

Seltzer Charles Alden

'Firebrand' Trevison



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	27
CHAPTER VI	34
CHAPTER VII	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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CHAPTER I THE RIDER OF THE BLACK HORSE

The trail from the Diamond K broke around the base of a low hill dotted thickly with scraggly oak and fir, then stretched away, straight and almost level (except for a deep cut where the railroad gang and a steam shovel were eating into a hundred-foot hill) to Manti. A month before, there had been no Manti, and six months before that there had been no railroad. The railroad and the town had followed in the wake of a party of khaki-clad men that had made reasonably fast progress through the country, leaving a trail of wooden stakes and little stone monuments behind. Previously, an agent of the railroad company had bartered through, securing a right-of-way. The fruit of the efforts of these men was a dark gash on a sun-scorched level, and two lines of steel laid as straight as skilled eye and transit could make them – and Manti.

Manti could not be overlooked, for the town obtruded upon the vision from where “Brand” Trevison was jogging along the Diamond K trail astride his big black horse, Nigger. Manti dominated the landscape, not because it was big and imposing, but because it was new. Manti’s buildings were scattered – there had been no need for crowding; but from a distance – from Trevison’s distance, for instance, which was a matter of three miles or so – Manti looked insignificant, toy-like, in comparison with the vast world on whose bosom it sat. Manti seemed futile, ridiculous. But Trevison knew that the coming of the railroad marked an epoch, that the two thin, thread-like lines of steel were the tentacles of the man-made monster that had gripped the East – business reaching out for newer fields – and that Manti, futile and ridiculous as it seemed, was an outpost fortified by unlimited resource. Manti had come to stay.

And the cattle business was going, Trevison knew. The railroad company had built corrals at Manti, and Trevison knew they would be needed for several years to come. But he could foresee the day when they would be replaced by building and factory. Business was extending its lines, cattle must retreat before them. Several homesteaders had already appeared in the country, erecting fences around their claims. One of the homesteaders, when Trevison had come upon him a few days before, had impertinently inquired why Trevison did not fence the Diamond K range. Fence in five thousand acres! It had never been done in this section of the country. Trevison had permitted himself a cold grin, and had kept his answer to himself. The incident was not important, but it foreshadowed a day when a dozen like inquiries would make the building of a range fence imperative.

Trevison already felt the irritation of congestion – the presence of the homesteaders nettled him. He frowned as he rode. A year ago he would have sold out – cattle, land and buildings – at the market price. But at that time he had not known the value of his land. Now —

He kicked Nigger in the ribs and straightened in the saddle, grinning.

“She’s not for sale now – eh, Nig?”

Five minutes later he halted the black at the crest of the big railroad cut and looked over the edge appraisingly. Fifty laborers – directed by a mammoth personage in dirty blue overalls, boots, woolen shirt, and a wide-brimmed felt hat, and with a face undeniably Irish – were working frenziedly to keep pace with the huge steam shovel, whose iron jaws were biting into the earth with a regularity that must have been discouraging to its human rivals. A train of flat-cars, almost loaded, was on the track of the cut, and a dinky engine attached to them wheezed steam from a safety valve, the engineer and fireman lounging out of the cab window, lazily watching.

Patrick Carson, the personage – construction boss, good-natured, keen, observant – was leaning against a boulder at the side of the track, talking to the engineer at the instant Trevison appeared at the top of the cut. He glanced up, his eyes lighting.

“There’s thot mon, Trevison, ag’in, Murph’,” he said to the engineer. “Bedad, he’s a pitcher now, ain’t he?”

An imposing figure Trevison certainly was. Horse and rider were outlined against the sky, and in the dear light every muscle and feature of man and beast stood but boldly and distinctly. The big black horse was a powerful brute, tall and rangy, with speed and courage showing plainly in contour, nostril and eye; and with head and ears erect he stood motionless, statuesque, heroic. His rider seemed to have been proportioned to fit the horse. Tall, slender of waist, broad of shoulder, straight, he sat loosely in the saddle looking at the scene below him, unconscious of the admiration he excited. Poetic fancies stirred Carson vaguely.

“Luk at ’im now, Murph; wid his big hat, his leather pants, his spurs, an’ the rist av his contrhaptions! There’s a divvil av a contrast here now, if ye’d only glimpse it. This civillyzation, ripraysinted be this railroad, don’t seem to fit, noways. It’s like it had butted into a pitcher book! Ain’t he a darlin’?”

“I’ve never seen him up close,” said Murphy. There was none of Carson’s enthusiasm in his voice. “It’s always seemed to me that a felluh who rigs himself out like that has got a lot of show-off stuff in him.”

“The first time I clapped me eyes on wan av them cowbhoys I thought so, too,” said Carson. “That was back on the other section. But I seen so manny av them rigged out like thot, thot I comminced to askin’ questions. It’s a domned purposeful rig, mon. The big felt hat is a daisy for keepin’ off the sun, an’ that gaudy bit av a rag around his neck keeps the sun and sand from blisterin’ the skin. The leather pants is to keep his legs from gettin’ clawed up be the thorns av prickly pear an’ what not, which he’s got to ride through, an’ the high heels is to keep his feet from slippin’ through the stirrups. A kid c’ud tell ye what he carries the young cannon for, an’ why he wears it so low on his hip. Ye’ve nivver seen him up close, eh Murph’? Well, I’m askin’ him down so’s ye can have a good look at him.” He stepped back from the boulder and waved a hand at Trevison, shouting:

“Make it a real visit, bhoy!”

“I’ll be pullin’ out of here before he can get around,” said Murphy, noting that the last car was almost filled.

Carson chuckled. “Hold tight,” he warned; “he’s comin’.”

The side of the cut was steep, and the soft sand and clay did not make a secure footing. But when the black received the signal from Trevison he did not hesitate. Crouching like a great cat at the edge, he slid his forelegs over until his hoofs sank deep into the side of the cut. Then with a gentle lurch he drew his hind legs after him, and an instant later was gingerly descending, his rider leaning far back in the saddle, the reins held loosely in his hands.

It looked simple enough, the way the black was doing it, and Trevison’s demeanor indicated perfect trust in the animal and in his own skill as a rider. But the laborers ceased working and watched, grouped, gesturing; the staccato coughing of the steam shovel died gaspingly, as the engineer shut off the engine and stood, rooted, his mouth agape; the fireman in the dinky engine held tightly to the cab window. Murphy muttered in astonishment, and Carson chuckled admiringly, for the descent was a full hundred feet, and there were few men in the railroad gang that would have dared to risk the wall on foot.

The black had gained impetus with distance. A third of the slope had been covered when he struck some loose earth that shifted with his weight and carried his hind quarters to one side and off balance. Instantly the rider swung his body toward the wall of the cut, twisted in the saddle and swung the black squarely around, the animal scrambling like a cat. The black stood, braced, facing the crest of the cut, while the dislodged earth, preceded by pebbles and small boulders, clattered

down behind him. Then, under the urge of Trevison's gentle hand and voice, the black wheeled again and faced the descent.

"I wouldn't ride a horse down there for the damned railroad!" declared Murphy.

"Thru for ye – ye c'udn't," grinned Carson.

"A man could ride anywhere with a horse like that!" remarked the fireman, fascinated.

"Ye'd have brought a cropper in that slide, an' the road wud be minus a coal-heaver!" said Carson. "Wud ye luk at him now!"

The black was coming down, forelegs asprawl, his hind quarters sliding in the sand. Twice as his fore-hoofs struck some slight obstruction his hind quarters lifted and he stood, balanced, on his forelegs, and each time Trevison averted the impending catastrophe by throwing himself far back in the saddle and slapping the black's hips sharply.

"He's a circus rider!" shouted Carson, gleefully. "He's got the coolest head of anny mon I iver seen! He's a divvil, thot mon!"

The descent was spectacular, but it was apparent that Trevison cared little for its effect upon his audience, for as he struck the level and came riding toward Carson and the others, there was no sign of self-consciousness in his face or manner. He smiled faintly, though, as a cheer from the laborers reached his ears. In the next instant he had halted Nigger near the dinky engine, and Carson was introducing him to the engineer and fireman.

Looking at Trevison "close up," Murphy was constrained to mentally label him "some man," and he regretted his deprecatory words of a few minutes before. Plainly, there was no "show-off stuff" in Trevison. His feat of riding down the wall of the cut had not been performed to impress anyone; the look of reckless abandon in the otherwise serene eyes that held Murphy's steadily, convinced the engineer that the man had merely responded to a dare-devil impulse. There was something in Trevison's appearance that suggested an entire disregard of fear. The engineer had watched the face of a brother of his craft one night when the latter had been driving a roaring monster down a grade at record-breaking speed into a wall of rain-soaked darkness out of which might thunder at any instant another roaring monster, coming in the opposite direction. There had been a mistake in orders, and the train was running against time to make a switch. Several times during the ride Murphy had caught a glimpse of the engineer's face, and the eyes had haunted him since – defiance of death, contempt of consequences, had been reflected in them. Trevison's eyes reminded him of the engineer's. But in Trevison's eyes was an added expression – cold humor. The engineer of Murphy's recollection would have met death dauntlessly. Trevison would meet it no less dauntlessly, but would mock at it. Murphy looked long and admiringly at him, noting the deep chest, the heavy muscles, the blue-black sheen of his freshly-shaven chin and jaw under the tan; the firm, mobile mouth, the aggressive set to his head. Murphy set his age down at twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Murphy was sixty himself – the age that appreciates, and secretly envies, the virility of youth. Carson was complimenting Trevison on his descent of the wall of the cut.

"You're a daisy rider, me bhoy!"

"Nigger's a clever horse," smiled Trevison. Murphy was pleased that he was giving the animal the credit. "Nigger's well trained. He's wiser than some men. Tricky, too." He patted the sleek, muscular neck of the beast and the animal whinnied gently. "He's careful of his master, though," laughed Trevison. "A man pulled a gun on me, right after I'd got Nigger. He had the drop, and he meant business. I had to shoot. To disconcert the fellow, I had to jump Nigger against him. Since then, whenever Nigger sees a gun in anyone's hand, he thinks it's time to bowl that man over. There's no holding him. He won't even stand for anyone pulling a handkerchief out of a hip pocket when I'm on him." Trevison grinned. "Try it, Carson, but get that boulder between you and Nigger before you do."

"I don't like the look av the baste's eye," declined the Irishman. "I wudn't doubt ye're worrud for the wurrold. But he wudn't jump a mon divvil a bit quicker than his master, or I'm a sinner!"

Trevison's eyes twinkled. "You're a good construction boss, Carson. But I'm glad to see that you're getting more considerate."

"Av what?"

"Of your men." Trevison glanced back; he had looked once before, out of the tail of his eye. The laborers were idling in the cut, enjoying the brief rest, taking advantage of Carson's momentary dereliction, for the last car had been filled.

"I'll be rayported yet, begob!"

Carson waved his hands, and the laborers dove for the flat-cars. When the last man was aboard, the engine coughed and moved slowly away. Carson climbed into the engine-cab, with a shout: "So-long bhoy!" to Trevison. The latter held Nigger with a firm rein, for the animal was dancing at the noise made by the engine, and as the cars filed past him, running faster now, the laborers grinned at him and respectfully raised their hats. For they had come from one of the Latin countries of Europe, and for them, in the person of this heroic figure of a man who had ridden his horse down the steep wall of the cut, was romance.

CHAPTER II IN WHICH HATRED IS BORN

For some persons romance dwells in the new and the unusual, and for other persons it dwells not at all. Certain of Rosalind Benham's friends would have been able to see nothing but the crudities and squalor of Manti, viewing it as Miss Benham did, from one of the windows of her father's private car, which early that morning had been shunted upon a switch at the outskirts of town. Those friends would have seen nothing but a new town of weird and picturesque buildings, with more saloons than seemed to be needed in view of the noticeable lack of citizens. They would have shuddered at the dust-windrowed street, the litter of refuse, the dismal lonesomeness, the forlornness, the utter isolation, the desolation. Those friends would have failed to note the vast, silent reaches of green-brown plain that stretched and yawned into aching distances; the wonderfully blue and cloudless sky that covered it; they would have overlooked the timber groves that spread here and there over the face of the land, with their lure of mystery. No thoughts of the bigness of this country would have crept in upon them – except as they might have been reminded of the dreary distance from the glitter and the tinsel of the East. The mountains, distant and shining, would have meant nothing to them; the strong, pungent aroma of the sage might have nauseated them.

But Miss Benham had caught her first glimpse of Manti and the surrounding country from a window of her berth in the car that morning just at dawn, and she loved it. She had lain for some time cuddled up in her bed, watching the sun rise over the distant mountains, and the breath of the sage, sweeping into the half-opened window, had carried with it something stronger – the lure of a virgin country.

Aunt Agatha Benham, chaperon, forty – maiden lady from choice – various uncharitable persons hinted humorously of pursued eligibles – found Rosalind gazing ecstatically out of the berth window when she stirred and awoke shortly after nine. Agatha climbed out of her berth and sat on its edge, yawning sleepily.

"This is Manti, I suppose," she said acridly, shoving the curtain aside and looking out of the window. "We should consider ourselves fortunate not to have had an adventure with Indians or outlaws. We have *that* to be thankful for, at least."

Agatha's sarcasm failed to penetrate the armor of Rosalind's unconcern – as Agatha's sarcasms always did. Agatha occupied a place in Rosalind's affections, but not in her scheme of enjoyment. Since she *must* be chaperoned, Agatha was acceptable to her. But that did not mean that she made a confidante of Agatha. For Agatha was looking at the world through the eyes of Forty, and the vision of Twenty is somewhat more romantic.

"Whatever your father thought of in permitting you to come out here is a mystery to me," pursued Agatha severely, as she fussed with her hair. "It was like him, though, to go to all this trouble – for me – merely to satisfy your curiosity about the country. I presume we shall be returning shortly."

"Don't be impatient, Aunty," said the girl, still gazing out of the window. "I intend to stretch my legs before I return."

"Mercy!" gasped Agatha; "such language! This barbaric country has affected you already, my dear. Legs!" She summoned horror into her expression, but it was lost on Rosalind, who still gazed out of the window. Indeed, from a certain light in the girl's eyes it might be adduced that she took some delight in shocking Agatha.

"I shall stay here quite some time, I think," said Rosalind. "Daddy said there was no hurry; that he might come out here in a month, himself. And I have been dying to get away from the petty

conventionalities of the East. I am going to be absolutely human for a while, Aunty. I am going to 'rough it' – that is, as much as one can rough it when one is domiciled in a private car. I am going to get a horse and have a look at the country. And Aunty –” here the girl's voice came chokingly, as though some deep emotion agitated her “ – I am going to ride 'straddle'!”

She did not look to see whether Agatha had survived this second shock – but Agatha had survived many such shocks. It was only when, after a silence of several minutes, Agatha spoke again, that the girl seemed to remember there was anybody in the compartment with her. Agatha's voice was laden with contempt:

“Well, I don't know what you see in this outlandish place to compensate for what you miss at home.”

The girl did not look around. “A man on a black horse, Aunty,” she said. “He has passed here twice. I have never seen such a horse. I don't remember to have ever seen a man quite like the rider. He looks positively – er —*heroish*! He is built like a Roman gladiator, he rides the black horse as though he had been sculptured on it, and his head has a set that makes one feel he has a mind of his own. He has furnished me with the only thrill that I have felt since we left New York!”

“He hasn't seen *you*!” said Agatha, coldly; “of course you made sure of *that*?”

The girl looked mischievously at the older woman. She ran her fingers through her hair – brown and vigorous-looking – then shaded her eyes with her hands and gazed at her reflection in a mirror near by. In *deshabille* she looked fresh and bewitching. She had looked like a radiant goddess to “Brand” Trevison, when he had accidentally caught a glimpse of her face at the window while she had been watching him. He had not known that the lady had just awakened from her beauty sleep. He would have sworn that she needed no beauty sleep. And he had deliberately ridden past the car again, hoping to get another glimpse of her. The girl smiled.

“I am not so positive about that, Aunty. Let us not be prudish. If he saw me, he made no sign, and therefore he is a gentleman.” She looked out of the window and smiled again. “There he is now, Aunty!”

It was Agatha who parted the curtains, this time. The horseman's face was toward the window, and he saw her. An expression of puzzled astonishment glowed in his eyes, superseded quickly by disappointment, whereat Rosalind giggled softly and hid her tousled head in a pillow.

“The impertinent brute! Rosalind, he dared to look directly at me, and I am sure he would have winked at me in another instant! A gentleman!” she said, coldly.

“Don't be severe, Aunty. I'm sure he is a gentleman, for all his curiosity. See – there he is, riding away without so much as looking back!”

Half an hour later the two women entered the dining-room just as a big, rather heavy-featured, but handsome man, came through the opposite door. He greeted both ladies effusively, and smilingly looked at his watch.

“You over-slept this morning, ladies – don't you think? It's after ten. I've been rummaging around town, getting acquainted. It's rather an unfinished place, after the East. But in time –” He made a gesture, perhaps a silent prophecy that one day Manti would out-strip New York, and bowed the ladies to seats at table, talking while the colored waiter moved obsequiously about them.

“I thought at first that your father was over-enthusiastic about Manti, Miss Benham,” he continued. “But the more I see of it the firmer becomes my conviction that your father was right. There are tremendous possibilities for growth. Even now it is a rather fertile country. We shall make it hum, once the railroad and the dam are completed. It is a logical site for a town – there is no other within a hundred miles in any direction.”

“And you are to anticipate the town's growth – isn't that it, Mr. Corrigan?”

“You put it very comprehensively, Miss Benham; but perhaps it would be better to say that I am the advance agent of prosperity – that sounds rather less mercenary. We must not allow the impression to get abroad that mere money is to be the motive power behind our efforts.”

“But money-making is the real motive, after all?” said Miss Benham, dryly.

“I submit there are several driving forces in life, and that money-making is not the least compelling of them.”

“The other forces?” It seemed to Corrigan that Miss Benham’s face was very serious. But Agatha, who knew Rosalind better than Corrigan knew her, was aware that the girl was merely demurely sarcastic.

“Love and hatred are next,” he said, slowly.

“You would place money-making before love?” Rosalind bantered.

“Money adds the proper flavor to love,” laughed Corrigan. The laugh was laden with subtle significance and he looked straight at the girl, a deep fire slumbering in his eyes. “Yes,” he said slowly, “money-making is a great passion. I have it. But I can hate, and love. And when I do either, it will be strongly. And then – ”

Agatha cleared her throat impatiently. Corrigan colored slightly, and Miss Benham smothered something, artfully directing the conversation into less personal channels:

“You are going to build manufactories, organize banks, build municipal power-houses, speculate in real estate, and such things, I suppose?”

“And build a dam. We already have a bank here, Miss Benham.”

“Will father be interested in those things?”

“Silently. You understand, that being president of the railroad, your father must keep in the background. The actual promoting of these enterprises will be done by me.”

Miss Benham looked dreamily out of the window. Then she turned to Corrigan and gazed at him meditatively, though the expression in her eyes was so obviously impersonal that it chilled any amorous emotion that Corrigan might have felt.

“I suppose you are right,” she said. “It must be thrilling to feel a conscious power over the destiny of a community, to direct its progress, to manage it, and – er – figuratively to grab industries by their – ” She looked slyly at Agatha “ – lower extremities and shake the dollars out of them. Yes,” she added, with a wistful glance through the window; “that must be more exciting than being merely in love.”

Agatha again followed Rosalind’s gaze and saw the black horse standing in front of a store. She frowned, and observed stiffly:

“It seems to me that the people in these small places – such as Manti – are not capable of managing the large enterprises that Mr. Corrigan speaks of.” She looked at Rosalind, and the girl knew that she was deprecating the rider of the black horse. Rosalind smiled sweetly.

“Oh, I am sure there must be *some* intelligent persons among them!”

“As a rule,” stated Corrigan, dogmatically, “the first citizens of any town are an uncouth and worthless set.”

“The Four Hundred would take exception to that!” laughed Rosalind.

Corrigan laughed with her. “You know what I mean, of course. Take Manti, for instance. Or any new western town. The lowest elements of society are represented; most of the people are very ignorant and criminal.”

The girl looked sharply at Corrigan, though he was not aware of the glance. Was there a secret understanding between Corrigan and Agatha? Had Corrigan also some knowledge of the rider’s pilgrimages past the car window? Both had maligned the rider. But the girl had seen intelligence on the face of the rider, and something in the set of his head had told her that he was not a criminal. And despite his picturesque rigging, and the atmosphere of the great waste places that seemed to envelop him, he had made a deeper impression on her than had Corrigan, darkly handsome, well-groomed, a polished product of polite convention and breeding, whom her father wanted her to marry.

“Well,” she said, looking at the black horse; “I intend to observe Manti’s citizens more closely before attempting to express an opinion.”

Half an hour later, in response to Corrigan's invitation, Rosalind was walking down Manti's one street, Corrigan beside her. Corrigan had donned khaki clothing, a broad, felt hat, boots, neckerchief. But in spite of the change of garments there was a poise, an atmosphere about him, that hinted strongly of the graces of civilization. Rosalind felt a flash of pride in him. He was big, masterful, fascinating.

Manti seemed to be fraudulent, farcical, upon closer inspection. For one thing, its crudeness was more glaring, and its unpainted board fronts looked flimsy, transient. Compared to the substantial buildings of the East, Manti's structures were hovels. Here was the primitive town in the first flush of its creation. Miss Benham did not laugh, for a mental picture rose before her – a bit of wild New England coast, a lowering sky, a group of Old-world pilgrims shivering around a blazing fire in the open, a ship in the offing. That also was a band of first citizens; that picture and the one made by Manti typified the spirit of America.

There were perhaps twenty buildings. Corrigan took her into several of them. But, she noted, he did not take her into the store in front of which was the black horse. She was introduced to several of the proprietors. Twice she overheard parts of the conversation carried on between Corrigan and the proprietors. In each case the conversation was the same:

“Do you own this property?”

“The building.”

“Who owns the land?”

“A company in New York.”

Corrigan introduced himself as the manager of the company, and spoke of erecting an office. The two men spoke about their “leases.” The latter seemed to have been limited to two months.

“See me before your lease expires,” she heard Corrigan tell the men.

“Does the railroad own the town site?” asked Rosalind as they emerged from the last store.

“Yes. And leases are going to be more valuable presently.”

“You don't mean that you are going to extort money from them – after they have gone to the expense of erecting buildings?”

His smile was pleasant. “They will be treated with the utmost consideration, Miss Benham.”

He ushered her into the bank. Like the other buildings, the bank was of frame construction. Its only resemblance to a bank was in the huge safe that stood in the rear of the room, and a heavy wire netting behind which ran a counter. Some chairs and a desk were behind the counter, and at the desk sat a man of probably forty, who got up at the entrance of his visitors and approached them, grinning and holding out a hand to Corrigan.

“So you're here at last, Jeff,” he said. “I saw the car on the switch this morning. The show will open pretty soon now, eh?” He looked inquiringly at Rosalind, and Corrigan presented her. She heard the man's name, “Mr. Crofton Braman,” softly spoken by her escort, and she acknowledged the introduction formally and walked to the door, where she stood looking out into the street.

Braman repelled her – she did not know why. A certain crafty gleam of his eyes, perhaps, strangely blended with a bold intentness as he had looked at her; a too effusive manner; a smoothly ingratiating smile – these evidences of character somehow made her link him with schemes and plots.

She did not reflect long over Braman. Across the street she saw the rider of the black horse standing beside the animal at a hitching rail in front of the store that Corrigan had passed without entering. Viewed from this distance, the rider's face was more distinct, and she saw that he was good-looking – quite as good-looking as Corrigan, though of a different type. Standing, he did not seem to be so tall as Corrigan, nor was he quite so bulky. But he was lithe and powerful, and in his movements, as he unhitched the black horse, threw the reins over its head and patted its neck, was an ease and grace that made Rosalind's eyes sparkle with admiration.

The rider seemed to be in no hurry to mount his horse. The girl was certain that twice as he patted the animal's neck he stole glances at her, and a stain appeared in her cheeks, for she remembered the car window.

And then she heard a voice greet the rider. A man came out of the door of one of the saloons, glanced at the rider and raised his voice, joyously:

“Well, if it ain't ol' 'Brand'! Where in hell you been keepin' yourself? I ain't seen you for a week!”

Friendship was speaking here, and the girl's heart leaped in sympathy. She watched with a smile as the other man reached the rider's side and wrung his hand warmly. Such effusiveness would have been thought hypocritical in the East; humanness was always frowned upon. But what pleased the girl most was this evidence that the rider was well liked. Additional evidence on this point collected quickly. It came from several doors, in the shapes of other men who had heard the first man's shout, and presently the rider was surrounded by many friends.

The girl was deeply interested. She forgot Braman, Corrigan – forgot that she was standing in the doorway of the bank. She was seeing humanity stripped of conventionalities; these people were not governed by the intimidating regard for public opinion that so effectively stifled warm impulses among the persons she knew.

She heard another man call to him, and she found herself saying: “‘Brand’! What an odd name!” But it seemed to fit him; he was of a type that one sees rarely – clean, big, athletic, virile, magnetic. His personality dominated the group; upon him interest centered heavily. Nor did his popularity appear to destroy his poise or make him self-conscious. The girl watched closely for signs of that. Had he shown the slightest trace of self-worship she would have lost interest in him. He appeared to be a trifle embarrassed, and that made him doubly attractive to her. He bantered gayly with the men, and several times his replies to some quip convulsed the others.

And then while she dreamily watched him, she heard several voices insist that he “show Nigger off.” He demurred, and when they again insisted, he spoke lowly to them, and she felt their concentrated gaze upon her. She knew that he had declined to “show Nigger off” because of her presence. “Nigger,” she guessed, was his horse. She secretly hoped he would overcome his prejudice, for she loved the big black, and was certain that any performance he participated in would be well worth seeing. So, in order to influence the rider she turned her back, pretending not to be interested. But when she heard exclamations of satisfaction from the group of men she wheeled again, to see that the rider had mounted and was sitting in the saddle, grinning at a man who had produced a harmonica and was rubbing it on a sleeve of his shirt, preparatory to placing it to his lips.

The rider had gone too far now to back out, and Rosalind watched him in frank curiosity. And in the next instant, when the strains of the harmonica smote the still morning air, Nigger began to prance.

What followed reminded the girl of a scene in the ring of a circus. The horse, proud, dignified, began to pace slowly to the time of the accompanying music, executing difficult steps that must have tried the patience of both animal and trainer during the teaching period; the rider, lithe, alert, proud also, smiling his pleasure.

Rosalind stood there long, watching. It was a clever exhibition, and she found herself wondering about the rider. Had he always lived in the West?

The animal performed a dozen feats of the circus arena, and the girl was so deeply interested in him that she did not observe Corrigan when he emerged from the bank, stepped down into the street and stood watching the rider. She noticed him though, when the black, forced to her side of the street through the necessity of executing a turn, passed close to the easterner. And then, with something of a shock, she saw Corrigan smiling derisively. At the sound of applause from the group on the opposite side of the street, Corrigan's derision became a sneer. Miss Benham felt

resentment; a slight color stained her cheeks. For she could not understand why Corrigan should show displeasure over this clean and clever amusement. She was looking full at Corrigan when he turned and caught her gaze. The light in his eyes was positively venomous.

“It is a rather dramatic bid for your interest, isn’t it, Miss Benham?” he said.

His voice came during a lull that followed the applause. It reached Rosalind, full and resonant. It carried to the rider of the black horse, and glancing sidelong at him, Rosalind saw his face whiten under the deep tan upon it. It carried, too, to the other side of the street, and the girl saw faces grow suddenly tense; noted the stiffening of bodies. The flat, ominous silence that followed was unreal and oppressive. Out of it came the rider’s voice as he urged the black to a point within three or four paces of Corrigan and sat in the saddle, looking at him. And now for the first time Rosalind had a clear, full view of the rider’s face and a quiver of trepidation ran over her. For the lean jaws were corded, the mouth was firm and set – she knew his teeth were clenched; it was the face of a man who would not be trifled with. His chin was shoved forward slightly; somehow it helped to express the cold humor that shone in his narrowed, steady eyes. His voice, when he spoke to Corrigan, had a metallic quality that rang ominously in the silence that had continued:

“Back up your play or take it back,” he said slowly.

Corrigan had not changed his position. He stared fixedly at the rider; his only sign of emotion over the latter’s words was a quickening of the eyes. He idly tapped with his fingers on the sleeve of his khaki shirt, where the arm passed under them to fold over the other. His voice easily matched the rider’s in its quality of quietness:

“My conversation was private. You are interfering without cause.”

Watching the rider, filled with a sudden, breathless premonition of impending tragedy, Rosalind saw his eyes glitter with the imminence of physical action. Distressed, stirred by an impulse to avert what threatened, she took a step forward, speaking rapidly to Corrigan:

“Mr. Corrigan, this is positively silly! You know you were hardly discreet!”

Corrigan smiled coldly, and the girl knew that it was not a question of right or wrong between the two men, but a conflict of spirit. She did not know that hatred had been born here; that instinctively each knew the other for a foe, and that this present clash was to be merely one battle of the war that would be waged between them if both survived.

Not for an instant did Corrigan’s eyes wander from those of the rider. He saw from them that he might expect no further words. None came. The rider’s right hand fell to the butt of the pistol that swung low on his right hip. Simultaneously, Corrigan’s hand dropped to his hip pocket.

Rosalind saw the black horse lunge forward as though propelled by a sudden spring. A dust cloud rose from his hoofs, and Corrigan was lost in it. When the dust swirled away, Corrigan was disclosed to the girl’s view, doubled queerly on the ground, face down. The black horse had struck him with its shoulder – he seemed to be badly hurt.

For a moment the girl stood, swaying, looking around appealingly, startled wonder, dismay and horror in her eyes. It had happened so quickly that she was stunned. She had but one conscious emotion – thankfulness that neither man had used his pistol.

No one moved. The girl thought some of them might have come to Corrigan’s assistance. She did not know that the ethics forbade interference, that a fight was between the fighters until one acknowledged defeat.

Corrigan’s face was in the dust; he had not moved. The black horse stood, quietly now, several feet distant, and presently the rider dismounted, walked to Corrigan and turned him over. He worked the fallen man’s arms and legs, and moved his neck, then knelt and listened at his chest. He got up and smiled mirthlessly at the girl.

“He’s just knocked out, Miss Benham. It’s nothing serious. Nigger – ”

“You coward!” she interrupted, her voice thick with passion.

His lips whitened, but he smiled faintly.

“Nigger – ” he began again.

“Coward! Coward!” she repeated, standing rigid before him, her hands clenched, her lips stiff with scorn.

He smiled resignedly and turned away. She stood watching him, hating him, hurling mental anathemas after him, until she saw him pass through the doorway of the bank. Then she turned to see Corrigan just getting up.

Not a man in the group across the street had moved. They, too, had watched Trevison go into the bank, and now their glances shifted to the girl and Corrigan. Their sympathies, she saw plainly, were with Trevison; several of them smiled as the easterner got to his feet.

Corrigan was pale and breathless, but he smiled at her and held her off when she essayed to help him brush the dust from his clothing. He did that himself, and mopped his face with a handkerchief.

“It wasn’t fair,” whispered the girl, sympathetically. “I almost wish that you had killed him!” she added, vindictively.

“My, what a fire-eater!” he said with a broad smile. She thought he looked handsomer with the dust upon him, than he had ever seemed when polished and immaculate.

“Are you badly hurt?” she asked, with a concern that made him look quickly at her.

He laughed and patted her arm lightly. “Not a bit hurt,” he said. “Come, those men are staring.”

He escorted her to the step of the private car, and lingered a moment there to make his apology for his part in the trouble. He told her frankly, that he was to blame, knowing that Trevison’s action in riding him down would more than outweigh any resentment she might feel over his mistake in bringing about the clash in her presence.

She graciously forgave him, and a little later she entered the car alone; he telling her that he would be in presently, after he returned from the station where he intended to send a telegram. She gave him a smile, standing on the platform of the car, dazzling, eloquent with promise. It made his heart leap with exultation, and as he went his way toward the station he voiced a sentiment:

“Entirely worth being ridden down for.”

But his jaws set savagely as he approached the station. He did not go into the station, but around the outside wall of it, passing between it and another building and coming at last to the front of the bank building. He had noted that the black horse was still standing in front of the bank building, and that the group of men had dispersed. The street was deserted.

Corrigan’s movements became quick and sinister. He drew a heavy revolver out of a hip pocket, shoved its butt partly up his sleeve and concealed the cylinder and barrel in the palm of his hand. Then he stepped into the door of the bank. He saw Trevison standing at one of the grated windows of the wire netting, talking with Braman. Corrigan had taken several steps into the room before Trevison heard him, and then Trevison turned, to find himself looking into the gaping muzzle of Corrigan’s pistol.

“You didn’t run,” said the latter. “Thought it was all over, I suppose. Well, it isn’t.” He was grinning coldly, and was now deliberate and unexcited, though two crimson spots glowed in his cheeks, betraying the presence of passion.

“Don’t reach for that gun!” he warned Trevison. “I’ll blow a hole through you if you wriggle a finger!” Watching Trevison, he spoke to Braman: “You got a back room here?”

The banker stepped around the end of the counter and opened a door behind the wire netting. “Right here,” he directed.

Corrigan indicated the door with a jerking movement of the head. “Move!” he said shortly, to Trevison. The latter’s lips parted in a cold, amused grin, and he hesitated slightly, yielding presently.

An instant later the three were standing in the middle of a large room, empty except for a cot upon which Braman slept, some clothing hanging on the walls, a bench and a chair. Corrigan ordered the banker to clear the room. When that had been done, Corrigan spoke again to the banker:

“Get his gun.”

A snapping alertness of the eyes indicated that Trevison knew what was coming. That was the reason he had been so quiescent this far; it was why he made no objection when Braman passed his hands over his clothing in search of other weapons, after his pistol had been lifted from its holster by the banker.

“Now get out of here and lock the doors!” ordered Corrigan. “And let nobody come in!”

Braman retired, grinning expectantly.

Then Corrigan backed away until he came to the wall. Reaching far up, he hung his revolver on a nail.

“Now,” he said to Trevison, his voice throaty from passion; “take off your damned foolish trappings. I’m going to knock hell out of you!”

CHAPTER III

BEATING A GOOD MAN

Trevison had not moved. He had watched the movements of the other closely, noting his huge bulk, his lithe motions, the play of his muscles as he backed across the room to dispose of the pistol. At Corrigan's words though, Trevison's eyes glowed with a sudden fire, his teeth gleamed, his straight lips parting in a derisive smile. The other's manner toward him had twanged the chord of animosity that had been between them since the first exchange of glances, and he was as eager as Corrigan for the clash that must now come. He had known that the first conflict had been an unfinished thing. He laughed in sheer delight, though that delight was tempered with savage determination.

"Save your boasts," he taunted.

Corrigan sneered. "You won't look so damned attractive when you leave this room." He took off his hat and tossed it into a corner, then turned to Trevison with an ugly grin.

"Ready?" he said.

"Quite." Trevison had not accepted Corrigan's suggestion about taking off his "damned foolish trappings," and he still wore them – cartridge belt, leather chaps, spurs. But now he followed Corrigan's lead and threw his hat from him. Then he crouched and faced Corrigan.

They circled cautiously, Trevison's spurs jingling musically. Then Trevison went in swiftly, jabbing with his left, throwing off Corrigan's vicious counter with the elbow, and ripping his right upward. The fist met Corrigan's arm as the latter blocked, and the shock forced both men back a step. Corrigan grinned with malicious interest and crowded forward.

"That's good," he said; "you're not a novice. I hope you're not a quitter. I've quite a bit to hand you for riding me down."

Trevison grinned derisively, but made no answer. He knew he must save his wind for this man. Corrigan was strong, clever; his forearm, which had blocked Trevison's uppercut, had seemed like a bar of steel.

Trevison went in again with the grim purpose of discovering just how strong his antagonist was. Corrigan evaded a stiff left jab intended for his chin, and his own right cross missed as Trevison ducked into a clinch. With arms locked they strained, legs braced, their lungs heaving as they wrestled, doggedly.

Corrigan stood like a post, not giving an inch. Vainly Trevison writhed, seeking a position which would betray a weakened muscle, but though he exerted every ounce of his own mighty strength Corrigan held him even. They broke at last, mutually, and Corrigan must have felt the leathery quality of Trevison's muscles, for his face was set in serious lines. His eyes glittered malignantly as he caught a confident smile on Trevison's lips, and he bored in silently, swinging both hands.

Trevison had been the cool boxer, carefully trying out his opponent. He had felt little emotion save that of self-protection. At the beginning of the fight he would have apologized to Corrigan – with reservations. Now he was stirred with the lust of battle. Corrigan's malignance had struck a responsive passion in him, and the sodden impact of fist on flesh, the matching of strength against strength, the strain of iron muscles, the contact of their bodies, the sting and burn of blows, had aroused the latent savage in him. He was still cool, however, but it was the crafty coolness of the trained fighter, and as Corrigan crowded him he whipped in ripping blows that sent the big man's head back. Corrigan paid little heed to the blows; he shook them off, grunting. Blood was trickling thinly from his lips; he spat bestially over Trevison's shoulder in a clinch, and tried to sweep the latter from his feet.

The agility of the cow-puncher saved him, and he went dancing out of harm's way, his spurs jingling. Corrigan was after him with a rush. A heavy blow caught Trevison on the right side of the neck just below the ear and sent him, tottering, against the wall of the building, from which he rebounded like a rubber ball, smothering Corrigan with an avalanche of deadening straight-arm punches that brought a glassy stare into Corrigan's eyes. The big man's head wobbled, and Trevison crowded in, intent on ending the fight quickly, but Corrigan covered instinctively, and when Trevison in his eagerness missed a blow, the big man clinched with him and hung on doggedly until his befogged brain could clear. For a few minutes they rocked around the room, their heels thudding on the bare boards of the floor, creating sounds that filtered through the enclosing walls and smote the silence of the outside world with resonant rumblings. Mercilessly, Trevison hammered at the heavy head that sought a haven on his shoulder. Corrigan had been stunned and wanted no more long range work. He tried to lock his big arms around the other's waist in an attempt to wrestle, realizing that in that sort of a contest lay his only hope of victory, but Trevison, agile, alert to his danger, slipped elusively from the grasping hands and thudded uppercuts to the other's mouth and jaws that landed with sickening force. But none of the blows landed on a vital spot, and Corrigan hung grimly on.

At last, lashing viciously, wriggling, squirming, swinging around in a wide circle to get out of Corrigan's clutches, Trevison broke the clinch and stood off, breathing heavily, summoning his reserve strength for a finishing blow. Corrigan had been fearfully punished during the last few minutes, but he was gradually recovering from his dizziness, and he grinned hideously at Trevison through his smashed lips. He surged forward, reminding Trevison of a wounded bear, but Trevison retreated warily as he measured the distance from which he would drive the blow that would end it.

He was still retreating, describing a wide circle. He swung around toward the door through which Braman had gone – his back was toward it. He did not see the door open slightly as he passed; he had not seen Braman's face in the slight crevice that had been between door and jamb all along. Nor did he see the banker jab at his legs with the handle of a broom. But he felt the handle hit his legs. It tripped him, forcing him to lose his balance. As he fell he saw Corrigan's eyes brighten, and he twisted sideways to escape a heavy blow that Corrigan aimed at him. He only partially evaded it – it struck him glancingly, a little to the left of the chin, stunning him, and he fell awkwardly, his left arm doubling under him. The agonizing pain that shot through the arm as he crumpled to the floor told him that it had been broken at the wrist. A queer stupor came upon him, during which he neither felt nor saw. Dimly, he sensed that Corrigan was striking at him; with a sort of vague half-consciousness he felt that the blows were landing. But they did not hurt, and he laughed at Corrigan's futile efforts. The only feeling he had was a blind rage against Braman, for he was certain that it had been the banker who had tripped him. Then he saw the broom on the floor and the crevice in the doorway. He got to his feet some way, Corrigan hanging to him, raining blows upon him, and he laughed aloud as, his vision clearing a little, he saw Corrigan's mouth, weak, open, drooling blood, and remembered that when Braman had tripped him Corrigan had hardly been in shape to do much effective hitting. He tottered away from Corrigan, taunting him, though afterwards he could not remember what his words were. Also, he heard Corrigan cursing him, though he could never remember *his* words, either. He tried to swing his left arm as Corrigan came within range of it, but found he could not lift it, and so ducked the savage blow that Corrigan aimed at him and slipped sideways, bringing his right into play. Several times as they circled he uppercut Corrigan with the right, he retreating, side-stepping; Corrigan following him doggedly, slashing venomously at him, hitting him occasionally. Corrigan could not hurt him, and he could not resist laughing at Corrigan's face – it was so hideously repulsive.

A man came out of the front door of Hanrahan's saloon across the street from the bank building, and stood in the street for a moment, looking about him. Had Miss Benham seen the man she would have recognized him as the one who had previously come out of the saloon to greet

the rider with: “Well, if it ain’t ol’ ‘Brand’!” He saw the black horse standing in front of the bank building, but Trevison was nowhere in sight. The man mumbled: “I don’t want him to git away without me seein’ him,” and crossed the street to the bank window and peered inside. He saw Braman peering through a half-open door at the rear of the banking room, and he heard sounds – queer, jarring sounds that made the glass window in front of him rattle and quiver.

He dove around to the side of the building and looked in a window. He stood for a moment, watching with bulging eyes, half drew a pistol, thought better of the notion and replaced it, and then darted back to the saloon from which he had emerged, croaking hoarsely: “Fight! fight!”

Trevison had not had the agility to evade one of Corrigan’s heavy blows. It had caught him as he had tried to duck, striking fairly on the point of the jaw, and he was badly dazed. But he still grinned mockingly at his enemy as the latter followed him, tensed, eager, snarling. He evaded other blows that would have finished him – through instinct, it seemed to Corrigan; and though there was little strength left in him he kept working his right fist through Corrigan’s guard and into his face, pecking away at it until it seemed to be cut to ribbons.

Voices came from somewhere in the banking room, voices raised in altercation. Neither of the two men, raging around the rear room, heard them – they had become insensate savages oblivious of their surroundings, drunken with passion, with the blood-mania gripping their brains.

Trevison had brought the last ounce of his remaining strength into play and had landed a crushing blow on Corrigan’s chin. The big man was wabbling crazily about in the general direction of Trevison, swinging his arms wildly, Trevison evading him, snapping home blows that landed smackingly without doing much damage. They served merely to keep Corrigan in the semi-comatose state in which Trevison’s last hard blow had left him. And that last blow had sapped Trevison’s strength; his spirit alone had survived the drunken orgy of rage and hatred. As the tumult around him increased – the tramp of many feet, scuffling; harsh, discordant voices, curses, yells of protest, threats – not a sound of which he heard, so intent was he with his work of battering his adversary, he ceased to retreat from Corrigan, and as the latter shuffled toward him he stiffened and drove his right fist into the big man’s face. Corrigan cursed and grunted, but lunged forward again. They swung at the same instant – Trevison’s right just grazing Corrigan’s jaw; Corrigan’s blow, full and sweeping, thudding against Trevison’s left ear. Trevison’s head rolled, his chin sagged to his chest, and his knees doubled like hinges. Corrigan smirked malevolently and drove forward again. But he was too eager, and his blows missed the reeling target that, with arms hanging wearily at his sides, still instinctively kept to his feet, the taunting smile, now becoming bitterly contemptuous, still on his face. It meant that though exhausted, his arm broken, he felt only scorn for Corrigan’s prowess as a fighter.

Fighting off the weariness he lunged forward again, swinging the now deadened right arm at the blur Corrigan made in front of him. Something collided with him – a human form – and thinking it was Corrigan, clinching with him, he grasped it. The momentum of the object, and his own weakness, carried him back and down, and with the object in his grasp he fell, underneath, to the floor. He saw a face close to his – Braman’s – and remembering that the banker had tripped him, he began to work his right fist into the other’s face.

He would have finished Braman. He did not know that the man who had greeted him as “ol’ ‘Brand’” had smashed the banker in the forehead with the butt of a pistol when the banker had tried to bar his progress at the doorway; he was not aware that the force of the blow had hurled Braman against him, and that the latter, half unconscious, was not defending himself. He would not have cared had he known these things, for he was fighting blindly, doggedly, recklessly – fighting two men, he thought. And though he sensed that there could be but one end to such a struggle, he hammered away with ferocious malignance, and in the abandon of his passion in this extremity he was recklessly swinging his broken left arm, driving it at Braman, groaning each time the fist landed.

He felt hands grasping him, and he fought them off, smashing weakly at faces that appeared around him as he was dragged to his feet. He heard a voice say: “His arm’s bruk,” and the voice seemed to clear the atmosphere. He paused, holding back a blow, and the dancing blur of faces assumed a proper aspect and he saw the man who had hit the banker.

“Hello Mullarky!” he grinned, reeling drunkenly in the arms of his friends. “Come to see the picnic? Where’s my – ”

He saw Corrigan leaning against a wall of the room and lurched toward him. A dozen hands held him back – the room was full of men; and as his brain cleared he recognized some of them. He heard threats, mutterings, against Corrigan, and he laughed, bidding the men to hold their peace, that it was a “fair fight.” Corrigan was unmoved by the threats – as he was unmoved by Trevison’s words. He leaned against the wall, weak, his arms hanging at his sides, his face macerated, grinning contemptuously. And then, despite his objections, Trevison was dragged away by Mullarky and the others, leaving Braman stretched out on the floor, and Corrigan, his knees sagging, his chin almost on his chest, standing near the wall. Trevison turned as he was forced out of the door, and grinned tauntingly at his tired enemy. Corrigan spat at him.

Half an hour later, his damaged arm bandaged, and some marks of the battle removed, Trevison was in the banking room. He had forbidden any of his friends to accompany him, but Mullarky and several others stood outside the door and watched him.

A bandage around his head, Braman leaned on the counter behind the wire netting, pale, shaking. In a chair at the desk sat Corrigan, glowering at Trevison. The big man’s face had been attended to, but it was swollen frightfully, and his smashed lips were in a horrible pout. Trevison grinned at him, but it was to the banker that he spoke.

“I want my gun, Braman,” he said, shortly.

The banker took it out of a drawer and silently shoved it across the counter and through a little opening in the wire netting. The banker watched, fearfully, as Trevison shoved the weapon into its holster. Corrigan stolidly followed his movements.

The gun in its holster, Trevison leaned toward the banker.

“I always knew you weren’t straight, Braman. But we won’t quarrel about that now. I just want you to know that when this arm of mine is right again, we’ll try to square things between us. Broom handles will be barred that day.”

Braman was silent and uneasy as he watched Trevison reach into a pocket and withdraw a leather bill-book. From this he took a paper and tossed it in through the opening of the wire netting.

“Cash it,” he directed. “It’s about the matter we were discussing when we were interrupted by our bloodthirsty friend, there.”

He looked at Corrigan while Braman examined the paper, his eyes alight with the mocking, unfeared gleam that had been in them during the fight. Corrigan scowled and Trevison grinned at him – the indomitable, mirthless grin of the reckless fighting man; and Corrigan filled his lungs slowly, watching him with half-closed eyes. It was as though both knew that a distant day would bring another clash between them.

Braman fingered the paper uncertainly, and looked at Corrigan.

“I suppose this is all regular?” he said. “You ought to know something about it – it’s a check from the railroad company for the right-of-way through Mr. Trevison’s land.”

Corrigan’s eyes brightened as he examined the check. They filled with a hard, sinister light.

“No,” he said; “it isn’t regular.” He took the check from Braman and deliberately tore it into small pieces, scattering them on the floor at his feet. He smiled vindictively, settling back into his chair. “‘Brand’ Trevison, eh?” he said. “Well, Mr. Trevison, the railroad company isn’t ready to close with you.”

Trevison had watched the destruction of the check without the quiver of an eyelash. A faint, ironic smile curved the corners of his mouth as Corrigan concluded.

“I see,” he said quietly. “You were not man enough to beat me a little while ago – even with the help of Braman’s broom. You’re going to take it out on me through the railroad; you’re going to sneak and scheme. Well, you’re in good company – anything that you don’t know about skinning people Braman will tell you. But I’m letting you know this: The railroad company’s option on my land expired last night, and it won’t be renewed. If it’s fight you’re looking for, I’ll do my best to accommodate you.”

Corrigan grunted, and idly drummed with the fingers of one hand on the top of the desk, watching Trevison steadily. The latter opened his lips to speak, changed his mind, grinned and went out. Corrigan and Braman watched him as he stopped for a moment outside to talk with his friends, and their gaze followed him until he mounted Nigger and rode out of town. Then the banker looked at Corrigan, his brows wrinkling.

“You know your business, Jeff,” he said; “but you’ve picked a tough man in Trevison.”

Corrigan did not answer. He was glowering at the pieces of the check that lay on the floor at his feet.

CHAPTER IV THE LONG ARM OF POWER

Presently Corrigan lit a cigar, biting the end off carefully, to keep it from coming in contact with his bruised lips. When the cigar was going well, he looked at Braman.

“What is Trevison?”

Pale, still dizzy from the effects of the blow on the head, Braman, who was leaning heavily on the counter, smiled wryly:

“He’s a holy terror – you ought to know that. He’s a reckless, don’t-give-a-damn fool who has forgotten there’s such a thing as consequences. ‘Firebrand’ Trevison, they call him. And he lives up to what that means. The folks in this section of the country swear by him.”

Corrigan made a gesture of impatience. “I mean – what does he do? Of course I know he owns some land here. But how much land does he own?”

“You saw the figure on the check, didn’t you? He owns five thousand acres.”

“How long has he been here?”

“You’ve got me. More than ten years, I guess, from what I can gather.”

“What was he before he came here?”

“I couldn’t even surmise that – he don’t talk about his past. From the way he waded into you, I should judge he was a prize fighter before becoming a cow-puncher.”

Corrigan glared at the banker. “Yes; it’s damned funny,” he said. “How did he get his land?”

“Proved on a quarter-section. Bought the rest of it – and bought it mighty cheap.” Braman’s eyes brightened. “Figure on attacking *his* title?”

Corrigan grunted. “I notice he asked you for cash. You’re not his banker, evidently.”

“He banks in Las Vegas, I guess.”

“What about his cattle?”

“He shipped three thousand head last season.”

“How big is his outfit?”

“He’s got about twenty men. They’re all hard cases – like him, and they’d shoot themselves for him.”

Corrigan got up and walked to the window, from where he looked out at Manti. The town looked like an army camp. Lumber, merchandise, supplies of every description, littered the street in mounds and scattered heaps, awaiting the erection of tent-house and building. But there was none of that activity that might have been expected from the quantity of material on hand; it seemed that the owners were waiting, delaying in anticipation of some force that would give them encouragement. They were reluctant to risk their money in erecting buildings on the strength of mere rumor. But they had come, hoping.

Corrigan grinned at Braman. “They’re afraid to take a chance,” he said, meaning Manti’s citizens.

“Don’t blame them. I’ve spread the stuff around – as you told me. That’s all they’ve heard. They’re here on a forlorn hope. The boom they are looking for, seems, from present conditions, to be lurking somewhere in the future, shadowed by an indefiniteness that to them is vaguely connected with somebody’s promise of a dam, agricultural activity to follow, and factories. They haven’t been able to trace the rumors, but they’re here, and they’ll make things hum if they get a chance.”

“Sure,” grinned Corrigan. “A boom town is always a graft for first arrivals. That is, boom towns *have* been. But Manti – ” He paused.

“Yes, different,” chuckled the banker. “It must have cost a wad to shove that water grant through.”

“Benham kicked on the price – it was enough.”

“That maximum rate clause is a pippin. You can soak them the limit right from the jump.”

“And scare them out,” scoffed Corrigan. “That isn’t the game. Get them here, first. Then – ”

The banker licked his lips. “How does old Benham take it?”

“Mr. Benham is enthusiastic because everything will be done in a perfectly legitimate way – he thinks.”

“And the courts?”

“Judge Lindman, of the District Court now in Dry Bottom, is going to establish himself here. Benham pulled that string.”

“Good!” said Braman. “When is Lindman coming?”

Corrigan’s smile was crooked; it told eloquently of conscious power over the man he had named.

“He’ll come whenever I give the word. Benham’s got something on him.”

“You always were a clever son-of-a-gun!” laughed the banker, admiringly.

Ignoring the compliment, Corrigan walked into the rear room, where he gazed frowningly at his reflection in a small glass affixed to the wall. Re-entering the banking room he said:

“I’m in no condition to face Miss Benham. Go down to the car and tell her that I shall be very busy here all day, and that I won’t be able to see her until late tonight.”

Miss Benham’s name was on the tip of the banker’s tongue, but, glancing at Corrigan’s face, he decided that it was no time for that particular brand of levity. He grabbed his hat and stepped out of the front door.

Left alone, Corrigan paced slowly back and forth in the room, his brows furrowed thoughtfully. Trevison had become an important figure in his mind. Corrigan had not hinted to Braman, to Trevison, or to Miss Benham, of the actual situation – nor would he. But during his first visit to town that morning he had stood in one of the front windows of a saloon across the street. He had not been getting acquainted, as he had told Miss Benham, for the saloon had been the first place that he had entered, and after getting a drink at the bar he had sauntered to the window. From there he had seen “Brand” Trevison ride into town, and because Trevison made an impressive figure he had watched him, instinctively aware that in the rider of the black horse was a quality of manhood that one meets rarely. Trevison’s appearance had caused him a throb of disquieting envy.

He had noticed Trevison’s start upon getting his first glimpse of the private car on the siding. He had followed Trevison’s movements carefully, and with increased disquiet. For, instead of dismounting and going into a saloon or a store, Trevison had urged the black on, past the private car, which he had examined leisurely and intently. The clear morning air made objects at a distance very distinct, and as Trevison had ridden past the car, Corrigan had seen a flutter at one of the windows; had caught a fleeting glimpse of Rosalind Benham’s face. He had seen Trevison ride away, to return for a second view of the car a few minutes later. At breakfast, Corrigan had not failed to note Miss Benham’s lingering glances at the black horse, and again, in the bank, with her standing at the door, he had noticed her interest in the black horse and its rider. His quickly-aroused jealousy and hatred had driven him to the folly of impulsive action, a method which, until now, he had carefully evaded. Yes, he had found “Brand” Trevison a worthy antagonist – Braman had him appraised correctly.

Corrigan’s smile was bitter as he again walked into the rear room and surveyed his reflection in the glass. Disgusted, he turned to one of the windows and looked out. From where he stood he could see straight down the railroad tracks to the cut, down the wall of which, some hours before, Trevison had ridden the black horse. The dinky engine, with its train of flat-cars, was steaming toward him. As he watched, engine and cars struck the switch and ran onto the siding, where they

came to a stop. Corrigan frowned and looked at his watch. It lacked fully three hours to quitting time, and the cars were empty, save for the laborers draped on them, their tools piled in heaps. While Corrigan watched, the laborers descended from the cars and swarmed toward their quarters – a row of tent-houses near the siding. A big man – Corrigan knew him later as Patrick Carson – swung down from the engine-cab and lumbered toward the little frame station house, in a window of which the telegrapher could be seen, idly scanning a week-old newspaper. Carson spoke shortly to the telegrapher, at which the latter motioned toward the bank building and the private car. Then Carson came toward the bank building. An instant later, Carson came in the front door and met Corrigan at the wire netting.

“Hullo,” said the Irishman, without preliminaries; “the agent was tellin’ me I’d find a mon named Corrigan here. You’re in charge, eh?” he added at Corrigan’s affirmative. “Well, bedad, somebody’s got to be in charge from now on. The Willie-boy engineer from who I’ve been takin’ me orders has sneaked away to Dry Bottom for a couple av days, shovin’ the raysponsibility on me – an’ I ain’t feelin’ up to it. I’m a daisy construction boss, if I do say it meself, but I ain’t enough of a fightin’ mon to buck the business end av a six-shooter.”

“What’s up?”

“Mebbe you’d know – he said you’d be sure to. I’ve been parleyin’ wid a fello’ named ‘Firebrand’ Trevison, an’ I’m that soaked wid perspiration that me boots is full av it, after me thryin’ to urge him to be dacently careful wid his gun!”

“What happened?” asked Corrigan, darkly.

“This mon Trevison came down through the cut this mornin’, goin’ to town. He was pleasant as a mon who’s had a raise in wages, an’ he was joshin’ wid us. A while ago he comes back from town, an’ he’s that cold an’ polite that he’d freeze ye while he’s takin’ his hat off to ye. One av his arms is busted, an’ he’s got a welt or two on his face. But outside av that he’s all right. He rides down into the cut where we’re all workin’ fit to kill ourselves. He halts his big black horse about forty or fifty feet away from the ol’ rattle-box that runs the steam shovel, an’ he grins like a tiger at me an’ says:

“‘Carson, I’m wantin’ you to pull your min off. I can’t permit anny railroad min on the Diamond K property. You’re a friend av mine, an’ all that, but you’ll have to pull your freight. You’ve got tin minutes.’

“‘I’ve got me orders to do this work,’ I says – begging his pardon.

“‘Here’s your orders to stop doin’ it!’ he comes back. An’ I was inspectin’ the muzzle av his six-shooter.

“‘Ye wudn’t shoot a mon for doin’ his duthy?’ I says.

“‘Thry me,’ he says. ‘You’re trespassers. The railroad company didn’t come through wid the coin for the right-of-way. Your mon, Corrigan, has got an idee that he’s goin’ to bluff me. I’m callin’ his bluff. You’ve got tin minutes to get out av here. At the end av that time I begin to shoot. I’ve got six cattridges in the gun, an’ fifty more in the belt around me middle. An’ I seldom miss whin I shoot. It’s up to you whether I start a cemetery here or not,’ he says, cold an’ ca’mlike.

“The ginneys knowed somethin’ was up, an’ they crowded around. I thought Trevison was thryin’ to run a bluff on *me*, an’ I give orders for the ginneys to go back to their work.

“Trevison didn’t say another word, but at the end av the tin minutes he grins that tiger grin av his an’ busts the safety valve on the rattle-box wid a shot from his pistol. He smashes the water-gauge wid another, an’ jammed one shot in the ol’ rattle-box’s entrails, an’ she starts to blow off steam – shriekin’ like a soul in hell. The ginneys throwed down their tools an’ started to climb up the walls of the cut like a gang av monkeys, Trevison watchin’ thim with a grin as cold as a barrow ful ov icicles. Murph’, the engineer av the dinky, an’ his fireman, ducks for the engine-cab, l’avin’ me standin’ there to face the music. Trevison yells at the engineer av the rattle-box, an’ he disappears like a rat into a hole. Thin Trevison swings his gun on me, an’ I c’u’d feel me knees

knockin' together. 'Carson,' he says, 'I hate like blazes to do it, but you're the boss here, an' these min will do what you tell thim to do. Tell thim to get to hell out of here an' not come back, or I'll down you, sure as me name's Trevison!'

"I'm old enough to know from lookin' at a mon whether he manes business or not, an' Trevison wasn't foolin'. So I got the bhoys away, an' here we are. If you're in charge, it's up to you to smooth things out. Though from the looks av your mug 'Firebrand's' been maulin' you some, too!"

Corrigan's answer was a cold glare. "You quit without a fight, eh?" he taunted; "you let one man bluff half a hundred of you!"

Carson's eyes brightened. "My recollection is that 'Firebrand' is still holdin' the forrt. Whin I got me last look at him he was sittin' on the top av the cut, like he was intendin' to stay there indefinite. If ye think he's bluffin', mebbe it'd be quite an idee for you to go out there yourself, an' call it. I'd be willin' to give ye me moral support."

"I'll call him when I get ready." Corrigan went to the desk and sat in the chair, ignoring Carson, who watched him narrowly. Presently he turned and spoke to the man:

"Put your men at work trueing up the roadbed on the next section back, until further orders."

"An' let 'Firebrand' hold the forrt?"

"Do as you're told!"

Carson went out to his men. Near the station platform he turned and looked back at the bank building, grinning. "There's two bulldogs comin' to grips in this deal or I'm a domn poor prophet!" he said.

When Braman returned from his errand he found Corrigan staring out of the window. The banker announced that Miss Benham had received Corrigan's message with considerable equanimity, and was rewarded for his levity with a frown.

"What's Carson and his gang doing in town?" he queried.

Corrigan told him, briefly. The banker whistled in astonishment, and his face grew long. "I told you he is a tough one!" he reminded.

Corrigan got to his feet. "Yes – he's a tough one," he admitted. "I'm forced to alter my plans a little – that's all. But I'll get him. Hunt up something to eat," he directed; "I'm hungry. I'm going to the station for a few minutes."

He went out, and the banker watched him until he vanished around the corner of a building. Then Braman shook his head. "Jeff's resourceful," he said. "But Trevison –" His face grew solemn. "What a damned fool I was to trip him with that broom!" He drew a pistol from a pocket and examined it intently, then returned it to the pocket and sat, staring with unseeing eyes beyond the station at the two lines of steel that ran out upon the plains and stopped in the deep cut on the crest of which he could see a man on a black horse.

Down at the station Corrigan was leaning on a rough wooden counter, writing on a yellow paper pad. When he had finished he shoved the paper over to the telegrapher, who had been waiting:

J. Chalfant Benham, B – Building, New York.

Unexpected opposition developed. Trevison. Give Lindman removal order immediately. Communicate with me at Dry Bottom tomorrow morning. Corrigan.

Corrigan watched the operator send the message and then he returned to the bank building, where he found Braman setting out a meager lunch in the rear room. The two men talked as they ate, mostly about Trevison, and the banker's face did not lose its worried expression. Later they smoked and talked and watched while the afternoon sun grew mellow; while the somber twilight descended over the world and darkness came and obliterated the hill on which sat the rider of the black horse.

Shortly after dark Corrigan sent the banker on another errand, this time to a boarding-house at the edge of town. Braman returned shortly, announcing: "He'll be ready." Then, just before midnight Corrigan climbed into the cab of the engine which had brought the private car, and which was waiting, steam up, several hundred feet down the track from the car.

"All right!" said Corrigan briskly, to the engineer, as he climbed in and a flare from the fire-box suffused his face; "pull out. But don't make any fuss about it – I don't want those people in the car to know." And shortly afterwards the locomotive glided silently away into the darkness toward that town in which a judge of the United States Court had, a few hours before, received orders which had caused him to remark, bitterly: "So does the past shape the future."

CHAPTER V

A TELEGRAM AND A GIRL

Banker Braman went to bed on the cot in the back room shortly after Corrigan departed from Manti. He stretched himself out with a sigh, oppressed with the conviction that he had done a bad day's work in antagonizing Trevison. The Diamond K owner would repay him, he knew. But he knew, too, that he need have no fear that Trevison would sneak about it. Therefore he did not expect to feel Trevison at his throat during the night. That was some satisfaction.

He dropped to sleep, thinking of Trevison. He awoke about dawn to a loud hammering on the rear door, and he scrambled out of bed and opened the door upon the telegraph agent. That gentleman gazed at him with grim reproof.

"Holy Moses!" he said; "you're a hell of a tight sleeper! I've been pounding on this door for an age!" He shoved a sheet of paper under Braman's nose. "Here's a telegram for you."

Braman took the telegram, scanning it, while the agent talked on, ramblingly. A sickly smile came over Braman's face when he finished reading, and then he listened to the agent:

"I got a wire a little after midnight, asking me if that man, Corrigan, was still in Manti. The engineer told me he was taking Corrigan back to Dry Bottom at midnight, and so I knew he wasn't here, and I clicked back 'No.' It was from J. C. He must have connected with Corrigan at Dry Bottom. That guy Trevison must have old Benham's goat, eh?"

Braman re-read the telegram; it was directed to him:

Send my daughter to Trevison with cash in amount of check destroyed by
Corrigan yesterday. Instruct her to say mistake made. No offense intended. Hustle.
J. C. Benham.

Braman slipped his clothes on and ran down the track to the private car. He had known J. C. Benham several years and was aware that when he issued an order he wanted it obeyed, literally. The negro autocrat of the private car met him at the platform and grinned amply at the banker's request.

"Miss Benham done tol' me she am not to be disturbed till eight o'clock," he objected. But the telegram in Braman's hands had instant effect upon the black custodian of the car, and shortly afterward Miss Benham was looking at the banker and his telegram in sleepy-eyed astonishment, the door of her compartment open only far enough to permit her to stick her head out.

Braman was forced to do much explaining, and concluded by reading the telegram to her. She drew everything out of him except the story of the fight.

"Well," she said in the end, "I suppose I shall have to go. So his name is 'Brand' Trevison. And he won't permit the men to work. Why did Mr. Corrigan destroy the check?"

Braman evaded, but the girl thought she knew. Corrigan had yielded to an impulse of obstinacy provoked by Trevison's assault on him. It was not good business – it was almost childish; but it was human to feel that way. She felt a slight disappointment in Corrigan, though; the action did not quite accord with her previous estimate of him. She did not know what to think of Trevison. But of course any man who would deliberately and brutally ride another man down, would naturally not hesitate to adopt other lawless means of defending himself.

She told Braman to have the money ready for her in an hour, and at the end of that time with her morocco handbag bulging, she emerged from the front door of the bank and climbed the steps of the private car, which had been pulled down to a point in front of the station by the dinky engine, with Murphy presiding at the throttle.

Carson was standing on the platform when Miss Benham climbed to it, and he grinned and greeted her with:

“If ye have no objections, ma’am, I’ll be ridin’ down to the cut with ye. Me name’s Patrick Carson, ma’am.”

“I have no objection whatever,” said the lady, graciously. “I presume you are connected with the railroad?”

“An’ wid the ginneys that’s buildin’ it, ma’am,” he supplemented. “I’m the construction boss av this section, an’ I’m the mon that had the unhappy experience av lookin’ into the business end av ‘Firebrand’s’ six-shooter yisterday.”

“‘Firebrand’s’?” she said, with a puzzled look at him.

“Thot mon, Trevison, ma’am; that’s what they call him. An’ he fits it bedad – beggin’ your pardon.”

“Oh,” she said; “then you know him.” And she felt a sudden interest in Carson.

“Enough to be certain he ain’t to be monkeyed with, ma’am.”

She seemed to ignore this. “Please tell the engineer to go ahead,” she told him. “And then come into the car – I want to talk with you.”

A little later, with the car clicking slowly over the rail-joints toward the cut, Carson diffidently followed the negro attendant into a luxurious compartment, in which, seated in a big leather-covered chair, was Miss Benham. She motioned Carson to another chair, and in the conversation that followed Miss Benham received a comprehensive estimate of Trevison from Carson’s viewpoint. It seemed unsatisfying to her – Carson’s commendation did not appear to coincide with Trevison’s performances.

“Have you heard what happened in Manti yesterday?” she questioned. “This man, Trevison, jumped his horse against Mr. Corrigan and knocked him down.”

“I heard av it,” grinned Carson. “But I didn’t see it. Nor did I see the daisy scrap that tuk place right after.”

“Fight?” she exclaimed.

Carson reddened. “Sure, ye haven’t heard av it, an’ I’m blabbin’ like a kid.”

“Tell me about it.” Her eyes were aglow with interest.

“There’s devilish little to tell – beggin’ your pardon, ma’am. But thim that was in at the finish is waggin’ their tongues about it bein’ a dandy shindy. Judgin’ from the talk, nobuddy got licked – it was a fair dhraw. But I sh’ud judge, lookin’ at Corrigan’s face, that it was a darlin’ av a scrap.”

She was silent, gazing contemplatively out of the car window. Corrigan had returned, after escorting her to the car, to engage in a fight with Trevison. That was what had occupied him; that was why he had gone away without seeing her. Well, Trevison had given him plenty of provocation.

“Trevison’s horse knockin’ Corrigan down was what started it, they’ve been tellin’ me,” said Carson. “But thim that know Trevison’s black knows that Trevison wasn’t to blame.”

“Not to blame?” she asked; “why not?”

“For the simple rayson thot in a case like thot the mon has no control over the baste, ma’am. ‘Firebrand’ told me only yisterday mornin’ thot there was no holdin’ the black whin somebuddy tried to shoot wid him on his back.”

The girl remembered how Trevison had tried to speak to her immediately after the upsetting of Corrigan, and she knew now, that he had wanted to explain his action. Reviewing the incident in the light of Carson’s explanation, she felt that Corrigan was quite as much at fault as Trevison. Somehow, that knowledge was vaguely satisfying.

She did not succeed in questioning Carson further about Trevison, though there were many points over which she felt a disturbing curiosity, for Agatha came in presently, and after nodding stiffly to Carson, seated herself and gazed aloofly out of a window.

Carson, ill at ease in Agatha’s presence, soon invented an excuse to go out upon the platform, leaving Rosalind to explain his presence in the car.

“What on earth could you have to say to a section boss – or he to you?” demanded Agatha. “You are becoming very – er – indiscreet, Rosalind.”

The girl smiled. It was a smile that would have betrayed the girl had Agatha possessed the physiognomist’s faculty of analyzation, for in it was much relief and renewed faith. For the rider of the black horse was not the brutal creature she had thought him.

When the private car came to a stop, Rosalind looked out of the window to see the steep wall of the cut towering above her. Aunt Agatha still sat near, and when Rosalind got up Agatha rose also, registering an objection:

“I think your father might have arranged to have some *man* meet this outlaw. It is not, in my opinion, a proper errand for a girl. But if you are determined to go, I presume I shall have to follow.”

“It won’t be necessary,” said Rosalind. But Agatha set her lips tightly. And when the girl reached the platform Agatha was close behind her.

But both halted on the platform as they were about to descend the steps. They heard Carson’s voice, loud and argumentative:

“There’s a lady aboored, I tell ye! If ye shoot, you’re a lot of damned rapscallions, an’ I’ll come up there an’ bate the head off ye!”

“Stow your gab an’ produce the lady!” answered a voice. It came from above, and Rosalind stepped down to the floor of the cut and looked upward. On the crest of the southern wall were a dozen men – cowboys – armed with rifles, peering down at the car. They shifted their gaze to her when she stepped into view, and one of them laughed.

“Correct, boys,” he said; “it’s a lady.” There was a short silence; Rosalind saw the men gather close – they were talking, but she could not hear their voices. Then the man who had spoken first stepped to the edge of the cut and called: “What do you want?”

The girl answered: “I want to speak with Mr. Trevison.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” came back the voice; “but Trevison ain’t here – he’s at the Diamond K.”

Rosalind reached a decision quickly. “Aunty,” she said; “I am going to the Diamond K.”

“I forbid you!” said Agatha sternly. “I would not trust you an instant with those outlaws!”

“Nonsense,” smiled Rosalind. “I am coming up,” she called to the man on the crest; “do you mind?”

The man laughed. “I reckon not, ma’am.”

Rosalind smiled at Carson, who was watching her admiringly, and to the smile he answered, pointing eastward to where the slope of the hill melted into the plains: “You’ll have to go that way, ma’am.” He laughed. “You’re perfectly safe wid thim min, ma’am – they’re Trevison’s – an’ Trevison wud shoot the last mon av thim if they’d harm a hair av your pretty head. Go along, ma’am, an’ God bless ye! Ye’ll be savin’ a heap av throuble for me an’ me ginneys, an’ the railroad company.” He looked with bland derision at Agatha who gave him a glance of scornful reproof as she followed after her charge.

The girl was panting when she reached the crest of the cut. Agatha was a little white, possibly more from apprehension than from indignation, though that emotion had its influence; but their reception could not have been more formal had it taken place in an eastern drawing-room. For every hat was off, and each man was trying his best to conceal his interest. And when men have not seen a woman for a long time, the appearance of a pretty one makes it rather hard to maintain polite poise. But they succeeded, which spoke well for their manliness. If they exchanged surreptitious winks over the appearance of Agatha, they are to be excused, for that lady’s demeanor was one of frigid haughtiness, which is never quite impressive to those who live close to nature.

In an exchange of words, brief and pointed, Rosalind learned that it was three miles to the Diamond K ranchhouse, and that Trevison had given orders not to be disturbed unless the railroad company attempted to continue work at the cut. Could she borrow one of their horses, and a guide?

“You bet!” emphatically returned the spokesman who, she learned later, was Trevison’s foreman. She should have the gentlest “cayuse” in the “bunch,” and the foreman would do the guiding, himself. At which word Agatha, noting the foreman’s enthusiasm, glared coldly at him.

But here Agatha was balked by the insurmountable wall of convention. She had ridden horses, to be sure, in her younger days; but when the foreman, at Rosalind’s request, offered her a pony, she sniffed scornfully and marched down the slope toward the private car, saying that if Rosalind was *determined* to persist she might persist without *her* assistance. For there was no side-saddle in the riding equipment of the outfit. And Rosalind, quite aware of the prudishness exhibited by her chaperon, and not unmindful of the mirth that the men were trying their best to keep concealed, rode on with the foreman, with something resembling thankfulness for the temporary freedom tugging at her heart.

Trevison had camped all night on the crest of the cut. It was only at dawn that Barkwell, the foreman who had escorted Rosalind, had appeared at the cut on his way to town, and discovered him, and then the foreman’s plans were changed and he was dispatched to the Diamond K for reinforcements. Trevison had ridden back to the Diamond K to care for his arm, which had pained him frightfully during the night, and at ten o’clock in the morning he was stretched out, fully dressed and wide awake on the bed in his room in the ranchhouse, frowningly reviewing the events of the day before.

He was in no good humor, and when he heard Barkwell hallooing from the yard near the house, he got up and looked out of a window, a scowl on his face.

Rosalind was not in the best of spirits, herself, for during the ride to the ranchhouse she had been sending subtly-questioning shafts at the foreman – questions that mostly concerned Trevison – and they had all fell, blunted and impotent, from the armor of Barkwell’s reticence. But a glance at Trevison’s face, ludicrous in its expression of stunned amazement, brought a broad smile to her own. She saw his lips form her name, and then she waited demurely until she saw him coming out of the ranchhouse door toward her.

He had quite recovered from his surprise, she noted; his manner was that of the day before, when she had seen him riding the black horse. When she saw him coming lightly toward her, she at first had eyes for nothing but his perfect figure, feeling the strength that his close-fitting clothing revealed so unmistakably, and an unaccountable blush glowed in her cheeks. And then she observed that his left arm was in a sling, and a flash of wondering concern swept over her – also unaccountable. And then he was at her stirrup, smiling up at her broadly and cordially.

“Welcome to the Diamond K, Miss Benham,” he said. “Won’t you get off your horse?”

“Thank you; I came on business and must return immediately. There has been a misunderstanding, my father says. He wired me, directing me to apologize, for him, for Mr. Corrigan’s actions of yesterday. Perhaps Mr. Corrigan over-stepped his authority – I have no means of knowing.” She passed the morocco bag over to him, and he took it, looking at it in some perplexity. “You will find cash in there to the amount named by the check that Mr. Corrigan destroyed. I hope,” she added, smiling at him, “that there will be no more trouble.”

“The payment of this money for the right-of-way removes the provocation for trouble,” he laughed. “Barkwell,” he directed, turning to the foreman; “you may go back to the outfit.” He looked after the foreman as the latter rode away, turning presently to Rosalind. “If you will wait a few minutes, until I stow this money in a safe place, I’ll ride back to the cut with you and pull the boys off.”

She had wondered much over the rifles in the hands of his men at the cut. “Would your men have used their guns?” she asked.

He had turned to go to the house, and he wheeled quickly, astonished. “Certainly!” he said; “why not?”

“That would be lawlessness, would it not?” It made her shiver slightly to hear him so frankly confess to murderous designs.

“It was not my quarrel,” he said, looking at her narrowly, his brows contracted. “Law is all right where everybody accepts it as a governor to their actions. I accept it when it deals fairly with me – when it’s just. Certain rights are mine, and I’ll fight for them. This situation was brought on by Corrigan’s obstinacy. We had a fight, and it peeved him because I wouldn’t permit him to hammer my head off. He destroyed the check, and as the company’s option expired yesterday it was unlawful for the company to trespass on my land.”

“Well,” she smiled, affected by his vehemence; “we shall have peace now, presumably. And –” she reddened again “– I want to ask your pardon on my own account, for speaking to you as I did yesterday. I thought you brutal – the way you rode your horse over Mr. Corrigan. Mr. Carson assured me that the horse was to blame.”

“I am indebted to Carson,” he laughed, bowing. Rosalind watched him go into the house, and then turned and inspected her surroundings. The house was big, roomy, with a massive hip roof. A paved gallery stretched the entire length of the front – she would have liked to rest for a few minutes in the heavy rocker that stood in its cool shadows. No woman lived here, she was certain, because there was a lack of evidence of woman’s handiwork – no filmy curtains at the windows – merely shades; no cushion was on the chair – which, by the way, looked lonesome – but perhaps that was merely her imagination. Much dust had gathered on the gallery floor and on the sash of the windows – a woman would have had things looking differently. And so she divined that Trevison was not married. It surprised her to discover that that thought had been in her mind, and she turned to continue her inspection, filled with wonder that it had been there.

She got an impression of breadth and spaciousness out of her survey of the buildings and the surrounding country. The buildings were in good condition; everything looked substantial and homelike and her contemplation of it aroused in her a yearning for a house and land in this section of the country, it was so peaceful and dignified in comparison with the life she knew.

She watched Trevison when he emerged from the house, and smiled when he returned the empty handbag. He went to a small building near a fenced enclosure – the corral, she learned afterward – and came out carrying a saddle, which he hung on the fence while he captured the black horse, which she had already observed. The animal evaded capture, playfully, but in the end it trotted mincingly to Trevison and permitted him to throw the bridle on. Then, shortly afterward he mounted the black and together they rode back toward the cut.

As they rode the girl’s curiosity for the man who rode beside her grew acute. She was aware – she had been aware all along – that he was far different from the other men of Manti – there was about him an atmosphere of refinement and quiet confidence that mingled admirably with his magnificent physical force, tempering it, suggesting reserve power, hinting of excellent mental capacity. She determined to know something about him. And so she began subtly:

“In a section of country so large as this it seems that our American measure of length – a mile – should be stretched to something that would more adequately express size. Don’t you think so?”

He looked quickly at her. “That is an odd thought,” he laughed, “but it inevitably attacks the person who views the yawning distances here for the first time. Why not use the English mile if the American doesn’t satisfy?”

“There is a measure that exceeds that, isn’t there? Wasn’t there a Persian measure somewhat longer, fathered by Herodotus or another of the ancients? I am sure there was – or is – but I have forgotten?”

“Yes,” he said, “– a parasang.” He looked narrowly at her and saw her eyes brighten.

She had made progress; she felt much satisfaction.

“You are not a native,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Cowboys do not commonly measure their distances with parasangs,” she laughed.

“Nor do ordinary women try to shake off ennui by coming West in private cars,” he drawled.

She started and looking quickly at him. “How did you know that was what happened to me?” she demanded.

“Because you’re too spirited and vigorous to spend your life dawdling in society. You yearn for action, for the broad, free life of the open. You’re in love with this country right now.”

“Yes, yes,” she said, astonished; “but how do you know?”

“You might have sent a man here in your place – Braman, for instance; he could be trusted. You came yourself, eager for adventure – you came on a borrowed horse. When you were looking at the country from the horse in front of my house, I saw you sigh.”

“Well,” she said, with flushed face and glowing eyes; “I *have* decided to live out here – for a time, at least. So you were watching me?”

“Just a glance,” he defended, grinning; “I couldn’t help it. Please forgive me.”

“I suppose I’ll have to,” she laughed, delighted, reveling in this freedom of speech, in his directness. His manner touched a spark somewhere in her, she felt strangely elated, exhilarated. When she reflected that this was only their second meeting and that she had not been conventionally introduced to him, she was amazed. Had a stranger of her set talked to her so familiarly she would have resented it. Out here it seemed to be perfectly natural.

“How do you know I borrowed a horse to come here?” she asked.

“That’s easy,” he grinned; “there’s the Diamond K brand on his hip.”

“Oh.”

They rode on a little distance in silence, and then she remembered that she was still curious about him. His frankness had affected her; she did not think it impertinent to betray curiosity.

“How long have you lived out here?” she asked.

“About ten years.”

“You weren’t born here, of course – you have admitted that. Then where did you come from?”

“This is a large country,” he returned, unsmilingly.

It was a reproof, certainly – Rosalind could go no farther in that direction. But her words had brought a mystery into existence, thus sharpening her interest in him. She was conscious, though, of a slight pique – what possible reason could he have for evasion? He had not the appearance of a fugitive from justice.

“So you’re going to live out here?” he said, after an interval. “Where?”

“I heard father speak of buying Blakeley’s place. Do you know where it is?”

“It adjoins mine.” There was a leaping note in his voice, which she did not fail to catch. “Do you see that dark line over there?” He pointed eastward – a mile perhaps. “That’s a gully; it divides my land from Blakeley’s. Blakeley told me a month ago that he was dickering with an eastern man. If you are thinking of looking the place over, and want a trustworthy escort I should be pleased to recommend – myself.” And he grinned widely at her.

“I shall consider your offer – and I thank you for it,” she returned. “I feel positive that father will buy a ranch here, for he has much faith in the future of Manti – he is obsessed with it.”

He looked sharply at her. “Then your father is going to have a hand in the development of Manti? I heard a rumor to the effect that some eastern company was interested, had, in fact, secured the water rights for an enormous section.”

She remembered what Corrigan had told her, and blushing dissembled:

“I put no faith in rumor – do you? Mr. Corrigan is the head of the company which is to develop Manti. But of course *that* is an eastern company, isn’t it?”

He nodded, and she smiled at a thought that came to her. “How far is it to Blakeley’s ranchhouse?” she asked.

“About two parasangs,” he answered gravely.

“Well,” she said, mimicking him; “I could *never* walk there, could I? If I go, I shall have to borrow a horse – or buy one. Could you recommend a horse that would be as trustworthy as the escort you have promised me?”

“We shall go to Blakeley’s tomorrow,” he told her. “I shall bring you a trustworthy horse at ten o’clock in the morning.”

They were approaching the cut, and she nodded an acceptance. An instant later he was talking to his men, and she sat near him, watching them as they raced over the plains toward the Diamond K ranchhouse. One man remained; he was without a mount, and he grinned with embarrassment when Rosalind’s gaze rested on him.

“Oh,” she said; “you are waiting for your horse! How stupid of me!” She dismounted and turned the animal over to him. When she looked around, Trevison had also dismounted and was coming toward her, leading the black, the reins looped through his arm. Rosalind flushed, and thought of Agatha, but offered no objection.

It was a long walk down the slope of the hill and around its base to the private car, but they made it still longer by walking slowly and taking the most roundabout way. Three persons saw them coming – Agatha, standing rigid on the platform; the negro attendant, standing behind Agatha in the doorway, his eyes wide with interest; and Carson, seated on a boulder a little distance down the cut, grinning broadly.

“Bedad,” he rumbled; “the bhoy’s made a hit wid her, or I’m a sinner! But didn’t I know he wud? The two bulldogs is goin’ to have it now, sure as I’m a foot high!”

CHAPTER VI

A JUDICIAL PUPPET

Bowling along over the new tracks toward Manti in a special car secured at Dry Bottom by Corrigan, one compartment of which was packed closely with books, papers, ledger records, legal documents, blanks, and even office furniture, Judge Lindman watched the landscape unfold with mingled feelings of trepidation, reluctance, and impotent regret. The Judge's face was not a strong one – had it been he would not have been seated in the special car, talking with Corrigan. He was just under sixty-five years, and their weight seemed to rest heavily upon him. His eyes were slightly bleary, and had a look of weariness, as though he had endured much and was utterly tired. His mouth was flaccid, the lips pouting when he compressed his jaws, giving his face the sullen, indecisive look of the brooder lacking the mental and physical courage of independent action and initiative. The Judge could be led; Corrigan was leading him now, and the Judge was reluctant, but his courage had oozed, back in Dry Bottom, when Corrigan had mentioned a culpable action which the Judge had regretted many times.

Some legal records of the county were on the table between the two men. The Judge had objected when Corrigan had secured them from the compartment where the others were piled.

"It isn't regular, Mr. Corrigan," he had said; "no one except a legally authorized person has the right to look over those books."

"We'll say that I am legally authorized, then," grinned Corrigan. The look in his eyes was one of amused contempt. "It isn't the only irregular thing you have done, Lindman."

The Judge subsided, but back in his eyes was a slumbering hatred for this man, who was forcing him to complicity in another crime. He regretted that other crime; why should this man deliberately remind him of it?

After looking over the records, Corrigan outlined a scheme of action that made the Judge's face blanch.

"I won't be a party to any such scurrilous undertaking!" he declared when, he could trust his voice; "I – I won't permit it!"

Corrigan stretched his legs out under the table, shoved his hands into his trousers' pockets and laughed.

"Why the high moral attitude, Judge? It doesn't become you. Refuse if you like. When we get to Manti I shall wire Benham. It's likely he'll feel pretty sore. He's got his heart set on this. And I have no doubt that after he gets my wire he'll jump the next train for Washington, and –"

The Judge exclaimed with weak incoherence, and a few minutes later he was bending over the records with Corrigan – the latter making sundry copies on a pad of paper, which he placed in a pocket when the work was completed.

At noon the special car was in Manti. Corrigan, the Judge, and Braman, carried the Judge's effects and stored them in the rear room of the bank building. "I'll build you a courthouse, tomorrow," he promised the Judge; "big enough for you and a number of deputies. You'll need deputies, you know." He grinned as the Judge shrank. Then, leaving the Judge in the room with his books and papers, Corrigan drew Braman outside.

"I got hell from Benham for destroying Trevison's check – he wired me to attend to my other deals and let him run the railroad – the damned old fool! You must have taken the cash to Trevison – I see the gang's working again."

"The cash went," said the banker, watching Corrigan covertly, "but I didn't take it. J. C. wired explicit orders for his daughter to act."

Corrigan cursed viciously, his face dark with wrath as he turned to look at the private car, on the switch. The banker watched him with secret, vindictive enjoyment. Miss Benham had judged Braman correctly – he was cold, crafty, selfish, and wholly devoid of sympathy. He was for Braman, first and last – and in the interim.

“Miss Benham went to the cut – so I hear,” he went on, smoothly. “Trevison wasn’t there. Miss Benham went to the Diamond K.” His eyes gleamed as Corrigan’s hands clenched. “Trevison rode back to the car with her – which she had ordered taken to the cut,” went on the banker. “And this morning about ten o’clock Trevison came here with a led horse. He and Miss Benham rode away together. I heard her tell her aunt they were going to Blakeley’s ranch – it’s about eight miles from here.”

Corrigan’s face went white. “I’ll kill him for that!” he said.

“Jealous, eh?” laughed the banker. “So, that’s the reason – ”

Corrigan turned and struck bitterly. The banker’s jaws clacked sharply – otherwise he fell silently, striking his head against the edge of the step and rolling, face down, into the dust.

When he recovered and sat up, Corrigan had gone. The banker gazed foolishly around at a world that was still reeling – felt his jaw carefully, wonder and astonishment in his eyes.

“What do you know about that?” he asked of the surrounding silence. “I’ve kidded him about women before, and he never got sore. He must be in love!”

Riding through a saccaton basin, the green-brown tips so high that they caught at their stirrups as they rode slowly along; a white, smiling sky above them and Blakeley’s still three miles away, Miss Benham and Trevison were chatting gayly at the instant the banker had received Corrigan’s blow.

Miss Benham had spent the night thinking of Trevison, and she had spent much of her time during the present ride stealing glances at him. She had discovered something about him that had eluded her the day before – an impulsive boyishness. It was hidden behind the manhood of him, so that the casual observer would not be likely to see it; men would have failed to see it, because she was certain that with men he would not let it be seen. But she knew the recklessness that shone in his eyes, the energy that slumbered in them ready to be applied any moment in response to any whim that might seize him, were traits that had not yet yielded to the stern governors of manhood – nor would they yield in many years to come – they were the fountains of virility that would keep him young. She felt the irresistible appeal of him, responsive to the youth that flourished in her own heart – and Corrigan, older, more ponderous, less addicted to impulse, grew distant in her thoughts and vision. The day before yesterday her sympathies had been with Corrigan – she had thought. But as she rode she knew that they were threatening to desert him. For this man of heroic mold who rode beside her was disquietingly captivating in the bold recklessness of his youth.

They climbed the far slope of the basin and halted their horses on the crest. Before them stretched a plain so big and vast and inviting that it made the girl gasp with delight.

“Oh,” she said, awed; “isn’t it wonderful?”

“I knew you’d like it.”

“The East has nothing like this,” she said, with a broad sweep of the hand.

“No,” he said.

She turned on him triumphantly. “There!” she declared; “you have committed yourself. You are from the East!”

“Well,” he said; “I’ve never denied it.”

Something vague and subtle had drawn them together during the ride, bridging the hiatus of strangeness, making them feel that they had been acquainted long. It did not seem impertinent to her that she should ask the question that she now put to him – she felt that her interest in him permitted it:

“You are an easterner, and yet you have been out here for about ten years. Your house is big and substantial, but I should judge that it has no comforts, no conveniences. You live there alone, except for some men, and you have male servants – if you have any. Why should you bury yourself here? You are educated, you are young. There are great opportunities for you in the East!”

She paused, for she saw a cynical expression in his eyes.

“Well?” she said, impatiently, for she had been very much in earnest.

“I suppose I’ve got to tell you,” he said, soberly. “I don’t know what has come over me – you seem to have me under a spell. I’ve never spoken about it before. I don’t know why I should now. But you’ve got to know, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“On your head rest the blame,” he said, his grin still cynical; “and upon mine the consequences. It isn’t a pretty story to tell; it’s only virtue is its brevity. I was fired out of college for fighting. The fellows I licked deserved what they got – and I deserved what I got for breaking rules. I’ve always broken rules. I may have broken laws – most of us have. My father is wealthy. The last time I saw him he said I was incorrigible and a dunce. I admit the former, but I’m going to make him take the other back. I told him so. He replied that he was from Missouri. He gave me an opportunity to make good by cutting off my allowance. There was a girl. When my allowance was cut off she made me feel cold as an Eskimo. Told me straight that she had never liked me in the way she’d led me to believe she did, and that she was engaged to a *real* man. She made the mistake of telling me his name, and it happened to be one of the fellows I’d had trouble with at college. The girl lost her temper and told me things he’d said about me. I left New York that night, but before I hopped on the train I stopped in to see my rival and gave him the bulliest trimming that I had ever given anybody. I came out here and took up a quarter-section of land. I bought more – after a while. I own five thousand acres, and about a thousand acres of it is the best coal land in the United States. I wouldn’t sell it for love or money, for when your father gets his railroad running, I’m going to cash in on ten of the leanest and hardest and loneliest years that any man ever put in. I’m going back some day. But I won’t stay. I’ve lived in this country so long that it’s got into my heart and soul. It’s a golden paradise.”

She did not share his enthusiasm – her thoughts were selfishly personal, though they included him.

“And the girl!” she said. “When you go back, would you – ”

“Never!” he scoffed, vehemently. “That would convince me that I am the dunce my father said I was!”

The girl turned her head and smiled. And a little later, when they were riding on again, she murmured softly:

“Ten years of lonesomeness and bitterness to save his pride! I wonder if Hester Keyes knows what she has missed?”

CHAPTER VII

TWO LETTERS GO EAST

After Agatha retired that night Rosalind sat for a long time writing at a little desk in the private car. She was tingling with excitement over a discovery she had made, and was yearning for a confidante. Since it had not been her habit to confide in Agatha, she did the next best thing, which was to indite a letter to her chum, Ruth Gresham. In one place she wrote:

“Do you remember Hester Keyes’ love affair of ten years ago? You certainly must remember it! If you cannot, permit me to brush the dust of forgetfulness away. You cannot forget the night you met William Kinkaid? Of course you cannot forget that, for when you are Mrs. Kinkaid – But there! I won’t poke fun at you. But I think every married person needs to treasure every shred of romance against inevitable hum-drum days. Isn’t that a sad sentiment? But I want to get ahead with my reminder.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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