t do,” he said angrily to himself, “you’ve got to pull yourself together, Jack Mason. We’re going to find that secret passage when Scotty comes back, old top, dontcherknow, as Percy would say.”

He tried to figure out how long Scotty had been gone. It had seemed like hours since he went for the lantern, and Mason began to chafe with impatience at the delay. It was so dark in the cellar that he could not see the hands on his watch, but he knew in all reason that Scotty had not been gone longer than ten minutes at most.

Suddenly he started up violently, his overtired nerves tuned to the highest pitch.

His tense ears had caught a sound like the clicking of some instrument. He strained forward in the inky darkness, his body rigid and revolver drawn.

Had his tired nerves played him a trick? No, the thing was clicking again, but very faint, and he reasoned from the sound that it must be at least thirty feet from him. Was somebody signaling from the far depths of the cellar to Ricker?

He was sure that was the reason for the clicking sound. Abruptly the noise ceased. His heart was pumping furiously as he silently turned around and peered into the darkness. To his great joy two lights were coming his way. Scotty was returning at last.

“Don’t speak above a whisper, Scotty,” Mason cautioned him in a low voice as the Scot attempted to explain his delay. “While you were after the lantern I heard a strange tapping noise, something like a telegraph instrument. It sounded to me

like someone was trying to signal from this cellar to Ricker. We had better go slow as we may get shot from ambush.”

In the dim light Scotty’s face showed his astonishment. “I supposed we had all the gang as prisoners upstairs,” he said, gazing at Mason in wonder.

“Just the same, I’m sure there is somebody in this cellar besides ourselves,” Mason whispered impatiently; “you take the lantern and I will carry the small flash light. I can tuck it under my left arm and that will give me a chance to use my good right arm. I can handle my revolver all right if I am attacked. You take one wall and I the other, and we will circle this cellar and look for the secret passage.”

This plan was followed out at once and Mason could hear Scotty at intervals as he stumbled over some object while groping his way along the cellar wall. It was a dangerous undertaking, as both carried lights, and they took a chance of drawing a shot from some hidden foe. Mason was closely examining the wall when he heard a sharp exclamation from Scotty.

“Come out of that! what are you skulking down here for?” he heard him say in forceful tones.

Mason straightened up in surprise.

“What have you found, Scotty?” he called.

“Come over and see,” the Scot answered wrathfully.

Mason crossed rapidly to the opposite side and beheld Scotty holding his lantern in the face of the blackest negro woman he had ever seen. The eyes of the negress were rolling in abject fear and her limbs were trembling violently.

Whether her fear was assumed or not, he couldn’t tell, but remembering the signaling noise, he regarded her with suspicion.

“Woman, what position do you fill in this house, and what were you hiding in the cellar for?” Mason questioned her sharply.

The negress looked at him mutely.

“She must be a little deaf,” muttered Scotty.

“Come, tell me the truth,” Mason continued in a louder voice. “We won’t hurt you.”

“I’s de cook,” she faltered, gaining courage from Mason’s reassuring smile. “And when dem gemmen’s done come heah and begins a fighting and shooting,

why I done runs into de cellah fo mah life.”

“Sounds good, Belinda, or whatever your name is,” he said, his face growing stern again, “But what were you signaling to Ricker for?”

Her face took on a blank look.

“Signaling,” she repeated in wonder, “’deed I wasn’t making signals to anybody, I was keeping just quiet as a mouse awaiting fo dem mens to leave.”

Mason was inclined to believe the negress was telling the truth.

“Scotty, you had better take her to Bud and the Marshal and let them question her,” he said after a short pause. “I will continue the search until you come back, and it would be a good idea to bring the Marshal back with you.”

From the look on Scotty’s face it was evident he didn’t relish his task, but he complied with the request with fairly good grace and hustled the negress along while she continued to protest her innocence of any wrong. Left to himself, Mason again began a systematic search.

Before the interruption by the negress, he had noted that one portion of the wall appeared to have oak beams running from top to bottom. He now went to this part of the wall and was feeling over one of the oak supports when his hand accidentally touched a knot which projected suspiciously out from the surface. He pressed hard on it, and to his delight that part of the wall began to swing slowly inward! Something was moving on the other side of the wall and he held his breath while waiting for an attack. Standing to one side he snapped his flashlight out and held his revolver pointed into the opening. Unable to resist a sudden impulse, he flashed on his light and found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver and the villainous face of Pete Carlo, the halfbreed Mexican!

Mason realized his helpless position, and a sneering smile came into the halfbreed’s face.

“So,” he taunted, showing his wolfish teeth, “Ze brave American dog, he walk into a trap, ha?”

“I settle first with the dog of a Gringo, then I steal the fair Josephine again, and she shall watch me torture you, Gringo dog.”

His baleful eyes were looking gloatingly at his victim. Mason’s blood boiled at the mention of Josephine’s name. He held himself in check, however, as his only hope now was to gain time and give Scotty a chance to rescue him. He figured at

the worst he would make a sudden attack on the halfbreed and chance taking him by surprise.

“Don’t be too sure of your game, you yellow cur,” he said scornfully, hoping to anger the halfbreed. “I’ve sent for two of our men and they will be here any minute now, and I want to warn you if you ever harm Josephine, I will kill you like I would a rattle snake.”

He raised his voice purposely as he made the assertion.

“Silence! dog of a Gringo!” the halfbreed hissed, “you talk more, I shoot you dead.”

Mason wondered why the halfbreed didn’t attempt to close the door and take him out through the secret passage. He had just made up his mind to risk an attack on the halfbreed when he heard a slight noise behind him. He turned swiftly, but too late. He heard the swish of some object as it fell with crushing force on his head, and he sank to the floor unconscious.

CHAPTER XIV—THE FIGHT IN THE SECRET PASSAGE

When Mason regained consciousness, Trent Burton the Marshal was bending over him supporting his head and holding a flask of brandy to his lips. The brandy and muffled reports of revolver shots sounding through the secret passage revived him instantly.

“Get Pete Carlo the Mexican halfbreed!” he gasped, staggering weakly to his feet. “The halfbreed was holding me up when I was struck down from behind,” he continued, “and there must be another cut-throat working with him. Where’s Scotty?”

Trent Burton’s two automatics appeared like magic in his hands.

“Scotty is having it out with the halfbreed,” he answered rapidly. “We caught sight of the Mexican just as we came up to you, and thinking you were badly wounded I ordered Scotty to round him up while I examined your wound. You have been roughly handled this night my lad, and you had better report to Jean Barry while I go after this other desperado. He must be somewhere between Scotty and us this very minute. I had no idea there was more than one of them and they may be trying to work Scotty in between them.”

They could hear an exchange of shots at intervals, but the firing seemed to be getting farther away and more faint each time.

“I’m not going back until I find out how Scotty is faring with those cut-throats,” Mason declared firmly. “My head is feeling much clearer now, and I know my hand is steady enough to shoot straight, besides I want a chance at the man that knocked me out. Bud and his men won’t hear any of this shooting down here and we can’t expect any help from them. The halfbreed and his pal will try to get Scotty in between them to finish him off and make their escape.”

“You’re a brave lad,” the Marshal said in admiration.

“Come, follow me. I have a plan to trap the halfbreed’s pal, at least I think we

can draw his fire, and that is our only chance to get him in this darkness.”

He bent swiftly over, and Mason could hear him searching about the floor with his hands. Presently he straightened up and thrust a piece of broken table leg into Mason’s hand.

“What’s this for?” the latter whispered in astonishment.

“Just you hand that piece of wood to me in a hurry when I call for it,” came the surprising answer. “We will make all possible speed through this secret passage without using our lights, and for the love of Mike, don’t make any noise!”

“When we get to where that revolver duel is going on you will see something happen.”

Mason followed after the strange and fearless detective with great difficulty. The latter’s speed was terrific, and at times when Mason lagged behind he would find the detective crouched against the wall waiting for him. It was a hazardous undertaking as they might at any moment plunge into some unknown pit or trap. They had traveled some hundred feet when they came to a turn in the passage and now could hear the revolver shots plainly.

The Marshal was moving slowly and with great stealth now. Presently they could see the flash from the muzzle of the men’s guns as they fired. Each time the flashes came from different positions, showing the men had changed their location after firing.

The Marshal was crouched low and huddled against the wall. Mason was sure he had his two deadly automatics trained on one of those flashes.

Suddenly to his horror he saw the flash from a third gun, and it came from a different position from the first two.

He thought he heard a groan follow this last shot and bent low to whisper to the silent being at his feet.

“Hand me that piece of wood and when I throw it, train your gun on the next flash, and shoot to kill,” the Marshal hissed in a thrilling whisper. “Lie flat on the ground. I’m going to draw that murderer’s fire.”

Mason felt the Marshal’s arm grow rigid as he hurled the piece of table leg with great force against the opposite wall about twenty feet ahead of them.

Immediately the third gun began to flash again and Mason could hear the bullets as they pattered on the wall above his head. Before he could return the shots the

Marshal's guns were in action, and a perfect stream of fire leaped from their muzzles.

The third gun was silent! Suddenly the shrill note of a whistle pierced the silence of the secret passage. Bud was coming to join in the fight.

The Marshal sent back an answering call, and Bud, leading four cowboys, came up to them with a rush.

"Keep going, boys," the Marshal's voice rang out sharply. "Rush this passage; Pete Carlo, the halfbreed, is hiding just ahead of us and he's got somebody with him."

"Watch out for their guns and fire at the first flash. I think they got Scotty, the poor fellow, but if not he knows we are here now and he won't shoot in our direction."

All this was said as they almost ran through the secret passage, their lights searching every nook and corner.

They were braving the chance of drawing a shower of bullets from the hidden foe, but the Marshal was determined to clean out the secret passage at any cost.

Rounding a sharp turn in the passage they came upon Scotty huddled in a niche against the wall. He was clutching his revolver tightly between his knees while his head was sunk forward on his chest. A tiny stream of blood was trickling down his cheek, showing where he had been hit. Mason dropped quickly down beside him and felt over his heart.

To his great relief there was a little heart action.

"Quick! the brandy!" he cried in an overjoyed voice. "He's alive, I think the bullet only stunned him."

The Marshal, producing his flask, bent over and forced a small portion of the liquor down Scotty's throat. They had the satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes and stare about in a dazed way. His gaze finally rested on Mason and he rose to his feet with alacrity.

"I'm all right," he said almost savagely, shaking off the Marshal's detaining hand. "The bullet only creased my head and knocked me senseless. It takes more than a dirty greaser to kill this canny Scotchman. Have you looked for the half breed? I think I got him in that last exchange of shots, then a third gun cut in from a different direction, and I went to sleep."

They were startled at this point by a cry from one of the cowboys who had pressed on through the secret passage.

"I guess I can answer for your third gunman, Scotty," the Marshal said tersely. "Come, let's see what the men have found."

Rapidly making their way to where the men were flashing their lights, they came upon the form of a man stretched on the ground. It was the halfbreed's pal, and he was dying. He was still breathing, but with great difficulty. Trent Burton's guns had cut short his villainous career, and forty feet from him lay the halfbreed. Bud made a hasty examination of the latter's wound, and to his surprise he discovered that the bullet had not reached a vital spot.

The halfbreed had been hit in the right side just above the hip and was unconscious from loss of blood.

Just above him through a small aperture in the roof the stars were faintly shining.

A thorough search proved this to be the outlet for the secret passage, and it was evident the halfbreed was about to make his escape when a bullet from Scotty's gun had laid him low.

Under Bud's order the two men were carried out of the secret passage and taken to the ranch, where they were placed under the doctor's care. The man of medicine quickly pronounced the one that had fallen under Trent Burton's guns to be past all earthly aid, and set vigorously to work to revive the halfbreed.

An hour later, his wounds properly dressed, the halfbreed was placed under guard.

He sat glaring sullenly at his captors, and his eyes gleamed savagely whenever they rested on Mason or Scotty. It was Scotty's gun that had laid him low and gotten him into his present trouble while he was attempting to escape. He cherished a bitter hatred for Mason since the time the latter had tumbled him out of his saddle with a well placed shot when the rescue of Josephine was accomplished.

The bullet wound had nearly cost him his life and caused him to take to the mountains in hiding, save for an occasional visit to the Ricker ranch, which was made possible by his almost superhuman knowledge of the mountains and the existence of the secret passage. The halfbreed's shifty eyes finally turned in the direction of the chief of counterfeiters, who sat staring moodily into space.

A slight cough from the halfbreed succeeded in attracting his chief's attention

and a series of signals passed between them by means of an almost inaudible sound made by a light tapping of their bootheels.

Mason had left the room in answer to a call from the Marshal, and on returning to watch the captives his sharp ears instantly caught the sound, faint as it was. Remembering the signals he had heard in the cellar he regarded the sound as of deep significance. He promptly made the Marshal and Bud aware of his suspicions that the two were signaling each other, with the result that the halfbreed was taken into another room and put through a grilling third degree. At the end of an hour of this sweating process he was taken out, and Jim Haley, the foreman, was given the same treatment. Others that were close to the operations of the chief of counterfeiterers were taken in turn. Through the answers wrung from the captives they learned that the secret passage had originally been the bed of a creek that had long ago changed its course or had become dried up. As the bed of the creek ran close to the ranch, Ricker conceived the idea of using it as a means of exit to and from the ranch. He had it tunneled deeper and roofed over with extreme care. The work had been accomplished so cleverly that none but the men who were in on the counterfeiting deal knew of its existence. Even Jean Barry, the Marshal's deputy, had been among the counterfeiterers and had not become aware that the secret passage led out of the cellar. A telegraph instrument, cleverly concealed and partly muffled, was found in the room where the fight had taken place, and tracing the wires out they found they led to the secret passage.

In the secret passage another telegraph instrument was found, showing that Ricker had been in communication with the halfbreed. All the wires and instruments were destroyed by the Marshal, and the halfbreed was again taken away from the other prisoners and given a more severe grilling.

This time he broke down completely and under promise that he would be given a shorter prison sentence he told in broken English how he and his pal had entered the secret passage just as the fight was taking place at the ranch. Knowing Bud's men to be there in force he had signaled to Ricker that he would bide his time and wait for a chance to rescue his chief.

He had intended to pick up some more men of his own kind, and if necessary cut his way through Bud's men by a sudden dash and rescue his chief.

He had planned all this with his pal, and they were about to leave the secret passage when they heard Scotty and Mason moving about close to the hidden door of the wall. The sharp ears of the halfbreed heard one of them say he was

going for a light and listening closely he discovered that the man who was to wait was Mason. Prudence told the halfbreed to leave at once and bring help to his chief, but his burning hate for Mason caused him to linger with the hope of getting the latter in his power.

As the reader already knows, Mason had succeeded in finding the way to open the secret door and had played right into the hands of the halfbreed, while his pal had crept cautiously behind him and dealt the vicious blow that had robbed him of his senses until revived by the Marshal. The sudden coming of the Marshal with Scotty had caused the halfbreed to change his plan to make Mason a prisoner and he had fled, with Scotty in close pursuit, but the latter had the halfbreed's pal to reckon with, a fact that nearly cost him his life.

The work of the Marshal with Bud's aid in breaking up the power of Ricker's evil gang of gunmen was a notable performance. This man, chief of the counterfeiters and outlaws, had long held the country in awe of his desperate gang of gunmen, whom he controlled with an iron hand.

Many a case of robbery and cattle running had been laid to his master hand, but so cleverly had the work been accomplished that it was impossible to get direct evidence against him.

Dawn was breaking when the Marshal announced his work at the ranch as finished and the cowboys with their prisoners were lined up outside. The plan was for the Marshal to take charge of the prisoners and turn them over to the proper authorities, thus relieving Bud of all responsibility. Two of Bud's men were to remain at the ranch until they had sealed up the secret passage and to watch out for suspicious characters.

The negro woman was provided with a horse after Bud had decided to take her back with him to Bar X ranch. The horses and cattle of the Ricker ranch were to be taken care of by some of Bud's men until the courts had decided how many of Ricker's cowboys were implicated in running the counterfeiting plant.

Bud sent a couple of his men after their horses that had been picketed about half a mile from the ranch, and upon their coming up the party mounted and headed for Trader's Post. On their arrival there the party separated, after the Marshal had received a hearty handshake from all the cowboys of the Bar X ranch. The Marshal's duties were to take his prisoners to the little railway station and catch the nine o'clock express, then after seeing them safely jailed his duties were ended. It was with genuine regret that Mason watched him depart. He had come to admire the Marshal's good humor, and as he recalled in his mind the way the

detective had fooled him all along with his half-witted smile and awkward shuffling gait, he smiled at the man's clever deception.

Trent Burton, the halfwit, and Trent Burton in action, were two different persons.

It was a long weary ride to the ranch, and when the cowboys arrived there they were about fagged out. Josephine and Ethel were at the corral to meet them, and as Mason turned his horse over to one of the men, Josephine noticed his wounded arm and immediately ordered him to the ranch, showing great concern over his injury.

"My wound is nothing serious," he protested in answer to anxious questions. "My arm will be lame for a few weeks, and then it will be all right again. The doctor at Ricker's ranch fixed me up in fine shape."

The sight of the two girls had acted like a tonic to his jaded system. The ranch owner, who had been talking with Bud, now walked hurriedly over to them.

"Bud tells me you put in a hard night of it, Jack," he said, eyeing him anxiously. "I have ordered Pomp, our cook, to prepare a hot breakfast for you at the house, and we are going to have the negress you boys brought back with you to cook for the boys at the bunk-house. I don't intend to swap Pomp for the woman until I know what she can do in the way of cooking, and we know Pomp to be excellent."

"And I will have the doctor come and dress your arm, Sir Jack, just as soon as you have had your breakfast, but I guess we had better call it dinner, as it is almost noontime," Josephine cut in eagerly; "and then you can tell us all about your adventure and how you got wounded. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you the good news. Tex is feeling much better and the doctor says he will surely recover."

"I'm very glad to hear that," he answered, keeping his eyes on the face of the girl.

He thought her eyes looked unusually bright this morning.

They walked slowly to the ranch, Mason between the two girls, who kept up a running fire of questions about his wound.

"You girls are trying to make too much of a hero of me," he protested, smiling at their eagerness to welcome him back.

At the house he speedily convinced his mother that he was in no danger from his wound, and the girls continued to besiege him with questions concerning the

night raid. He was seated in one of the large easy chairs in the library and every once in a while Josephine left him for a mysterious visit to the kitchen.

He could hear the rattle of dishes and a savory smell of cooking filled the room every time she opened the door.

“We are going to have Bud and Scotty dine with us,” Josephine announced after one of her visits. “And there will be just those two, with you, Ethel and myself. Pomp is doing himself proud. I told him he is to be our steady cook, as the cowboys are going to have the negro woman to cook for them in the future. I have arranged it with Dad, and you know he just about lets me have my own way in most things. I have always wanted Pomp for our steady cook and he will take a lot of hard work off of mother. All I can get out of Pomp is, ‘Yes, Missus, ’deed Missus, I will show dem gem-mens I can shore cook,’ and he is grinning from ear to ear.”

Soon Bud and Scotty arrived, and a little later Pomp announced that the meal was served, while Josephine conducted them to the dining-room where plates for five were laid. It was more of a banquet than a dinner, and during the meal Mason, with the help of Bud and Scotty, furnished the girls with all the details of the night’s raid. Ethel and Josephine listened with eyes open wide in astonishment when they came to the part in the story about the secret passage and the counterfeiter’s den, but when Mason told them of Trent Burton’s part in the raid they were amazed.

“And to think that man took us all in like that!” Josephine cried in wonder. “Sir Jack, did you have any idea that MacNutt was anything more than he pretended to be?”

She shook her finger playfully at him.

“No,” he answered slowly, as all eyes were turned upon him. “But I did seem to place a lot of confidence in him, and really I can’t explain the reason why. At times I felt the man was playing a double game, but that was as far as I could get with him, and you may be sure I was as surprised as anyone in the room when he called the turn on Ricker.”

“I admit that I took him for a plain damn fool all the time,” Bud said shortly.

Scotty nodded his head vigorously.

“Me, the same,” he said looking sheepish.

After the meal the doctor came in and gave Mason’s arm a new dressing, after

which he was ordered to bed for rest. Josephine laid down some strict rules for him to follow in the matter of giving his arm a much-needed rest, with the healing promise that if he heeded them she would read to him in her leisure hours.

CHAPTER XV—THE DANCE AT THE GAYLOR RANCH

Six weeks had passed and business was running smoothly again at the Bar X ranch. Mason had fully recovered from his wound and Tex was also able to be about, although his complete recovery was still a matter of time. No word had been heard from Trent Burton, the Marshal, since he had taken his prisoners away. His services were in great demand by the Government, and the opinion prevailed at the ranch that he was working on a hard criminal case somewhere in the East. The Marshal had seemed anxious to dispose of the Ricker case in a hurry, saying that he had matters of great importance awaiting him at headquarters.

One fine morning, Mason feeling the need of exercise, found himself longing for a spin in his racing car. He had not been out in it since the time he drove to the station with Josephine to meet his mother and sister. The idea getting a firm hold on him, he made his way to the shed that did duty as a garage, with the intention of giving the car a careful overhauling. He paused as he was about to open the door, and looked down the trail leading to Trader's Post.

It was a magnificent morning with a gentle breeze sweeping up the valley. He smiled as he made out the figures of Waneda and Tex just coming out of the bunk-house and headed his way. The Spanish girl called regularly on Tex every morning, and insisted that he take a walk in the warm sunshine. It was due to this fact that the cowboy was recovering so rapidly. The lanky cowboy had taken a great liking to his Spanish nurse with the large dreamy eyes, and it didn't take very hard coaxing on her part to get him to take a walk when the weather was fine.

Mason was working industriously on his racer when the pair came up and looked in on him.

"Good morning, Tex," he called cheerfully, bowing to Waneda. "Want to take a ride in my racer? I can take both of you to Trader's Post and back again before

breakfast is ready.”

Tex was eyeing the machine distrustfully.

“Nope,” he answered laconically. “A hoss is plenty good enough for me. What if the blamed thing got to frisking balky like? I reckon I ain’t afraid of no hoss that walks, but if this here critter got to acting up peevish like, why I know I sure would jump out. I ain’t got no objections to the gal here a-going with you if she likes.”

Before Waneda could answer two riders rode past them on their way to the ranch. Tex looked after them in surprise.

“Bruce and Lem Gaylor from the Gaylor ranch across the valley from us,” he said in a puzzled tone. “Wonder what they want this early in the morning?”

“Probably nothing serious,” Mason answered, briskly, turning his attention to getting his car in running order.

“People can begin to enjoy life again in this part of the country, now that the Ricker gang has been cleaned out,” he resumed. “Tex, doesn’t it seem good to know you can ride this range without bumping into some of Ricker’s cut-throats?”

Tex frowned darkly.

“Huh,” he snorted, “he’s got plenty of friends scattered around these parts, and I have been tipped off that Nick Cover’s cousin is going to get me on sight; his cousin works on a small ranch that joins Gaylor’s boundary line, and they say he is dead sore because Nick was jailed on my account.”

Tex was fingering his gun as he talked, and Mason could see the hot blood mount into his cheeks and his voice grew hard and stern. The raw deal he had received at the hands of one of Ricker’s men had left a bitter hatred in his soul. As he slowly recovered from his wound he vowed revenge for the cowardly shot that laid him low.

“I’m telling you, Jack,” the lanky cowboy continued impressively, “that you ain’t seen the last of Ricker’s gang of cut-throats, and you want to pack a gun when you’re riding this range. I’ve got it straight that you are a marked man since the raid, and the friends of Ricker will get you if they have to shoot from ambush.”

Mason was a bit startled at Tex’s vehement manner.

Waneda had kept silent up to this point, but Tex's words had seemed to cause her great agitation.

"Tex is right, Signor," she said earnestly, her great eyes full of entreaty, "you must be very careful, for while I was at Ricker's he had many people call on him. His place is a sort of rendezvous, and I have seen all sorts of people gather there from all parts of the country."

Mason was about to answer her when Tex announced that the Gaylor brothers were coming back from the ranch. He waited for them to pass by, but to his surprise they dismounted and asked Tex where they could find Jack Mason.

"Jack's inside there working on his machine," the lanky cowboy answered, as he proceeded in his quaint way to introduce Waneda and Mason to the Gaylor boys.

They were well set-up men and about Mason's own age. He took to them at once and liked their straightforward manner and jovial dispositions. Bruce, the elder, did most of the talking, his brother being a little more reticent.

"We rode over here this morning to invite the Bar X boys to a dance at our ranch the last of this week," Bruce explained to Mason, "and as to-day is Wednesday you have until Saturday to make up your mind. I know what your outfit has been through with in cleaning out some of the Ricker gang, and my sister insisted on this party to liven up the boys of the Bar X. It is all her own arrangement, and you know how woman folks are when they get set on an idea. I think it is a good plan to get the boys together once in a while.

"Miss Josephine seemed to be taken up with the idea, and told me to get you to promise to visit us Saturday. I guess she is pretty near the boss of this ranch, and as I have her on my side I have hopes that she will be able to persuade you to come to our party, Jack."

"I'll be glad to come and you can depend on me for one," Mason answered, turning to look at Tex who was in earnest conversation with Lem and Waneda. "I'll go among the boys and get them all to turn out for this occasion, and we will make the party such a success that your sister won't have any kick coming."

"Another reason why we came over here this morning was to warn you to watch out for the friends of Ricker," Bruce continued, lowering his voice. Tex had started on a slow walk to the ranch with Lem and Waneda. "You know the town of Smoky Point below Trader's Post at the railroad junction?"

Mason nodded his head, becoming deeply interested.

“Well,” Bruce resumed, “Lem and I happened to have some business to transact in that town yesterday, and we dropped into the Duke hotel: it is a saloon and dance hall run by Duke Williams, a notorious gambler. He got his nickname, Duke, from his highly polished manners and cool indifference to danger. He is said to be a man who never gets rattled or shows any signs of nervousness, no matter what the provocation. We were seated at a table and had just ordered a round of drinks when two cowboys came in and took seats near us. They were from the ranch that joins our boundary line, and from their talk they had been drinking heavily and were in an ugly mood. One of the men was Nick Cover’s cousin and goes by the name of Spot Wells. They didn’t appear to realize they were talking loud, and during their conversation I caught Tex’s name mentioned, followed by an oath, and then they began to plan how they could get Tex and then finish you off. For some reason or other they seemed to think that you were directly responsible for the Ricker raid. We took our leave shortly after that, and I made it my business to let you know the kind of deal you are up against. Lem will put Tex wise, and you can bank on me to keep you posted if I hear anything else. What I am most concerned about just now, is to make sure that you will come to our dance.”

Mason grasped his hand and shook it heartily.

“You can depend on me, Bruce, I wouldn’t miss it for the world, and I want to thank you for going to all this trouble on my account,” he said sincerely. “Why, you almost made me forget about your party while I was listening to your description of these men.”

His eyes lighted up with a curious gleam and he looked hard at Bruce.

“Say, I’ve got an idea,” he burst out suddenly; “get your brother to stay here and have breakfast with us, and then you and I will quietly get this old machine out and take a spin down to Smoky Point. There is a bare chance that we will find those cowboys there, and I want to get a good look at them. We won’t say a word to anybody about going, and you can patch it up with your brother afterwards. Are you game?”

“It’s a go,” Bruce answered readily, “I always did want to ride in one of those blaze wagons, and now is my chance. I see Tex has vanished with the girl and my brother and I suppose they are at the ranch by this time. That makes me think, while I was telling the ranch owner about that deal at Smoky Point, Josephine cut in on my conversation and urged me to stay for breakfast. I refused her invitation, so when she sees me again I will have to lay the blame on you.”

When they arrived at the ranch, breakfast was ready, and Josephine took Mason to task for keeping her waiting.

He looked at Bruce and laughed.

“You see, Bruce,” he said gaily, “if there are any scoldings to be had I get ’em.”

“What have you two been hatching up?” the girl questioned suspiciously, smiling at Mason’s good humor. “Do you know, Mr. Gaylor, since Sir Jack has gotten well from his wound, he is getting to be an awful tease?”

After breakfast the owner of Bar X insisted on showing the Gaylor brothers around the ranch, and had them look over some new stock he had received a large shipment of. To the vexation of Mason and Bruce it was a matter of over four hours before they managed to break away from the enthusiastic ranch owner and got started down the trail towards Smoky Point.

Bruce had to tell his brother he would be gone for nearly the rest of the day, and just as Mason got his car in motion one of the men in the corral yelled after him that Josephine and his sister had taken their horses right after breakfast, and said they were going to do some shopping at Trader’s Post. Mason wondered at this, for the girls usually let him know when they intended taking a long trip.

“Maybe we will meet or pass them somewhere on the trail,” Bruce suggested, noticing Mason’s anxiety.

Mason brightened up at the thought.

“That would be fine,” he agreed, and he let the car out until they were doing a good fifty miles per hour.

“They are fine girls, but just a little too daring to suit me at these times. How does this speed suit you, Bruce? Shall I let her out a little more?”

Bruce had his hat jammed well down over his ears.

“No,” he managed to gasp, “I ain’t no hog for speed. This is plenty fast enough for me.”

Mason laughed as he slowed the racer down to a more moderate road speed. Then he began to try to figure out about how far ahead the girls were.

As they had over four hours the start of him, he had to give it up in disgust. Knowing Josephine’s daring, he reasoned that she might even swing off after reaching Trader’s Post and head towards Devil’s Gap. He had heard the girls repeatedly express a desire to be able to travel when and where they pleased, but

he had always cautioned them that it was unsafe for them to be without an escort, as there was always the danger of running into some of the lawless gunmen of the valley. He wished most heartily that they had not started off alone, and he was worried more than he cared to admit even to Bruce Gaylor.

The motor was running in perfect order this day, and later when the buildings of Trader's Post came in sight, Bruce opened his eyes in surprise.

"This sure is a quick way of traveling, and beats a horse forty ways," he remarked in admiration.

"You're a little different from Tex," Mason answered, as he remembered how the lanky cowboy had refused to ride. "Why, I couldn't get him any closer than four feet to the car."

They had made good time from the ranch, and as they drove into the town, Mason's first move was to dash into the leading store and inquire if the girls had done any trading there this day. They were well known at Trader's Post, as it was the nearest place to Bar X ranch and the girls did quite a bit of shopping there. Mason was astonished to receive the answer that the girls had not been seen to enter the town, or at least they had done no trading in any of the stores which he visited.

He was thoroughly aroused by this time, and something seemed to tell him that the girls were in danger. He was inclined to follow his first idea that the girls had swung off the trail before reaching Trader's Post and had headed for Devil's Gap. He told Bruce of his thought and waited impatiently for his opinion.

"It won't make any difference to me if you want to go towards Devil's Gap," Bruce said grimly; "if you think the girls are in danger we ought to get busy right quick. This trip to Smoky Point can wait for some other time."

Mason did some hard thinking and kept looking anxiously down the trail towards Smoky Point. Suddenly he jumped for the driver's seat and started the racer off at a furious speed.

"Hang on hard, Bruce," he grated, "something tells me the girls took a notion to visit Smoky Point, and it's to Smoky Point we go."

There was a whirl of dust as the car shot out of the town, and some of the natives of Trader's Post who happened to be in the street stared after them in amazement. That Bruce was scared, Mason well knew, for he could feel his body quiver. With set lips he drove the fast machine ahead, and he confided to Bruce afterwards that he never had driven faster on the race track. Soon they struck a

bad part of the trail and he had to slow the car down. Bruce seized the opportunity to ask a few questions.

“What got the idea into your head that the girls might visit Smoky Point?” he queried curiously.

“When you told the folks at the ranch about Spot Wells and Duke Williams’ place at Smoky Point, the girls heard you, didn’t they?” Mason questioned him.

“Why, yes, they were in the room,” Bruce admitted, wonderingly.

“Well,” Mason resumed, “it would be just like my sister to coax Josephine to show her this town, and as you know, she is from the East and nothing would suit her fancy better than a little adventure of this kind, so she could tell the people back East what a real Western town is like. It would appeal to her about the same as it does to some of our society people in New York when they go on a slumming trip to Chinatown. Now, do you get the drift of my reasoning?”

Bruce nodded understandingly.

“God grant that they haven’t fallen into evil hands,” Mason added, as he pulled the plunging car out of a bad ditch.

A little later they were entering the outskirts of Smoky Point and he slowed the car down in order not to attract any undue attention. As they drove into the main street, he joyously discovered the girls’ horses hitched close to a large department store.

Mason stopped the car in front of the store, and turning to Bruce said:

“You go into this store and make inquiries and if you don’t hear any news of them there, visit the other stores. In the meantime I will look over Duke Williams’ place and you can come there as soon as you find out anything.”

“But you don’t know Duke Williams or the run of the place as well as I do,” Bruce protested.

“That’s just the reason I want to go alone,” Mason replied hurriedly, “this Williams don’t know me, and if there is any deviltry afoot they won’t suspect me half as quick as they would you.”

This plan was agreed to, and Mason sauntered slowly over to the place run by Duke Williams. He entered the bar-room and called for a cigar. There was the usual bunch one would find in a place of this kind, lined up against the bar talking with the barkeeper. After a sharp glance at this man Mason decided he

was not the proprietor. There was a small booth, or reading-room, just outside the barroom. Mason, taking a paper out of his pocket, entered this room and seating himself comfortably made an attempt at reading. Seated directly opposite him were two cowboys engaged in earnest conversation.

Mason assumed a drunken attitude, allowing his head to sink slowly into his paper. Listening closely, he watched them over the top of that paper. They were talking in subdued tones, but he caught the name of Tex mentioned and he was instantly on the alert. If one of these men should turn out to be Spot Wells, he could thank his lucky stars that the cowboy did not know him by sight. He listened eagerly and a minute later he was electrified to hear one of them say it was about time to visit the girls!

They laughed hoarsely and rose to their feet. There was a flight of stairs leading out of the room and as they started to ascend them, Mason came under their direct gaze. His head had fallen on a level with the table and he appeared to be fast asleep. He was watching them out of the corner of his eye, however, and he saw one of the men hesitate and regard him suspiciously.

This one appeared to be the leader and had a spot just under his right eye.

Mason's heart jumped as he realized that this cowboy might be Spot Wells, the man Bruce had told him about. He determined to stick close to these men until he found out what they meant when they spoke about visiting the girls. His blood boiled as the thought struck him that they might mean Josephine and Ethel.

The cowboy with the spot came over and shook him roughly, but Mason made only a feeble attempt to raise his head.

"Seems to be dead drunk," he said to his companion with an oath.

"You had better stay here and watch him while I visit our fair prisoners," he continued, "even the Duke don't know we got the girls from Bar X, and I know he won't stand for this kind of play if he gets wise, so it is up to us to get them out of here right quick. I'll go and look them over and fix it up with the old Mexican woman. You know the danger signal; if anybody comes, one short blast on that whistle of yours, and we will get them out of here in a hurry."

This was enough for Mason, and he quickly made up his mind to attack the two cowboys. He heard the man with the spot mounting the stairs while the other took up a position at the foot.

Mason waited until he was sure the cowboy had reached the next floor, then he

carefully measured the distance to the foot of the stairs, and with a bound was upon his guard. The fellow was so startled he forgot to cry out, and Mason tried for a strangle hold. The man seemed possessed with unusual strength, and breaking away from him darted up the stairs. The next instant a shrill whistle sounded and Mason, following his opponent closely, hurled himself upon him in time to grasp the muzzle of a revolver he had drawn. Mason worked free from a deadly hold his enemy had secured and getting his feet set firm, he sent a crashing blow to his jaw, knocking him the length of the stairs. A door back of him was flung open and he turned just in time to avoid a vicious blow aimed at him with the revolver butt of the cowboy with the spot under his eye.

A cry of rage escaped Mason's lips and he saw red as he beheld the terror-stricken faces of his sister and Josephine in the doorway.

Before the cowboy with the spot could recover his balance Mason swung a powerful blow, knocking him sprawling on top of his comrade. Sweeping Josephine up in his arms and calling sternly for his sister to follow him, he went down the stairs with a rush kicking one of the cowboys over as he vainly tried to draw his gun. In the street he sat Josephine on her feet just as Bruce came running up to them.

"Don't ask any questions, Bruce," he said rapidly, "I found the girls all right, and I want to ask a favor of you. I am going to take them back to the ranch in my car and I would like you to take their horses back with you. If you will do me this favor I will never forget it, and you stay at the ranch to-night and I will tell you how I found the girls, but don't say anything to the folks at the ranch about this stunt the cowboys tried to pull on us. I will take the matter up with Bud as I don't want the old folks at the ranch to get alarmed. Will you do this for me?"

"Sure thing," Bruce agreed readily; "I am glad to be of some help, but it is just my luck to miss all the fun, and I can see that you have been in a right smart mix-up."

Mason hastily bundled the girls into the car and when the town was left well in their rear he looked reproachfully at Josephine. Her lips were quivering and his heart softened.

"I know what you are going to say," she said demurely, "you are going to scold Ethel and me for getting into this scrape."

"No, I'm not," he answered soberly, "but I want you to tell me all that happened while you were in that hotel and how you came to be prisoners of those men."

“We didn’t come to any harm, thanks to your timely rescue,” she said earnestly, “and I will tell you the whole story on just one condition.”

“And what is that?” he asked, painfully surprised.

“That you don’t tell our parents of our narrow escape.”

“I can promise you that right off the reel,” he said, greatly relieved. “Now just fire away, truants.”

“And also, that you explain in some way to their satisfaction how we come to return in your car instead of on our horses.”

“All right, all right, my fair Princess; I’m great at explaining things.”

“Well, I will start from the beginning and then you will understand the whole story, won’t he, Ethel?” Josephine began.

“Ethel and I wanted to take a nice long ride this morning, so we finally decided just before we reached Trader’s Post to branch off the trail and go on to Smoky Point. I knew of a short cut we could take, so we didn’t go through Trader’s Post —”

“No wonder we couldn’t get any news of you there,” Mason cut in, looking at her in surprise. “Bruce and I came through that town and inquired for you there.”

“Well,” Josephine resumed, “when we arrived at Smoky Point we made a few simple purchases at one of the stores, after which we walked about the place as Ethel wished to see all there was to be seen of the town. You know she had never been there before, but I went there once before with Dad and knew all about the famous resort run by Duke Williams. In a spirit of mischief I led Ethel to this place and we were standing near one of the windows of the dance hall innocently listening to the music when we were suddenly attacked by two men. They had thrown blankets over our heads to stifle our cries. We both fainted from fright and when we came to our senses we found we had been locked in a room and were prisoners. We were guarded by an old Mexican woman. She warned us not to make an outcry and held a glittering dagger before our eyes. I tried to buy her off and was making some impression on her with the promise of gold, when one of our captors unlocked the door and strode into the room. He snarled some orders to the Mexican woman as he covertly watched us frightened girls. Then a whistle sounded somewhere in the building and the man’s face seemed to blanch white. He ran to the door and flung it violently open; then came the sound of blows, and we rushed out into the hall just in time to see you knock him downstairs. Believe me, you looked good to us just then. I don’t know what

became of the old Mexican woman; anyway she disappeared during the excitement.”

“I have a score to settle with that spotface cowboy,” Mason said grimly. “What do you suppose his object was in making you girls prisoners?”

“I heard the old Mexican woman say we were to be held as prisoners out of revenge for Ricker’s arrest, and they were going to demand money from Josephine’s father for our safe return to the ranch,” Ethel spoke up; “the two cowboys had been drinking heavily and were in a revengeful mood.”

The rest of the ride was made in silence, all three being busy with their own thoughts.

“I would advise you girls to go to your room and rest up,” Mason said as he drove the car in front of the house. “Just act as if nothing had happened, and when Bruce arrives we will figure out some means of rounding up this spotface cowboy and his pal. I’ll tell the folks that I kidnapped you girls at Trader’s Post and brought you home in my car. Remember, we have to get in shape for the dance at Bruce’s ranch, and I am going to demand some extra dances from you girls by way of punishment.”

“Do you dance so badly as all that, Sir Jack?” Josephine flung back saucily at him as she took Ethel’s arm and disappeared into the house.

In the two remaining days before the dance, Bruce, Bud Anderson and Mason scoured the country for the spotface cowboy and his pal, but those worthies had disappeared. Inquiry at the ranch where they had worked revealed the fact that they had quit their jobs and departed for parts unknown.

Mason had almost forgotten the affair at Smoky Point, and the evening of the dance found him waiting patiently at the ranch door with his racer. He had planned to take the girls over to the Gaylor ranch in his car, the cowboys having left long before on their horses. Soon, two visions of beauty greeted his eyes, and with a satisfied smile he tucked the girls comfortably in their seats for the ride.

“This is the night that Percy Vanderpool will shine,” he said with a laugh. “I saw him leave this afternoon with the cowboys, and he was dolled up like a Christmas tree.”

“I hope you will treat the poor fellow with a little more respect when we get to the dance,” his sister said, with a severe look at him.

“Well, Percy is a lucky cuss at that,” he answered whimsically. “I only wish I had two such fair champions as he has in you girls.”

Their cries of protest were drowned in the roar of the motor as he set a fast pace for the Gaylor ranch.

CHAPTER XVI—THE SHOT IN THE NIGHT

It was dark when they drove into the grounds of the Gaylor ranch, and the girls gave a gasp of surprise when they saw a regular avenue of Japanese lanterns leading up to the main entrance.

“The Gaylor people certainly do things in style,” Mason said in admiration, as he brought the car to a stop in front of the porch.

The ranch house fairly blazed with different colored lanterns and a soft strain of music greeted their ears as Bruce Gaylor received them with a shout of welcome. In his breezy Western style he introduced them to his sisters and later to his parents and all the guests. A dance was in progress and Mason hastily made sure that he could have the next one with Josephine. A moment later he signaled Bruce out and called him over to them.

“I must say you have surprised me this night, Bruce,” he said gaily; “I didn’t suppose you could put on so fine a show as this, and I want to congratulate you. Why, this display matches our Eastern society dances. But there is one thing that sticks me, Bruce; you led me to suppose you had but one sister, and now I find you have two.”

“Yes, and hurry up and get them signed on your card. I will give you a straight tip, they are fine dancers,” he answered jovially, seizing the opportunity to ask Ethel for the next dance.

Mason had his dance with Josephine, and a little later when he came to look over her card he discovered to his dismay that he could only secure one of the remaining dances. Her list contained the name of Bud Anderson signed no less than six times.

When he mentioned this fact to her he thought her manner was a trifle cool, and try his best, it put a damper on his spirits. He strolled moodily out on the veranda where he could get a good view of the dancers. He lit a cigarette and was trying to enjoy a smoke when the orchestra struck up a waltz.

Josephine was dancing with Bud, and as they floated near to the window where he stood, he saw that she was laughing and chatting gaily with him. She certainly was paying particular attention to Bud this evening, and Mason realized that she had never been so friendly to him.

“Josephine loves Bud all right, and Jack, you are a damn fool to think she cares for you any more than a friend,” he mused, savagely grinding the cigarette under his heel. “Bud has the inside track and he has known her since she was a kid. Oh, I am a damned fool all right, but I sure do love her. None of my Eastern girl friends ever made me feel this way, and the Lord knows, I had plenty of them.”

He heard the rustle of a dress and turning his back drew further into the shadow. Footsteps sounded behind him and a hand was laid on his shoulder.

Turning reluctantly around he saw the smiling face of his sister gazing at him.

“So, here you are, and I have been looking all over the hall for you,” she cried triumphantly, “but, why the grouch, brother? You look as though you were attending a funeral instead of a dance.”

“My head felt dull and I came out to get the air,” he answered lamely.

Her eyes looked searchingly into his face.

“It is something more than that. Come, you can’t fool me, your sister. I know your disposition too well. Tell me what the trouble is, Jack, and maybe I can help you out.”

“Well,” he began, desperately, “it’s about Josephine. Have you noticed that she is dancing more often with Bud than anyone else?”

“Meaning yourself, I suppose,” she said with a laugh; “my, but how vain you men are, and I am sure you haven’t any strings on her?”

“That’s right, rub it in,” he grumbled.

She was tapping her fan lightly on his shoulder and smiling queerly at him.

“Well, let me give you a tip and see if you know enough to take advantage of it. When you come to know girls a little better you will learn to act quicker. Josephine hasn’t said a word to me, but I know I am right in this; she is merely dancing often with Bud to make you jealous.”

“What makes you think that?” he demanded eagerly.

She was turning to go and fired a bomb over her shoulder.

“You certainly are slow. When you looked Josephine’s dance card over early in the evening you failed to put your name down for more than one dance number.”

She left him with a tantalizing smile, while he cursed himself for an idiot.

“And I promised her some extra dances, too,” he groaned dismally; “Gee, Jack, you sure will have to square yourself somehow with Josephine, and I’ll get that last dance with her or there will be murder done here this night.”

He did manage to get the last dance with her, but her manner still continued cool towards him, and for all of his eager advances he felt he had made a dismal failure in winning her good graces.

The dance broke up at a late hour and Bruce Gaylor prevailed on Mason’s party to stay at the ranch over night, as he wanted to show them about the place the next day. He clinched his argument with Mason by saying he could leave any time the next day and could make the run back to Bar X ranch in quick time with his car. Bruce had already won Ethel and Josephine over to his plan, and under the circumstances Mason could not very well refuse.

The cowboys had already left as they had their duties to perform at Bar X. This left just Mason’s party with Waneda and Tex, as Bruce had decided the trip was too long for the Spanish girl to undertake in the dark, and as Tex had not fully recovered from his wound, the Gaylor people would not consent to his taking the ride back until the next day.

The girls readily consented to the plan as they were fatigued from the dance, and when Mason finally turned in for the night he was tired enough to thank Bruce most heartily for his hospitality.

The next morning he awoke considerably refreshed and looking at his watch he was surprised to find he had slept until nine A.M. He dressed hastily and going out into the ranch grounds found his host conducting his sister and Josephine about the place.

Mason joined them and was told by his host that they had just started for the house to have breakfast.

“Then I am just in time,” he said cheerfully, watching Josephine closely to see if she showed any signs of relenting toward him. “I was afraid I had made you all late by my tardiness.”

They spent a pleasant morning about the ranch and Mason had to admire the well kept buildings. The Gaylor ranch differed in design from the Bar X ranch

which was of a Colonial type of construction. The Gaylor ranch was a magnificent building finished in stucco work, but Mason liked the Bar X ranch better, with its huge columns and strictly Southern type. In the afternoon, Bruce provided horses and they started for a ride over the range.

“It won’t make any difference if you people don’t start back until night,” Bruce insisted; “and by the way, Jack, if you need any gasoline I have plenty of it in the storehouse. We use a gasoline engine to do some of our work here and I see you have powerful lights on your car, so why worry?”

“Oh, that will be fine,” Josephine cried in delight, “and I only hope we will have a moonlight night.”

“All right,” Mason agreed, pleased beyond measure that the idea suited his girl, for he had come to the point of secretly calling Josephine his girl now.

“I may have to call on you for gas at that, Bruce, although my tank was full when I left the Bar X ranch. Safety first, you know.”

If Josephine had held any vexation against Mason the night before, all traces of it had vanished by now, and she graciously permitted him to ride by her side while Bruce and Ethel rode slightly in advance of them. Both girls were in high spirits and the laughter and witty repartee that passed among them was sparkling with good humor. There was a charm about this girl at his side that drew him to her as a magnet draws steel. Unconsciously Mason pressed his horse closer to hers until he was aware that she was smiling at him under almost closed lashes.

“I don’t see any occasion for you to try and run my horse down,” she said, smiling at him.

He eased his horse away, feeling provoked at himself.

“There, that’s better,” she said gently; “I suppose the first thing I know you will be trying to make love to me again.”

“I will most certainly if I get you out alone in my car sometime.”

“That makes me think of something. You promised to teach me how to drive, and if you remember, the last time I tried it was when we went to Trader’s Post. You know I am very anxious to learn.”

“Just as soon as we get home again I will promise to take you out and keep you at it until you do learn, and I will tell you truly that you did fine that day.”

“Yes, just about like you promised me those extra dances last night,” Josephine

was pouting prettily now.

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself immensely with Bud last night, I thought,” he said surlily. It was a tender spot with him.

“And why not? He’s a splendid dancer.”

Her eyes were dancing with mischief as she fenced words with him like a skilful swordsman.

He flung his hands up in mock despair.

“A truce,” he cried gaily, “I solemnly swear to make you an expert driver the first time we go for an automobile ride. Now, does that suit you, my Princess?”

“Yes, and I will hold you to your promise, Sir Jack.”

“You see,” he continued, “in making you that promise I have secret designs on you.”

Her blue eyes opened wide.

“And what are they?”

“That I have hope of succeeding in keeping you away from Bud Anderson for a short time, at least,” he answered.

Josephine laughed a silvery laugh.

“What in the world are you two chatting about?” Ethel called back to them.

“Sir Jack just said something funny,” Josephine answered, smiling roguishly at him.

“It may seem funny to you; but I mean it,” he said frowning.

“My, but you can get serious at times, Sir Jack.”

Ethel fell back and joined in the conversation, and Mason had to stand some good natured raillery from the girls until Bruce came to his rescue by calling his attention to a group of riders on their right.

They were less than a quarter of a mile away and were riding slowly on almost a parallel line with Bruce’s party. There appeared to be four men in the group, and Mason looked at them in surprise.

“Wonder where those fellows came from,” he observed; “queer we didn’t see them before this.”

“They just broke out from behind that knoll,” Bruce answered, indicating with a wave of his hand a rise in the plain. “And they don’t belong on my ranch either,” he continued; “my men never ride this range only in pairs. They seem to be observing us pretty close too. Shall we ride over their way?”

Mason started to agree, but the girls put up such a protest against it that he abandoned the idea. On second thought he reasoned it would be doing the girls an injustice if the strangers should turn out to be enemies and a fight might be the result.

They were too far away to make out their features and he noticed with a feeling of relief that they had spurred their horses and were setting rapidly off in a different direction.

“Did you recognize any of those men, Mr. Gaylor?” Josephine questioned.

“No,” he answered guardedly with a sidelong glance at Mason. “The distance was too great to make out their features.”

Afterwards on their way back to the ranch, Bruce seizing a favorable opportunity, confided to Mason in an undertone that he was sure he had recognized one of the men as Spot Wells.

“Well, don’t let the girls know, as it would worry them to death,” he cautioned Bruce after he had recovered from his surprise. “I am more than glad that we didn’t start after them as there would have been a hot fight on our hands. I know the girls have been enjoying this outing immensely, thanks to you, old man, and I don’t want anything to happen to mar their happiness. What makes you think one of them was Spot Wells? I couldn’t have told my own father at that distance.”

“I didn’t recognize him until they turned their horses and started to ride off,” Bruce answered. “I can tell Spot Wells by the way he rides; he used to be a jockey and has never gotten over the habit of riding well forward on a horse’s neck. Just as they started off I noticed him take that position.”

“Now that you mention the fact, I noticed one of them rode in a different style when they started that spurt,” Mason admitted.

The girls were riding up closer to them, putting a stop to their conversation, and commenced to banter them for neglecting their charges.

It was well towards evening when they arrived at the ranch and after supper Mason got his car out and looked at the sky. There was not a star in sight. Bruce

wanted them to remain over and start early the next morning, but Josephine would not hear to it. Mason seated the girls and switched the powerful lights on.

“I’m sorry we haven’t the nice moonlight night you wished for, Josephine,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t care, when we have such fine lights as you have on your car,” she answered naïvely: “isn’t it wonderful? Why, I can see the trail just as well as in the day time.”

He smiled at her childlike enthusiasm. This Western girl could appreciate a ride in a fast car at night with the trail lighted up with powerful headlights. It appealed to her fancy as she had spent all her life riding the range on horseback, but when it came night she had to spend her time about the ranch house.

Mason wondered what would be her thoughts if she could see Fifth Avenue in New York at night with its countless automobiles and glaring headlights. He mentally resolved that she should see them if it lay in his power, and the only bar to his ambition lay in Bud Anderson. The thought almost caused him to groan out loud, when suddenly he realized that the object of his thoughts was regarding him gravely.

“Sir Jack,” she cried with an attempt at severity.

He turned and looked at her guiltily.

“If you are going to sit there and moon-gaze when there isn’t any moon, then I will have to take the wheel and drive. Here comes Mr. Gaylor to say good-bye to us.”

Mason thanked his host warmly for his hospitality. Ethel and Josephine joined in by asking him to visit Bar X ranch and bring his sisters to pay them a call. On his promise to come when he found an opportunity, Mason started the car off amid a loud roar from the motor. It was a delightful night for a ride as the day had been hot and the soft cool night air in their faces with the humming of the motor almost lulled them to sleep. The girls had little to say, being content to lie back and enjoy the ride, watching the trail shown by the glare of the headlights.

Half the distance to Bar X had been covered, when the night air freshening up a bit, he ordered the girls to wrap themselves up more warmly.

He had slowed the car down considerably while this was being accomplished, and then seeing that his charges were again made comfortable, he started the car off at a high rate of speed.

The car was easily taking the rises in the trail at this new speed and Mason was figuring that they would arrive at Bar X in about a half hour.

Suddenly they were startled by the sharp crack of a rifle causing the girls to scream in terror, while one of the rear tires blew out with a loud report. For a moment the car plunged wildly, and Mason with his face drawn white managed by a supreme effort to bring it under control.

CHAPTER XVII—TRENT BURTON WIRES ALARMING NEWS

With a shrieking and grinding of brakes Mason brought the car to a stop. After calming the fears of the girls he changed tires, his experience on the race track enabling him to accomplish this feat in a short time. He worked feverishly, fearing a second shot from out the dark as the car would make a good target for the unknown assassin. That the bullet which hit the tire was meant for one of them he had no doubt, and his mind coupled Spot Wells and the three strange riders with this new outrage.

He started the car off at a fast speed and breathed a sigh of relief when no shot followed them. Of the two girls, Mason could see that his sister was the more nervous and he tried to laugh away her fears. As the car gained momentum and they drew away from the danger spot his sister began to get more calm.

Josephine was quiet and appeared to be thinking deeply.

“Sir Jack,” she asked presently, “do you connect those four men we saw this afternoon with that rifle shot?”

“I’ll have to admit that I do,” he answered gravely; “anyway, I am going to report the incident to Bud when we arrive at the ranch.”

With increasing speed he shot the car ahead, and they were all relieved when a little later they drove to the ranch house and Mason put the car away.

In the morning he reported the matter to Bud. The sheriff grew serious at the news and immediately word was posted at Bar X ranch for the cowboys to keep a sharp watch for Spot Wells and the three strangers.

Mason saw very little of the girls for the next few days, his attention being taken up with matters about the ranch.

One morning, however, while working with the cowboys at the corral he was surprised to see the girls ride up.

They were accompanied by Percy Vanderpool, and Mason stared in amazement when he heard Josephine ask her father for permission to ride to Trader's Post.

But his bewilderment increased when he heard her say that they intended to ride from there on to the Ricker ranch.

The ranch owner readily consented as he always had in the past two every wish of this girl of the plains. Bud made a mild protest which was seconded vigorously by Mason.

Josephine gave him an icy stare. He ignored her apparent chilliness and offered to go with them if they were so intent for the trip.

"Oh no," she said the words with hauteur as she faced him. "You are too busy! Besides, Mr. Vanderpool is going with us."

Mason looked Percy over in disgust.

"You could at least have one of the cowboys go with you," he said, turning appealingly to Bud.

Before Bud could answer, Josephine cut in with a forced laugh.

She faced Mason again and he fancied he saw a reckless light in her eyes.

"There is no danger"; she spoke the words slowly; "you must remember that two of Bud's cowboys are in charge of the Ricker ranch."

At the rebuke the hot blood mounted into his cheeks. He felt the sting of her words and lapsed into silence as he watched them ride off.

"Josephine is a strange girl, and I cannot understand her," he mused angrily. "Anyone would think she is sore at me for something. She never treats Bud that way; instead, she favors him all the time and that proves she loves him."

Thus meditating, he passed a part of the morning away. Dinner time came and found him in a wretched state of mind.

Later, while idly chatting with the cowboys, a rider was observed coming from the direction of Trader's Post.

The cowboys watched him keenly when they noticed he was riding furiously. Mason stood near Buck Miller and was amused at the eager way the cowboy was watching the rider's approach.

He smiled grimly as he thought how such little things interested these cowboys. As for himself, his heart was heavy at the remembrance of Josephine's attitude to

him this day, and he was turning wearily away when he heard a sharp exclamation from Buck Miller which caused him to turn and look at him in surprise.

“That’s a dispatch rider from the railroad station below Trader’s Post,” Buck was saying. “He must have something important from the looks of his hoss; he’s ridden the critter until it’s most spent.”

Mason watched with interest as the dispatch rider swung up to them with his horse all lather.

Dismounting before his horse could come to a full stop he made his way directly to Bud Anderson.

“Message for you, Bud,” he panted; “must be mighty important too, for I was told to get here quick, even if I had to kill my horse. Reckon he’s about done for at that,” he added, watching the trembling animal with remorse.

Springing to Bud’s side, Mason watched him as he tore the message open. Bud hastily read its contents and silently passed it over to Mason.

It was a laconic message from Trent Burton and the news he read staggered him.

The message read as follows:

Ricker makes jail delivery. Jim Haley, Pete Carlo the Mexican, and Nick Cover with him. All headed for Nevada. Form posse and round up. Coming with deputy Jean Barry. News two weeks old.

(Signed)

Marshal Trent Burton.

Mason heard Bud giving orders to his men as though in a daze. His eyes caught sight of the message again and he read the words over. News two weeks old!

“Good God, Bud!” he cried in an agony of fear. “Do you realize what that message means? News two weeks old and my sister and Josephine in the clutches of that fiend at the Ricker ranch!”

Running like the wind to the shed where his racer was kept, he quickly had the engine spinning. The next instant he shot past the group of startled cowboys. They saw him feeling on his belt for his guns, and then man and car were swallowed up in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE LOST AIRPLANE

Josephine rode away from Bar X ranch with a feeling of misgiving. She knew that she had treated Mason rather mean, but she felt piqued because he had neglected her for the last few days.

Ethel noticed her abstracted manner, and asked her the reason for it.

“I think your big brother has been neglecting us shamefully,” she said at last in answer to a repeated query from Ethel. “Dad doesn’t need him to work about the ranch as he persists in doing, and I think it mean of him while you are visiting us.”

Ethel smiled at her serious manner.

“You certainly cut him to-day when you refused his offer to go with us,” she said, watching keenly the effect of her words on her friend.

“Serves him right,” Josephine answered spiritedly. “I suppose he thinks I am a very unreasonable girl, but you know we planned to visit the secret passage at the Ricker ranch, and I really wanted to ask him to go with us, but for the last three days I have scarcely been able to get a word with him.”

“Jack thinks you are in love with Bud Anderson,” Ethel ventured gently.

Josephine laughed merrily.

“Bud and I are great friends and I like him immensely,” she answered, a far-away look in her eyes.

Percy Vanderpool had been an interested listener up to this point, but now he began to get impatient at the lack of interest they were showing in him.

“Aw, I say girls,” he drawled, “do you really think this bally ranch with the aw, secret passage is a safe place to go?”

Josephine flashed him an amused glance.

“If you are afraid, you may go back, but Ethel and I are going to see this place.

There is no danger, for two of Bud's men are guarding it," she answered him scornfully.

"Oh, Percy is game, all right," Ethel cut in; "I know he isn't afraid to go where us girls dare go."

At this praise the fop began to tell of some deeds of daring he had performed while on a trip through the jungles of Africa and the girls listened with much merriment.

Thinking he had impressed them with his great prowess he launched into such a lengthy tale of one of his trips that Josephine had to cut him off in the midst of it.

They were nearing Trader's Post where they had planned to halt for a short rest before proceeding on to the Ricker ranch.

A foreboding of evil was stealing over Josephine and try as she would, she couldn't seem to shake it off. She wished most heartily that she had permitted Mason to come with them and felt vexed with herself for being so obstinate.

As they entered Trader's Post she caught sight of one of the cowboys Bud had left in charge of the Ricker ranch. He was on the opposite side of the street and bidding Ethel and Percy to wait, she hastened over and had a chat with him.

The cowboy had come to town for a few supplies and was going back at once. He assured her that everything was going fine at the ranch, and feeling relieved she hurried back to join Ethel and Percy.

After lunch and a short rest they started for the ranch. The cowboy would reach the ranch ahead of them, but somehow the meeting with him had helped dispel the depressing spirit that seemed to grip her. In the course of an hour they had reached the outbuildings of the ranch, and the desolate condition of the place almost struck terror to the girl's heart, but remembering the meeting with the cowboy they pressed on.

Arriving at the ranch house, Josephine was shocked to find the door partly open, and the house was apparently deserted.

"That's strange," she said, nervously entering the room. "Come on in, Ethel, and bring Percy. We'll see if he has got the nerve he has been bragging to us about. I'm not going to stay in this place long myself, it looks spooky to me. We will investigate that secret passage and then dust out of here. I have got a nice flashlight with me so we won't have to stumble over anything."

"I cannot understand what became of the two cowboys that are supposed to be in

charge here," Ethel replied, stepping inside and walking gingerly about the room. "Oh, say a real live counterfeiter's den! Won't I have something to tell the people back in New York when I get home?"

Josephine smiled at the Eastern girl's enthusiasm.

"I guess only one of the guards stay here at a time," she said, "and they probably take turns while one of them rides the range. The one we met is no doubt on watch here now, and is about the place somewhere. Come, Percy dear, I will let you take this nice new flashlight; won't you lead the way into the cellar?"

It was plain to the girls that the task was not to Percy's liking, but when they laughed at him he braced up and made a show of courage.

With quaking hearts, it must be confessed, they found a door leading into the cellar. Once at the bottom, they huddled close together.

"I suppose we were awful fools to come here alone," Josephine remarked, jumping nervously at the sound of her own voice; it sounded strange and hollow to her in the long cellar. "Now that we're here we'll see it through. I remember Sir Jack telling that there was a button or knot that he pushed, and lo! a door opened into the secret passage. I suppose they have the passage sealed up, but I am going to see for myself just the same. Here, Percy, let me take that light, your face is white as a sheet and your hand is trembling. Brace up, man."

Josephine took the light and led the way, the others following cautiously. They had not proceeded far when Josephine stopped short in a listening attitude.

For the first time, Ethel saw that she was carrying a revolver in one hand.

"What is it?" Ethel whispered anxiously, and her knees shook in spite of her.

"I thought that I heard a sound like an engine motor," Josephine answered joyously.

Distinctly the sound of a motor came to their ears, each moment growing louder until the sound developed into a continuous roar.

"Hurrah," Josephine cried, unable to suppress her delight. "Sir Jack is coming."

The next instant a heavy hand was clasped over her mouth and a voice hissed in her ear:

"Keep silent, or you die!"

Josephine screamed and discharged her revolver. She heard a shout and an answering shot and she was sure that if it was Mason, he had heard her fire the

shot and was coming to their assistance.

The revolver was knocked out of her hand before she could fire another shot, and she was grasped in the arms of her assailant and carried she knew not where. She knew that Ethel had fainted as she had seen her body sink limply to the floor, while Percy was struggling in the hands of two men.

Her captor picked her up and carried her along the passage until he came to a flight of stairs which led out into the open. Here she was placed on her feet and given over to the care of two men who acted as guards. Her captors wore masks and she was unable to make out any of their features. Ethel was brought out with Percy and placed under the same guards, who proceeded to bind their hands behind their backs.

Josephine could still hear an automobile engine running idle and an occasional revolver shot. Suddenly there came to her ears a volley of shots and soon after the engine stopped running. With sinking heart the girl realized that they were shooting holes in the gasoline tank. Ethel was gradually coming out of her swoon, and the helplessness of the poor girl made Josephine's eyes flash fire.

"Cheer up, Ethel," she said tenderly, as the girl came to her full senses. "These devils won't be allowed to keep us as prisoners long. I think they put your brother's car out of commission, but he was too much for them as I see that they haven't captured him yet."

They were gruffly ordered by the guard to cease talking. Soon another masked guard approached the prisoners and proceeded to blindfold them.

Before this happened, Josephine had counted six masked men, and she wondered if Mason had managed to escape unhurt. She strained her ears for every sound. At a short distance from her a group of masked men were talking in subdued tones, but her ears caught the word, chief, and a little later the name Ricker! Soon she heard them mention Mason's name, so she knew that he had made an attempt to rescue them and the thought gave her new courage.

So she was in the power of Ricker and his cutthroats. She remembered that Mason had told her of Ricker's oath to break jail and his threat to come back and get revenge on Mason and herself and now he was at large again. She wondered how Ricker happened to be at the ranch the very day she had chosen to visit it. She had played right into the hands of fate, and she remembered how hard Mason had pleaded with her not to leave Bar X. Her body grew numb and her eyes filled with tears. Well, anyway, they had not caught Mason yet, and her heart thrilled at the thought.

There was a chance that he might be able to rescue them and she knew he wouldn't lose any time in getting a posse on the outlaws' trail. That they would be more desperate than ever, she well knew, as they had broken jail and Ricker was an escaped murderer.

At this point in her meditations she was rudely jerked to her feet by one of the guards and placed on a horse. She managed to whisper a word of encouragement in Ethel's ear and was delighted when she found that they were to ride together. That is, Ethel was placed on a horse and rode by her side, and she had a vague idea that Percy rode just ahead of them.

Then followed a long ride with many hardships.

In the course of a few hours they reached the mountains where the trail was very difficult, and at times their captors had to guide their horses over the rough trails.

After ages of climbing as it seemed to Josephine, they struck a more level trail. That they were high in the mountain ranges she had not a doubt and was fearful that the captors were taking them to some unknown mountain retreat where it would be difficult for rescuers to find them.

The captors had thrown off all restraint and were talking freely among themselves. Josephine kept her wits and listened closely. From the talk she gathered that they were being led by Pete Carlo, the Mexican. He knew the mountains better than any living person and was leading the outlaws to a retreat where it would be utterly impossible for anybody to discover them. Spot Wells was among her captors, too, for she had heard his name called by one of the men.

Thus far they had suffered no indignity from the men, but she trembled when she thought of brutal Spot Wells and his attempt to carry her and Ethel off at Smoky Point when the timely arrival of Mason checkmated him. She was almost in despair at their probable fate when she heard two of the captors start up a conversation near her.

She listened eagerly, and from the words dropped with a coarse laugh and curse, she learned that Ricker had made a jail delivery with the Mexican, Jim Haley and Nick Cover.

The outlaws had been at large about two weeks and immediately after their escape from jail they had struck out for Nevada. Arriving at their old haunt, the Ricker ranch, they had kept concealed for a few days. Ricker's plan had been to raid the Bar X ranch and make a quick kill including Mason and Bud Anderson,

and then to carry off the girls out of pure revenge.

Her coming with Ethel and Percy to the Ricker ranch on the very day this diabolical plan was to be carried out had upset all Ricker's plans. Kind fate was playing into his hands, for here was Percy Vanderpool, the son of a millionaire from New York. The cowboys at the ranch had been captured by Ricker's men while he laid plans to make Percy and the girls prisoners and take them to the mountains to be held for ransom.

Josephine felt somewhat relieved when she overheard this statement, for she was sure they would not come to any harm while there was a chance of a large reward for the outlaws.

She was sure that Percy's father would pay a large sum of money to secure his son's release, and no doubt there would be a large amount of money demanded from her father and Ethel's. The talking had ceased and she failed to learn more.

The chances were that Ricker would tell them in plain terms what he expected their fathers to do when they reached their mountain retreat.

She was hoping the ride would end soon as her body ached and she knew that Ethel and Percy must be suffering too. She was glad when finally an order was given by Ricker to dismount and the blindfold was removed from their eyes.

Next, their hands were untied, and Josephine went over and put her arms around Ethel.

"Forgive me, dear, I am sorry I got you into this trouble," Josephine said with a heavy heart.

"You are no more to blame than I am," Ethel protested stoutly. "I was just as anxious to see the secret passage as you were, and my brother will make it hot for these cut-throats if they dare to harm us."

Josephine's eyes glistened.

"I know he will, dear, and I am sure he will rescue us. He rescued me from the Mexican once before when I was in just as bad a position as now.

"Did you hear what the outlaws were saying as we came up the trail? I think they will try to hold us for a ransom."

Ethel started to reply, when Ricker pushed up to them with a leering smile.

"Some birds I have caught in my cage to-day," he said with a coarse laugh. "Your quarters are right over there by that flat table rock. There is a shanty there

which I will have the men fix up comfortable for you, and you won't be harmed if you don't try to escape. And I wouldn't advise you to try it, either," he added with an oath.

"In due time your folks will be presented with my terms for your release, and if they don't come across with the money it will go hard with you girls. My men will have quarters just inside this semicircle here." He waved his hand towards a natural barrier of rock. "One of my men will have you under watch night and day, and the rest will see that none of your friends come too close for their health. If they try it they are dead men. I can hold off a small army from this retreat, and I don't intend to leave here until I gain my ends, which is money, and plenty of it too."

He stopped and looked hard at the girls.

"Josephine, when the proper time comes, you are going to write a letter for me," he said threateningly.

Josephine faced him with flashing eyes.

"I'll write no letters for you, you swine," she said defiantly, "and when Mason comes he will kill you."

"Not so fast, my little spitfire," he purred, "but I am telling you straight. If you value Mason's life, or any lives at the Bar X ranch, you will write this letter which I will dictate to you. If any of your friends come within two hundred yards of this place it will be sure death to them. Just look around and see for yourself how foolish it would be for any one to try to rescue you."

With this warning he turned and left them.

Josephine took a general survey of the place. At last she turned a pale face to Ethel, for she had noticed the natural barriers of rock all about them.

"This place is twice as hard to get at as the one where I was held a prisoner before," she said sadly.

It was beginning to get dark and the girls were completely tired out. They went over to the little cabin on the flat table rock and throwing themselves down tried to sleep. Percy was to make his quarters with the men in another cabin a hundred yards across the flat rock from the girls' cabin, and they were surprised to see how well he seemed to bear up under his present troubles. Josephine arranged to have one of them keep watch while the other slept, and in this way they passed the long night.

When morning came they were full of aches and pains as neither had slept well during the night and the bunks were hard. Both girls had finally agreed that it would be best to grant Ricker's demands, and write the warning letter to Mason.

The men were astir over in their camp and the smell of coffee boiling came to them with an appetizing flavor. A stream flowed close by and Josephine went over to it and started to bathe her swollen eyes.

She was startled by a strange humming noise over her head and looked up in alarm.

"Oh, look! Ethel!" she screamed, "an airplane!"

Like a huge bird it soared above them, then the motor stopped and the airplane began to come down gracefully in long sweeping spirals. The girls were waving their handkerchiefs at the aviator when Ricker came rushing out of the men's cabin and fired his revolver at him. Instantly the motor started to hum and the airplane began to lift. Soon it was a mere speck in the sky.

Josephine clasped Ethel in her arms and her eyes were swimming with tears.

"I'll bet my life that was Roy Purvis, the aviator," Josephine said, her spirits drooping at their slim chance of being rescued. "Sir Jack told me that he expected an aviator to visit him from New York, and I believe that was his airplane and he has lost his way in the mountains!"

CHAPTER XIX—THE ROUND-UP

When Mason arrived at the Ricker ranch in his racer there was an ominous silence about the place that confirmed his worst fears. He knew the girls must have arrived at the ranch ahead of him, but seeing no signs of life about the place he left his motor running and sprinted for the house.

Just as he threw the door open he heard a piercing scream followed by a revolver shot that appeared to come from the depths of the cellar. He drew his revolver and fired an answering shot. He dashed madly down the stairs leading to the cellar where he found himself in pitch darkness. Sounds of a struggle reached his ears as he blindly felt his way along the cellar. He cursed his stupidity for not thinking to have brought along a light of some kind.

The sounds of a struggle had abruptly ceased and a deathly silence prevailed. Too late!

He had traversed the entire length of the cellar and was about to start a search of the secret passage when he heard a number of shots fired in rapid succession.

Soon after, to his dismay, his engine stopped running. In desperation he raced back through the cellar and collided with a man who had just started to come down the cellar stairs.

A fierce battle ensued between them, Mason's adversary striving to bring his revolver butt down on his head. The fellow wore a mask and after repeated attempts Mason succeeded in tearing it off.

The gunman was a stranger to him. Mason redoubled his efforts and backheeling the man, threw him downstairs. The delay had proved costly, however, and when he got out to his car he found the gasoline tank punctured with bullet holes. In the distance a party of horsemen with Josephine, Ethel and Percy in their midst were riding hard for the foothills.

"Oh, hell," he swore to himself as he leaned dejectedly against his useless racer. "I'm some rescuer, I don't think. Why didn't Trent Burton's message come

through sooner. The news two weeks old and those cut-throats at large all this time. I think now that the four riders Gaylor and I saw that day were just a scouting party of Ricker's. Yes, and the rifle shot that blew my tire out was some of their dirty work too. Lucky the bullet hit a tire instead of one of the girls, but it wasn't their fault that it didn't."

The thought of the girls' plight nerved him to swift action and he set out to search the premises for a horse. He wondered what had become of the two cowboys who were in charge of the ranch. His mind was bordering on a state of frenzy after he had searched the corral and failed to find a horse.

About a hundred yards from the corral lay the bunk-house. It was a large building and Mason noticed there was a small shed attached to the far corner of it. Something impelled him to look the building over, and it was well that he did so. Upon entering the bunk-house he found the two guards. They were bound and gagged and tied to one of the bed posts. Mason liberated them, after which he stood regarding them with scorn.

"Well, you're a fine pair of huskies, I must say," he said contemptuously. "Hell's to pay about this ranch, and here I find you two cowboys trussed up like two fine turkeys. Both girls carried off by Ricker and his gang of cut-throats and no one here to stop them. How did it happen, anyway?" he wound up savagely.

Both cowboys had been spare hands at the Bar X ranch, and Mason felt that Bud had made a mistake in not placing more competent men in charge of the Ricker ranch. His own choice would have been the two fire eaters, Scotty Campbell and Red Sullivan.

"Don't be too hard on us, boss," one of the cowboys pleaded. "It happened this way. Bob, here, rode over to the Post for supplies right after I came in off the range. Just after he had left and got out of sight somebody sneaked up behind me and cracked me over the head. When I came to my senses I found Bob tied up alongside of me. I didn't have a chance, pard, honest I didn't."

"I got served the same way," the cowboy named Bob spoke up. "I met the girls and the young fellow at the Post, and Miss Josephine said they were coming on to the ranch. I left quite a spell ahead of them and got served the same as Jim here."

"So it seems," Mason said sarcastically. "You fellows can square yourself to a certain extent if you will dig me up a horse."

"That's easy," Bob spoke up eagerly, "my horse is tied in the shed at the end of

the bunk-house, and Jim's horse is there too."

"All right," Mason answered curtly, "I'll take one of them and when you get a chance, tow my machine to Trader's Post and have the gasoline tank repaired. The tank is shot full of holes and I will have to depend on you cowboys to see that it is fixed and send the bill on to me at Bar X ranch. I expect some of Bud's men will be here before long, and by the way, I knocked one of Ricker's men down cellar. You might go and see if he's there yet, and hand him over to Bud's men when they come along."

Quickly he looked the cowboys' horses over and picking out the better one he set out rapidly for Bar X ranch. On the way he met a detachment of Bud's men led by Big Joe Turner. They had been ordered to report at the Ricker ranch and would be joined by Bud the next day. Big Joe informed him that a general alarm had been sent out and that the Gaylor brothers had been notified. A fast rider had been dispatched to their ranch and they were expected at Bar X the next morning. Mason related all that had happened at the Ricker ranch and gave as his judgment that there were eight men in Ricker's gang.

There was a general tightening of belts and a savage glitter in the men's eyes as he told his story. Josephine was a popular idol with the men of Bar X and it would go hard with her captors if they should fall into these cowboys' hands.

Mason bid them good luck and pressed on. It was late at night when he arrived at Bar X, but he immediately sought out Bud and they held a long consultation.

They planned to send out a detachment of cowboys the next morning and another one in the afternoon.

In all, there were to be three detachments of cowboys who were to relay each other in turn.

"What gets me," Mason said in perplexity, "is why Trent Burton didn't get word through to us sooner."

"I forgot to tell you that I received another message from him while you was away," Bud said with a look of wonder in his eyes. "He explained in this last message that the jail officials tried their best to locate him, but he was away on a case at the time. The message was brought to me by a rider just an hour after I received the first one. He sure is a wonder and is a strange man. Here, read this last message yourself."

"Talking about me?" an amiable voice said over their shoulder.

Both men jumped to their feet in astonishment. They were sitting in a little room used as an office of the ranch house.

“For God’s sake, Trent Burton!” Bud stared at him.

“How did you get here?”

“Why, it was very simple, I assure you,” the strange man answered blandly. “The door was partly open and I merely walked in. I repeat, were you talking about me?”

“We sure were,” Mason answered. He had recovered in a measure from his astonishment.

“Well, you know the old saying, speak of the devil and you hear his wings.”

“You must have wings at that,” Bud retorted; “what I want to know is how you arrived at this ranch so soon after wiring me?”

“First part, special train; second part, fast automobile. Fast automobile is outside this minute. Now that I have cleared myself, what has my estimable friend Ricker been doing since he broke loose? I see where I have all my work to do over again.”

Briefly they told him of the counterfeiter’s latest outrage, and all three sat up till a late hour perfecting plans for the morrow.

There was little sleep for Mason that night, and the morning found him worn and haggard. Trent Burton had taken absolute charge and already one group of fighting men had left the ranch to join Big Joe Turner at the Ricker ranch. Mason wanted to leave with them, but the Marshal wouldn’t listen to his pleading.

“Stick with me, man, and brace up,” he said kindly. “I want all the brainy men with me. There is still another outfit to go before we start, and in our group will be such men as Bud, fire-eating Scotty, Red, Tex, Buck Miller and yourself. The Gaylor ranch has sent over ten men and Bruce Gaylor is coming with the rest. We will need all the men we can get to beat the mountains and surround the outlaws.”

Mason was silently turning the events of the past twenty-four hours over in his mind.

“This is going to be a delicate mission,” the Marshal continued, “and at the least sign of a slip-up on our part, that beast will butcher those girls. Ricker is a desperate man and I am waiting for him to show his hand. He knows that I will

be sent after him, and the fact that he has the girls and Percy in his power forces me to move with caution. I have a suspicion that he will try to get word through to us as to his demands. That is the reason why I am in no hurry to take to the mountains, and I want you to be here when that word comes. Rest content that the girls will be safe, for I am convinced that his first demand will be for money.”

An hour later the next section left in charge of the Gaylor brothers. When noon came, Mason was almost going mad at his inaction. He was electrified five minutes later when Scotty came to the house with news that a dispatch rider was waiting for him at the bunk-house. He hastened down and the message was placed in his hands. It was from Josephine and was written at the command of Ricker. The demand was for money with a warning not to try to find the girls under penalty of their death. If they agreed to pay over the amount of money demanded in the dispatch, Ricker would see that the prisoners were set free.

He stipulated in the message that they would be given forty-eight hours to decide, and at the expiration of that time, if a messenger did not arrive at Duke Williams’ place at Smoky Point, the prisoners would be killed.

It closed with a warning to Mason and Bud that any attempt to capture Ricker’s agent at Duke Williams’ hotel would result in the girls’ death.

The message was written in Josephine’s own handwriting.

“Where did you get this message?” Mason asked, looking sharply at the rider.

“It was given me at the station by a stranger and I was paid well to deliver it to you,” the rider answered simply.

“There will be no answer,” Mason said shortly, dismissing him.

He kept turning the envelope over in his hand. On one corner there was drawn the picture of a butterfly, and it puzzled him. Hunting up the Marshal he turned the message over to him.

The latter read it, then gave a long whistle.

“So, he has shown his hand at last,” was his comment; “whew! a cool million he wants. Modest in his demands, isn’t he?”

“What puzzles me,” Mason replied, “is what that butterfly means on the corner of the envelope.”

The Marshal looked it over carefully.

“Just merely the whim of a girl,” he said at length.

“I don’t believe it,” Mason protested warmly. “Josephine drew that picture on there for a purpose, and I would stake my life on it.”

“There may be a reason for the picture at that,” the Marshal replied thoughtfully; “well, anyway, the counterfeiter has shown his hand, and now I can work with light ahead.”

The Marshal’s forces were to start within an hour.

Mason with Red Sullivan and Scotty were looking over their guns at the bunk-house.

Tex, a short distance away from them, was watching an object in the sky. Finally he called Red over to where he stood, and Red in turn called Mason over to them.

“Shure, Jack, and isn’t that a devil of a big bird?” the Irishman asked, pointing to the sky.

Mason looked up and stared at the object which was looming up larger to their vision each minute.

“That’s an airplane,” he said at last in wonderment.

“Holy Saints!” Red cried, crossing himself, “and may the devil fly away with it!”

Mason could plainly hear the humming of the motor now, and he took off his hat and waved it excitedly.

“Tex, call Trent Burton to come here at once,” he said, a glad ring to his voice. “Red, I’ll bet your old red head, that’s my friend Roy Purvis the aviator, from New York.”

The airplane came down in graceful spirals and made a landing a short distance from the corral. Mason rushed over and the aviator offered him a languid hand which Mason shook heartily.

“Roy, you’re just the man I want to see,” he cried, “you dropped out of the sky just in time.”

“I’ll say I did, I was all out of gasoline, you know,” the aviator answered, leaning languidly back in his seat gazing interestedly at the cowboys who stood looking him and the airplane over in open-mouthed wonder.

“Am I welcome?” Roy questioned, turning his attention again to Mason.

“Certainly you’re welcome. What makes you think you wouldn’t be welcome to Bar X ranch?” Mason demanded.

“Well, be a good fellow and help unstrap me from this confounded seat, and when we get to the house I’ll tell you,” he answered whimsically.

Mason called one of the cowboys over to assist him. In a small compartment back of the aviator’s seat was his luggage. It consisted of four suitcases and a black object resembling a tank about the size of a suitcase. Roy took especial charge of this black tank.

“Why all these warlike preparations?” he queried, noticing the bristling guns of the cowboys. “Looks like I had dropped into a fighting man’s country for fair.”

“I’ll explain the whole business to you when we get to the house and you have had some refreshments,” Mason answered.

“Hang the refreshments,” Roy growled, with another puzzled look at the cowboys with their revolvers and saddle guns.

At the house, after having been introduced all around, he surprised Mason by asking him if there was a dark room in the house.

“No,” the latter answered with a blank look, “but I think we could rig you up one.”

“Friends,” the aviator said with a look into their anxious faces, “I can see that you are in some kind of trouble, and from a hint that my friend Mason dropped, I think I can help you out. Just rig me up that dark room, Jack, and I will show you something that will surprise you.”

“There is a small closet in my room and you can use it,” Mason said quickly.

Taking the mysterious black tank with him the aviator left them and was in the room for a half hour. When he came out he held a number of films in his hands.

“Before I join these films together,” he said to his mystified audience, “I want to tell you of a little incident that happened to me this morning. Starting from a town about a hundred miles from here, and depending entirely on my compass, for I had no idea where the Bar X ranch lay, I crossed the railroad track at a point fifty miles below here.

“If you remember, there was a slight mist this morning, making it difficult to distinguish objects unless I flew quite low. Knowing I had a good supply of

gasoline I opened the engine up wide and flew at a high altitude and drifted aimlessly in the hope that the mist would soon clear away.

“My wish was soon granted, but, to my surprise, I found myself flying over your wonderful mountains and hopelessly lost. Bringing the airplane around, I determined to cruise in the opposite direction.

“Flying at a lower altitude, I was surprised to see a group of men directly under me. The place was an ideal spot to land, and shutting off the engine I began to make spirals, at the same time taking this series of films you see in my hand.

“One of the men commenced to fire a revolver at me, and thinking it wouldn’t be healthy to land among them, I started my engine. After much difficulty, I succeeded in reaching this ranch. I didn’t know what ranch it was, but for once I was lucky.”

The aviator joined the films together and held them out to their startled eyes. It was a complete picture of the counterfeiter’s retreat in the mountains and showed the two girl prisoners!

“This is wonderful,” the Marshal exclaimed. “Bud, do you think you have a man that can locate this place?”

“I know right where it is,” Bud replied, breathing heavily. “It is dead easy to find, but hard to get at. It can be taken all right, but if we force the position, they are sure to kill the girls.”

Mason was making a close examination of the films.

A semicircle of rock showed plainly, and as near as he could judge, about two hundred yards back from this semicircle there was a flat table rock, backed by a cliff that rose hundreds of feet in the air.

A cabin, showing the two girls outside looking up at the sky, was plainly visible.

Mason called Bud over to him.

“Bud, you say you know where this place is?” he questioned him.

The latter nodded.

“And the only point of attack is this semicircle of rock,” Mason continued, “and if we rush that point there is nothing to prevent Ricker from killing the girls before we could get to them.”

“That’s just the way I figure it out,” Bud agreed.

“Well, I have a plan that has a chance of success,” Mason said grimly. “If we should pay those cutthroats the money they demand, we are not sure they will keep their word about delivering the prisoners safely to us. We have just got to go in and get them.

“My plan is to dynamite this semicircle of rock, then rush in and get the girls before Ricker’s men can recover from their surprise. They are sure to guard that point every minute. Let me have Scotty to draw their fire while I lay the blasting charge. They know what a reckless daredevil Scotty is and as I will keep out of sight they will think he is attacking them single-handed, and they will all be busy trying to pick him off. When the blasting charge goes off you can rush the position and capture them before they recover from their surprise.”

“That’s a good plan, lad,” the Marshal said with an approving glance at him. “We will arrange to arrive at their mountain retreat at five o’clock tomorrow morning. It won’t do to make the attack at night, for if anything went wrong they could kill the prisoners before we knew it. I’ll send Jean Barry to the Ricker ranch with my automobile, and have Big Joe get all the men together. Our party will join them there in time to reach the counterfeiter’s stronghold by five o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“Jack, have the cowboys take their horses along with them to the ranch, and I will take you there in my airplane,” Roy cut in.

Mason looked at his watch.

“That will be fine,” he said. “It is just one P.M. and I won’t have to start from here until about five o’clock if I go by airplane. We are all to meet at the Ricker ranch and make a start from there some time during the night. The Marshal and Bud have the trip timed so we will reach the counterfeiter’s stronghold early in the morning and take them by surprise.”

Mason and Roy laid a plan for the latter to be in the vicinity of the mountain retreat, and after Mason had set off the explosive charge and a successful rescue was accomplished, Roy was to carry the glad news by airplane to the girls’ anxious parents.

They put in some of the time going over the airplane and getting it in order. The Marshal and Bud had left with the last cowboys, and at five o’clock Mason and Roy started their flight. In a short time they had overtaken and passed the Marshal’s riders.

Arriving at the Ricker ranch they made a safe landing and immediately turned in

to get a little rest.

Mason's sleep was fitful, and he was glad when aroused by the Marshal and told that the hour had struck.

The dynamite with wire and a battery was given to him, and Scotty was carefully rehearsed in the part he was to play. The moon was shining as the grim riders formed and set out rapidly for the foothills. Sunrise found them concealed at the base of the outlaws' stronghold.

Mason and Scotty began their perilous climb to the semicircle of rock. It was thought to be utterly impossible to approach closer than a hundred yards to the stronghold without being challenged by the guards. It was the brave Scot's duty to open fire the minute he was challenged and attract the outlaws' attention while Mason was to crawl to a position where he could place the charge of dynamite to the best advantage.

When the charge was planted he was to set it off, while the Marshal was to hurl his men on the outlaws before they could recover from their surprise.

They had climbed to within seventy-five yards of the strongly guarded point, when a sharp command to halt rang out. Scotty recklessly exposed himself to view for an instant and received a bullet through the crown of his hat. Flattening his body against the rocks, he opened a hot fire in reply. Mason continued to crawl ahead fast, but cautiously, working slightly around to the right. The outlaws sent a hail of bullets down past Scotty, which the Scot returned with interest, still keeping up his pretense of attack.

Mason worked up so close that he could see the outlaws answering Scotty's shots with their rifles. He carefully placed the dynamite charge and dropped swiftly down the ledge with wire and battery. At a safe distance from the deadly charge he turned the switch of the battery. A tremendous explosion followed.

Amid falling rocks, Scotty came racing over to him, and together they scrambled up the cliff and into the outlaws' stronghold.

The outlaws were wild with excitement and Jim Haley was trying to rally them when a bullet from Scotty's gun put him out of action.

Mason and Scotty dropped down behind a rock just as a volley of bullets whistled over their heads.

Ricker rallied his men and firing rapidly he gave a yell of defiance. Seeing that he had but two men behind the rock to deal with, he called to his men and they

started to rush in upon them.

Pieces of rock and dirt were filling the eyes of Mason and Scotty as they crouched behind the rock and their position was getting perilous as they couldn't return the fire without exposing themselves.

As the outlaws charged across the open, a bullet caught Ricker in the side and he reeled, his gun in the air.

Bud and Trent Burton were in the fight and the latter had cut loose with his deadly automatics!

Sorely wounded, the counterfeiter turned and bringing his gun down, emptied it point blank at his hated foe. Trent Burton's guns were trained on him and were spitting a steady stream of lead.

The counterfeiter's knees began to sag and his shots went wild. Josephine and Ethel stood at the cabin door, their faces white with fear.

Overhead, Roy's airplane motor was humming in harmony with the cracking of the guns. Mason stood up from behind the rock as he saw the halfbreed Mexican start with a yell toward the girls' cabin.

Mason shouted a warning to the girls and turned his smoking gun on the halfbreed. At the third shot the Mexican fell, and Mason rushed over and clasped his sister in his arms.

When the fight was over, Percy was found tied securely in the outlaws' cabin.

Ricker was dying and Jim Haley and Nick Cover were severely wounded. The Mexican was brought into the outlaws' cabin and breathed his last while Trent Burton was examining his wound.

The Marshal arranged to have Mason and Bud leave at once with the girls, and when they arrived at the Ricker ranch, Mason was to take the Marshal's automobile and drive them to Bar X ranch.

"Some round-up," the Marshal observed to Bud as they parted. "I wanted to take Ricker alive, but he was trying to get me, so it was his life or mine."

"Yes, and I had to pin Spot Wells just as he was drawing a bead on Scotty," Bud replied regretfully.

CHAPTER XX—SILVER SKIES

The trip to the Ricker ranch was uneventful, the girls maintaining a tired silence. They had passed through an ordeal that would have tried the nerves of strong men. At the ranch, Mason hastily got the Marshal's car ready and they started for the ride home. Bud insisted on remaining at the Ricker ranch to look after the men and prisoners when they came in.

Mason drove at a moderate speed, and gradually the girls came out of their listless mood.

"Cheer up," Mason said gaily, "I'll soon have you home right side up with care, and you will get a grand welcome, I can assure you. Roy, the aviator, flew home with the good news as soon as he found out that we had made your rescue, and it would be just like him to come sailing back this way any minute."

"You're very good to us," Josephine murmured, leaning back in the seat with a tired sigh.

He glanced at them quizzically.

"What you girls need is a good rest to-night and you will be all right in the morning," he said, compassionately.

Halfway to the ranch they saw the daring aviator heading towards them. The birdman was flying at a dizzy height and when directly over them he went into a series of loops after which he banked the airplane sharply and continued along with them to the ranch. It would be useless to try to describe the joy of the girls' anxious parents when they found them safe in their arms.

In the evening, Bud came in with Percy Vanderpool and the cowboys. Jean Barry the deputy had come with them to run the Marshal's car back to the Ricker ranch. The Marshal was to remain at the ranch until the wounded prisoners could be moved. He would then lodge them in jail and return East to an important criminal case. He sent hearty congratulations to the girls on their timely escape from the outlaws, and promised to visit Bar X again in the near future.

The next day Mason was kept busy about the ranch until noon. Roy had just returned from a flight to Trader's Post and brought back a message for Mason. It was from his father, saying he was coming to take his mother and sister home.

The news that his father was coming to Bar X ranch pleased him immensely, and he hastened to break the news to his mother and sister.

His mother seemed glad, but Ethel's face clouded when she heard her father was coming.

"What's the matter, sis?" he cried in wonder. "Don't you want to go home?"

"Of course not," she answered in a vexed tone. "Why, I have been here scarcely a month, and it is much more pleasant out here this time of the year than in a stuffy city."

"Well, you can take the matter up with Dad when he comes," he said briefly, starting for the door. "Roy is going to take me to Trader's Post to see if they have got my car repaired."

Josephine had just entered the room and he paused, with his hand on the door knob. She was dressed in a stunning creation of champagne silk and he gazed at her in silent admiration.

"How do you like my new dress, Sir Jack?" she asked, making him a curtsy. "My, but you are a busy man. I am going to play lady for a few days, and I intended to ask you to take me down to Rover's kennel. Father tells me the poor dog has been acting sick lately, and I want to see if there is anything I can do for him."

"Certainly I'll go with you," he answered readily; "I will tell Roy not to wait for me and will join you in a minute."

Roy agreed to make the trip alone, and when Mason arrived at the kennel, Josephine was bending over Rover. The dog was frisking around her and joyously barking a welcome.

"There's nothing the matter with Rover, he's merely lonesome to see you," he said.

They had taken seats on a rustic bench between two cottonwood trees. Josephine was fondly watching the dog's antics.

"Oh, I am so glad there is nothing the matter with him. He was the means of saving my life once, you know."

“That time, I remember well,” he answered, a feeling of gloom stealing over him.

He was thinking of her deep concern over Bud’s injury when she was rescued from the brute Tom Powers.

“I suppose you would have been better pleased yesterday if Bud had been the one to rescue you,” he said, a little ungallantly.

“What makes you think that?” her face was averted from him.

“Well, you love him, don’t you?” he put the question bluntly.

Josephine was silent and he relentlessly repeated his question.

“No, I—I—love some one else,” the girl faltered at last.

His breath came in quick gasps.

“I don’t suppose I have the right to know, but is it one of the Gaylor boys you love?”

“No.”

“Well, is it anybody I know?”

“Yes, and he’s an awful thickhead, but—I—I-love—him just the same.”

He turned away in irritation.

“Well, I should think a girl of your intellect would pick out a man with brains, anyway,” he said wrathfully.

“I—I—have, but—at times, he’s such a fool.”

He turned slowly and looked at her in exasperation. The girl’s head had sunk forward, and he heard her sobbing softly.

“Josephine!”

Quickly he bent over her and raised her face to his as he gathered her in his arms. Her eyes were shining through her tears like beautiful stars, and he saw a light in them that thrilled him. He kissed away the tears as she lay quiet and passive in his arms.

“Josephine, you love me?” he whispered in wondering delight.

“Silly boy,” she managed to gasp, “I have loved you from the first time we met. Now, unhand me, you villain. Here come Ethel and Bud and they will see us.”

“I don’t care,” he said recklessly, holding her fast. “Anyway, they are going into the house.”

“You received a message from your father about noon time?” she asked dreamily.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be very much pleased to meet him. I wonder if he will like me?”

“The idea! Of course he will. How can he possibly help liking you?”

“Well Sir Jack, just because you like me, that’s no sign everybody else will,” she said demurely.

“Why, you’ll be winding Dad around your little finger in less than thirty minutes after he gets here, and I’ll bet my life on it.”

“Say,” he added, “do you know that Ethel is crazy about this part of the country and doesn’t want to go back home with Dad?”

“Don’t you know the reason?”

“Reason,” he echoed.

“It’s Bud,” she said simply.

“Bud,” he cried in bewilderment. “Do you mean to tell me that Ethel is in love with Bud Anderson?”

“Yes, but I don’t see any harm in that, Bud is a fine fellow.”

“I know,” he said thoughtfully. “Lord, but it will be a shock to Dad. Josephine, I just happened to think of something. Why did you draw the picture of that butterfly on the envelope Rick sent through to me?”

“I wrote that letter right after Roy’s airplane appeared to us, and I was going to draw a picture of the airplane, but Ricker stood over me and I didn’t dare to. He even wanted to know what the butterfly meant, and I told him that it was a sign between us so you would know the letter was written by me. You see I was trying to let you know that we had seen Roy’s airplane, and I knew you were expecting him out here. We gave up hope of Roy finding you as we thought he was lost in the mountains.”

“He was lost in the mountains, but he found us all right, and later I will tell you all about it,” he said, looking fondly at her. “I was sure that butterfly meant something, but couldn’t figure it out. You little beauty, when Dad comes I am

going to take you to New York and we will get married there. Would you be willing to leave your home here, and live with me in New York?"

Roy was returning in his airplane, and right over them he began making loops and hair raising nose dives, finally going into a tail spin.

Josephine watched him breathlessly until Mason repeated his question.

"I would like very much to live in New York, if I thought I could get along with your father," she answered naively. "Sir Jack, I want you to make me a promise. Please don't go up in that airplane again. If Roy wants to risk his neck, I'm sure I don't want you to risk yours."

"All right," he laughed, "I promise, so you see we will get along famously."

Josephine smiled contentedly.

"And another thing," she said, eyeing him seriously. "I will want to have my saddle horse, Fleet, and my dog, Rover, with me if I live in New York. I never could leave them here and be happy."

"I will have them shipped along with us when we go," he declared, "and I am going to buy you a nice white chummy roadster car when we get home and you can drive it all by yourself."

"That won't be any fun unless you go with me," she pouted.

"Oh, I will be with you so much that you will be glad to get rid of me once in a while."

She voiced a quick protest.

"Let's go into the house and tell the people," he cried boyishly.

They went in and Mason directly looked up Josephine's father and received his hearty consent to giving his daughter's hand in marriage, but when he told him he intended to take her to New York to live, the old man almost broke down.

In the meantime, Ethel informed her mother and Josephine that she was engaged to marry Bud Anderson. The two girls planned on a double wedding in New York, after which Bud was to take his bride back to Nevada.

A week later Mason's father arrived, and the first thing his son did was to take him with his mother and sister into a room, where he told him all about the events leading up to Ricker's death, and a general account of all the counterfeiter's plots and the final round-up of the outlaw gang. He saved the fact about his own and Ethel's coming marriage until the last, and then he waited

patiently for the explosion he knew would follow. At this latest news, his father looked blankly first at his wife, then at son and daughter.

“Huh,” he snorted, after he had recovered from his surprise. “Things must move pretty rapidly in this part of the country. Wait until I see Tom Walters and have a talk with him. Then I will give you my opinion on the subject.”

The banker stalked into the ranch owner’s office and the two held a consultation behind closed doors.

Josephine was working in the kitchen, but she had heard the banker voice his sentiment. Mason joined her and saw a troubled look in her eyes.

“My, such a bear,” she said gravely, “how will I ever get along with him?”

“That is just Dad’s way,” he replied earnestly. “Dad was brought up in the old school, and never does things by halves. Don’t worry, sweetheart, I have enough money in my own right, left me by an aunt of mine. I shall marry you in spite of him, but you will have Dad eating out of your hand after he sees you.”

Josephine could hear her father and the banker chuckling over old times like two schoolboys, and her face brightened as she listened.

“Dad is all right and you will soon get used to his bluff ways,” Mason insisted, leading her into the parlor.

Soon, the two men came out of the office, and Mason immediately presented Josephine to his father.

“So this is Josephine,” the banker said kindly; “my son has written me often about you, and I see where I gain a daughter and lose one.”

In the afternoon they made up a party and showed the elder Mason around the ranch grounds, Josephine taking special charge of him. Afterwards, to Mason, Jr., she confided that he was a dear old man. Mason grinned knowingly, and laughed at her for her former fears.

“Why, I will be a regular outlaw between you and Dad when we get home,” he said in mock alarm.

Roy had already left in his airplane for New York, after first seeing that Mason’s car had been packed and shipped. He had promised to attend the double wedding in New York, and that night Josephine and Mason made plans for the trip East.

The ranch was to be left in charge of Big Joe as he was the acting foreman in Bud’s absence. Josephine and Ethel’s parents completed all the arrangements for

leaving the ranch in Big Joe's charge. The cowboys who were to go East with the party were Scotty, Red, Buck Miller and Tex. Waneda was to go and act as Josephine's bridesmaid, and all looked forward to the event with great eagerness. Bud had arranged to buy the Ricker ranch where he would live with his bride after their return from New York.

Three days later it was a merry party that boarded a train for the East. The cowboys insisted on wearing their cowboy suits, but each had brought along extra clothes so they could doll up at the wedding.

When the merry party finally arrived in New York they were whisked away from the station in taxicabs to the Mason home on Fifth Avenue. They had arrived in the city at nine P.M. so the cowboys had a chance to see a little of the city with its wonderful dazzling lights. The double wedding was set for the following night, and after their arrival at the Mason home, Mason, Jr., retained two of the taxicabs and gave the drivers instructions to drive the cowboys around the city to any place they wished to go, even if they took all night about it.

Buck Miller had been to New York on several different occasions, and Mason pressed a roll of money into his hands.

"This is my treat, boys, and I want you to have a good time," he said earnestly; "this taxicab firm is reliable, so you don't need to fear any trouble from that source, but for the love of Mike, don't try to shoot the town up."

He then gave the drivers some orders as to their passengers after which they looked the cowboys over with respect and awe.

"Looks like we had a man's sized job on our hands to-night, boss," one of them said, again looking at the cowboys dubiously.

"Just show the boys around and report to me by telephone if anything should happen," he advised them.

Mason was up bright and early the next morning and called up Roy the aviator, on the telephone. Roy was to be his best man at the wedding, and the aviator agreed to come promptly at seven P.M. as the wedding was set for eight o'clock. Bud was to have Buck Miller act as his best man, and he was getting decidedly nervous as the cowboys had not shown up.

Josephine was to have Waneda act as her bridesmaid, while Ethel had arranged to have one of her girl friends act as hers. About nine o'clock in the morning, it was a tired bunch of cowpunchers that came trooping in, but they declared they had had a grand time, so Mason packed them off to their rooms to get rested up

for the evening.

At six o'clock he called them, and laughed heartily as he watched their desperate efforts to struggle into their Sunday clothes. Roy had arrived ahead of time and was laughing and joking with Buck Miller who looked hot and uncomfortable in a new suit.

Percy Vanderpool was there too, and decked out in his usual gorgeous style.

The minister having arrived, the double wedding was performed with simple ceremony. A banquet followed, and Mason made a speech to the cowboys, assuring them he would visit the Bar X ranch the following summer. "And I will bring my wife along with me, boys," he wound up.

A hearty cheer went up at this statement, and he told them to wine and dine to their hearts' content. Bud and Ethel were to accompany the cowboys back to Nevada as Bud could spare only ten days away from his new ranch.

Mason and Josephine strolled into the library where Mason Senior always found his favorite retreat.

"Well, Dad," he said, putting his arms around his bride, "I didn't stay away a whole year, but I made good."

"And now, you want the reward I promised you, huh," his father grunted.

"Certainly, and I want a double reward now, because there are two of us."

"Indeed, you young scoundrel. Well, I intend to make Josephine a present of a fine house which I bought next door to us. As for you, I am going to place you under charge of my manager at my steel works, and give you a chance to work your way up to his position."

"That is fine of you, Father," he cried in delight; "what do you think of the old bear now, Josephine?"

"He's a dear," she countered softly.

"Well, Dad, you sent me out West to make good and I won an angel. Is that picture on the wall one you have had enlarged of yourself lately?"

The gruff fellow turned his head to look, and there was a sound suspiciously like a kiss. When he glanced at them again they were listening to the cowboys making merry in the banquet hall.

"By, by, Bar X," Josephine murmured, smiling contentedly at her husband.

THE END

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