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THE WALLS  
OF JERICHO

PAUL I.  
WELLMAN

THE  
BOWL  
OF  
BRASS

"REALISM OF THE MOST RUGGED SORT—  
STRONG, EARTHY, ROUGH...EASILY HIS BEST"

—Kansas City Star

POWERFUL  
AS HIS NEW  
BESTSELLER  
MAGNIFICENT  
DESTINY



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DANGEROUS, CORRUPT,  
GAMBLING CENTER  
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by **PAUL I. WELLMAN**

author of the great new best seller

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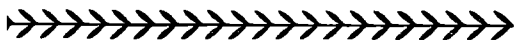
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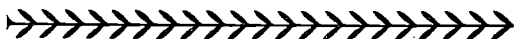
INDIAN WARS AND WARRIORS



# **THE BOWL OF BRASS**



**PAUL I. WELLMAN**



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New York



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**To Alice**

## ONE

### 1.

THE LAND was immense and flat. Two-thirds of the world appeared to be sky—the vast, ever-changing sky of the high plains—and the other third was endless landscape on which it seemed that a jackrabbit could be seen miles away.

Long gradual swells of ground marched slowly toward the infinitely remote horizons, but these no more alleviated the impression of endless sameness than do the steady swells of the ocean. In another respect the high plains resembled the sea, for the levelness of their spaces made it appear that the horizons rose slightly all around at the rim of the earth, exactly as the horizons of the ocean often seem to dish up about a lonely ship.

A man standing in the midst of the plain sometimes had the feeling that he was standing in an enormous shallow bowl. It was a bowl beaten by the midsummer sun and brassy with the color of the soil, and with the color of the kiln-dried buffalo grass. A bowl of brass—superheated, dry as lime, with the heat haze rising clear to the edge of the world and distant objects wavering dizzily to the sight.

This had been cattle country but now it seemed almost deserted. The great horn-spiked herds which once grazed on the boundless pastures had been swept away—obliterated overnight almost, by a great blizzard which, a few years before, had roared down out of the north, slaying the cattle in uncounted thousands, so that the next spring the white racks of their

bones strewed the new green buffalo grass for leagues on leagues.

Men dated time from the Great Blizzard of 1886. It wiped out the cattle industry on the high plains of Kansas. But at the same time it opened the way for the people of the plough—the land-hungry grangers who hitherto had been kept at bay by the locked opposition of the cattlemen. Into the great abandoned range the farm folk moved, and what lately had been one limitless pasture was broken into countless small, fenced-in homesteads.

On the sun-baked flats isolated little shacks sprang into being. Some were sod houses, others dugouts. Still others were cheap frame shanties in which the green lumber of the weather sheathing warped and shrank under the pitiless beating of the elements. Windmills appeared beside the wretched dwellings, pumping barely enough water to keep alive a few head of livestock, but never sufficient to furnish the irrigation that the country really needed.

The soil was light and prone to blow when stirred by the plow, and a sinister hint of future portent appeared in the towering "sand devils" which sucked up the powdered earth in their whirlwinds and scattered it afar over the dry landscape.

From all parts of America the grangers pushed out on the plains with hope and faith in their eyes, lured by the promise of cheap land. Many were shiftless failures who, unable to succeed elsewhere, now tried their hands in the very place where their chances of success were most remote. Others were capable farmers. And the tragedy of these was that they devoted to their arid farms the skill, thought and labor which should have brought them dividends—but did not.

Whatever were the characteristics of these people when first they arrived in western Kansas, they became in a manner very much alike by the time they lived for a little time on the high plains. They were moulded by their common vicissitudes and by the pitiless bombardment of sun and wind.

The men grew leathery as to skin and bleached as to mustaches; and they were almost without exception marked by the tell-tale thickening of the eyelids which betrays long squinting over sun-dazzled landscapes. The women became slatternly. As women will always do, they at first made some shift to prettify their premises, but it was to be observed that these efforts faded in discouragement; and where the hopeful little plots once had been spaded for roses, sweet peas, and asters, the wild thistle, the sunflower, and the gross tumbleweed soon ruled.

At times with hope and at times in despair the farmers of the Short Grass Country—as it was commonly called—labored against unrelenting handicaps. They plowed—and saw the dry winds sweep away their fields as cleanly as any broom, down to the bare hardpan. When and if their crops sprouted and tentatively came up, the searing sun and the withering gale curled and frizzled the tender shoots. And in swirling clouds the voracious grasshopper came to devour what was left.

Yet men will fight and continue to fight when the fight is for life. Finding themselves abandoned on the high plains, the people in some manner wrested from the inhospitable soil a livelihood as gaunt as desiccated rawhide; and in so doing they grew to know one another.

It might be supposed that, living under such circumstances, they would have formed a community of interests, insofar as great distance permitted. But the curious effect of the plains was to make men strongly individual and therefore frequently antagonistic, so that their interests conflicted with each other, almost as if by design.

## 2.

The scattered dry farms of the high plains did not break the empty sameness of the land. Human habitation was too separated, except where a small collection of buildings lay sun-backed and hot in the middle of the expanse, spread athwart the landscape as if a giant hand had cast a fistful of building blocks haphazardly. Sometimes the mirage caught up those huddled shacks and lifted them into the sky in similitude of a great city of magnificent structures. But no denizen of the plains ever was fooled by the mirage. All men knew it for what it was, and it would take more than a mirage to endow with anything but squalor the boom town of Jericho, whose shacks, irregularly jumbled together, were so new that some of them were still yellow with unpainted, unweathered lumber.

Jericho's Main Street was rutty and wide. In the latter circumstance there was sound logic. Since the planners of the raw settlement had practically the entire limitless landscape with which to work in laying out their town, there was no reason why the thoroughfares should not be as wide as anyone desired. So, from sidewalk to sidewalk in Jericho it was a good shouting distance; and Chet Tooley, the editor, was heard to

complain that a man could die of thirst in the time it took to run from the *Weekly Clarion* office to Potlicker's Drug Store, where he could obtain a whiskey "prescription."

The wooden sidewalks served the double purpose of walking places and loading platforms for the few stores. For this reason they ran at different levels, connected with rough stair steps.

By late forenoon in Jericho, the eye was dazzled by the brilliance of the day. Every building stood out in stereoscopic three-dimensional sharpness. A few structures were of two stories, such as the General Store, the Apex Hotel, and a brand-new edifice which still stood empty but which had been designed and built as a court house. For the most part, however, the houses of Jericho were of a single modest story, the private dwellings distinguished from the buildings dedicated to commerce by the fact that the latter possessed the inevitable false fronts of the West, in specious counterfeit of more pretentious proportions, while the former had each its pile of tin cans rusting in the prickly growth of tumbleweeds at its back doorstep. A score or more of windmills hoisted their whirling wheels above the roofs of the town.

In a small white building standing on Jericho's main corner, next to the yellow two-story Apex Hotel, and across the street from the barn-red two-story Cox & McCluggage General Store, sat Henry Archelaus, apparently dozing between his roll-top desk and his office table. The appearance was deceptive. Actually he was watching the gray smoke curl up from his cigar end, and waiting.

Archelaus was the townsite man. In reverse, on the glass of the window which looked out on the street, he could read his own business sign:

THE JERICH0 LAND,  
LOAN AND IMMIGRATION  
COMPANY.

A more complete catalogue of his numerous activities was set forth on a sheaf of paper letterheads which stood stacked before him on the table. Ornately printed, and with the listing nicely pyramided, each letterhead read as follows:

HENRY ARCHELAUS  
Dealer In

Farms and City Property, Buggies, Wagons, Breeding Animals,  
Lumber, Building Materials, and Loans Money on Personal

or Chattel Security. Deeds, Mortgages, Wills and Legal Instruments Drawn at All Hours. Hard Collections Solicited—Might Buy Poor Accounts, Notes, or Anything Else. Owner of the Best Breeding Animals in Kansas—the Best Hotel, Livery Barn, and Lumber Yard in Jericho, Ex-Banker, Hardware Merchant, Druggist, Physician, Proprietary Medicines, Gold Miner, and School Teacher. White—German Descent. Age 63. Weight 274 Pounds. Independent in Politics. Motto Is: "Square Dealing," and Am Willing to Be Tried. Place This in Your Bible and It Will Never Be Lost.

The appearance of the man was in keeping with his letter-head. Beneath his dark slouch hat, his face was broad and florid, like the face of a Dutch burgher in a Rembrandt painting. The hat was never removed, indoors or out, save when Henry went to bed. He wore it to conceal a baldness concerning which he was sensitive.

Beneath his chin a stiff "standup" collar supported his heavy jowls, and his cravat was broad, silken, and black. A massive gold watch chain swung like the cable of a suspension bridge across his generous breadth of white waistcoat, giving a sort of benign assurance to the beholder that the wearer was a man of substance and dependability.

That gold watch chain furnished an index to the personality of Henry Archelaus. He loved massive jewelry. In the thick knot of his cravat he always wore something dazzling in the form of a fancy tie pin—usually a chaste design in dog heads with emerald eyes, or a horse shoe with rubies. His cuff links also were distinctive both for the intricacy of the goldsmith's art and for the impressiveness of their weight; and Henry considered it no affectation to "shoot his cuffs" and dazzle the onlooker.

The watch chain, however, was the real center of fascination. One, two, or even more ornaments habitually dangled from it—a couple of heavy gold-and-jewel lodge emblems, a noble elk's tusk set in gold, and perhaps a five-dollar gold piece for a luck charm—while a watch with a gold hunting case of turnip proportions anchored this oriental magnificence in its place.

A substantial investment was required to maintain such splendor, and a substantial figure to uphold it. But to Henry



Archelaus it was worth the cost. Admiration and public trust pursued him as he walked, glittering like an aurora borealis, down the street.

The door of his office opened, and for a moment his face was almost expectant. But the welcoming look quickly faded from it. A young man stood in the middle of the room, awkwardly holding his hat in his hands. He was a tall, well-shouldered young man, with sandy hair which swirled back from his forehead in a cowlick, and a pair of troubled gray eyes.

"Well, Til," said Archelaus. After a minute: "What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Archelaus," said the young man, "I'm looking for a job."

"A job? What's the matter with your farm?"

"It ain't done so well, Mr. Archelaus. The land's too sandy an' too all-fired dry. It won't grow nothing." He paused and looked directly into Henry's eyes. "That farm ain't worth a damn," he said finally and positively.

"Ah," said the townsite man. He shifted uneasily in his chair. "You bought that land with your eyes wide open, didn't you, Til Rector? Now you say it ain't worth a damn. Is it my fault? Is that any way for you to talk?" He paused and his expression became that of one who has been injured by unjust accusation. "I sold it to you as cheap as I could, didn't I? I made that deal with a growed man who ought to have knowed what he was doing. It was like stealing it, the way you bought it. Can you blame me if you can't make that farm do what a better piece of land, at better prices, would do?"

"I jest had the two hundred dollars that I give you for a down payment," said the young man, as if making excuses for his failure to foresee the shameless bucketing he had received on the transaction.

"That's true," said Archelaus, seizing his advantage. "I knew you was short on cash when we talked the first time. 'Here's a young feller named Til Rector,' says I to myself. 'He ain't got much, but he wants to get a start. All right,' I says to myself. 'I'm going to help a chap with spunk like that. I'm going to get him the very best I can for his money,' I says. An' that's what I done. The best I could get for your money, Til. With only two hundred you couldn't hardly expect, you know, to swing a quarter section of ten- or fifteen-dollar land."

"Yes. I guess that's right," said Til Rector.

He was thinking: He swindled me. This old clabber-mouth

robbed me on them sand hills he sold. Wisht I could take them and cram them, sand and all, down his craw. But I better watch myself. This is no time to start a ruckus. I'm in a bad hole. I got to walk light and talk small—for awhile, anyway. I got to have help . . .

"I guess it was about the best I could hope to do with the puny stake I had," he said aloud, reasonably. "Well, I ain't blaming you, Mr. Archelaus. But I would like for you to help me find some work."

Henry felt a sensation of relief, minor but grateful. He had not liked that momentary look with the hidden core of anger behind it. Henry hated having trouble with anybody, and more particularly with six-foot young giants with walking-beam shoulders. Youths like this were inclined to be hot-headed and lacking in judgment . . .

"I'll be glad to help you if I can, Til," he said briskly. "I'll go over my list. But I can't do it right now. I've got some men coming over to this office—they should be here now. Urgent business—"

"I understand. I'll come back, Mr. Archelaus."

"You do that," said Henry. "Later on. Tomorrow maybe—I see my crowd coming now."

"Thank you, Mr. Archelaus." The young man turned and walked out into the glare of the sun, his worn blue overalls vividly highlighted.

High-headed young devil, thought Henry. That land I sold him must be worse than I thought. He's worked it like hell—that I know. But he'd better not get canary with *me*. Business is business. He knew what he was doing, and I can make things god-awful tough for him if he wants to tangle. But I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. Likely he's going to take it all right.

Once more he seemed to sink back into a doze. The door of the office opened again and three men entered. Without a word they seated themselves in chairs across the table from Henry, and all of them fixed their gaze on him.

An oven wind was blowing outside and the office was very warm, but Archelaus, for all his appearance, was not drowsing. It was an habitual attitude which he assumed under circumstances of a certain order. The deception was created by the heavy lids of his eyes. Always those eyes seemed almost closed, but to a nearer look the glitter of them was clearly apparent. The man was not sleeping; he was only lurking in a self-created ambush.

One by one, the gleam of the half-concealed gaze took in

the men across the table. They were widely divergent in appearance.

At Henry's right across the table sat a lean, dark man, with a kind of dangerous elegance in the way he lounged in the chair, and a kind of dangerous handsomeness in his countenance. He might have been in his early thirties. His face was arresting, with its leanness, its black mustache and goatee, and the white and perfect teeth displayed as with considerable dexterity he worked a cigar around from one corner of his mouth to the other. His knees were crossed and one checkered trousers leg, pulled up slightly, revealed an expensive handmade cattleman's boot, with high heel, soft calfskin vamp, and intricate designs stitched with colored silks into the uppers. His wide hat was drawn low over his eyes, and as he seated himself, he unbuttoned and opened his black frock coat, revealing a fancy vest to which was affixed a silver-plated star—and also giving a suggestive glimpse of a polished leather shoulder holster. This was Sherry Quarternight, a Texan, by the grace of Henry Archelaus marshal of Jericho.

Next to the marshal was an undersized, one-armed man, with rheumy eyes and a perpetual drop of moisture dangling like an evil jewel at the end of his huge, diseased nose. He looked like a buzzard, and that was in line with his occupation. He was Shadrach Spilker, the Jericho undertaker. In part his habitual air of gloom was the practiced melancholy of his craft. But much of it was due also to real emotion arising from his conviction that the high plains were too healthy to permit an undertaker to prosper. Never would Shad Spilker be really happy until the supply of cadavers increased. For the present, Archelaus found him useful because he had a flair for ferret politics.

The third member of the trio was Chet Tooley, the editor of the town's only newspaper, the *Jericho Weekly Clarion*. He was graying and dissipated, with bat ears, a red bottle nose, tousled hair shot with gray, and face wrinkles which ran down from the corners of his nostrils into the disordered growth of a two weeks' beard. The color of his nose, and of his eyes, the underlids of which pouched loosely from the inflamed eyeballs, told what was the matter with him, even if one failed to smell the whiskey stench that perpetually hung about him.

These were Henry's three lieutenants in a matter of some importance which was now brewing.

"Let's get at it," said Spilker, with an impatient jerk of the stub of his arm.

"Good," agreed Henry. "Gents, I've called you over to make a report on this name canvass."

He laid a broad hand on a heap of papers. The sheets were ruled, and soiled with thumb marks and blots, and some of them were rolled while others were folded or crumpled. All of them were covered with scribbled signatures.

"Here are the lists of names we've got so far," said Archelaus. "I just finished checkin' them. By my count, there's sixteen hundred an' forty-three names there—not enough by a damn sight. You-all know what the law says on organizin' new counties in Kansas. There has to be two thousand *bona fide* residents, of which a third must be property owners. Boys, we lack three hundred an' fifty-seven names."

The men across the table nodded.

"Don't sit noddin' like a row of squinch owls at me! I reckon I don't need to remind you that we've combed this country for names until I think we've got just about every nester an' sand hill rat in the district."

"You think mebbe we might have to give up the organization for the time being?" asked Tooley, blinking his inflamed eyes.

"That doesn't sound like it come from you, Chet," said Archelaus, his eyelids opening a little with displeasure. "Knowin' that we've got to get the county seat for Jericho—*got to*, I say—an' that if we don't get it quick we may not get it at all—your remark sounds mighty trifling, sir!"

At the reproof the editor swallowed, his adam's apple making gyrations in the tangle of his whiskers, but he said nothing.

"Those names has got to be got," went on Henry, addressing all of them again. "Let me recapitulate, gents. First, here's Jericho, right smack in the center of the new county. Second, there's Bedestown—way yonder, north of the Cimarron, but hungry to get the county seat that Jericho's entitled to by its location an' by being the older community—"

"About two months older, ain't we?" It was Quarternight, and his teeth flashed pleasantly white as he spoke.

"I grant you we ain't old," replied Archelaus. "This here's June 1889, ain't it? Well, I sunk the first location stake in Jericho, in June 1887. If you date from that, we're two whole years old. Of course nobody lived on the townsite but me, for a few weeks, but dating from that original staking, Jericho's six whole months older than Bedestown. I remember it was just after New Year's Day, 1888, that the location party for old Sam Bede drove the stakes north of the river. Why, gents, figurin' the relative lives of the two towns, we were

a settled community when Bedestown was nothin' but a howling wilderness!"

"If we could get a little co-operation from the Bedestown people in the name canvass, we might fill them lists," said the undertaker.

"That's correct. But we may as well figure on going without any help from them. They've had their orders from St. Louis. Old Sam Bede's a poker player. He ain't a millionaire in coal an' shoe manufacturing for nothing. In this here promotion out in Kansas, he may be playin' at long range, but he knows the hand he holds ain't none too good now, an' his game is to hold things off so that he can have another draw. The town that gets the county seat is goin' to be set, gents. It'll have all the county offices, with the salaries appurtainin' thereto, an' the county printing, an' the county vouchers for all kinds of expenditures—it'll be a bedrock foundation for the economy of any town. Jericho needs that county seat, gentlemen."

The others soberly agreed.

"If we could organize the county right now," went on Henry, "Jericho would be a cinch for the county seat, because most of the voting population lives south of the river. Sam Bede knows that. So there's our new court house." He smiled wryly. "I guess everybody knows I built it out of my own pocket. An' I ain't made of money like some seems to think." He glanced around challengingly. "Well, there's our new court house, standin' empty. To fill that court house is the first big battle to win if we're goin' to put Jericho on the map. No slowin' down now. We're in the stretch, men, an' now's the time to pour the leather to the nag. There's only about a week of time left. Somewhere we've got to find four or five hundred more names."

A silence grew eloquent in the room for a moment. Spilker, the little undertaker, broke it at last.

"We ain't goin' to accomplish nothin' settin' here, boys," he said with that queer nervous jerk of his stump. "I got some ideas. If you're done with us, Boss, I reckon we might as well adjourn."

Archelaus nodded slightly. The three men pushed back their chairs and tramped out.

### 3.

For a time Archelaus sat still in his office gazing out of his window at the broiling street. Familiar business signs caught his eye:

General Store, Cox & McCluggage, Proprietors. The Acme Lumber, Feed & Supply Co. Hippocrates Morse, M.D. Exchange State Bank. Bon Ton Restaurant, Meals Family Style or Short Order. The New York Store, Dry Goods & Notions.

To an unusual degree Henry could say that this was his town. He had built it, and he still owned it, or much of it. Those varied mercantile and professional enterprises he regarded almost with a feeling of paternity. Except for Henry Archelaus none of them would be in existence now. Nothing would be here except the prairie dogs—and the prairie.

Jericho had been born of an accident and there was an unwritten history concerned with the conception, gestation and nativity of it. Henry Archelaus alone could supply that history.

In his varied life he had sampled many occupations, all with comparative ill success, until he made what approached a "killing" during a short period of good fortune as a gold prospector in New Mexico, when he took ten thousand dollars' worth of gold dust out of a placer in the Black Mountains.

Repairing thereafter to the metropolis of the West, Kansas City, to cut the alkali out of his system through a regimen of bourbon whiskey, he chanced upon an old acquaintance, one Tecumseh Jackson, a personage of almost legendary reputation in the West, a financier who skated often on very thin ice and who had an intimate connection with several railroad bond scandals which caused severe reverberations—and in one or two of which he came close to making an ugly accounting to gatherings of angry citizens with ropes in their hands. Now, however, he was reputable. A banker, no less.

"What, my dear Hank, are you doing?" he asked Archelaus.

"Nothing at present. Looking for a speculation."

"As what?"

"Thought I might buy a hotel or a store—"

"Rubbish!"

"I fail to understand you, sir."

"Use your imagination, man! Try something real! How much money have you?"

"Around ten thousand—"

"None too much. But perhaps enough. Ever consider promoting a town?"

Henry had not.

"An easy operation," purred Tecumseh, "and frequently a most profitable one. I've known millionaires made by cornering property in some good town. Take Astor in New York. Take Kersey Coates right here in Kansas City. Why don't you look around, my friend, and pick out a good place to start yourself a town?"

"I got no experience—" began Henry cautiously.

"Listen, Hank," said Tecumseh, "the profits accruing from the location of a town which is fortunate enough to prosper are—well, enormous. Consider this: A section of land at government price is usually eight hundred dollars. Plat that in town lots. At eight lots to the acre, you have fifty-two hundred and twenty lots. Say that you ask only one hundred dollars a lot—which is dirt cheap, and no pun intended—you clean up better than half a million dollars. And all for a bit of staked prairie that, at most, won't cost you—including your investments in the necessary buildings and improvements—what you'd pay for a first-class grocery store in Kansas City."

Archelaus wet his lips greedily. But he felt a sudden canker of suspicion. "If this is so all-fired good, why ain't you in it yourself?" he demanded.

"Hank, one of the things that endears you to me is the brutality of your frankness. However, it is a shrewd question, and I compliment you on it, while deploring your evident lack of full confidence in my good intentions toward yourself. I will give a frank answer. My good Hank, I am in the banking business now. Speculation would damage the reputation of the institution of which I am the head. Yet—" he paused and tugged at his gray side-whiskers, "—I might be willing to back the proper man. For my share of the profits of course, and on acceptable security. And on the strict understanding that regardless of what might occur, my name would be kept entirely out of the affair."

The answer restored Henry's confidence. Thereafter the two conversed for many hours while Archelaus probed the possibilities. There were heavy risks. Money would have to be invested not only in land and improvements, but in advertising, salesmen, and other expenses. It would require all of Henry's ten thousand dollars, plus whatever other sums Tecumseh



forwarded to him. And after the whole thing was done the town might die—or never develop at all.

But the gambling spirit was strong in both men and in the end they reached a compact. With earnest and detailed instructions from Tecumseh Jackson still ringing in his ears, Archelaus traveled to western Kansas, just being opened to settlement after the disastrous blizzard which ruined the cattlemen. The result of that journey was—Jericho.

Jericho. He had chosen the name because it had a Biblical sound and he knew that Kansas people were suckers for the Bible. He was no student of the Scriptures himself, but somebody once had quoted him a Bible verse that contained the words, “. . . the land, and Jericho.” It sounded like a real estate development and appealed to Henry.

From the very first the town had presented a series of problems which grew daily more complicated. The promotion campaign carried on in the East under the direction of Tecumseh Jackson—who insisted on exerting a continuing and sometimes galling oversight of the whole affair in spite of the fact that he would not permit his name to appear in connection with it—was directed at people who were dissatisfied with conditions as they found them at home, and who therefore might be expected to wish for a change. Tecumseh's broadsides and bill posters held forth the idea that very little money was required to start life anew in the promised land of western Kansas. Jackson had written the advertisements with skill and with shrewd knowledge of human weaknesses.

Naturally the immigrants brought into Jericho by such lures were not of the highest or most substantial class of society. Henry found very many of them shiftless and shifty, but without exception the “movers” arriving in his country seemed to expect him to make good on the glowing promises of the printed literature—which most of them had apparently brought along in their covered wagons, evidently feeling that it was a guarantee in some sort.

The grangers came with faith in the new land, and in that faith they bought the farms and town lots Henry showed them. Their very willingness to believe and accept at face value his representations might have rendered uneasy a conscience less fortified than his.

For Henry had come to a conclusion. It was a conclusion which he never publicly admitted—he was convinced in his own mind that the Short Grass was never intended for the small farmer, and that most of the draggled families who bought of him, on the down payment method, would starve to death on their holdings if they stayed long enough. The

quarter-section homestead was still in effect on the high plains, and water was very scarce. It was too late to remedy this. God had done it. As for Henry, he had been reared in the belief that it was the duty and responsibility of the buyer to protect himself. And that when a man had something to sell, he should not be so weak as to feel any emotions of remorse when he found someone willing to buy, no matter how shoddy he knew the bargain to be—for willingness to buy indicated satisfaction with the purchase, and that was salve for any conscience.

There remained only one step—the shiftless and insolvent should not be permitted to stay too long on the lands they took. What money they brought with them Henry considered as his rightful prerogative. Squeeze that money out of them and let them go on out of the country. Then the land could be sold over again. He met this problem with a special contract of sale, an iron-clad contract, whereby he could repossess any property he sold whenever there was a payment due and not forthcoming. It was a neat arrangement. Tecumseh jokingly had referred to it as “putting the clothes through the wringer.” When the wringer got through with them there was little left to squeeze out.

Henry thought suddenly of that young fellow Til Rector. He was about to be put through the wringer. Odd, quiet boy, Rector. Henry knew that the quarter section the young man had bought should never have been farmed by anyone. Seventy acres, perhaps, was sandy soil, too poor even to raise decent buffalo grass. The rest of it was duneland—cactus, and sage, and thistle, with not enough herbage to make reasonable pasture.

A very rudimentary twinge of conscience momentarily assailed the townsite man. Henry decided that he would do something for Til Rector. He began to enjoy at the thought a comfortable feeling of magnanimity as he sat, seeming to drowse, in his hot office looking out on the streets of Jericho.

#### 4.

In spite of the steady hot wind, Jericho was static and somnolent in the noontide sun. Two women, their parasols tilted askew and their skirts blowing, sought to take advan-

tage of the shade offered by the scanty wooden canopies of the stores along the street. Women and birds as a rule hate the high plains, and for the same reason—the constant wind which ruffles and buffets them.

Bland and blue was the sky, save for where it seemed to focus in incandescent heat about the blazing sun. A few hours drooped at the hitch racks, dispiritedly fighting flies with hoof and tail and swinging muzzle.

"Nobody much in town today," said Sherry Quarternight. His companions, Chet Tooley and Shad Spilker, let their silence give consent. The three walked down the irregular wooden sidewalk, with the hollow boards echoing under their heels.

Tooley and Spilker had the slovenly townsman's gait, but the Texan strode along with the peculiar mincing step with which high heels have endowed the cattle country. His fine figure looked lithe and strenuous compared with the shiftless droop of his associates.

On the opposite side of the street a sign, elaborately lettered, stared at them from the false front of a one-story frame structure:

BON TON RESTAURANT  
Meals Family Style or Short Order

Quarternight halted.

"It's noon," he said. "How about a snack?"

"O.K. here," said Tooley.

They crossed the dusty street and entered the eating place. There was a counter, they slid around the end of it and seated themselves on tall stools. Outside the sun baked the dusty ground, but in here it was even warmer. Food smells twisted through the air—roasting meat, fresh bread, frying potatoes—very grateful to the nostrils of hungry men.

From where they sat the counter extended toward a partition with a square opening through which plates of food were passed from the kitchen. Fly specks peppered the walls and ceilings.

Sherry whistled to himself.

"You see what I see?" he asked Tooley.

Tooley glanced at Spilker. Woman. Sherry was smoothing his sleek black mustache. A new girl—it was part of his religion that he would have to explore what possibilities lay here.

The girl had an insinuating figure and her blonde hair was piled high on her head. She came sidling down behind the counter with three glasses of water balanced dextrously.

"Hello," she said, putting the glasses before the men.

"Hi," said Shad and Chet gruffly.

Sherry's teeth gleamed in his best smile.

"Sweetheart, pay no attention to my friends," he said easily.

"They're a couple of broken down old men and simply can't appreciate something like you."

She did not acknowledge his remark.

"I got ham, roast beef, roast pork, and steak," she said.

"You got more than that," said Sherry.

For the first time the girl turned toward him. She smiled, showing magnificent teeth.

"Well, *welcome*, stranger!" she exclaimed.

"There ain't no need for us to stay strangers," he said.

"No?"

"My name's Quarternight—Sheridan Quarternight. Sherry to *you*. I live here. Everybody knows me."

"I would have known that." There was a half smile that baffled him.

"I've told you my name, honey. It ain't polite for you' not to tell yours."

She considered a minute. "Gosney," she said after a time. "Gussie Gosney."

"How long yo' been here, an' me not knowin' it?"

"I come in yesterday."

"Where from?"

"Mister," she said, and the smile was gone now, "can I take your order?"

Sherry became silent. The others were ordering. He did likewise; ate.

Other men came in until all the high stools at the long counter were occupied, and upon them the girl who called herself Gussie attended sinuously. Sherry's eyes took in her fine figure, the insolent leisure of her walk, the challenge in her eyes, the tinting on her firm cheeks.

Why the little devil, he thought suddenly, she paints. It was a hallmark, placing Gussie Gosney in a definite category. Sherry Quarternight grinned slightly again, and tugged at his spiky goatee. She had thrown down the gauntlet, as it were. It would be amusing to make her take it up herself.

Now, however, was not the time to begin things. In these matters a certain amount of preliminary maneuvering was requisite. The Texan understood women of a certain type. He

looked at his friends. There was other pressing business to dispose of.

"Yo' gents eaten?" he asked. "Let's get over to Potlicker's."

They paid for their meals and filed out. It was Tooley who glanced over his shoulder and caught the eyes of the Gosney girl fixed with an oddly speculative look on the back of Sherry Quarternight.

Half a block farther down the street was Potlicker's Drug Store. "Doc" Potlicker, a short, beet-faced man, almost completely bald and with jowls so massive that his head was pyramidal in appearance, stood by the door.

The establishment did not amount to much. At one side was the prescription counter with its standard remedies—bottles of sulphur, elixir, asafoetida, castor oil, and calomel. Elsewhere around the walls ran rows on rows of shelves, containing patent medicines—for female troubles, that "down in the back feeling," lost manhood, pregnancy, and others ills in fashion—not forgetting a row of obscene boxes labeled: *Dr. Ludlum's Specific for the Cure of Gonorrhoea, Gleets, Whites, Strictures and Complaints of the Organs of Generation, with Full Directions for Administering and Applying.*

The store had its little counter of luxuries also—candy, fancy bottles of cheap perfume, and sachet powder, in boxes. But the most important source of "Doc" Potlicker's income was not visible. The prohibitory law was a statute of Kansas, but Kansans had never fully reconciled themselves to it. Anyone would obtain a "medical prescription" and the prescription counter at Potlicker's did a business in liquor so large that "Doc" hardly had time to bottle the product he kept in barrels in his cellar.

To the stubby druggist Quarternight raised a beckoning hand.

"Valley Tan," he said.

Potlicker came from behind the counter in a minute or two, wrapping a bottle in paper. The marshal paid for his purchase and led his two companions through the back of the store into a rear room, the entrance of which was concealed by hangings.

Here a second evidence that mere legislation will not end sin was made manifest. The place was a gambling room. Windows were painted, so that their panes were opaquely green. Two or three overhead lamps hung from the ceiling and beneath each stood a round table, large enough to seat six or eight persons, and covered with heavy green baize.

"Nobody here yet, as I thought," said Quarternight. "My dealers is still in bed. Big night last night—lodge night. We

don't never start up nohow much until afternoon, an' the real works begins after dark. We can talk here."

They seated themselves at one of the tables and the Texan filled from the bottle three small glasses he took from a shelf.

"They tell me this ain't allowed in Kansas," he said with a laugh. "Funny state, Kansas. Always passin' laws to keep itself from doin' what it wants to do. Reminds me of a Hard-shell Baptist preacher down at Austin, Texas. He give up eatin' fried chicken. When he was asked why he done so, he said that he liked fried chicken too much. Likin' anything that much was sinful, he figgered, so he give it up. Kansas is a little different, though. They may *vote* dry, but they still *drink* wet."

They jested pleasantly and drained their glasses.

"This here's the committee on ways an' means, I reckon," said Quarternight, suddenly bringing them back to the subject of their conference. "The Boss kind of checked it up to us."

"Four hundred names to get," said Spilker. "That's an awful lot of names."

"One thing's a cinch," said Tooley. "Scruples has to be dropped. This has got down to cold turkey with us."

"Confidentially," said the undertaker, "I been workin' a little free for several days now. Notice them last names I turned into Henry? They was residents all right—when I signed 'em. But I'd hate to have to guarantee they was residents *now*. A man's a bona fide resident while he's livin' on the soil of the county, ain't he? Even if he's in a wagon just passin' through. Like that old billygoat, William Ainesworth that I got this morning. He acted like he didn't know what I wanted of him—he was headed for the Colorado line. But he signed all right. I corraled every mover like that I could find travelin'. How can I be held responsible if, after they signed their names, they went on an' moved out of the county?"

"How many of them 'bona fide residents' yo' got, Shad?" asked Quarternight.

"Twelve, I think it was."

"Good as far as it goes. But it ain't fast enough. It would take six months for four hundred movers to come through this county. Traffic's mighty puny an' triffin', looks like."

"Any notions?" asked the undertaker.

"Mebbe. Yo' give me an idee." He began distributing pads of ruled paper. "Mo' space fo' names, gents," he said.

They rose from the table and left the room. At the door Tooley hesitated.

"Comin' with us?" asked Quarternight.

"No-o. Guess not," replied the editor. "I got a little business . . ."

"Suit yo'self," said the marshal. "Come along, Shad. I'm goin' to show yo' how to make them lists multiply."

Tooley turned toward the livery stable and the others tramped on to the hotel.

"See that?" asked Sherry suddenly. "New rig. Drummer, likely."

"He's just got in," said the undertaker. "Prob'ly registerin' now."

"We'll look him over."

In the lobby they discovered a plump stubby man in spats and a black fedora, a linen duster over his cutaway coat which was notable for its very short velvet lapels. He had heavy black mustaches, gleaming with wax.

"The name is Mahannah," he was saying to the clerk. "Emmett Mahannah. Out of Peoria, Illinois. Cigars. I want a room. May God spare me, but this is an atrocious place!"

"First visit to Jericho?" asked the clerk as the man registered.

"Yes, and heaven forbid that I ever come this way again." The visitor was fervent. "No roads! Dust, ankle deep! Sand storms! Cyclones! And a dry state, a prohibition state, Mother of God, for a man with a thirst all the way from Peoria!"

"You will have the room at the head of the hall," said the clerk. "The boy will bring up your baggage."

"Many thanks. May I be forgiven for me sins! And I could have stayed in Peoria, where ther are thirty Mahannahs to cut the dust out of me throstle with!"

"Thirty Mahannahs, seh?"

The cigar salesman turned and found himself looking into the face of a tall, lean dark man with a negligent grace of pose, and a black mustache and goatee.

"And why not?" demanded the drummer belligerently. "Why not thirty Mahannahs? Why not a hundred? A thousand? Sure it's the salt of the earth they are, good God almighty!"

"Indeed, seh, no offense. I was only admirin' the thought, seh, of thirty gents with yo' elegant qualities. Let me introduce myself. I am Sherry Quarternight, an' this is my friend Shad Spilker. I am wonderin' if, in the absence of them thirty Mahannahs, seh, yo' would consent to cut that dust with a couple of strangers?"

The Peoria man stared. "Ye wouldn't be speakin' of—the crayture—?"

"I am. It would be a pleasure to show yo' a little of the



hospitality, seh, that yo' have regrettably found absent so far in Jericho."

Mahannah drew a deep breath. "God bless yel!" he cried fervently. "Oh, glory be to God and His Blessed Mother, it's me heartmost prayers ye've answered. Lead on gentlemen, and God save ye for the kind an' ministerin' Samaritans ye are. If I can't drink a barrel of Peoria whiskey meself at this very minute, divil an Irishman am I, sure!"

## 5.

The stranger in a strange land, with his unexpected friends, passed out of the door of the Apex Hotel, arm in arm with Sherry Quarternight and Shad Spilker.

Mahannah's whole opinion of Jericho had changed within a few seconds, and now he was purring with anticipation and filled with curiosity.

"In a prohibition state, Mother of God, how is it ye can buy poteen?" he wanted to know.

"Easy. It's an old Kansas custom, arisin' from a Kansas characteristic. *Ad astra per aspera* is the motto of this state, meanin' 'To the stars the hard way,' near as I can figger out. No Kansan likes to do anything easy. He raises his crops hard. He takes his religion hard. To be able to get licker easy would jest be contrary to nature for him. So he makes laws to keep him from gettin' it. That's the fust step. The second is to hunt fo' the loophole in that law. Every law has its loophole, as yo' know. So when he finds the loophole he goes about the job of gettin' his licker that way. It makes it harder, which gives mo' of a point to drinkin' it, an' lo an' behold, yo' Kansan thereby derives a greater satisfaction of soul out'n it."

They entered Potlicker's and passed on through to the rear room. Since Sherry and Shad had been there, a small game had started at one of the poker tables. Three or four men, in shirt sleeves, were examining cards, shoving in chips. They were farm workers, evidently, from their bronzed skins, and in town for a brief holiday, from the pink napes of their necks, which disclosed the work of the barber's shears on unaccustomed locks, with the razor producing the old round-house neck shave. The poker they were playing was a piker game, as much to pass the time of the dealer as anything, and Sherry paid no attention to it.

But the Peoria Irishman was charmed. This was something nearer to his notions of the West. No Indians had Emmett Mahannah seen in his sojourn in Kansas. He had, in point of fact, seen few cattle, and Sherry Quarternight here looked more like a typical cowboy than almost anyone he had beheld. The trip, as a sight-seeing expedition, had thus far been a great disappointment. But here at last was something more satisfying.

"A gamin' room!" cried Emmett. He had almost said "a gambling hell," but changed his term.

"Well, in a small way."

The day's heat penetrated into the room as the marshal poured three drinks.

"This here's Valley Tan whiskey—Mormon whiskey," he said, handing a glass to Mahannah. "It's easier fo' us to get it from the mountains than from the Missouri."

The drummer raised his glass to his lips and tasted it. "By all the saints, it's good whiskey!" he cried.

"Here's a little Texas drinkin' toast, then," smiled Quarternight. He raised his glass in his right hand, his eyes fixed on it, and recited:

"Here's to the vinegaroon that jumped on the centipede's  
back.

"He looked at him with a glow an' a glee—"

(here Sherry shifted the glass to his left hand)

"An' said: 'Yo' p'isonous son-of-a-bitch,

"If I don't get yo' yo're going to get me!"

(here he downed the contents of his glass in a single gulp.)

"It's neat. The saints preserve us, but it's neat," crowed Mahannah in high glee. "I've got only the night here, but it's that same I'm going to learn, if I have to drink a barrel of Valley Tan whiskey to do it!"

From the other table came the voice of the dealer speaking tonelessly as he dealt the cards. There were chips, blue, red and white.

"I'm that curious to know something," said Mahannah. "It ain't a damn bit of my business—"

"Shoot," said Sherry, good humoredly.

"Ye've got a gamin' house here. I guess ye don't make any secret about it?"

"Not a bit in the world."

"Well, here's what's got me wondering—how do you get away with it? Mother of God, how about the church people and the temperance societies—bad cess to them?"

"Fo' one thing," said Sherry, "I stay as near as I can within the law. Fo' another, I'm one of the big contributors to the church here. I ain't makin' any advertisement of them benefactions, but the church folks knows it—anyways the preacher an' the deacons does. That makes 'em think befo' they tie into me. Finally, I'm honest."

"I would never question it, sure," said Emmett politely. "But," he added, "what do ye mean by honest in gambling?"

Quarternight took a pull at his cigar and poured out a new round of drinks.

"A man who runs a gamblin' house," he said slowly, "has got to be square if he wants to stay in the game. I'm honest, fust because I want to keep in business; second, because I want to keep from gettin' shot. Nothin' makes folks so skittish with lead as bein' cheated at cyards."

"Ye go in for poker mostly?"

"That's correct. But I run two or three games on busy nights. Lodge nights are good fo' me. Masons an' Elks are good customers. An' we was speakin' of the church—some of them old he-saints ain't above takin' a flutter now an' then, which is another thing in my favor. When I can get anybody to play it, I run a faro game. I've got a chuck-a-luck outfit. Everything but roulette. An' I don't allow no dice in my place."

"Why no dice?" asked Mahannah.

"Because there's mo' inclination to cheat in dice than in any other game. There's sech a lot of paraphenalia that cheatin's always possible. I've seen dice tables in the big towns, located in half-lit rooms, that reminded yo' of an aged whore, suppo'tin' a whole group of pimps—a stick man, a pay-off man, an' two or three come-ons. Yo' jest knew that them games was crooked. Every man in it could an' did switch dice, an' most of 'em likely was dice handlers, too."

"What do ye mean, dice handlers?" the drummer inquired.

Sherry reached into his pocket. "Look here," he said, displaying a pair of white ivory cubes with dots upon them. "I ain't no good at dice handlin' but I could mebbe fool yo'. I'll roll a seven."

The dice rolled on the table, settled with a five and two up. Quarternight then rolled an eight, which he said was more difficult.

"Now a smaht man, watchin' the game, would know what

I'm doin'," he explained. "A greenho'n might be took in. Dice are dangerous."

The Peoria Irishman revealed an insatiable and eager curiosity. "How about other games?" he pursued.

"There's a big enough margin fo' the house in honest gamblin'. Yo' know there's a percentage in all normal bettin'. On an even thing, I'll offer fo' to five, to all comers, an' let them take their choice. I can be pretty sure, knowin' the differences in human nature, that the bettin' will even up on both sides, an' I'll have the margin of the odds fo' profit."

"Looks like a good thing."

"It's all human nature." Warned by his auditor's interest, Quarternight grew expansive. "Folks is divided into two classes—'come men' an' 'no men.' The 'no men' become professional gamblers, because most everybody else in a 'come man'—he'll bet positive instead of negative, layin' his money that such an' such a hoss will win, or that he'll draw such an' such a cyard. Only the hosses an' the cyards don't always do what he wants. The man who bets consistently against the 'come' fellows, will always win out over the long average."

His lean face was expressive as he explained this angle of his craft to his visitor. Again he poured a round of drinks. The Irishman was beginning to feel warm and full of ebullience.

"Here's another thing to remember," the Texan went on. "Aside from the percentages, there's somethin' else about the human race that plays in favor of the house. It's this: a man jest won't let himself win as much as he'll let himself lose. That there is a rock foundation fact. Take a fellow who sits into a game here in my place, for instance, an' wins twenty or thirty dollahs. He's ahaid, so he walks out. He feels comfortable an' eats a two-dollah dinner, an' has a drink or so. He's flush an' happy, thinkin' how he beat the game."

"But a loser, when the luck starts runnin' against him, often goes rigid in his mind. It's an offense to his vanity that he keeps on losin', an' he stiffens up. 'Ridin' luck'—fo' folks like that—means that when they're ridin' bad luck their judgment gets paralyzed. It gets so that it affects mo' than mere pocket money. A man loses fo'ty dollahs. Mebbe that's his rent money. He's lost mo' than he can affo'd. He begins takin' desperate chances because the world's gone black on him— an' he loses an' loses. A man like that's easy to peel, an' he'll lose three or fo' times as much as he'll himself win if the cyards is runnin' the other way."

Quarternight paused and puffed reflectively at his cigar. Once more they had a drink all round. Mahannah's face was growing flushed.

"I don't know why I'm tellin' yo' all this," the Texan said. "Reckon it's because I took a shine to yo'. But to go on: it's a sayin' that savin' the fust thousand dollahs is the hardest, an' that when a man has saved up a thousand dollahs he's on the road to success. Actually, to my mind, it's the fellow who's lost his fust thousand who's on the road up. It's a lot harder to learn the lesson of losin' than the lesson of savin'. The man who hasn't learned to lose cain't bear the thought of losin'. He'll keep puttin' money down the rat hole in the desperate hope of winnin' eventually, an' will hurt hisself right in the center of his bein', which is his pocketbook. If I had the doin' of it, every college would have a class teachin' students how to take losses an' not let them gum up their thinkin' processes."

He grinned amiably at his own novel educational program.

"You're probably gettin' tired of this," he said.

"No. Indade no. Ye have me hangin' on your words, good God almighty!"

"Well, I might as well finish," said Quarternight. "In any gamblin' game, a well-heeled man has an advantage over a man playin' on a margin, because he has the resources to make up his losses. There is two extremes in gamblin'—both dangerous to the house. One is the man with seventy-five cents or so, an' no mo'. The other is the man with ten thousand dollahs or better. The ten thousand dollah man is goin' to be hard to break an' will very possibly make a big comeback, because he can affo'd to lose. There's a sayin': 'All big fish eat all little fish.' That applies to the ten thousand dollah man."

"But how, in the name of God, can the seventy-five cent man be dangerous?"

"The seventy-five cent man is dangerous to the house because yo' cain't win off of him. Yo' get his six bits, mebbe, an' that's the end of it. But by a lucky freak of the cyards he might do the winnin'—might work that six bits up to a hundred dollahs or mo'."

"I begin to see it," said Mahannah.

"Takin' all them things into consideration," went on the marshal, "a gambler who watches his percentages an' stays honest will generally keep ahaid of the game. Some gamblers, however, is like the barkeeps who drink their own stuff—they don't stay in the game long."

The Irishman's face showed delight.

"By all the saints!" he cried, "I like this company. A Mahannah always knows gentlemen when he sees them. Me own father, God rest his soul, used to say that a man might pretend, but he could never fool a quart of whiskey. If he was a skunk it would show up when he got to drinking."

He was speaking thickly now. The poker game on the other side of the room went along quietly. From the table where Quarternight, Spilker, and Mahannah sat, came talk and laughter, sometimes loud. Once the Irishman sang a short verse of a song. At last the drummer's voice was upraised.

"And I also sign the other Mahannahs," he proclaimed, so that the card players across the room glanced curiously at him. "Why not? By the holy saints, if one Mahannah is good, thirty are that much better. Now let me think: there's John and Peter and Will and Patrick and Eddie—they're me brothers in Peoria, and every one of them a broth of a boy when he was young. And there's me sweet sisters, Fannie and Katy and Mary and Liza. That's nine. Ten counting me. If only me mother and Himself were living, God rest their souls, and may the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. But they're gone these many years. Now let me examine into me cousins. Heaven forgive me if I can do less than add thirty good names of 'bona fide residents' to your list. Sure, there's Tom, Walt, Jesse . . ."

On and on went the voice of the cigar salesman from Peoria, and Sherry Quarternight poured more glasses of Valley Tan, while Shad Spilker, bent over the sheet of paper which he held firm on the table with his stub of an arm, registered with his good hand the thirty Mahannahs on the census of the new county in Kansas.

## 6.

Far out from Jericho on the prairie, Chet Tooley stopped his buggy on a low rise. Before him lay a wide buffalo grass flat, studded with hundreds of little clay mounds a foot or so high, and resembling so many tiny volcanoes since each had a hole in its summit for all the world like a miniature crater. From the farther reaches of the area came a shrill, high-pitched yelping.

The journalist speculatively regarded the mounds, and scratched his unkempt chin.

He thought: This is sure the biggest prairie dog town in the county. Must be a thousand burrows here. Wonder how many dogs there are? Regular little city . . . likely has its mayor and aldermen, just like a corporation anywhere else.

The conceit pleased him and he grinned sheepishly to himself. What he was going to do here was a mighty childish activity for a grown man, so he might as well get into the spirit of it. To do so he brought a square bottle from under the seat and took from it a long pull, gagging and making faces at the crude liquor.

The recollection of this populous prairie dog community was what had caused him to leave Quarternight and Spilker when the "ways and means committee" voted to utilize every bit of its ingenuity in obtaining names for the county census.

Replacing the square bottle at a safe but easily accessible place, Tooley lifted from the seat beside him a thick book, bound in heavy gray canvas boards. CINCINNATI CITY DIRECTORY, said the title on the front of the book. He opened it.

When first Tooley's buggy had appeared near the dog town, every small animal in sight had kicked up its heels, flirited its short tail, and with a last shrill bark, dived down its hole. But the prairie dogs were not really alarmed. Nobody ever had hunted them, and the fear of men was not yet strongly implanted. Presently the fat, dun-colored creatures began coming up again into the sun. Far about him the Jericho editor now saw them, scrambling out of their burrows, sitting upright on their tiny hillocks, browsing on the short buffalo grass, or frisking in sheer joy at being alive. Continuously their piercing yelps rose on the air—*yek, yek, yek* . . .

Chet ran his eye down the page of the Cincinnati city directory. "Bauerle, Adolph," he read aloud. "Sounds like a substantial citizen. You, over there on that mound in the center, your name from now on is Adolph Bauerle. You look like a fat old Dutchman anyway. Howdy, Adolph."

He nodded cordially, but the distant marmot sat motionless on its hillock, its round belly distended, without so much as blinking its bright beady eyes in response to the greeting.

"Huh," said Chet to himself. "He don't appreciate gettin' a name free."

Again he grinned, a little foolishly. Chet Tooley was very glad nobody was near to witness this juvenile performance.

He wrote "Adolph Bauerle" at the top of a sheet of paper. Then he turned to the directory again. One after another he culled names from the old book, and formally presented each to a distant, yapping prairie dog. After every presentation he carefully added that name to his growing list.

Unconscious of the distinction being conferred upon them, the dogs scampered, dove into their holes, or emerged to



grub for grass roots. Their village was populous, filled with bustle and rodent good humor. They became after a time utterly unconscious of the presence of the strange vehicle and the human being who sat in it, his eyes serious, conscientiously giving dog after distant dog a name, and then inditing those names on his sheets of paper.

The afternoon was late when the editor at length rolled up his bundle of foolscap and turned his horse's head toward Jericho. He left the rig at the livery stable and stopped for a quick bite at the Bon Ton, before stumbling through the dust to Archelaus' office.

"Hello, Chet," said Henry as he entered. "You're late. Where have you been?"

The big man was sharp. Things were not going well. To Spilker and Quarternight he continued a sentence he had begun before Tooley's entry.

"—and at this rate, we're done for. Forty names. Thirty of them Mahannah! I'm not asking where you got those names—but forty names, no matter how you got 'em, make a mighty poor start on four hundred."

Then Chet Tooley had his moment of triumph.

He came to the table and laid his roll of papers before Henry.

"What's this?" asked the townsite man.

"Look at it, Boss."

Henry unrolled the bundle. "Adolph Bauerle," he read, unbelieving. "Is he a resident of this county?"

"He is," said Chet with a straight face. "Furthermore he owns his own home. Every name on those lists belongs to a bona fide resident and property holder in Blair County, livin' an' conductin' his business here, an' I'm prepared to take oath to that statement."

They stared at him.

"Chet, where you been this afternoon?" asked Shad.

But with sudden prescience Archelaus held up a large hand.

"Friend Tooley's statement is sufficient, gents," he said. "I for one have no desire to pursue the inquiry. After all, why should we put the fourth estate under an inquisition?"

Spilker and Quarternight exchanged significant glances. Henry did not want to know where the names had been obtained.

The townsite man rolled up the lists. "think we're in," he said.

## TWO

### 1.

TIL RECTOR stood at the door of the shanty and nervously shifted his feet. The shanty was unpretentious—two rooms and a lean-to addition, all of new green lumber. But it was as good as any in the country where lumber had to be hauled by wagon from Dodge City, ninety miles across the prairie.

The shanty stood on a slight rise, which on the plains passed for a hill, although in any other part of the world it would have been ignored as a topographical feature. Still, its feeble eminence gave it a wide general view of the country, the broad plain to the south with its two or three tiny farm dwellings in the distance, an apparently endless road ribboning across the buffalo grass, and to the north a curious low irregularity of the earth—the sand hills of the Cimarron River.

All these things the young man saw yet did not see, as he waited at the door on which he had knocked. He had just come by that road from Jericho, riding in the mail hack, which had let him out at the entrance to this farm.

A quick step came from within—a woman's step. The door opened.

"Ma'am," said Til, removing his hat, "I come to see about work. Mr. Archelaus sent me."

"Oh yes." She was a tall, thin young woman in a plain green dress. Thin, and delicate looking. She had red hair. Til looked again at that hair. It was worth a second look. It was

not red after all—at least not plain red. It had rich shades and meanings to which he could not lay his tongue. He dropped his eyes and hoped she had not noticed his staring.

"Mr. Trudge will be here in a minute," she said. Then almost needlessly: "I am Mrs. Trudge."

"Gary, who's out there?" came a querulous voice from within. She moved aside. A man appeared in the door.

"I'm Simeon Trudge," he said. "What might your business be?"

"My name's Til Rector."

"I like full names."

"All right. Tilford Rector. Everybody calls me Til. Mr. Archelaus said you was lookin' for a hand.

Til was surprised at the appearance of the farmer. The man was undersized, lean and stooped. He seemed at least half a head shorter than his wife. Leathery wrinkles drew at his thin face and a tangle of short kinky whiskers, very gray, almost concealed his small petulant mouth. From a nest of crabbed lines his eyes glared yellowly like those of a Leg-horn rooster. No symptom of the deterioration of years was in his small raw frame, but it was evident that he was past his prime—fifty at least. And the girl behind him—she could not be more than twenty-three. Til found the disparity in ages displeasing.

"What's your experience?" Trudge was asking testily.

"I've farmed about all my life."

"Ain't you the feller that's been workin' that sand hill quarter north of Phelps?"

"Yes. I do have a patch northwest of here."

"How come you ever let anybody sell you a no-good piece of land like that? Tried spring wheat, didn't you?" In the voice was a contemptuous implication that the young man had been guilty of ignorance or stupidity—or perhaps inferiority.

"That's correct," said Til. No use to explain the situation. The result of it condemned him. He felt instinctively that the farmer had an aversion to him. Yet this job was important.

"Well," said Trudge reluctantly, "if Henry Archelaus sent you . . . I do have some work got to be done. I could use a man through harvest—if he gives satisfaction."

"I promise satisfaction."

"Humph! You do, do you? Well promisin' an' doin' is two different things. We work hard at this place. I take farmin' serious. No room for loafers. I figger to use what daylight there is for field work. The chores can be did by lantern."

He looked at Til as if hoping the latter would decline the terms.

"I'm used to hard work. Hours don't mean nothin' to me, Mr. Trudge."

Simeon Trudge cleared his throat harshly.

I don't know, he thought. Reckless, he looks like, an' full of fleshly pride. Drinks, likely. Smokes tobacco, too. Swears.

Simeon decided he did not like the young man. He did not like anyone at whom he had to look up. He did not, moreover, quite approve of the bold carriage of this young man's head and shoulders. Simeon was excessively religious. Any semblance of the worldly was offensive, and this youth had a hint of easy laughter in his eyes.

But help was scarce in this new country where nearly everyone was trying to till his own acres.

"I'll give you a trial, I guess," the farmer said. "You bring your telescope bag in here, an' Gary will show you where to put it in the lean-to. You can unpack an' get ready to help with the chores. Supper ain't for two hours. Your pay starts tomorrow."

Til picked up the gray canvas bag and stepped within. His hat was still in his hand, and he halted as he saw the tall red-haired girl. Gary. That must be her first name.

"That door over there," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Gary Trudge watched him go. As soon as he had closed the door behind him she began to wonder what kind of a person he was.

He was homely, but it was a man's strong homeliness. His face, after all, was youthful, pleasant and good-humored. And about him was a jauntiness, a part of his youth, manifested in his wide easy-smiling mouth, and the manner in which he carried his fine shoulders. They were powerful shoulders, spread and toughened by hard labor. And his legs were long and straight.

He looked as if he was easy-going, but there was something in his eyes that was not easy-going.

That boy has something on his mind, she said to herself.

As her husband immediately had disliked Til Rector, Gary Trudge instinctively liked him.

## 2.

It was after dark when the men came in from the chores, talking.

"Kin you use a bull-tongue?" asked Simeon.

"Yes."

"I'll let you try your hand at the kaffir-corn in the mornin'."

Til was carrying a bucketful of milk, heavy with its fluff of foam on top, the hall-mark of the good milker. He had milked the Trudge cow under the eye of the farmer, and then had been shown the other chores—feeding the four Trudge pigs in their sty down by the barn, turning the horses out to pasture, the other many odds and ends to be done about the farmyard. They carried a smoking lantern.

"Anything new at Jericho?" The question was the first indication of unbending on the part of Simeon.

"Not much. I was only there two days. Heard they got enough names on the census to organize the county."

The farmer grunted. "I suppose that means elections, an' offices, an' taxes," he said. "I left Indianny to get away from taxes. Now I get out here an' right away they put more taxes on me."

Outrage was in his voice.

He led the way over to the unpainted wooden bench on which stood a tin basin, poured water from a pail which stood beside it, and washed, splashing the water and snorting as he sloshed it over his face and neck.

Til awaited his turn to wash, then followed his new employer across the room to the oil-cloth covered table beside the window nearest the kitchen's outside door. As they seated themselves, a few flies forsook their evening clinging-places on the walls to circle and buzz in the steam of the hot food which Gary Trudge was bringing to the table.

She lifted her voice: "Ranny!"

So there was a third member of the household.

From the next room came a scampering, and joy for a moment made lovely the young mother's face. A little boy bolted from the door, then came to a halt, staring, as he saw the stranger.

"Ranny," said Gary, "this is Mr. Rector. He has come to work for us. Can you say how do you do?"

"How do," said the child doubtfully.

Ranny was four, touseled, and very dirty as to hands and feet. He had been through a day of vast and complicated juvenile activities—ranging from the top rafters of the barn where he had climbed for a perilous examination of a mud-dauber's nest, to the bottom of the 'fraid hole, into which he had gone to get a cool drink of buttermilk. Ranny was an only child, and as such was much on his own resources. His mother was his sole playmate, and she had very little time to devote to him. But this rarely concerned the youngster. His life was full of many colored imaginings. About him was a world filled with wonders, and his curiosity was so constant that almost never did he lack for interest. There were, however, certain of the conventions which he disliked.

"Ma," he said breathlessly, turning his gaze unwillingly from Til, "I washed already, ma."

"When?" asked Gary.

"A—a li'l while ago."

"You march right over, sir, and wash your face and hands!"

This was well-worn ritual and occurred before each meal.

"Mus' I wash my foots, too?" Ranny demanded in injured tones.

Gary shook her head. "Not until bedtime. Hurry!"

With amusement Til watched the child dip his hands gingerly into the water and rub the grimy pink palms flatly together. A moment of this and the mother went with determination to the wash bench, where in spite of Ranny's complaints, she washed him deftly and thoroughly.

"Looks like you'd get that kid washed up without so much racket every time," growled Simeon. He spoke as if the small disturbance had been purposely designed to annoy him.

Silently Gary and Ranny slipped into their chairs just as the farmer bowed his skull head.

Simeon was a praying man. A life-time of rural church-going and attendance at country revival meetings, had given him an almost limitless command of the clichés and catch-words of pious expression, and with these he made up for whatever he lacked in rhetorical invention. It was a long prayer he uttered, and Ranny listened to it impatiently. Before the "Amen" was well out of his father's mouth, the child was reaching for the plum-butter.

Simeon's visage stiffened and the little hand hesitated, then crept slowly back beneath the table. Ranny's eyes sought his mother's face. The farmer's voice was a dry rasp:

"How many times I got to tell you about proper respect?"

"He forgot—" began Gary.

With growing anger Simeon rejected this immemorial mother's defense.

"Forgot!" he sneered bitterly. "If I've tole him once, I've tole him a hundred times. This here's gone too far. It's *sacrilege*, that's whut it is—not even waitin' for the blessin' to be finished. I'm goin' to learn him right now!"

A wail went up from Ranny. He did not know what portended, but he had set up a policy when dealing with his father, of acting as if he expected the worst.

Simeon, more than twice as old as his wife, had no understanding of children. This one had come so late in his life that the natural interests of fatherhood had in large measure departed. He possessed a certain amount of natural affection, but he never showed it and he was erratic in his dealings, so that Ranny never knew whether he would be punished severely for some minor offense or ignored when he was guilty of some far more serious misdeed. The child not unnaturally feared his parent, and this Simeon sensed, so that his resentment was further quickened. Gary, too, was the consistent ally of the boy's, and this gave the farmer a feeling of being defied in his own home, which added to his irritability.

Til viewed the scene with some surprise. Here was something in which, clearly, he could take no part. Yet he found that his sympathies were all with Gary and the child. Simeon was unnecessarily harsh—as if the man was unsure of his own authority. Til disliked petty martinetts, but certainly this was none of his business. He commenced to eat, trying to pay no attention.

Simeon scowled and rose from his chair.

With face carefully expressionless, Til at last spoke:

"Mebbe the kid thought you was done before you was."

"How do you mean?" Simeon's face was suspicious and truculent.

"The ending to that prayer, you know—it was a mighty han'some ending, I was thinkin', but it did throw me off a little."

Simeon considered this. It was true that he had ended with a final flourish he had heard the last time he was in Jericho to church. That Til, new at his table, should have noticed it, secretly pleased him, and his anger toward Ranny cooled measureably.

"Well," he said, "he can go without his supper."

"Oh, no!" protested Gary. "That would be wore than whipping. The child is growing, Mr. Trudgel!"

Til took note that one of the oddments of this household

was that the wife always addressed her husband as "Mr. Trudge." Never his first name.

"It'll mebbe learn him not to go grabbin'," said Simeon, "before the 'Amen's' out'n my gullet—"

"He was starved. He won't do it again. I'll give him a good talking to—"

Eagerly she rushed in with her defense, her promises, her supplication.

"All right," Simeon grumbled at length. "But he don't get no plum-butter," he added, as if saving something from his capitulation.

Til busied himself with his eating. Plain fare, typical of western Kansas. Fried potatoes, steak, white gravy, beans. Pie also. Til kept his eyes on his food, paid full attention to his victuals.

After a time, Simeon cleared his throat.

"Whereabouts did you come from out to this country?" he asked.

"Illinois."

"What part of Illinois? We come from Indianny."

"I come from Streator," said Til. "A mining town. Welsh, a good many of the miners was. My folks kept a store—or least-ways my father did. My mother, she died when I was right young."

"Funny you took up farming."

"Well, it is, mebbe. My father, he was a temperance man, an' his convictions was pretty solid—too solid for his own good, I reckon. Them Welsh was colliery people, brought over from the old country to do the mining. The whole earth under Streator was honeycombed with the galleries. I can remember how the tinware in our store used to jingle sometimes at the blasting that went on down beneath us. Once a neighbor's house, an' the barn with it, sunk as soft an' gentle as you could think, right down into the ground when a gallery caved. Nobody was hurt, but I never did get over my surprise at the way a man's whole property could disappear into the ground that way."

"You was speakin' of your father."

"Yes, I was. I helped about the store until I was twelve. Then father closed up the store. You see them Welsh, a lot of them, was awful hard drinkers, an' it used to get father, the way the miners would get drunk on the liquor they bought of him. So, since he didn't know of no way to run a grocery store in that country without selling liquor, an' since he wouldn't be no party to them Welshmen drinkin' theirselves



looplegged every night—why, father, he jest sold out the store, an' went to work in the mines himself."

"Diggin' coal?"

"Yep. But only a little while. One day—well, they brought father home from the mine. The explosion had been in another part of the workings, but the black damp got father an' twenty-four others. I won't never forget that day . . ."

Til's deep voice trailed off, and Gary saw the young face twist with pain.

"They was all wet," he went on, "an' smeared black with coal dust, an' limp an' terrible pitiful . . . carried out into the daylight that way. I took one look at father. It wasn't my father—couldn't be. An' yet I knew it was. I run away, I guess. I hid out until a neighbor come an' found me an' took me home."

Gary pictured the tragedy, the child lurking like a little lost animal, sobbing and hiding until the kindly neighbor came.

"That's about all there was to it," Til said. "I never got over the horrors I felt about the mine. To get shut of it, I was glad to leave Streater an' take a job farming."

### 3.

Grown sleepy in the unaccustomed lamp light, the few active flies droned drowsily away to the nearest wall and settled for the night. Ranny stuffed himself gravely, smearing his mouth with food. Gary nibbled. After a time Simeon laid down his fork, stretched back in his chair, and fished from the pocket of his overalls a folded square of coarse yellow paper.

"Here" he said to Gary. "Look this over."

She took the wad, glanced at him, and began unfolding it. Crude black type—country print-shop type—shouted from the paper:

## PUBLIC SALE

To raise cash for removal and to settle obligations I will set at public auction at my farm, 3 mi. north & 3 east of Jericho on

FRIDAY, JUNE 18

the following described property—beginning at 10 o'clock A.M.:

### —LIVESTOCK—

- 1—Team Molly Mules  
smooth mouth
- 1—Sorrel Saddle Horse
- 1—Cow, coming 6 yrs.
- 1—Roan Heifer Calf
- 3—Brood Sows, 23 Pigs
- HOUSEHOLD GOODS—
- 1—Wood Range
- 1—Franklin Heating Stove
- 1—Dining Table & Chairs
- 1—Wash Stand, Bed, Cot,  
Chairs, Dresser, 5 Gal.  
Cream Can, Small Tools,  
Dishes & Other Articles  
Too Numerous to Men-  
tion

### —FARM IMPLEMENTS—

- 1—Breaking Plow
- 1—All-Purpose Plow
- 1—Bull-Tongue, good con-  
dition
- 1—2-section Harrow
- 1—Grain Drill
- 1—2-Row Planter
- 1—12-ft. McCormick Head-  
er
- 1—Header Barge & Gears
- 1—Header Barge Body
- 1—Wagon, Studebaker
- 1—Buggy with Top
- 1—Set Work Harness
- 1—Saddle, good.

—Terms: Cash—

THRUSTON PHELPS, OWNER

COL. LEN LEFORCE,  
Auctioneer

DILLY CAPEHART,  
Clerk

Gary read carefully, to the very end. She handled the sale bill gently, almost as if it were some article belonging to death. It did mean death in a sense, the bill. A sale of this kind, to Gary, was the ultimate confession of failure.

“Sold out,” was the farmer’s word. It carried a connotation of pity, and with it of contempt. The crude yellow placard meant that someone had proved unable to cope with the bitter vicissitudes imposed by this harsh country.

Gary handed the placard over to Til. She knew the Phelpses—old Thruston and his old wife, Carrie. A crotchety, quarrelsome couple, but in spite of their ill humors they somehow

clung to each other with a loyalty that was touching. Gary found herself feeling violently sorry for Carrie Phelps. Every poor article the old woman had gathered about her in all her barren life seemed listed on this dull paper. It was almost indecent to expose her thus to public gaze. The people would come, and paw over Carrie's things, and make critical, derogatory remarks—"tradin' talk," designed to beat down the seller's prices. And every remark would go straight to Carrie Phelps' heart—and to her husband's too, perhaps, although he would never show it. Their livestock would be belittled, their furniture, the very bed in which they had lain together these many years.

But there was something of interest beyond the ordinary in the sale bill for the two men. Gary could hear the surprise in Til's voice:

"LeForce an' Capehart. They're both Bedestown men. How come they got that Bedestown crowd to run this sale?"

Gary's attention turned on the question also. She had not noticed when she read the bill that the auctioneer and clerk were both men from Bedestown. And Bedestown was north of the Cimarron River, while Jericho, to the south, could legitimately claim the Phelps farm as in its rightful domain.

"Len LeForce is the best auctioneer in the country, ain't he?" suggested Simeon.

But that argument would not answer.

"There'll be them south of the Cimarron who won't like this much," Til said. "Not with the way feelin's been gettin' lately."

"Forcin' the organization of the county won't help the feelin'. Any truth in it that Henry Archelaus certified fake population figgers?" said Simeon.

Everyone knew of the tangled interests, tangled ambitions, tangled prejudices between the two raw, new towns of the Cimarron country. So light a matter as the employment of two Bedestown men to conduct a farm sale on the Jericho side of the river could provoke trouble.

"Ain't much argument but what Len LeForce can give cards an' spades to any other sale-caller hereabouts," said Til.

"I could've tole you them Phelps would sell—months ago," said Simeon with acrid triumph. "This country's not for them that don't understand it. I could've tole them that corn wouldn't do no good in that gumbo." The man was complacent. "Cane's what you got to grow for feed in this country. It'll take the sun, an' it'll take the drought, an' it'll make feed spite of all the weather can do to it. Wheat—you allus run a gamble on wheat. A poor gamble *this* year." He cocked his

eyebrows at Til. "You got to know an' you got to work, an' you got to get ahead of the other feller. It's an ill wind, though, as the feller says. I aim to go over to the Phelps sale. Might buy that cow reasonable. An' there's the bull-tongue. You lived over by them—ever seen their bull-tongue?"

Til, it developed, had.

"Good shape like it says?" asked the farmer.

"I'd call it fair."

"My bull-tongue ain't much good—not since I hooked into a deadman root the other day. I kin use a new one—if I kin get it cheap enough."

Gary listened to Til's reply, impersonally appraising the prospects of the bargain. Sometimes she could hear this kind of talk with interest, but a sort of depression held her tonight. She forgot about the strange Bedestown intrusion. To her it seemed sad that not a word was uttered by either Til or Simeon containing pity or concern for the Phelps.

"What's going to happen to them?" she asked suddenly. "The Phelps, I mean."

Her husband stared with annoyance. "I don't know how that concerns us."

"Well *somebody* ought to think about it. The Phelps are neighbors. It's terrible, having this thing happen to those poor old people right at the end of their lives. They'll be stripped of everything. Nothing to hope for but charity of some kind. Nothing to wait for but—but to die . . ."

A dread of this fate hung over Gary. It seemed to come to every man and woman who grew old at farming without becoming prosperous—and nobody seemed to grow very prosperous out here in the Short Grass. Yet her thought at this moment was for the Phelps only and not for herself. Why did she alone at that table feel these things?

Gary rose to put water into the teakettle. Simeon resumed eating, silently masticating his food with a moroseness that was a part of him. Across the board Til also ate wordlessly, ducking his head slightly when he lifted the fork to his mouth, the lean muscles of his young jaws bunching beneath the smooth plane of his skin as he chewed.

When supper was finished Gary cleared away the dishes. Simeon shifted his seat at the table, hunching close to the lamp, his head tipped backward as he glanced through his steel-rimmed spectacles at a newspaper. Because of religious reasons he permitted no books in his home, save three or four theological works. The only other reading consisted of the mail-order catalogue, the weekly edition of the small, edi-

torially violent *Weekly Clarion* published at Jericho, and the *Kansas City Times*, to which he had subscribed in an ill-advised moment under the spell of a traveling "representative," and which arrived regularly eight days late.

Invariably Simeon read the newspaper at night, his body twisted so that the light from the coal-oil lamp came over one bony shoulder, the paper raised high to catch the inferior illumination, and his head tilted back to permit him to obtain the best possible vision through the cheap ugly spectacles which he wore only for reading, since his vision for objects at a distance was as good as ever.

Simeon was a close but slow reader. His lips moved silently, forming each word. June 3, 1889, the newspaper was dated. Here it was, June 11th already, he thought angrily. News could get mighty stale in the eight days it took to get the *Times* from Kansas City. His eye ran across the headlines on the front page.

Booming Towns. Oklahoma Centers All Lively. The Survey Contest on Guthrie Ended by Mayor Dyer. General Satisfaction Expressed.

They seemed to be having big times in Oklahoma. The Territory was settling up fast after that spectacular opening last April. Simeon asked himself again if he should not have made the "run." A chance for free land—but then there were so many people who got nothing at all for all their trouble. The "Sooners" lay in wait, and beat them to the claims. Simeon's nature shrank from a gamble. He assured himself that he had been smart to buy his land outright like a lawful citizen, and know just where he stood.

He read on. An advertisement ran a full column down the left side of the front page: Bullene, Moore, Emery & Co. A Surprise to Everybody; the Prices of Chenille and Velour Curtains Have Dropped Below Your Hopes.

Simeon sneered. Velour curtains! That was for the rich women of Kansas City. Such luxury was sinful. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity. His eye wandered on to other headlines:

Warner to the Veterans. The Commander-in-Chief Makes a Little Speech.

It did not sound very interesting and Simeon turned the pages. Advertisements. Proprietary medicines and patent cures chiefly.

Dr. Whittier, said one. Blood and skin diseases such as Syphilis, Scrofula, Rheumatism, Goitre, Eczema, etc., causing Ulcers, Eruptions, Pain in Bones, Swelling of Joints, Enlarged

Glands and many other Symptoms, are quickly and permanently eradicated from the System by purely Vegetable Treatment. Nervous Debility, Spermatorrhoea, Impotency, etc., resulting from youthful indiscretion, excesses in matured years, and other causes, are permanently cured. Send for new book. Unquestionable references furnished on application.

By an effort of will Simeon tore his eyes away from the recital of debilities, all caused, he knew, by Sin. He was curiously frightened by them, and curiously fascinated. There was an unasked, terrifyingly intimate importunity here, as if the Scarlet Woman herself lurked with her horrors somewhere in the neat block of small type. Resolutely he turned again to the news columns.

Slain By Brutal Keepers. Horrible Fate of a Poor Lunatic in the Chicago Asylum.

General Sherman at the Play.

Edison's Latest Invention.

And again the advertisements: Pike's Toothache Drops, cure in one minute. Dr. T. Felix Gouraud's Oriental Cream or Magical Beautifier, removes tan, pimples, freckles, and moth patches. Unfortunately Afflicted with Gonorrhoea and Gleet, we guarantee 3 boxes to cure or we will refund the money. Dr. Felix Le Brun & Co., sole props.

Angrily Simeon threw down the paper. The *Times* assuredly had little to offer. He picked up instead the *Jericho Clarion*, to which he subscribed fitfully, having a personal disapproval for Editor Tooley who was, in his estimation, a drunkard. In spite of himself he grew interested in one of Editor Tooley's fulminating editorials against some mysterious "unholy interests" which that alert journalist envisaged as threatening the future and prosperity of the section, by blocking "every movement proposed for progress, through selfish and venal motives."

"I don't see nothing here about completing the name canvass to organize the county," he said aloud.

"No, that happened since they got out that paper. I heard about it before I left town. Jericho's sure circlin' an' pawin' for trouble with Bedestown."

"By pride cometh only contention," said Simeon. "I only hope they don't mess things up to a point where we have to hold more than one election. Elections cost money, an' taxes will be out of sight as it is."

Til nodded absently.

Gary had finished the dishes, and now she led Ranny, who was knuckling his sleepy eyes, to bed.

#### 4.

When Gary returned to the kitchen, Simeon carefully folded the paper he had been reading and laid it beside the lamp.

"We observe the custom of evenin' worship," he said. The words were noncommittal, but though he did not look at Til, the remark was addressed to the new hired man.

"That's all right by me. We prayed at home when I was a kid."

Within the kitchen now grew a new atmosphere—an atmosphere solemn and reverent, as Gray seated herself.

From a shelf behind him Simeon took a large Bible with dog-eared leaves and broken back. He opened the book, fumbling through it, paused, cleared his throat nervously, adjusted his spectacles and suddenly said, in a high, strident voice:

"Nineteenth Psalm."

Again he cleared his throat, before reading in a queer, discordant semi-chant: *The heavens declay-er the glow-ry of God; An' the firma-ment showeth His handiwork . . .*

He read the psalm through. When he finished they "read a chapter round," taking turns, verse and verse, the worn Bible passing from hand to work-roughened hand, until the nightly stint was completed. Til read his verses in a low, self-conscious voice. The chapter was Leviticus XI, a sterile recital of the abominations and unclean things forbidden the Children of Israel:

*. . . Nevertheless these shall ye not eat of them that chew the cud, or of them that part the hoof; the camel, because he cheweth the cud but parteth not the hoof, he is unclean to you . . .*

And again: *. . . And these ye shall have in abomination among the birds; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination; the eagle, and the gier eagle, and the ospray . . .*

Til read. Verses singularly inappropriate and meaningless in western Kansas. That was mighty poor advice about eating camels, he thought. He had seen camels once—two miserable, moth-eaten beasts, in a little one-ring circus to which his father had taken him when he was a boy. He could not imagine that anyone in his right mind would even think of eating a camel. As for an eagle, here too was a ridiculous as-

sumption—that anyone needed to be told not to eat it. And a gier eagle—what was that? And an ospray . . . ? The Bible, Til concluded, sometimes devoted a lot of space to some mighty trifling things.

The inappropriateness of the context did not, however, concern Simeon. He took the Bible as it came. Each chapter, regardless of subject matter, was read in its proper order. Sometimes the “begat” chapters were tedious, but nothing interfered with the regular nightly routine. Many times Simeon had read the Bible through—a ritual of a narrow, constricted life.

The chapter completed, Simeon carefully replaced the Bible on its shelf and knelt before his chair, his elbows on the seat, his eyes closed tightly. The others followed his example. Gary knelt erectly, her skirts tucked about her, her spine superbly straight even when her head was bowed. She could see Til, and the novelty of the presence of another man in this house caused her covertly to observe him. He rested his head on his arms in the seat of the chair, his long, supple back slightly swaying downward at the waist, his thick sandy hair an enigmatic swirl above his folded arms. Strength and a kind of grace and balance were in the virile body.

Gary decided this was not reverent thinking, and turned her attention fully to the prayer now being offered by her husband.

“Oh, Lord, Almighty God, creator an’ preserver of all mankind . . .”

Praying—public praying in particular—was Simeon’s one great sober pleasure and mental stimulant. In all this flat country he did not know a single person who agreed with all his own peculiar crabbed views on religion, but in his family circle he could at least pray frequently and at length. On such occasions he sometimes had almost happy recollections of his moments of triumph back in Bethseda meeting house in Indiana. As if it were only yesterday he remembered the great moment when Elder Morrison had told him: “You got transcendent power in your prayin’, Brother Trudge.” Transcendent was the loftiest word of praise Elder Morrison knew, and the recollection of it warmed Simeon to this day.

His voice, cracked and dry at first, gathered sonority as it progressed. Prayer was his own special type of virtuosity, and followed a set pattern. As the well-oiled phrases rolled on his tongue, and the beloved catch-words and fragments of scriptural quotation, the never-failing spell came upon him. It engendered in him a sort of hypnosis, like that which seizes an orator who becomes drunk with the sound of his own words.



Prayer, to Simeon, was never a closet performance. To be deprived of an audience for his rhetoric would have taken away the choicest pious thrill of it. Praying, the man was for a time happy.

It was a long prayer, and most shrewdly Til's knee bones felt the hard pine boards of the floor before it ended. Gary paid grave attention, and slowly some of the fire which burned in her husband entered her. To her there was nothing outworn in the verbiage of Simeon's prayers, and when "the power was on him" there was that in him which she could admire fervently. Surely no such outpouring could come to one who was not inspired of God. The *goodness* of Simeon impressed itself on her. What he did was right; what he desired had the consent of godliness. Under the spell of the prayer her long submission as a wife seemed fully justified. It was woman's place to sacrifice; this was inherent in her being.

Her thoughts went back to her wedding day six years before when she was seventeen . . . it was dream-like as she remembered it. Her vanity had been pleased at being selected by a man so important in the church and the community as Simeon Trudge—even though he was so much older.

It had given her a feeling of self-confidence that she had never known before. The question of love was not considered. Marrying Simeon was a "sensible" act; there was no appeal to her emotions.

Really, she had hardly been consulted about it. One evening her father and mother, very solemn, called her before them.

"We have decided that you should marry Mr. Trudge," her father told her.

Marry Mr. Trudge? She scarcely had known he was interested in her. Two or three times he had walked with her to the church, and once or twice he had called and talked with her in her father's home. But he had seemed so much older . . . the idea of marrying him somehow had never entered her mind.

Obedience, however, had been instilled in her deeply. She bowed her head without words. Her heart filled her throat, but she did not cry . . .

In the succeeding days she grew accustomed to the idea, especially when Simeon Trudge himself came to pay formal suit to her. He took her on rides in his buggy, and this was not frightening because he spoke to her only of religion and such matters. The arrangements were made between her parents and him. Sometimes he briefly referred to the future in which

they both were involved, but even this she found herself able to accept with equanimity.

Especially was this so after her friends, her family, everyone pointed out to her again and again, "what a lucky girl she was." She was told that she had "nothing to worry about," once she married Simeon. She would be "provided for all her life." Again and again it came: "How lucky you are to be picked out by such a *good* man."

The goodness of Simeon seemed to inspire everyone in the Bethesda neighborhood with a species of awe, and certainly she took it for granted. If she ever speculated on why he had chosen her, she may have thought that her piety had the most to do with it. Her hair was the thing on which she made her nearest approach to vanity, and perhaps she believed at times that this also had drawn him to her.

Gary's great hope had been to emulate the perfection of the worthy woman extolled by the wise Solomon as having a price far above rubies:

*She riseth also while it is yet night,  
And giveth food to her household . . .  
Her husband is known in the gates,  
When he sitteth among the elders of the land . . .  
Strength and dignity are her clothing;  
And she laugheth at the time to come.  
She openeth her mouth with wisdom;  
And the law of kindness is on her tongue.  
She looketh to the ways of her household,  
And eateth not the bread of idleness.  
Her children rise up, and call her blessed;  
Her husband also . . .  
Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain;  
But a woman that feareth Jehovah; she shall be praised.*

That was how she had dreamed of being. Strength and dignity and the law of kindness on her tongue, wise and willing in the ways of her household. And her husband to be "known at the gates," because of the virtues of his wife.

How had she succeeded? There were times when misgivings assailed her and when doubts . . . nameless doubts . . . came.

Presently Gary ceased to think at all. Devoutly she bent her ears to the rising, falling stream of Simeon's orison.

At the "Amen" they rose, each in his own manner. Simeon climbed stiffly up, resting his hands heavily on the chair seat. Gary came erect all at once, her feet together under her, with-

out apparent effort. Til put one foot forward, rested an elbow on his knee, and levered himself upward powerfully and quickly.

On its shelf above the door into the bedroom, the hands of the old Seth Thomas clock pointed to nine.

Without a word Simeon went into his sleeping room. Gary remained in the kitchen a moment, putting the finishing touches to her day's labors.

She became conscious that the hired man had not yet gone into the lean-to, and with surprise glanced up. He was looking at her.

"I was jest goin' to say—" he hesitated. Cleared his throat.

"Yes?"

"I was jest goin' to say, Mrs. Trudge, that what you was thinkin' about the Phelps is mighty true. An' there's a reason why they got the Bedestown auctioneer, too. I didn't say nothing about it, but you're friends with them, an' I thought you might like to know . . ."

"Yes, I would," she said.

"They got Len LeForce to spite Henry Archelaus, Mrs. Trudge."

"Why should they want to do that?"

"I guess you don't understand. This here is a force-out. The Phelps is one of Henry's 'iron-clad' families."

Still she looked puzzled.

"You might not know about this," he said patiently. "You folks bought your land outright an' paid for it. You're your own boss. But some ain't. The Phelps was'n't. They bought their land from Archelaus by payin' something down. What they paid I don't know, but whatever it was, it was all they had. That's the whole secret of Henry's system. All you got. In a year you're to make the next payment—if you can raise it. With the country the way it is you're up against the impossible, but you don't know that. Later, when you can't make the payment, you get closed out. Henry's got an iron-clad mortgage agreement. There ain't a loophole in it. That's why they call the down-payment buyers his 'iron-clads.' I know. I got one myself."

Gary listened intently. Here was something outside her experience, yet she knew she was listening to the truth.

"It's a dead cinch scheme," Til went on bitterly. "You sell a certain number of pieces of land on down-payments with that iron-clad yearly payment contract. Them that don't pay, you force to sell out. Then you've got your land back—an' the improvements, an' the down-payment they made—all salted away in the bank. You repeat the process with the next

sucker that comes along. Oh, it's a beautiful scheme. I know all about it—from the receiving end."

She knew suddenly the blow his pride had suffered when he had to cease being an independent farmer and go back to working by the day. She wished there was some way to make him feel better, but none suggested itself.

"Good night," she said. "I hope you will not find it too bad . . . here."

## 5.

For the first few days the inevitable novelty of changed surroundings and new tasks occupied and interested Til. The Trudge family was to be considered odd—unreasonably religious. Old Simeon could hardly utter a sentence without ringing in a Bible phrase.

Gary, too. Til liked the name, somehow. Odd name. He had never heard it before. He surmised that it must be a family name, and he would never have thought of it for a girl. But as he came to know the owner of it, he grew to the feeling that the name was just right for her. Gary was brighter and quicker than her husband. And pleasant. But she was bitten by the religion bug, too.

He spent a good deal of his time familiarizing himself with the horses. Where the horse is the key of all labor, every animal is an important unit, and the individuality existing among them is almost as great as among men.

Simeon took Til out the first morning after his arrival and indicated his animals. There were five of them—three horses, and a pair of small red mules which frisked in the corral, running nervously about, their ears pointed toward the men, their nostrils flaring.

"Two year olds?" Til asked.

"Long twos. I been figgerin' on having them broke."

Simeon had purchased the little mules from an itinerant horse trader. They were wild; had hardly had a harness on. He regarded them rather helplessly. Horse-breaking was not in his line.

Most of the farm work was done by Simeon's single steady team, a rusty black mare named Topsy, and a lazy bay named Felix. They were docile and willing enough if they had a taste of whip-lash, but growing thin from overwork. Glancing

at the deep creases bitten into their gaunt thighs, Til thought it was high time the little mules took part of the burden from this faithful and uncomplaining pair.

"I could break them mules for you," he said.

"You had experience breakin' critters?"

"Yep. Spent a year on a mule farm in Missouri, old man Doughty's place over by Fulton, where the loony asylum is. I like mules. You got to know them, to understand what they're thinkin'. They ain't like ordinary animals. A horse will r'ar an' tear until he knows he's licked, an' then he'll give up. Mules don't never give up. They may conclude to get along with you, but they always get mental reservations. They hold somethin' back. That's why they can do more work than horses. If you understand 'em an' they understand you, they're the best work animals there is. Them of yours is a bit light, but I could make a good team of them if you'd want me to."

"Well, mebbe," said Simeon. "What I want you here for is to do the reg'lar work on the farm. If you want to fool with them mules after hours—"

Til was half amused and half exasperated. It was very apparent that he was going to give full value for every nickel he received on this farm. Simeon's hint that he might take his "own time," brief as it was, to work with the mules, seemed a good indication of the kind of a man he was dealing with. A skinflint. And a religious skinflint—the worst kind, because he could buttress his penuriousness with the proper pious platitude.

In spite of this Til itched to work with the mules.

The only other work animal was an ancient veteran named John, gaunt, roan, spiritless, but safe for Gary to drive in the buggy, when she wanted to go somewhere, which was seldom. John was also broken to the saddle, although Til wondered how anybody could ever consider riding anything as drooping and inert as the old gelding.

During his first few days on the farm the hired man labored at a disadvantage in Simeon's kaffir corn. The farmer's aspersions as to his bull-tongue proved well grounded. The implement, a primitive corn cultivator built without wheels, and with a single shovel throwing the dirt both ways, depended for its efficient operation on the skill and often on the main strength of the man at the plow-handles, who must keep it from jumping out of the row and thus destroying some of the precious shoots on either side of it.

With this implement Til wrestled. The frame was out of true, the result, as Simeon had said, of "tying into" one of

the huge "dead-man" roots of the prairie morning glory, which sometimes reach the proportions of an actual corpse beneath the surface of the sod, and possess all the tough stubbornnesses of a root to go with their sullen weight and size. Til was forced to compensate for the bent frame with his own weight, constantly bracing to hold the bull-tongue against its natural inclination to slew over to the right. A day of this was wearying even to his strength, but Til kept doggedly at the task until he finished the field.

Simeon interfered with him little, beyond complaining occasionally when he found evidence where the bull-tongue had gone out of control for a moment and destroyed a hill or two of kaffir corn.

After his day's work in the field was done, Til would take up the gradual training of the little mules, haltering them first, accustoming them to the feel of the human hand, and later of the harness, leading up carefully toward the day when he should put them to work in good earnest.

This, coupled with his numerous chores, left him little time to spare, but such as there was he spent making friends with the four-year-old Ranny. At first the child was shy, hiding in the next room when Til was in the kitchen, and peeping occasionally around the door. But one bright day, during the noon hour, while the team was still eating its grain, Til made a small boat out of a shingle with a stick stuck in the middle of it and a piece of newspaper for a sail. When the tiny craft struck out boldly across the water tank, Ranny was enraptured; and even when a puff of the usual Kansas gale capsized it, his enthusiasm remained, and he righted it and sailed it again and again across the scummy stretch of tepid water.

Thereafter Ranny was devoted to Til. The child had a happy disposition, and he discovered in Til a genial good humor and patience. When the hired man found time, he might squat down by the barn door and show Ranny the tiny sand-crater of a doodlebug—and how a wandering ant, falling in this trap would be pulled down remorselessly and disappear beneath the sand in the hidden jaws below. Or Til might tell a little story. These tales were not conventional children's fairy tales, but they fascinated Ranny as greatly as the best work of Hans Christian Anderson might have done. The favorite concerned a fabulous horse named Black Jack and his rider Texas Jack, an impossible frontier hero who was continually getting into trouble. In these stories Til unconsciously put his own low estimate of the story book hero, and indeed of heroes in general, because invariably the peer-

less Black Jack would have to come to the rescue of his master, breaking down the door of the jail, or pulling the luckless Texas Jack out of the river with his teeth by the slack of the pants.

Ranny's mother seemed not to notice these things. Her face was carefully non-committal when she talked to Til, even when they met without the shadowing presence of Simeon. The young man wondered sometimes if she ever laughed, until one day he went to the shanty in mid-morning on an errand, and heard Gary's laughter as he came to the door of the house.

He hesitated, almost guiltily, then stepped into view. They did not see him—Gary and Ranny. They were romping as if both were four years old. A game of tag. She would pretend to run and let him catch her. The unconscious flash of bright spirits and gaiety he was watching surprised and delighted Til.

But then she saw him, and it was amazing to him how quickly the stiff mask returned. All in an instant she was the careful, proper, sober farmer's wife again, and Ranny seemed to catch the constraint in her and lost his jubilation too. Til was sorry. He got the wrench for which he had come and returned quickly to his blistering field, hoping that his unwelcome arrival had not spoiled this delicate moment of theirs for good.

Gossip almost never reached the Trudge home, because Simeon's sourness kept visitors away. But one day while Til still was working in the kaffir corn, Simeon had news. He had it from Earl Josserand, the Star Route man.

"Looks like big doings at Jericho," the farmer said that night at the supper table.

"What is it?" asked Gary, quick with feminine curiosity.

"They're goin' to have an election at Jericho next week—a county seat election."

"Are we—are you going in to vote?" To Gary here was a possible chance to visit the town, to break the monotony of her existence for a day.

But Simeon shook his head. "No. Waste of time. No skin off'n my nose whether Jericho or Bedestown wins. I'm half-way betwixt an' between, an' anyway it'll only mean taxes."

Til was silent. He was thinking that if he were given the opportunity to vote, he would certainly cast a ballot against Archelaus and his ring in Jericho. But he would have no chance to vote. The kaffir corn interposed louder demands than the ballot box:

## THREE

### 1.

WINDY MILLER's brindle hair was forever uncombed, and his green eyeshade was pulled down so low on his nose that the color of his eyes could never be seen. Even on the hottest summer days he wore a gravy-spattered vest over his open-necked shirt, simply for the convenience of the pockets, in which he carried a sack of tobacco, a packet of brown cigarette papers, matches, a much-gnawed plug of chewing tobacco, and many other articles, including key rings, tooth-picks, and oddities which he had picked up.

On his first arrival in Jericho he had been received on the basis of all new-comers—tentative acceptance until fuller acquaintance showed how he was to be classified and what place was to be accorded him. The expressive sobriquet "Windy" showed Jericho's final estimate of him. He was loquacious to the extreme and his loquacity had in it so little of interest that he bored even the loafers at Matassarini's blacksmith shop, or those on the porch at the Apex Hotel—who really had nothing more important to do than sit and listen to whatever conversation, from whatever source, offered itself.

After a time, because of the vapidness of his mind, Jericho ignored and forgot Windy Miller. He lived alone in a cheap room above Cox & McCluggage's General Store, ate at a cheap boarding house, and hung about the outskirts of any



little gathering of people when he was free from his official duties, hoping to have a chance to join in the talk.

Otherwise he lived for those occasions when he assumed genuine community importance. These were rare, but they were the sweeter for that reason. He was the Western Union's telegraph operator in Jericho, combining with this office the work of the Wells Fargo Express company's agency. The infrequent telegraphic messages that arrived all passed through his hands, and thereafter became a part of the common gossip of the town, for Windy never delivered a message without hurrying to impart its contents to all persons within hearing.

A telegram at any time was an event of first moment in Jericho, which sat at the end of a ratty one-wire line down from Dodge City. During the past several days, however, the whole town had known that a *certain* telegram was expected any hour, and the small one-room Wells Fargo-Western Union office became the object of the concentric interest of the community.

Henry Archelaus had sent in the census of names and the petition for the organization of the county. The impending result preoccupied Jericho to the verge of drooling.

It had been long since anyone in Jericho—or anybody in the whole Cimarron country for that matter—had seen an election. But the institution of the ballot is bred in the bone and blood of America, and the mere knowledge that there was to be an election aroused the most pleasurable anticipations among the town's wiseacres.

"Elections is better than Fourth of Julys," said Willie Madden at the town drinking trough which was opposite the empty "court house," and where much of the community gossip was purveyed since people stopped there to water their horses. Willie was a lazy, unkempt giant who lived by doing odd jobs about the town, being too indolent to hold a regular position. He was blond beneath his dirt, muscled like a gladiator, and foolishly good humored, the butt of many jokes which he never seemed to resent.

"Yeh," agreed his crony, Poke Trembley. Both Madden and Trembley were ex-Missourians. Poke was as tall as Willie, but he was excessively lanky and hollow chested.

"We used to have 'em in Callaway County," said Willie, "an' there never was more fun. Speech makin' an' plenty of free lickin'."

"The votin' box would be on the steps of the court house," said Poke with nostalgia, "an' the judges would set there in

their plug hats, solemn as squinch owls, an' a man would go up an' put his vote in the slot, an' feel impawtant."

"Lots of fellers couldn't write," broke in Willie. "Them the Democrat election committee would help out, showin' them jest where to put the 'X' at the head of the column, so as to vote the ticket straight."

"An' once an' awhile," eagerly added Poke, "when a body'd get too drunk to cast his own vote, one of them committeemen would be kind an' good enough to mark his ballot an' vote it for him—mebbe mark two or three ballots an' vote 'em. The jedges didn't make no fuss as long as they knew the committee feller was a Democrat in good standin'."

"Them was the times," chuckled Willie.

"An' at state elections," concluded Poke, "they'd generally let them German counties around St. Louis, an' the hill-billy counties down in the Ozarks—they was all Republican—come in fust with their election repawts. An' when they knew that them counties had shot their wad, Little Dixie—down the river from Kansas City—would repawt. An' the election would be safe again for the Party of the People!"

Such reminiscent conversations, savoring the new situation, were going on all over Jericho. How the election would be conducted nobody knew. It was hoped, however, that at least some of the pleasantly remembered amenities would be observed, even out here in sun-baked Kansas.

The social aspects of the election did not dim the real importance of it, either. Somewhat vaguely the townspeople of Jericho were sure that it was of utmost moment that their town should win the county seat. They did not exactly understand why this should be so, but it had been told to them so many times that they accepted it. In the final analysis, it is probable that the community animosity for Bedestown had more to do with solidifying sentiment than any constructive thinking.

There is no explaining prejudices. Most men live on them more than they do on reason. Of course the town rivalry had something to do with it. At any rate Jericho looked with scorn and lofty contempt on Bedestown. Merely to thwart Bedestown of its suspected design on the county seat became an objective, and to that end every Jericho citizen constituted himself a one-man electioneering committee.

On the day, therefore, when Windy Miller, his unkempt hair blowing in the steady thirty-mile prairie gale, went hurrying as fast as his scrawny legs could carry him over toward Henry Archelaus' office, the whole town came to a stop and paid due attention.

The telegraph man refused to answer hails. It was a part of his somewhat obscure sense of ethics that he would never reveal the contents of a telegram *before* delivering, just as some rural postmasters do not divulge the messages they read on the postcards of their clients, until *after* the mail has been distributed. There is no law governing this. It is merely a bucolic nicety.

Having delivered his telegram, Windy considered his obligation of silence at an end. He came forth from the townsite man's office with a gleam in his eye which told onlookers that he bore news. The time between his receipt of the message over the clicking key, and his delivery of it at Archelaus' office could not have spanned more than ten minutes. Yet one would have thought that Windy Miller had been observing a Trappist vow of silence for a matter of years.

Hurrying toward a group of gossiping men on the corner, he sidled up and conversation began to gush from him as water from the smitten rock.

"Pass the word, boys," he said from behind his hand. "The state's authorized the organization!"

"You don't say!"

"Good for you, Windy!"

Taking the last exclamation as a deserved personal tribute, Windy launched on a full summation of what he knew on the subject. He quoted the entire telegram, word for word, from memory. He interlarded the quotation with theories, deductions, speculations. He recounted an ancient and moth-eaten joke to illustrate one of his points. For once he had an audience which heard him through and he reveled in it.

When at last he felt that he had filled this receptacle of his information to turgidity, he happily trotted off seeking new ears for his news, with the wind blowing his baggy pants about his skinny legs, and his green eyeshade even more askew than usual on the bridge of his snipe nose.

Henry Archelaus lounged to the door of his office, with an expression of subdued amusement on his face. Well he knew that Windy Miller was spreading the news of his telegram as fast as those long legs would carry him. This did not annoy Henry. On the contrary, it suited his purpose exactly. He desired the information disseminated and there was nothing from which he obtained more satisfaction than the spectacle of other people unwittingly doing his behests.

He awaited the inner hierarchy of Jericho—Quarternight, Tooley, and Spilker, who gathered quickly at the news. There was with them this time a new member, an austere, black-garbed figure. The new-comer was a lawyer, Tiberius Co-

mingo, who had just arrived in Jericho and hung up his shingle across from the Apex. He was from Wichita, and was supposed to have a family there, which he intended to bring west as soon as he established himself. For the present he was a saturnine dark figure, whose heavy black beard and brooding features created no little speculation in the town.

The authorization to organize the county vastly pleased Henry—pleased him more greatly than he would admit, because that would also have been an admission that he was somewhat surprised by it. He had certified the census lists with misgivings—and particularly the last rolls brought in by Quarternight and Tooley—not because it strained his conscience to make the certifications, but because he feared that there might be skepticism concerning them in Topeka if they were closely scrutinized.

Evidently no such close scrutiny had taken place. Two weeks had elapsed since he sent off the names. He had telegraphed Tecumseh Jackson and knew that adroit individual had taken a train from Kansas City to Topeka, where he would employ certain types of "influence" to obtain the action they both desired.

It was Henry's happy thought to name the new county after Montgomery Blair, postmaster general during the War Between the States, on Abraham Lincoln's cabinet. The state administration of Kansas was highly Republican, and therefore highly Grand Army of the Republic. To the G.A.R. it seemed so worthwhile to perpetuate the name of a member of the Lincoln cabinet, that the necessary action was almost foregone.

To Tecumseh Jackson, however, remained the arranging of certain other matters, which he accomplished in various unpublicized ways. Tecumseh's methods in the state capital of Kansas did not differ too greatly from those employed elsewhere and were equally effective.

Shortly he was able to wire his associate in Jericho not only that the organization was authorized, but that the governor had been induced to appoint none other than Henry Archelaus as election commissioner, with the rights and powers to hold and supervise the election to select a county seat. The governor would appoint a panel of county officers pending election which would be held in the fall, and here, too, Tecumseh indicated that he had a friendly ear listening for suggestions.

"Gents," said Archelaus to his lieutenants, as he turned the yellow telegram over and over in his hands, "this isn't the official authorization. That's coming by registered mail. I've

arranged by wire at Dodge City to have a man with a fast horse bring it down here. But it will take three or four days at the every best. Now we can put that time to mighty fine use."

The four men nodded. He began at once to discuss plans. Speed was the essence of this business. The election should be held as early as possible. Moreover it was necessary to prepare a slate of county officers for appointment. Here Henry grew specific.

"The regular election's in November," he said. "But the men who go in now will have a big edge on those that run against them." He glanced around. "Just now we've got the ear of the governor. With our connections—" he carefully used *our* instead of *my*, thus whipping them all into his partnership, "we can get a yellow dog named to any office we want. But these will be temporary, an' the general election comes this fall, so anybody appointed now is goin' to have to take his chances at the polls. It's good judgment to put in men who are strong. Do you gents agree?"

They assented.

"Very well, there's five of us here. No reason why we shouldn't all have a county job apiece." He gave them his drowsy grin. "Spilker, you'll be the county coroner. That ought to suit you, you old turkey buzzard. Comingo, how'd you like to be district judge? I reckon the county printing will be your dish, Tooley. As for you, Quarternight, you can change that 'marshal' on your star to 'sheriff.' I'll send all these names in, soon as the county seat election's over."

Across the table from Archelaus the four men exchanged glances. Except, perhaps, for Tiberius Comingo, who had some experience in politics, events were moving so rapidly as to leave them almost numbed. Yet why not? Their minds already were busy exploring possibilities.

Being county coroner would make the undertaking profession possible in the Short Grass, Shad Spilker was thinking, the inevitable gleaming drop at the end of his nose quivering with his emotion. Every once in awhile somebody died from too much whiskey, or froze to death in a blizzard, or was drowned in a freshet on the Cimarron. On such occasions, as coroner, he could investigate the death officially, being careful, before calling a coroner's jury, to go through the pockets of the deceased. If the pockets yielded any money, he would hold a funeral in style, with hearse, coffin, cerements, pallbearers, and other trimmings, all paid for out of the money of the late departed. If, on the other hand, the pockets were empty, the funeral would be more simple and the County

would pay expenses. In either case Shad Spilker would be the gainer. An alluring prospect.

Chet Tooley was busy estimating the profits of the official printing which would come to the *Weekly Clarion*—by which was meant the official publication of notices, foreclosures, mortgages, ordinances, tax lists, and the like, all paid for by the County at good round thumping prices. Of the five men in the room he probably saw most clearly what would be the result of this ruthless division of the spoils in the inner circle of Jericho. There would be mutterings in Jericho itself. But in Bedestown and elsewhere the fury would be boundless. In particular, Chet foresaw, the Bedestown paper would be aroused—a small struggling sheet known as the *Argus*, published by Dilly Capehart, a man whose indolence and drinking habits very frequently interfered with his rigid adherence to a regular publication date. As a newspaper man, Chet fully understood the sensitivity, the jealousy, the blind, illogical, ferocious hatred of one newspaper for another. The *Argus* might very well become the spearhead for a new kind of feud which for enmity would make any ill-will between Jericho and Bedestown that had gone before seem like a love feast. Yet the editor was willing to go through with the present arrangements. He was a timid man, but there is a curious lionlike courage which an infusion of printer's ink, plus a smell of profits, will put into most men's veins.

Tiberius Comingo did not smile or glance about. He accepted the "nomination" silently, passing a hand over his dead black beard. To him a judgeship was the fulfillment of a long ambition, a silently nurtured one which had been frustrated in his former location at Wichita, Kansas, because there he was a small frog in a big puddle, whereas here he was a big frog in a small puddle. He mentally congratulated himself for his perspicacity in changing puddles.

The fourth lieutenant in the room tugged at his neat black goatee and smiled with a flash of white teeth. Sherry Quarter-night did not voice a certain mental reservation he had to his own appointment as sheriff. It was a reservation having to do with a secret he kept solely to himself. Besides he recognized the reason why he, of all persons in Blair County, should be sheriff.

"What about you, Boss?" he asked.

"Don't worry, Sherry. Nobody ever accused me of giving myself the worst of it," said Henry comfortably. "The board of county commissioners is going to need some steering in the next few months. I expect that I'll have myself named

chairman of the board—with no intention of running to succeed myself, understand. I have no political ambitions—a man in my situation would be as balmy as the whole population of Gilead to monkey with politics. I'd be a target. But I'm not running for office—this is appointive. When the fall election comes, I think likely there'll be no more need for me, an' I'll step aside for some—ah—deserving citizen to go to the hustings and take the lambasting a political candidate has to receive.”

He said it with a twinkle at which they chuckled. It was settled. They rose, shook hands all around, and departed to carry out their various assignments.

## 2.

For cold-blooded remorselessness, nothing in the Short Grass ever exceeded that county seat election. It was legend in the country and still is. Henry Archelaus and his gentle buccaneers knew they had what a poker player calls “an immortal cinch.” As things stood there was nothing that Bedestown could do to avert the certain prospect, and the Jericho leaders determined to make the result of the election as hard and fast as they knew how.

“When yo' got the cyards, never get sympathetic,” said Quarternight, the gambler. “Bear down on the miserable loser for every chip yo' can squeeze out of him. That's the only way to make a killing.”

Rumors circulated dizzily as knots of men gathered at street corners in Jericho, and at fence corners in the country. Bedestown, said one story, was doing everything in its power to forestall Jericho, by offering town lots free of cost to induce people to come and settle there to vote the Bedestown ticket. A hired gang of toughs was to be brought down from Dodge City to dominate the election, ran another report. Still a third stated that an injunction was to be brought somewhere in court to prevent outright the holding of an election of any kind.

None of these rumors were verified, but all were believed eagerly. Archelaus, however, smiled, and his lieutenants kept their own council. The election was officially set for the week following the receipt of the authorization. Someone raised the question of whether this was in strict accordance with

the statutes and Henry replied that he didn't know, but he supposed the statutes might be made to stretch a little in the present instance.

In Jericho the activity became constant. The voting place was announced—ballots would be cast at the empty "court house," which seemed appropriate, since one of the objectives of the election was to provide tenants for that structure. A little delegation arrived from Bedestown one morning—two or three men who were regarded with speculative and hostile eyes. They demanded that a polling place be established in Bedestown as well as Jericho, but Henry Archelaus, armed with his authority and knowing his powers, gave them a bland answer. One polling place was sufficient for a county the size of the new Blair County, he said. Since Jericho was the major center of population—he permitted the words to linger—it was right and proper that the balloting should take place there. One of the Bedestown men stood right up and spoke his piece at that:

"Archelaus, you an' Jericho look to be goin' to unnecessary lengths to breed trouble. I don't know much about these things, but it seems only fair to give Bedestown a votin' place too. Forcin' our people to drive twenty miles to vote is like a slap in the face. You mebbe got the authority now, but this kind of arrogance ain't goin' to pay. If I know the Bedestown folks' they ain't goin' to take to this kindly, Archelaus."

With that warning the Bedestown delegation departed, muttering and scowling, which Jericho returned in kind.

The rank and file of the citizens understood comparatively little of the comings and goings, the midnight consultations which sometimes took place in the office of the townsite man, the buggies which went out each day to make the rounds of the farm houses over the county.

Community effort of any kind was almost unknown on the high plains, and here was a whole county, suddenly interested in a central objective. A monstrous web seemed to be woven throughout the Cimarron valley, and men were caught by it into relationships which were strange and unaccustomed, but which carried the fascination of new interests and even potential dangers.

There came the hour when Henry Archelaus received the definite word that Bedestown was not going to contest the election. The rival hamlet had come to the conclusion that it could do little to avert the foregone result, and now it sulked and refused to vote. Jericho exulted in this report, but Henry did not fail to take precautions.

Election morning dawned bright. Every morning, these



weeks, dawned bright. There were many who would have welcomed a bank of clouds and a downpour, but the unfailing, monotonous fair weather continued.

At seven o'clock that morning the judges took their places. Jericho now observed that even here the fist of Henry Archelaus grasped all controlling factors. Three judges presided—Tiberius Comingo, the lawyer; Earl Chew, a barber; and Purd Weaver, a hay contractor who made a living cutting prairie hay at Antelope Lake in the east part of the County, but who was regarded as a stanch Jericho man. Of the three, Comingo was an authorized notary public, which gave him the power to draw up the necessary affidavits of election after the counting of the ballots.

Grimly this trio took their places at the table placed in the court room, on which stood the ballot box—an old sugar box of pine with a slot sawed in the top and a padlock to hold down the lid. The court room was unfinished and bare, since no court sessions had as yet been held in it. All the judges wore a look of solemn dignity.

A few voters arrived early, and toward mid-morning quite a sprinkling of farmers appeared in wagons or buggies to cast their ballots. These men all were scrutinized carefully by Shadrach Spilker and Sherry Quarternight, who were serving unofficially as watchers at the polling place. Every man who went in to the court room to vote was carefully checked and his leanings weighed.

Before noon Quarternight was able to report to Henry that less than a dozen men with Bedestown proclivities had come over to vote. By then at least ninety pro-Jericho ballots had been cast. True to predictions, Bedestown itself sent over no voting contingent.

Mid-afternoon came. Archelaus, fairly sure of the result, walked over from his office and cast a ballot. He nodded to the crowd of men at the foot of the "court house" steps as he went in, and shook hands with all three judges when he voted. As he came out admiring comments were heard on the street.

"Look at him."

"Knows what he' doin', bet your boots."

"Jericho's safe—safe as a dollar."

"There's the man that done it."

"Hank Archelaus—he's a wonder."

Henry heard some of these comments and was pleased. He had calculated that the town rivalry would strengthen his position in Jericho regardless of his conduct of the election, and these laudatory undertones proved he was right. He returned to his office.

The sun pitched steeply toward the west and the shadows lengthened. By now it was becoming certain that Bedestown was holding off from the election. One hundred and ninety votes had been cast—very light balloting even for a sparsely populated county like Blair.

It was necessary to make a better showing. Orders issued from the Archelaus office, and the townsite man's lieutenants went forth with messages and instructions.

Chet Tooley was by now laboring mightily in his print shop. With high journalistic enterprise he was preparing a front page form for the *Clarion*, complete with headlines, waiting only for the final results so that he could make announcement in full to his readers.

The polls were to close at seven o'clock. And at six-thirty the product of Archelaus' earlier orders became evident. Jericho had been searched for voters, and incoming farm hands had been corralled. These were taken to Potlicker's Drug Store. By the time they appeared at the "court house," led by those two lazy rascals, Willie Madden and Poke Trembley, they bore evidence of having been well prescribed for by the versatile apothecary.

Hangers-on they were, mostly—and Henry had been holding them as his ace-in-the-hole, to throw in at the last minute in the voting battle if necessary to counter a possible Bedestown upsurge. No such necessity existed, so now they tramped up the steps, unsteadily in many cases, and marked and deposited their ballots as instructed.

Shortly afterward the judges retired to a side room and began to count the vote.

Outside their door stood Quarternight and Spilker, ears strained.

Earl Chew, the barber, was reading the ballots, Purd Weaver was checking them, and Comingo was overseeing the operation.

"Jericho," came the barber's voice.

"Check," said the hay contractor.

"Jericho."

"Check."

Monotonously the voices droned on. Only a few occasional Bedestown votes interrupted the smooth flow.

"A landslide," said Spilker.

The judges appeared at the door.

"Here's the affidavit for the election commissioner," Comingo said solemnly. Spilker clutched, with his single hand, at the paper, and began to run for Henry Archelaus' office.

Outside that office a dense crowd had gathered, awaiting the announcement.

Henry appeared at the door, and received a cheer.

"Gentlemen," he said, "as special election commissioner I have just received the report of the county seat election. The final count is as follows: Bedestown, thirty-two votes. Jericho, one hundred and ninety-four!"

### 3.

A long howl went up from the throat of Jericho when the result was announced. Voices screeched jubilantly, fiercely, tossing phrases back and forth:

"That'll show them Bedestown tramps!"

"Hooray for Jericho!"

"To hell with Bedestown!"

Archelaus, at the door of his office, smiled benignly. The boys had a right to celebrate. And provision had been made so that they would have that with which to do their celebrating.

Not that a direct connection could be traced to Archelaus. The appearance of respectability was highly desirable in his position, so others saw that the less reputable part of the program went forward.

Across the street, on the raised wooden walk before the Cox & McCluggage store, a stern, disapproving little knot had gathered, and of it Henry was not unmindful. The Campbellite preacher was there, hard-visaged Reverend Mordecai North, and with him his deacon, Putnam Hatch, and the latter's astringent wife.

Their faces showed their condemnation of the noisy jubilation. Henry, with impeccable front, returned their look. Meantime a figure moved quietly through the crowd—Sherry Quaternight, with his teeth gleaming in his lean tanned countenance. A word here, a look there, a nudge yonder, and very quickly the crowd understood. In a body it began to move down the street toward Potlicker's, jostling and merry, with the tall marshal at its head.

In a small corner made by an ell behind Potlicker's, stood a whiskey keg, already broached.

"Looky yonder!"

"The oil of joy!"

"Gollie—nose paint!"

"Gimme a drinkin' cup with a good bottom!"

Glasses, cups, and mugs were passed around and a rush was made for the liquor. In a dense mass the celebrators stood around the keg, drinking, shouting, laughing, even singing.

"Hooray for Jerichol!"

"Boys, we're headed for big things now!"

"Good for old Hank Archelaus!"

Henry, a block away, heard the last long shout and was gratified. Though careful to remain in the background he was not averse to receiving unsolicited credit for this entertainment.

Now there was a yell and a second rush. Chet Tooley, the editor, had brought forth the results of his labors—nothing less than a surprise "special" edition of the *Weekly Clarion*, with headlines in "stud horse" type, which were his pride and joy, the masterpiece of his entire journalistic career. At the top of the page was a crude two-column woodcut of a crowing cock. Flanking the rooster on either side were equally crude representations of the American flag. Beneath all this flamboyance ran the screaming headlines:

CROW, OLD BIRD, CROW!

THE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN AND THEIR DECISION  
IS FINAL!

JERICHO THE COUNTY SEAT!

BY AN OVERWHELMING VOTE THE TAXPAYERS OF  
BLAIR COUNTY EXERCISING THEIR SOVEREIGN  
RIGHT OF THE BALLOT HAVE CHOSEN THIS  
MUNICIPALITY AS THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT!

GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!

The exuberant shout of the big black type was answered by a yell equally exuberant from the crowd. Tooley was still laboring at his presses, pausing only occasionally to reinforce himself with the whiskey which was rushed to him in mugs and glasses by admiring assistants who in turn bore off batches of fresh copies of the edition—copies on which the ink of the press was still so damp that it smeared to the touch.

The interest in the newspaper exhausted itself after awhile, and the mob, highly charged now with alcoholic spirits, moved out into the street, seeking diversion. It paused in front of the

Apex House, serenading the hostelry with "The Girl I Left Behind Me," to which new verses had been added:

*She jumped into bed,  
And covered up her head,  
And swore I couldn't find her;  
But I gave a leap  
Like a big fat sheep,  
And jumped right in behind her . . .*

Mrs. Putnam Hatch, four blocks away, was forced to put her fingers in her ears to keep from hearing this and worse vulgarities. Long ago she and the deacon and the minister had hurried to their residences, persuaded that this was no night for churchly folk to be abroad.

But serenading the hotel soon lost its novelty, and invention ran out on new and obscene verses for "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Jericho was looking for excitement, ready for anything.

A sudden yell rose above the other noise:

"Thar's a newly-wed couple down the street!"

Frenzy and glee were in the cry that answered the announcement:

*"Shivereel Shivereel!"*

A charivari—"shiveree" to the Short Grass—was exactly the kind of thing the whetted appetites of sensation-craving Jericho wanted. Here was a prime chance to "cut loose." There was an exciting aura of sex to this, and a chance for ribaldry, and for cruelty.

In the darkening street the crowd moved compactly. It was massed, growling, and it looked ominously like a lynch mob. Most of its members were men and boys, but there were some women and girls in the outskirts.

"Looky yonder!" a youth shouted, and another whistled sharply.

The girl named Gussie Gosney had just joined the crowd. She had seen the excitement from her upstairs room and slipped down to the street. Even in the gloom she was notable among the other females of Jericho because of the blondness of her piled hair, sensed rather than seen, and the seductive figure she displayed.

"Ain't that the Bon Ton gal?"

"If my eyes don't fool me."

"Cawd, she looks good enough to give a man the eagers, sure!"

"Slim in the waist, an' plenty of butt, an' Jesus, them boobies!"

"They say she'll play—for the right guy."

"I wonder."

"Give me room, accordin' to my strength! I aim to find out!"

Gussie seemed unfrightened in the dark, as a ring of men formed about her.

"Hi, boys," she said. She laughed. Something about her indicated knowledge of men and how to handle them.

A towering yokel put a great paw on her arm.

"How about goin' with me, sister?" he hiccoughed.

"Take your hands off," she said. Her voice was quiet and there was no threat in it, but something in her manner of uttering the order caused the yokel to drop his hand and back away.

For a moment the crowd hesitated. But another figure pushed forward.

"What's the matter, Poke? Lost yore nerve?" Those near in the darkness recognized Willie Madden, the Callaway County ne'er-do-well.

"Come, Blondie. A kiss. Jest one li'l smack—it won't hurt you—"

The ring of men craned forward as the great hulk reached for the girl. Like a pistol crack came the sound of her slap as she gave him the palm of her hand flat against his cheek with all the force of her buxom body behind it.

"God damn!" cried Willie, nursing his smarting cheek. "So that's the kind of a gal you are! You little bitch, I'll—"

Willie started forward and a tension came on the crowd. But a new voice spoke:

"Yo' slow down, Madden."

Willie halted in his enormous tracks. Quarternight had pushed into the ring.

"I ain't doin' nothin', Sherry," Madden said quickly.

The marshal's coat was open and even in the darkness those nearest him fancied they could see the butt of that revolver which all knew lay constantly snuggled in his armpit, weighting down his shoulder holster. Sherry looked at the girl.

"Have these men been botherin' yo'?" he asked.

The circle swayed back. Everyone had heard the story that this man had killed two gun-fighters down in Texas. That thought seemed miraculously to sober the minds of the crowd. Nobody desired to become a third notch on the pistol butt of Sherry Quarternight.

"No," said Gussie to the question. "I can take care of my-

self, thank you," she added. A sigh of relief was almost audible about her.

But the circle gave way, the group began to break up quickly, the men who composed it sidling off into the dark.

"Could I—be of any service?" Quarternight had come close to the girl and she saw his smile gleam white in the darkness. She liked that smile and she savored the man with approval. But she was not yet ready to unbend with him. Gussie had some well-grounded ideas about men. One was this: things hard to get are highly prized. She had a definite scheme of things in which Sherry Quarternight figured importantly. But first there was a treatment he must undergo to make him more appreciative . . . later.

So she turned away. "Thank you, Mr. Quarternight," she said coolly, "but I have a gentleman. Here he comes now."

Sherry almost let himself show the displeasure he felt as he turned to see a highly dressed individual in very tight pants and a black derby approaching.

"Mr. Burrows, I want for you to meet Mr. Quarternight," said Gussie, airily. "Mr. Burrows is sojourning at the Apex. He is in dry goods out of Kansas City."

A drummer, thought Sherry. She goes out with drummers. It was another peg to fix her in his estimate.

"I've been hunting all over for you," complained Mr. Burrows, with an odd mixture of eagerness and indignation. He had plans which were being delayed, and just at this moment they seemed very important plans to him. "You weren't in your room. The rig is ready at the stable—"

"I came down to see what was happening."

"Fine. Now you've seen. Come on. It's getting late."

"I want to see what goes on here."

"But you promised to go riding—" There was sudden fear and pleading in the drummer's voice.

"This is more fun." She said it finally, almost cruelly.

He looked at her pathetically. "Not for me, it ain't," he said.

A dream of bliss had suddenly been shattered for him. There was nothing else to do, so he glumly offered his arm, and wondered in his mind why this prairie nymph, about whom he had been thinking all day, and who had seemed so very friendly and understanding of the needs of a man far from home for a long time, should be so devastatingly changeable. Together they followed the crowd down the street.

Quarternight watched them go, then walked back toward the townsite office. The girl had treated him like trash—a new

experience. But he found it did not anger him as he expected. Rather he laughed a little at himself. She was adventurous. That pleased him. The game was not over. He would have his innings yet.

#### 4.

With the drunken Willie Madden and Poke Trembley at its head, the "shiveree" mob poured on down the street, coming to a halt at last before a wretched little shack of lumber and tar-paper. The shack was so ill-built that the light from within it gleamed out through numerous cracks in its weather boarding. At the windows the shades were drawn, but already one or two dark figures were applying eyes to the cracks and trying to peer into the interior.

Someone hammered thunderously at the door. It was timidly opened.

"What do you want?" The voice was reedy, a quavering boy's voice.

"What you doing here?" Willie Madden, swaggering and domineering, was the crowd's spokesman.

"I—we live here—"

"We? Who else beside you?"

"Nobody. Jest my w-wife—"

"Don't lie!"

"I ain't. Honest, mister, I ain't lying. We got married this afternoon with the Reverend down at the church. We got the license to prove it—"

Madden laughed cynically. "How do we know you're tellin' the truth? What's your name?"

"Albert Dahnke."

"Oh, Albert *Donkey*, eh?" The crowd laughed uproariously at the inferior wit and Madden permitted himself a swaggering look around.

"Well, Albert Donkey, what's your business?"

"Albert Dahnke, mister. I work at the Acme Livery—"

"Donkey at the livery. Oh, a jack, eh? Standin' stud?"

Again there was a shout of laughter, and again Madden glanced humorously around, pushing up the back of his battered hat so that it came down low over his eyes in front.

"No, sir, I—"

"Oh, you're standin' stud *here!*" Madden waited for the



burst of laughter. Got it. He esteemed himself to be in excellent vein and plumed himself accordingly.

The boy at the door was embarrassed, harassed, frightened. He mumbled but did not answer the last obscenity.

"How old are you, Albert?" his tormentor began on a new tack.

"Twenty-one."

"What?"

"Well—nineteen."

"*What?*"

"Eighteen, then."

"That your real age?"

"Yessir."

"So you *were* lying!"

Back in the outskirts of the mob Gussie Gosney giggled. Mr. Burrows took new hope from this circumstance, but he was not accustomed to the institution of the charivari.

"They're pretty rough on that young fellow, ain't they?" he asked.

She laughed again. "Maybe. What do you expect. He's been having his fun, ain't he. It won't hurt him to get a little hazing.

"Why does that boy let them badger him so?"

"Maybe he's afraid not to. That Willie Madden's plenty of man. It might pay to be a little polite to him."

Mr. Burrows sought to slip an arm about her. But she was still coy. She twisted away.

"This is sure a hell of a way to treat me—after what you promised—" he grumbled.

Madden's voice at the door cut across their conversation.

"If you was lyin' about your age, how we goin' to believe the rest of the story? This here's a law-abidin' community that don't hold with no immorality." He favored those about him with a wink so broad that they could see it even in the gloom.

"What's your wife's name—her you call your wife?"

"Minnie Gunter."

"How old is *she*?"

"Seventeen, I guess."

"You *guess*?" Willie's voice was ominous.

"No sir. Seventeen is how old she is."

"Where'd she come from?"

"She's been workin' down south of here—hired girl at Molenkamp's place."

"Trot her out!"

"But, mister, she's scairt an' she ain't hardly dressed—"

*"Trot her out!"*

Gussie Gosney could see the gawky couple at the lighted door. The girl had a loose Mother Hubbard dress wrapped about her. She was fastening the string around her waist with trembling fingers.

"That one's sure startin' married life young," Gussie commented. "They're both only kids."

The bridegroom scarcely looked the eighteen years he claimed. He was young, thin, inadequate, and the adolescent down still fuzzed his cheeks. The bride was even younger, shrinking, unformed, scared and clinging to the new husband who seemed so powerless to protect her.

They had been married only two hours. In their inexperience in such matters, it had never occurred to them that anyone might be interested in their meaningless little lives. They did now know the hysteria, the brutality, the viciousness that even the suggestion of sex arouses in a mob. They did not comprehend that this is at the bottom of the torture slayings of Negroes accused, often groundlessly, of rape. The new state into which Albert Dahnke and Minnie Gunter had entered, through the solemn words of the Campbellite preacher, had stimulated the curiosity and morbid sadism of the half-drunk riff-raff of Jericho.

The couple was pulled out of the shack, and shoved and jostled. Men with girls in the mob felt the excitement and hands were clasped, and even waists. At last Gussie Gosney relented to her drummer. The eager arm of Mr. Burrows found it way around her. She lifted an arm so his hand could go about her, under her armpit, and his fingers closed on the stunning resilience of a breast.

"Can't we get out of here?" he whispered, in panting supplication.

She nodded her head. "I've had enough of this." Her flesh was warm and her breath came quickly. "Where's your rig?" They turned aside and let the mob go forward without them.

4

## 5.

Up Main Street the mob surged with the young couple marched at its head, exactly as if the boy and girl were victims about to be lynched. Frightened, yet trying to keep up an appearance of accepting with good sportsmanship this

shocking invasion of their privacy, Albert and Minnie clung to each others' hands and comforted one another with words and looks, stumbling ahead of the laughing, gibing crowd.

But the mob would not stand even this comforting of each other. There was a cry:

"Separate 'em! Don't let 'em talk to each other!"

Albert and Minnie were torn apart. Two or three leering men shouldered the youth aside threateningly, jeering as if they invited him to resent their boorish effrontery. The girl, helpless, was dragged in another direction, by another group of men, who did not miss the opportunity and excuse to clutch and feel her body.

A great noise rose. Pans were beaten, and there were several of those creations of the devil called "bullroarers"—a device made by boring a hole in the bottom of a large can, and putting through this a whang-leather cord which is secured from slipping all the way through by a large knot. The operator of the bullroarer pulls along his leather cord a piece of resin, and the brutal, nerve-twisting bellow that rises shockingly to the sky is a horrid thing.

Willie Madden, bumptious master of ceremonies, led the way. They were in the open square before the newly constituted court house.

"Up the steps with them!" was the order.

Both the boy and girl were rushed up the steps and the crowd receded, leaving them standing there panting, disheveled, their clothing torn, the smiles now stricken from their lips.

A great obscene yell went up from the mob. Cat-calls, lewd comments, foul expressions were hurled at the defenseless couple. Thoroughly drunk, Jericho's leading irresponsibles were ready for anything.

Willie Madden appeared at the top of the steps and took the bridegroom by the shoulder.

For all the world he looked like a hangman, about to shove his victim, already haltered, off into eternity. But no rope was there save the bonds of causeless cruelty.

"Give us a speech," said Willie with a hoarse guffaw.

Albert Dahnke gulped and stammered. He could think of nothing. The crowd jeered heartlessly.

"Tell 'em why you married her," prompted Madden with lewd insinuation.

A yell burst from the crowd. They supplied the young husband with all manner of abominable suggestions as to why he had married the wretched child-woman at his side.

The girl was sobbing now, and the boy, pale and scared, still gulped.

Willie Madden seemed to relent.

"You love her, don't you?"

Helplessly the bridegroom nodded.

"Tell 'em so!"

Albert made an effort. His adam's apple wobbled in his skinny throat as he struggled for words. "I g-g-guess it w-w-was becuz I l-l-loved her," he stammered.

Another wild yell.

"He says he loves her!"

"Look at him! He's all het up!"

"Afire!"

"Burnin'!"

"Cool him off! Cool him off!"

And now there was a new fearsome movement. The crowd surged up the steps. For the first time fear caused the boy to strike out, but his blows availed nothing against the massed intent of the drunken mobsters. He was seized, hoisted aloft kicking and struggling, and carried down the steps out toward the street.

"The horse tank! Douse him! Put out that fire!"

In a dense pack they rushed toward the watering trough and he was hurled from the shoulders of the men who carried him.

His lanky body arched through the air and struck with a great splash in the trough. He staggered up, covered with green slime, the water running from him, blood staining his chin from a cut on his lip, and stood looking out over the crowd in bewilderment. Off toward the courthouse he saw his bride. She was held by two or three men and her mouth opened. He could scarcely see her in the gloom and he could not hear her at all in the tumult, but he knew she was calling to him.

"Look," he begged. "Do anything you want to me—I won't even fight. But don't you do nothin' to Minnie—"

A roar of laughter cut him short.

"He's tellin' us what to do!"

"Douse him again!"

"Under with him!"

Great paws reached for him, tripped his soaked feet from under him, brought him down with a mighty splash again into the green scum of the trough. Hands pushed him down, held him under.

"He ain't had a bath—give him a bath for his weddin' night!"

The skinny youth fought under the water with desperate panic. Sheer frenzy enabled him to break the hold and he came up to the surface gasping, coughing up green scum and water, the fear of death now on his face. These men were drunk. They did not know what they were doing. They were capable of anything.

"Aw-w-w-r-r-r—"

His throaty, gurgling scream was choked back into his throat with a coughing splash as he was pushed under water again. The men laughed. To them the boy in their hands meant no more than a puppy; they did not realize that he was growing weaker and weaker beneath the water, fighting more and more feebly.

"Let him up!"

A great bulky figure suddenly had appeared among them. The bellow had authority in it.

"Mr. Archelaus!"

"And Quarternight!"

"Let him up, or by the Jumping Jehoshaphat, we'll know the reason why!"

The men receded back from the tank. Weakly the boy came to the surface.

Henry gave him a hand.

"Climb out, son," he said.

The boy had come up to his knees, his clothing and hair running with the greenish water. He clung to Henry's hand like a child.

Suddenly he vomited and almost collapsed.

Henry helped him up once more and out of the tank, where he stood swaying on trembling legs, holding to the gnawed and splintery edge of the wooden trough, overwrought, too sick to know what was going on about him.

Archelaus turned to the crowd. "Fun's fun," he said. "This kid's had enough. I'd be plumb ashamed if I was you. Sherry, as marshal, I charge you to stop any further assaults on this boy. You leave him go with his wife."

Sobriety seemed to have come very suddenly to the mob. Willie Madden and Poke Trembley sneaked away, silent, fearful lest they catch the eye of the furious townsite man.

The boy began staggering up the street. From the crowd a figure came flying to meet him.

"Oh Albert, Albert!"

"It's all right, Minnie."

Arms about each other, they slowly went down the street into the darkness toward the shack where they lived.

"Now you get to your places," Archelaus said. He was ad-

dressing the sheepish and crestfallen crowd. "Another minute and you drunks would have had that kid drowned. Jericho's had enough of this kind of funny business. Get!"

They slunk away.

Archelaus turned and tramped toward his office. He drew a blue handkerchief and wiped his face. He lifted the hat he always wore, revealing the startling baldness of his domed head, and wiped that also.

"Phew!" he said to Sherry. "That was a close thing. Jericho's too young, its status too damned unsettled, to make a death by mob violence healthy."

"Them kids sure has yo' to thank," said Quarternight.

"They don't need to thank me. I didn't act through humanitarian reasons. Hell, I was only protecting my investment!"

## FOUR

### 1.

TIL RECTOR hear it thunder off in the distance; a faint tremulous rumble, far below the night horizon.

He halted in the darkness, his smoky lantern flicking dim awkward shadows against the cowshed, and turned his face off toward the southwest. Rain was brewing over there, he hoped. It certainly had been powerful hot and dry, even for the Short Grass. Here it was, June yet, and the buffalo sod already curing and crumbling as in August.

Now he saw the momentary glimmer of lightning. The under surfaces of a cloud were briefly limned—soft, insubstantial curves of light mottling vaguely the great imponderable masses above. A cloud mountain. Nobody could guess to what lofty heights its invisible peaks towered. It was gone almost as soon as seen, disappearing into the night so completely that the momentary revelation of its presence was discredited, almost, by the senses.

That's lightning, Til said to himself. Rain lightning.

It was nothing at all like the heat lightning he had been seeing every night on that same horizon—the dry, false flicker of distant empty skies, as counterfeit as the daytime mirage, and with a promise as mockingly unfulfilled.

The far-away mutter came again, and it seemed to Til that he felt a breath of air somewhat cooler than that of the still evening which pressed about him. Perhaps that cool breath

was his imagination but rain was working over yonder without doubt. With luck there might be a shower this very night.

A thought occurred: perhaps the brooding storm might account for old Egypt's behavior. Til could hear her noisily licking the last flecks of bran from her feed box in the malodorous cowshed. The cow had made him late with his milking this night. In some manner she had wriggled through the pasture fence during the afternoon and wandered off toward Wessel's, the farm neighbors to the south. Til had to hunt more than an hour before he found her grazing along the road and drove her home.

Mentally, Til damned a damned breachy cow—and that went double for a two-wired fence. It was none of his business, perhaps. He was only working here. Maybe a hired man ought not concern himself with matters like fences. But it was a cinch that Simeon Trudge didn't seem to bother about them. He could well afford to add another strand of wire to that shiftless pasture fence but he was, to Til's notion, tighter than a bull's butt in fly time.

Then Til half-grinned in the darkness and shook his head at himself. In all fairness to Trudge, something more imperious and elemental than storm currents was affecting old Egypt. Til glanced down at the bucket he was carrying. He could not see the milk in the lantern's half-light, but he judged by the heft that there was mighty little milk there—a quart and a half, maybe. It was all he had been able to get, and he was lucky for that much clean milk, considering the condition of the cow's bag. Two of her big soft teats were deeply gashed by the barbed wire through which she had crawled. He had spent half an hour washing the wounds—with a wary eye for a reaching, sidewise kick—and then filling the bloody rips with axle-grease. Damn a two-wire fence anyway, he thought again. It was just a temptation and a challenge to a breachy cow.

Although the storm seemed to be stirring in the southwest, the night sky overhead was a clear sapphire blue, spattered with the diamond points of stars. Against the sky the cowshed hoisted crude angles of ugliness. It was a primitive shed, framed of cottonwood posts hauled up from the Cimarron, and roofed over with a slovenly heap of old corn stalks and swale grass. Within it the air was hot and reasty, the floor a worked mire of urine and sodden straw.

Having licked up the last of her mash, Egypt, the cow, backed awkwardly from the shed, her cleft hoofs sucking at the mud.

"Get along with you," said Til. "You're as bad as a dog



that's been in a fight with a polecat and jest don't give a damn."

Unabashed, Egypt slowly, in the disjointed manner of her kind, lumbered off toward the lower pasture to look for the few lean pickings of green grass that might be left in the dry slough. Her hip bones protruded grotesquely and the soft limp udder swinging pendulously between her posterior quarters seemed to make a gesture of silent derision at the man.

Of a sudden Egypt stopped short. From some measureless distance came a pin-prick of sound—a faint, far trumpet.

Instantly the cow raised her ugly head, the mule ears pricked eagerly forward. She had recognized the far-off call of a bull. Suddenly she extended her muzzle and put every fiber of her gaunt being into the long, yearning bellow.

Til nodded.

"Breachy," he said aloud. "Breachy an' bulling!"

## 2.

He turned toward the house, letting himself through the wire gate and carefully fastening it behind him with the crude wire-and-stick latch. At his right in the darkness loomed the shadowy outline of the barn, and from the air above his head came a tinny clank—the windmill, dimly perceived in the darkness. Water gurgled faintly from an iron pipe, failing to cool the tepid contents of the tank.

Momentarily the distant towering cloud once more was made visible by a twitching upsurge of pale lavender light. Minutes later the earth rumbled faintly.

Fifty paces up the low hill from the windmill tower stood the shanty. They were the two inseparables of this country—the shanty and the windmill. One did not exist without the other. About the base of the windmill tower, even at night, a rank growth of ironweed and sunflower was discernible as a darkness against the paler background of the dried buffalo grass, a living reminder of the possibilities of the soil where water was available. Water. It was the everlasting need of this land.

With slow strides Til walked up the uneven path toward the house. The structure was unpretentious—two rooms and a lean-to addition. But a window made an oblong of saffron light and not even the gloom could keep that light from seem-

ing cheerful. From the open door, too, a long finger of brightness extended toward him across the ground, a trail of illumination up which he tramped, swing his milk pail.

Far away, across the night-dimmed plain to the southeast, a lonely dog was going *yow, yow, yow*. Til wondered where that night-barking dog lived. It must be at least five miles away—over toward Antelope Lake, maybe. Curious. Till knew of nobody living in that part of the sand hills.

The distant dog grew silent; and from the north, where the small sage hills hunched together beneath the stars, grew a long wail, shrill and keen, followed by a hurried patter of knife-edge yelps. Coyotes. They were yelling early tonight. Another sign of a weather change, perhaps. In these high plains the thought of weather dwelt constantly in the mind. Speculation on rain became an obsession . . . with Til as with everyone else.

He had reached the door. Before entering he straightened his tall figure and squared his shoulders. Then he entered the kitchen and looked at the woman within.

"That cow played hob tonight," he said to Gary Trudge.

She regarded him enigmatically.

"Storm coming, looks like," said Til.

She smiled faintly. "Maybe," she said in her rich voice.

Til wondered what she meant by that, and what she was thinking. Of late he had wondered much about her, a strange uncomfortable speculation that came to him without his wish. He would have preferred a complete indifference toward her, but he was finding as the days passed in which he met and saw and talked with her unavoidably in this house, that the thought of her grew on him, so that he was stirred by a queer uneasiness in her presence.

As for Gary, her thoughts at that moment really were not concerned with him at all.

In this country, she was saying to herself, you can't count on any ordinary sign to tell you what the weather is going to do—or any other useful thing.

This she did not voice—not because it was a secret, but because, unlike most women, Gary habitually refrained from speaking unless speech seemed necessary. Her thoughts were her own, and though her eyes rested on the young man at her door, her mind dwelt in Indiana where she had lived in her girlhood, and she thought how it would be to see again a grove of oaks, instead of the monotonous sagebrush and tumbleweeds.

After a moment Til set down the milk pail and blew out

the lantern. A tiny eddy of dirty brown smoke curled out from the wick. He hung the lantern on a nail.

Next he washed his face at the basin, splashing the water on his hair and neck as he did so. He could see Gary from the tail of his eye, not hunched as he was, but erect, her head as usual superbly high, her back straight. Gary never slouched. He was conscious as he scrubbed his neck, of the slight angularity of her body, of her tallness, of her lack of some of the softer feminine graces . . . and also of the power of sweetness that somehow was a part of her.

Gary was not really pretty. That had to be admitted. She was long-legged, thin and calm, with dark brown eyes and gingery lashes. But her hair gave her a distinction of her own. It was new copper with rich dark shadowings of bronze and golden gleams where the lamp touched highlights on it. A woman with hair like that never could be wholly unlovely. Til did not think of Gary as unlovely at all.

He finished washing and dried his face on the huck towel, venturing a glance at her. But she was expressionless and he felt baffled. To cover his awkward feeling he carefully hung the towel on its nail, taking unreasonable pains that its folds came down just right, so that the damp place where he had dried his face and hands was at least partly concealed.

Gary called the family to eat and with long strides Til crossed the room to the table. As he did so he caught a glimpse of Simeon standing beside the bedroom window nearest the kitchen door. It was almost as if the man had been standing close to the door listening. But apparently he was only watching the night sky outside, studying the lightning. He now came into the kitchen, sidling crabwise.

"Supper's late," he grumbled.

"My fault," said Til. "I was late pailin' the cow."

"Whut kep' you, Tilford?" Simeon was the only person in the whole country who persisted in calling Til by his full name.

"Old Egypt busted out an' cut her bag on the wire."

"Better put a crawl yoke on her, Tilford."

"Yoke wouldn't hold her. That fence." Disgust was in the last two words.

"Is she bullin'?" asked the farmer in a rusty, noncommittal voice. Til nodded. The meal began.

"I hear that the governor's telegraphed his appointments," said Simeon, who had been down to the mail road to intercept and talk with the Star Route man. "Henry Archelaus is chairman of the county commission, an' Jim McCluggage, the general store man, an' 'Doc' Potlicker is on there with him."

"That's sure a rubber-stamp commission," commented Til. "They'll do whatever Henry tells 'em."

"Shad Spilker got the appointment as coroner all right, an' Chet Tooley gets the county printing, as scheduled, so Earl Josserrand, the Star Route man, tells me."

"What about sheriff?"

"Earl wasn't certain about that. He said they'd had Sherry Quarternight on the slate but there was some kind of a hitch. Didn't know just what, but figgered it would be straightened out an' Quarternight would get it all right."

"Looks to me like Jericho sure is hogging things—the county seat an' all the county offices," said Til.

"Another thing Josserrand told me—there's a move afoot to hold a special election, or mebbe an election this fall along with the general election. For railroad bonds!"

"Railroad bonds!" Til's face was a study. "That makes it perfect. So that's the way Archelaus an' his ring is movin'. I was wondering."

"What do you mean?" demanded Simeon with a touch of asperity.

Ain't you never heard about bond issues for railroads?"

"Sure I have. Do you think I'm a fool? They're a steal mostly."

"That's what I meant."

"Well, they'll never get me on no petition for a bond election." Simeon gave a jackdaw grin. "I'm too smart for that."

The windows suddenly rattled.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Simeon, startled.

"She's been workin' up from the southwest," said Til. "I seen it when I was milkin'."

Thunder was no commonplace in this country. On the high plains where there is an ever-present anxiety, a hunger for rain, the doings of the weather always are important.

Around the Trudge table they sat in tense, expectant stillness. Simeon lifted his head on its thin corded neck, and turned his-tuft of beard in the direction from which the sound had come.

"It it gonna rain, ma?" asked Ranny.

"I hope so," said Gary.

"I do believe she's comin' this way!" exclaimed Simeon importantly. "The Lord giveth our rains in their seasons!"

The muslin curtains suddenly were blown inward at the kitchen windows, bringing a new freshness into the room.

### 3.

The wind came with gasping suddenness, catching at them as they ran to lower the windows. From the porch a galvanized iron wash-tub clattered and rolled booming into the night. A squawking blob of white was blown past the window—one of Gary's chickens. A few rain drops sounded like hard pebbles on the roof.

Ranny whimpered as lightning flashed closer, and Til lifted him to his lap.

"Looky here, old timer," he soothed, "thunder ain't nothin' but noise. It won't do no hurt to you."

"Wind—" said Ranny anxiously.

"It won't hurt. Jest blows the heat out'n the country. When the storm's over you'll sleep nice an' cool, like in fall."

"I've seen twisters come out of jest such a cloud," said Simeon uneasily. He was standing by a window trying to peer out.

"Twisters don't come with no line storm," Til calmly contradicted him. He smiled at Ranny's wide eyes and pulled toward him a thick catalogue with the name of a mail-order house emblazoned on it.

"That old storm ain't nothin' to bother with," he said to the child. "We can look at somethin' here that's interestin'—like toys." He began leafing through the pages. Til's calmness reassured Ranny, and presently in his eager interest over toy steam engines the child forgot his fear of the rising tempest.

The first fury of the wind passed, and the brief patter of raindrops ceased abruptly. With a groan Simeon came away from the window.

"False alarm," he said. "It's blown over. It raineth on the just an' the unjust—but it never seems to rain in western Kansas. I was hopin', Tilford, that a shower would come so as to soften the ground for you to get at the sod-breakin' on the slope forty."

"I reckon I can anyhow," said Til listlessly. It was remarkable how the aliveness, the keenness of their perceptions, dulled the minute it became apparent that the weather was again playing them false.

Gary thought of how the country looked in the blazing daytime. Great flat spaces, with the horizons standing up in the

far distance all around. The bowl of brass under the boundless sky above. She closed her eyes wearily. To live in a bowl of brass . . .

The night's routine summoned her. She began clearing away the supper dishes, with efficiency of long practice, wasting hardly a motion, her mind not occupied by what she was doing, and her hands going instinctively through the familiar motions. To her the mechanics of life were an emotional refuge. When her hands were busy she had less time to think.

Til watched her. It was impossible for him to keep from taking pleasure in her free-gaited movement about the kitchen, the surety of her actions. Snuggling against his shoulder, Ranny now lay asleep, the mail-order catalogue open and neglected at the pages which set forth the glories of the toy steam engines. Beyond Gary, against the wall, a giant shadow swept, as she moved before the lamp; a grotesque second Gary, looming high and sometimes reaching clear across the ceiling as she stacked away the cheap china dishes on the shelves, putting the forks and knives in their proper drawer. When she was at work, unconscious of scrutiny, all of Gary's slight awkwardness disappeared. Her eyes were on the labor of her hands, and she was conscious of competence in doing the thing she understood.

Almost guiltily realizing that he had been watching her for five minutes, Til turned his eyes quickly toward Simeon. He was momentarily startled to find the farmer staring at him with a peculiar intentness. But Simeon immediately dropped his eyes.

Til felt a stiff stir of resentment. There was no law against looking at a woman. No harm in it. Nor did he mean harm. Let Simeon start to say something . . . mentally Til for a moment ranged his own seventy-two inches of muscular strength against the other's undersized weakness. Immediately he felt foolish. Why should he have a guilty feeling, anyway?

He leaned over Ranny, who was cuddled in his arms, and arose. When Gary glanced at him, he looked questioningly down at the soiled feet of the sleeping child.

She shook her head; smiled. The foot-washing could be postponed this one night. Til passed into the other room and laid Ranny on his cot.

The child stirred and turned slightly on his side, his lips sweet with slumber, and his rounded white forehead innocent beneath his dark curls.

#### 4.

Prayers were over, and Gary was setting a bread sponge for the next day's baking. From a crock where it had been fermenting since mid-afternoon, she poured a yeasty mixture into her dishpan. The familiar sour odor rose to her nostrils as she dusted on it flour through a sieve, and deftly kneaded until the flour took up the liquid in the springy mass. This she placed in its container on the back of the stove, under a damp cloth, to rise during the night.

Simeon was deep in his paper, and Til stepped outside for a smoke. Tobacco was forbidden in the Trudge house, as was every other form of indulgence, but even Simeon did not try to carry his prohibitions too far. It was tacitly understood that the hired man might smoke so long as he did not smoke in the house. For twenty minutes, therefore, Til lounged outside, looking at the sky, and puffing at his old black pipe. The storm cloud that had threatened so promisingly had drawn off to the southeast. Lightning still illumined it occasionally, but not so fiercely as before. Til guessed that there might have been rain at Jericho; perhaps even nearer. But the immediate chances for any precipitation at the Trudge farm were gone. He realized this with a peculiar regret, the regret of the dweller in the thirsty lands.

After a time he knocked the dottle from his pipe. A stream of tiny sparks cascaded to the ground. He put the pipe in his pocket and went back to the shanty. Gary had gone into the bedroom and closed the door, but Simeon still sat at the table.

"How's the weather look?" he asked.

"The cloud's hauled off southeast," answered Til.

"Well, luck's had." Simeon knew that on the high plains nearly all summer storms work from southwest to northwest, and when the line is otherwise, prospects of rain are slim.

"I reckon we missed it," agreed Til.

"How do you think about that sod, Tilford?"

"She'll be dry an' hard. But it might work. If you say the word, I'll take them little red mules an' try 'em out on it tomorrow. I've got 'em so they work together pretty good." Til hesitated. "That cow . . ."

"Yes. I recollect." Simeon cleared his throat. "Wisht I had a bull," he said plaintively. "I hate to take her over to Wessel's

critter. Can't let her dry up on me, though. What's Wessel askin'?"

"Dollar, I heard."

"Dollar?" groaned Simeon. "For breedin' that no-good scrub of his'n?" But he shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I got to get another cow. Tilford, if that Phelps cow is any good—"

His voice trailed off. They were both thinking of the same thing.

"Say, Tilford, in view of what's happened—the county seat election, an' the appointment of them Jericho men as county officers—what do you think about Bedestown runnin' the Phelps sale? Kind of curious ain't it?" Simeon cleared his throat. "Think there might be any kind of trouble?"

"I don't know what kind. There'll be them south of the river that won't like it—particularly Henry Archelaus an' his crowd. But I don't look for no ruckus. Nothin' open. Not now."

"Well," said Simeon, as if he had weighed the matter and come to a momentous decision. "I'm goin' anyway—Bedestown or no Bedestown."

He broke off abruptly. Something else had taken possession of his mind.

"I'll see you in the mornin', Tilford," he said, and went into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

## 5.

Gary was sitting by the bureau, combing her hair. It was a nightly rite with her, almost the only concession she made to ordinary feminine vanity. Other women possessed pretty clothes, and scents, and ornaments, but to Gary Trudge these things were denied. The excellence of being "sensible" was preached constantly in her ears. Long ago she had surrendered to the invincible mandate. Her garments were dutifully plain—neat and carefully sewed, but minus frills and the gay touches women love. Having been shown early in her married life Simeon's disapproval of anything smacking of frivolity, she chose now, almost automatically, the quietest colors and patterns, and selected materials for practical reasons only, besides doing all her own dressmaking, as a matter of course.

In one respect, however, she remained true to her feminin-



ity. To the auburn glory of her hair she gave due attention each night. For a full half hour she brushed and combed it.

She heard Simeon come into the room, but gave no sign. The heavy mass of her hair was hanging around her face; and seen thus, with the severity of her plain hair-dress absent and the shimmering, coppery cloud framing her features, it was a different face, a face with unexpected delicacy and beauty. She turned her head sidewise to permit the thickness of her hair to come over a shoulder, and brushed with long rhythmic strokes. It was pretty hair, she thought, half self-conscious even at the silent admission to herself—beautiful and wavy. The lamplight brought out charming gleams in it, and it crackled with electricity as she brushed.

From behind her came the sounds made by Simeon as he readied himself for bed. A boot clattered on the floor, and then another. There was a rip of buttons. His overalls would be hung on the footpost of the bed; the springs creaked as Simeon crawled under the sheet.

Gary postponed her own bed-going as long as she could. First on one side, then the other, she brushed her hair. She reversed the brush and for minutes worked from below, letting the hair run over the brush in rippling undulations. Much brushing was good for the hair, making it glossy and healthy.

Besides, she could feel Simeon watching her.

Women are provocative when they brush their hair, it is a gesture so purely feminine and at the same time so intimate. Even a fat and awkward woman can look almost graceful at such times. The body is bent sidewise, the back arched, the arms make charming patterns in their play about the head.

But Gary was not seeking to charm Simeon. She knew the look that was in his eyes, and lately there had been a growing distaste—a distaste which this evening seemed especially strong. Eventually, she knew, she would have to give in and go under that sheet with Simeon, but for the present she stubbornly remained before the mirror, brushing and brushing, deliberately and rebelliously.

Marriage . . . somehow it had not worked out as Gary thought it should have worked out. In the days before her wedding she had been the center of attention. There was immense excitement in the preparations for her climactic event, and pleasures and thrills also. Her reactions to all these were childish rather than womanly, and the more so because then she hardly knew Simeon. Before their marriage he had been very dignified in his manner toward her. Even when they were alone together he never displayed anything approaching

hunger for her, or passion . . . and if he had, it might have frightened her. As it was he gave her no inkling of what was to happen to her.

The underlying and central reason for marriage—that terrible, shocking intimacy, the invasion of every privacy and life habit—had never been discussed with her except in the most general and almost furtive manner. She had been in profound ignorance of all but the most superficial meanings of sex. Her mother, she remembered, once had hinted about it, and in a manner that gave her to believe that this mystery was a necessary evil, but no more.

Her whole notion of a husband had been someone who would be a “good provider” and who would perhaps be a companion in her home. Love—even affection—were left out of all consideration. This, in a community where the people are unprosperous, is frequently so. The poor are mercenary without knowing it.

“It’s wonderful for her,” Gary’s mother had said over and over. “She won’t never have to work like I’ve had to. She’ll have better things than I’ve ever had.”

Her mother discussed the matter with a neighbor on the porch, while Gary sat, an arrant little eavesdropper, in the window of her bedroom upstairs, hearing clearly.

“Yes,” said the neighbor woman. “Better an old man’s darling than a young man’s slave, I always say.”

“Why, as to that,” said Gary’s mother primly, “Mr. Trudge is not so old . . .”

Thinking back on that distant day Gary almost laughed a tiny bitter laugh. How little had they known . . .

*An old man’s darling . . .* Only her pride, the stiffness of her backbone, carried her through what followed. The marriage bed became a shocking reality, and it was repellent. She was humiliated by it at first, and disgusted; but later she learned to endure it as a part of the inevitable shoddy experience of life. Never had she spoken concerning it to anyone, or permitted anyone to guess how she felt. She conceived that it was natural to feel as she did. A woman was not to expect to obtain any pleasure out of marriage, she thought, but must always be submissive as she had been taught in her home and in her church.

Love . . . honor . . . obey. These were the injunctions. She had tried to encompass the first and found it not possible. It therefore was the more incumbent on her to be dutiful in the observance of the other two.

She knew that her husband, with his yellow gaze, was star-

ing at her now. He was saying nothing; but he was looking. And waiting. She brushed on, almost defiantly. She was not in the mood . . . tonight . . .

"Ain't you never goin' to get through doin' that?" Simeon's voice was impatient and querulous.

She did not reply. But she laid the brush down. Still gazing into the mirror, she parted the heavy mane and began to braid it. Two braids—luxurious, gleaming copper plaits. Three thick strands to each plait. In and out and over. Out and over and in. Her fingers caressed the hair as they dextrously wove it. One braid was finished now, hanging down over her breast. She tied the end with a small faded bit of ribbon. With equal care she completed the other braid; tied it also. Then she took one final longing look at herself. When her hair was braided that way she still had the appearance of a little girl.

She rose at last from before the mirror.

Simeon lay back against the wall, propped on his elbow. His eyes glowed. There was no flame in them, such as youthful eyes sometimes have. It was a slow, yellow, devouring heat, a dull fire that burned savagely rather than furiously.

Simeon was waiting.

Gary blew out the lamp. Wife's duty. Unpleasant duty. Irsome duty.

In the dark she undressed and slipped hastily into her nightgown, which had long sleeves and buttoned up to the throat.

Then, unwillingly, she crossed the floor to the bed.

Simeon clutched at her. His body felt bony and harsh : . .

## 6.

In the kitchen Til lifted the small lamp from the table and blew out the larger lamp which hung, before its reflector, on the wall. At the far side of the stove was the door into the lean-to addition of the shanty, and this he entered.

The lean-to was his sleeping room, built as an afterthought to the rest of the house. It was used for storage of groceries, harness, and other surplus articles, so that he slept always in a combined aroma of the warehouse and the harness shop. Even as he opened the door, the pungent odor of saddle oil and the sharp scent of vinegar came to him, along with the musty smell of potatoes.

He set the lamp upon a cheap and decrepit washstand, and the interior of the room was thrown into relief by the light. That half of the lean-to nearest the door to the kitchen was occupied by a variety of things pertaining to the farm. Potatoes, bran, and shorts, all in gunny sacks, stood against the inner wall. Old harness nets hung like giant spider webs from the rafters, so that he made his way through a sort of passage between them. The outer wall was festooned with a set of very worn and weakened harness, hanging from pegs, where Simeon had placed it months before, intending to repair it at some distant day which never seemed to arrive.

Farthest from the door was Til's half of the lean-to, but even this was invaded by the storehouse clutter. Against the end wall stood an old wooden bedstead, with a pair of battered, mouldy horse collars hanging from a peg above the foot. The inner wall, against which the head of the bed was pushed, contained projecting nails from which hung his few belongings—his "store" suit of cheap blue serge, a jumper of jeans for chilly mornings, his "good" hat, a couple of shirts, and a few other simple articles of clothing. As revealed by the dim lamp-light, the quarters were ugly and barren, but there was one relieving feature: a pretty hand-pieced quilt on the bed, placed there by Gary.

Til seated himself on the side of the bed and removed from his feet the heavy elkskin brogans and thick knitted socks. Then he stood up and slid the suspenders of his overalls from his wide shoulders. The overalls slid down to the floor from his lean, muscular legs. He stepped out of the blue heap and hung the garment on a nail.

His simple preparation for bed was now complete. The faded blue hickory shirt remained on his body. It was his sleeping garment, in spite of the fact that it was soiled and sweat-stained, and strong with his male body odor. Of underwear he wore none whatever in this warm season.

Til blew out the lamp, turned back the quilt, and rolled into his bed. A window was open and the air had cooled so that Gary's coverlet seemed comfortable. He wriggled his long body to fit it to the contours of the ancient lumpy mattress. By continued experiment he had discovered that there was one hollowed place in the bed, where if he lay just right, the bumps came up about him, almost as if he were resting in a hammock. Til squirmed into this depression and lay still there for a long time.

He was weary, but at first he could not sleep. He wondered what he would be doing with the rest of this summer. Of one

thing he was sure—he would not indefinitely continue working for Simeon Trudge. Not only did he have an ill-defined dislike for the farmer, but there was in him a vast cumulative discontent at the course his own life was taking.

Looking back, Til said to himself that a streak of bad luck seemed to be dogging him—all the way back across the years to Streator, the Illinois mining town. He was a good farmer, and God only knew the infinite labor he had put into his effort to break away at last from the status of a hired hand to which fate seemed to bind him.

The experiment with spring wheat which he had made on his quarter section in the sand hills seemed poorly reasoned now, but at the time there was none to advise him against it. This country was too new, too untried for anyone to know what it would grow or would not grow. There would be a tedious process of trial and error before the suitable crops for it were discovered and demonstrated. In his present depression Til almost doubted they ever would be discovered.

His failure was not his fault. He had ploughed, and disced, and harrowed, and drilled. The late cold, or the drought, or the grasshoppers, or the poverty of the soil, or all four, had killed the wheat.

Til had put two hundred dollars—all the money he had in the world, the savings of more than ten years of working for other men—into that land. And the land was no good.

On the day when oil-tongued Henry Archelaus showed the quarter-section to him and promised that it would “pay for itself in one good year,” hope had dawned for him. The toil and hope and sacrifice he had put into that piece of dirt, should easily have returned in crops the money he spent had it been the “good year” to which Archelaus referred—but the trouble was that the “good year” did not come.

Til thought now of the fat, benevolent face of Henry Archelaus, and hated it.

The sandy acres had failed him. He had not the money for the second year's payment, due soon. Archelaus before long would demand payment—or the return of the land under his “iron-clad” contract. But Til rebelled at the thought. Those sand hill fields held within them his one last hope—they were to have been his salvation, enabling him at last to pull himself up to the condition of an independent farmer. He had dreamed—the sand hills were to be a start only. With the toil and care he was willing to bestow on it, he would have been able, he thought, eventually to buy other and better land. He would be a man of substance and weight before he died.

Instead he suffered the humiliation of going to the very man whom he charged with his misfortune, and begging him to help him find work as a hired hand again. Henry Archelaus made him wait a day for the final interview—a day in which Til's resentment grew until it seemed he could no longer keep it from boiling over. But he swallowed the resentment and acted meekly enough when finally he had his second interview with the purring Archelaus. The result was this job with the Trudges. The townsite man seemed to feel a tenuous sort of obligation over that sand hill transaction—being willing, it appeared, to perform a small service so long as it cost him nothing out of pocket. Now Til had a job—and little else. The job constituted at first a secret hope, that he might be able to save up enough money to pay Archelaus that second land installment. But with the skinflint Simeon this was a manifest impossibility now.

Aside from the scanty pay he received, Til had no great complaint of his treatment by Simeon Trudge. He worked very hard and for very long hours, but that was to be expected. The food was plain, but it was the food everyone ate in the Short Grass—a sight better than Til managed for himself when he "bached" on his own place. Simeon was full of sanctimony, and he was patronizing, drawing as it were his own comparative prosperity about him like a rich garment; while maintaining a certain politeness even when giving orders.

These things were not at the bottom of the depression which gripped Til, the depression which even now was causing him to debate when he would "ask for his time." It was something else. Something that in the inner core of his mind was all twisted and tangled up with Simeon Trudge's wife.

In the days he had known her, Til had striven harder and harder to keep the woman out of his thoughts, because he recognized something in himself which he did not voice, but which made thinking of her unhealthy for his mind. But Gary Trudge would not stay out of his thinking. There were so very many things to think about . . .

How, he asked himself, had a girl like her married an old man like Simeon? Cantankerous old Simeon, with his grizzled hair, and his haggard cheeks, and the funny little fuzz of chin whiskers—how did he ever get a girl like Gary?

Til had seen old men married to young women before. It was a common enough thing, and it had never before appealed to him as wrong. But with Gary . . . everything seemed different.

Gary . . . Gary. Swift, sweet Gary. Waiting on and obeying and wasting her life on an old man. Pain stabbed Til, and a hunger created an emptiness in his stomach.

It would be different, he thought, if she were happy. But Til was certain she was not. Perhaps it was his wish speaking only, or perhaps it was the translation of his dislike for Simeon. But he lay now in the darkness on his bed, and held grimly to the belief, like a starving dog to a bone.

He remembered that Gary never sang like other women, except for the little croonings to her child—mother-songs, and having in them the sadness of the whole world of motherhood. She laughed hardly ever. That occasion when he had surprised her with Ranny was almost the only time he had ever seen her laugh. And she worked to the limit of her strength—so very hard that it seemed to him, in spite of his own sweating toil, that there existed in labor an objective of itself for her; as if she deliberately strove to weary herself until exhaustion eased something in her.

. . . For a long time Til had known that Simeon had in him the qualities of a he-goat. Night after night, with the fever of a satyr, the farmer was after his woman, in a beastly ruttishness that enraged and sickened the young man . . . who could not help hearing . . . on the other side of the bedroom partition.

The sounds of it would start at any time now. Til shut his eyes and fought desperately to go to sleep. He did not want to hear what he was certain to hear . . .

## FIVE

### 1.

THE CIMARRON was running nearly dry, but Sherry Quarternight's eye barely took note of that. He gave his horse the opportunity of drinking before he splashed across the narrow shallows and breasted the slope beyond.

Across the interminable flatness of the plains, the Cimarron, with the long irregularity of the sand hills marking the southern edge of its wild, shallow valley, formed a landscape feature which was almost the only break in the monotony of these American steppes.

Had Quarternight been a man possessing more understanding than he did, he might have reasoned that the Cimarron, because of its character and location, was almost as much responsible for the growing hatred between Jericho and Bedestown, as were the ambitions of the respective town builders.

The Cimarron was to be reckoned with on the high plains. All prairie streams are eccentric, full of paradoxes, but in its wildness, the Cimarron transcended all others. Usually the river was almost dry, as now, a tepid trickle of water meandering among heated sand bars, yet dangerous because of possible quicksands. But on occasion, between one breath and the next almost, it could become a furious torrent.

The Cimarron was a river of head rises, and a head rise differs markedly from even the fiercest flood stage of an ordinary stream. The sluggish rivulet, which was the Cimarron



ordinarily, might be creeping among its sand bars on the floor-like level of orange sand, when a sudden incredible roar would come, and down the bed would sweep insanely a solid, tossing wall of water—ten feet high or more from foot of wave to lip, and level from bank to bank, carrying on its crest foam and debris almost with express-train speed, and rushing by with a violence that rocked the shores.

A head rise like that had a roar that could be heard for miles, a menacing snarl that pervaded the whole atmosphere. Curious freaks occurred. The weight of the oncoming wave, for example, was like an immense roller, heaving sudden tons of pressure on the sandy bed—pressure so great that for many feet ahead of the moving water wall the bare sand bars shot up slender jets of water, literally squeezed out by the rolling weight from upstream.

There was reason for this wild behavior of the Cimarron. Where most rivers have a fall of one to four feet to the mile, the Cimarron fell fifteen. With that enormous pitch it boiled along in times of spate at fifteen miles an hour, wild and headlong as a battering-ram, and gaining momentum and power from the time it was launched high on the slopes of the western mountains by some cloudburst.

Very early in their experience of the Cimarron men had concluded that to bridge the river was a waste of effort. A few wooden bridges were built at first, to be sure, but the next head rise ripped out the abutments and approaches, undermined the piling, and sent the bridges roaring along with the other debris on the foaming crest. After that bridge-building ceased. The farmers depended on fords to cross the stream, considering it easier to fetch ropes and snake a granger's wagon out of the clutching quicksand once in a while than to rebuild the bridges whenever the Cimarron chose to go on a tear.

The untamable nature of the river had a decisive effect on the living and thinking in this new Kansas country. North-and-south traffic across the stream was reduced to a minimum, so that even when the Cimarron was about as dry as anything could well be and still be called a river, it constituted a sharp dividing line.

That line affected notions and ideas as well as traffic in Blair County. South of the Cimarron, along the edge of its valley, the sand hills formed a crooked waste from three to six miles wide, consisting of low dunes, dry gulches, cactus, and sage brush. The sand hills of the Cimarron were inhospitable and almost unexplored. Hunters entered them occasionally for

prairie chicken, but otherwise only persons with devious reasons for avoiding the eyes of other men went there.

The broad No Man's Land formed by the river and its sand hills divided Blair County almost evenly in half, on a line running diagonally from northwest to southeast. And that division extended to the inhabitants as well as the land, separating, and building up the antagonism between Bedestown and Jericho.

Quarternight, trotting his handsome claybank horse along the road through this region, may not have considered these geographical factors. But he did know of the personalities which bulked large in the town rivalry.

Bedestown possessed a sort of impersonal personality—an investment company. The head of the company was a legendary figure known as Samuel Bede, whom Sherry had never seen, but who was reported to sit in a walnut wainscoted office in far-away St. Louis, combing his woolly white whiskers, and contributing to charity and the opera, with no more thought of the troubles faced by the people of his embryo town in Kansas than of the poverty of the families in his coal mining settlements in Illinois, or the wretched underpay of the workers in his shoe factories in Missouri.

Jericho had—Henry Archelaus.

It was war to the finish now between those leaders. Had Jericho not taken the high-handed method with the county seat dispute which had so angered Bedestown, the lists would still have been drawn, for uncontrollable forces were at work.

Settlement in the Short Grass was less than three years old, but already it was apparent that the sun-smitten soil was not rich enough to produce the crops to maintain two towns in prosperity in the same county. Starvation would be the fate of one—and neither Bedestown nor Jericho had intentions of being the starved.

So the law of survival implemented the growing animosity which had sprung from the very crudeness and newness of the rival communities. For neither Jericho nor Bedestown, in spite of their loud claims and ambitions, had arrived yet at the true status of villages.

A village has its being in many complex factors. It is more than a mere collection of buildings, just as a home is more than a mere house. A home is place where people have lived and which they have shaped to themselves, giving it a kind of grace in the doing. In like manner a village must have character. The men and women who have dwelt in it, moved and gossiped in its streets, conducted their affairs, loved and hated

and begotten children, and in the end have died there, all have left on it the impressions of their lives.

Jericho and Bedestown, new-spawned towns of the high plains, had been in existence only two years or so, and had no time to mellow as permanent habitations mellow. Yet it cannot be denied that in some degree they already were acquiring personalities—blatant it is true, and with an unpleasant tinge of acrimony and jealousy—but indubitable personalities nevertheless.

Sherry Quarternight glanced back from the top of the sand hills to the crooked valley snaking across the plains. He had been over that river just now, in the Bedestown country, to learn some things. He had expected no trouble, nor had he encountered any. But letting his horse come to a halt to breathe after the sharp climb up from the river, he suddenly realized that for some reason he was very glad to be back on his own side of the Cimarron again.

## 2.

“Have yo’ heard anything from Topeka?”

Quarternight had just entered the office of the Jericho Land and Immigration Company, and now took a chair, regarding Henry Archelaus with a straight dark gaze. He had thrown open his coat, as usual indoors, displaying his star of office which still read “Marshal” instead of “Sheriff.”

The townsite man’s half-concealed eyes took in his subordinate.

“I have,” he said. “This morning.”

He picked up a long envelope with the return address of a Kansas City banking house upon it.

“Our friend, Tecumseh Jackson, has made inquiries. He has given me the information here. Somebody threw a monkey-wrench into the machinery, Sherry.”

“Who was it?” The marshal leaned forward. Of all the names recommended for appointment to county offices by Archelaus, his alone had been rejected.

“Old Sam Bede.”

“The hell you say!” Surprise was in the exclamation. Quarternight sat back. This was something he had not taken into consideration.

“I’ve been wonderin’ why things run so smooth at Topeka,”

Archelaus went on in his purring voice. "The luck was all ours at the start. We couldn't lose. Looked like we could bet our pile an' be sure we could fill an inside straight any time we wanted. Until now. Colonel Bede has got to be counted in on the bets from now on. He's got the money bags—an' he'll play the game with us from who laid the chunk. If his representatives at Bedestown hadn't been so damned iron-headed, we'd have felt him before now. We must have caught 'em flat-footed as all hell. But if Sam Bede's people are lame in the brains, old Sam ain't."

"Who saw the governor?" demanded Quarternight.

"I don't know. But it was somebody who could balance Tecumseh Jackson himself in weight an' influence. That's how come your appointment has been held up. The governor has realized, all of a sudden, that there's political fields to be cultivated even out here in the buffalo grass. He'd made the other appointments already an' it was too late to call 'em back. But he could hold up the sheriff. Bedestown, he tells Tecumseh, also has advanced the name of a candidate—an' our governor, with a face like a holy roller parson, has delayed final action, he says, 'until he can make proper investigation of the qualifications of the two men proposed'—which means until he can assure himself which side his political bread is buttered on."

"So I'm to be the goat?"

"Looks that way."

Sherry was silent for a moment, and his face reflected no pleasure.

"Do you know who the Bedestown nominee is?" he asked presently.

"As it happens, I do—an' it'll surprise you. Tobe Shankle."

"Tobe Shankle? Why that big fat tramp! He's nothing but a loafer an' a tout!"

"True, quite true. But it happens that right now he has the interests of Samuel Bede behind him."

Quarternight swore fluently. "That dirty son-of-a-bitch, I hate his guts anyway," he ended.

"Bede?"

"No, Shankle. I've had one or two run-ins with him."

"We got to keep our heads, Sherry. The appointment ain't made yet. You know that I'm usin' everything I got to swing it for you. Why, the sheriff's office is almost more important than anything else to us right now. Your—your—enterprise. Think what would happen to it if there was a hostile sheriff!"

"That's what I been thinkin'. I reckon Bedestown is a-honin' fo' trouble." Quarternight was speaking in a soft menacing drawl now. "They're goin' to fight the railroad bond scheme—"

"I wish, Sherry," interposed Archelaus, with a deprecating smile, "that you wouldn't refer to this progressive movement for Blair County as a 'scheme.' Let's not forget that it's Blair County's great opportunity for development, an' it's backed by forward-looking an' public-spirited citizens.

"O.K." said Quarternight after a stare. "Yo' do the figgerin', Boss, an' we'll do the scoutin'. Anyway somebody at Bedestown's caught on that the railroad, if it comes, won't go nowhere near Bedestown. I got a copy of their little ol' paper whilst I was across the river just now."

He tossed across the table a small folded country weekly newspaper, badly printed, and slip-shod in makeup. Archelaus picked it up and looked at the title:

THE BEDESTOWN WEEKLY ARGUS  
Bedestown, Kansas, June 15, 1889

Below was a secondary line: *Covers Blair County Like The Morning Dew.*

"So they admit that there is a Blair County—that means they've accepted the organization an' the county seat election, for the present anyhow," said Archelaus.

"Yes, an' they aim to do somethin' about it."

Henry's eye took in the editorial, printed in double-column measure on the front page:

HOW LONG, HOW LONG?

Again the hand of the grafter is laid at the throat of Blair County. A bare-faced robbery, fostered by a mendacity worthy of an Ananias, and conceived in perfidy and corruption, is to be perpetuated on this fair county—if certain parties have their way. A committee of citizens of Bedestown has possession of the evidence showing that the same interests now projecting the bogus railroad bond election were guilty of the grossest fraud in the alleged census and county seat election of the recent lamented past. If there were any justice to be hoped for in a court at least temporarily controlled by the sinister interests before mentioned, this evidence would be sufficient to send the scaly reptiles to the rock piles of the penitentiary as they deserve. Under the present circumstances, however, *The Argus* will retain the evidence to keep it from falling into hands inimical to right and justice and will present it in these pages to arouse the citizenry to its peril.

Henry read slowly. "Our friend, Editor Dilly Capehart, seems pretty badly fired up," he said when he finished. He clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"What do yo' make of it?" asked Quarternight.

Archelaus shook his massive head. "Perhaps some kind of depositions or affidavits—"

"Affidavits?" asked Quarternight sharply. "Affidavits could cause no end of trouble, Boss."

Archelaus raised one sleepy eyelid a little. "You may be right, Sherry," he said.

Quarternight pulled his coat together and buttoned it closely about him in spite of the day's heat. He was so enamored of the slender-hipped figure he cut that he never went abroad without carefully grooming his outline.

"One of these days I'm liable to go over an' smoke Bedestown up a whole lot," he growled.

Henry regarded him quizzically.

"You talk like a bad man, a real dime-novel bad man, Sherry," he said. "Even around me, whose views you know to be realistic, you still seem to want to show your gun, an' talk like a character out of Ned Buntline. When are you goin' to learn that here, in Jericho, Kansas, people are as peaceful an' farmerlike as they are in New York State, or Ohio, or anywhere else?"

Quarternight's face darkened.

"Yo' might be badly surprised one of these days, Boss," he said.

The words were enigmatic, and Archelaus regarded him curiously. You never could tell about a man like Quarternight. For almost two years now Henry had known him, and yet he had to confess to himself that the marshal was still almost as much of a puzzle as he had been at first acquaintance. Sherry was a Texan—but beyond this Henry had little, really, to go on. A rumor had floated up with him from Texas that he had slain two men in that abode of nervous trigger fingers, before coming north to Kansas, and Sherry had never denied the report.

Henry had always respected the Texan's reticence. Their relationship was a business one and the townsite man was not of a type to pry into another's affairs. When Archelaus established his new town, the blueprint given him by Tecumseh Jackson said that one of the prime requisites was the rapid circulation of money. Building construction naturally circulates money, but gambling is even more rapid.

So when Quarternight came along, he fitted perfectly into the Archelaus scheme of things. It was a cold-blooded compact

the two of them made after a short acquaintance, the terms of which were not divulged, but it was thoroughly understood by both. When the Texan opened his discreet establishment with its green baize tables, his appointment as town marshal became almost automatic, because gambling was frowned upon in Kansas, but in a community where the chief gambler is the chief peace officer, even the most fanatical reformers find it difficult to accomplish much. Still Henry Archelaus would have liked to know at this moment several things . . . as he would have liked to know them before on more than one occasion.

"I think we can managed without 'smoking Bedestown up,' as you so picturesquely put it," he said, breaking the silence. "There are one or two little considerations. Your ambition to be sheriff, for one. It would get a hell of a kick in the ribs. An' I don't want that ranikaboo state government of Topeka nosing around out here. You know that."

"I guess you're right," grunted Quarternight.

"There are better ways, anyhow. I got a hunch we have a toe hold here—right in this article in the *Argus*. Notice how it speaks of the court—the honorable district court of Blair County? My guess is that Judge Comingo will be interested in this. If you're passin' Potlicker's, you may find His Honor in there gettin' a prescription. I understand 'Doc' has just had in a shipment of Sunny Brook whiskey. A favorite of the judge's. Ask him to step this way at his convenience. An' if you can, find Shad Spilker an' Holcomb. We got some things to talk over."

Quarternight nodded. He pulled his hat over his eyes and stepped forth, the hot wind whisking in a puff of reddish dust from the street as he opened the door.

### 3.

Henry tossed his half-smoked cigar into the brass spittoon and hoisted himself ponderously from his chair. He stepped outdoors and stood blinking about him. A half block down the street was a small building with the word CLARION painted on the window. He walked thither and entered.

The editor of the *Clarion*, sat in his print shop with an expression of profound discouragement, looking more wrinkled

and disheveled than usual. Chet Tooley, like Henry, was a bachelor. As Jericho's sole journalistic representative, he occupied a prominent position in the community—a distinction which would have been hard for a stranger to believe, seeing him in his dirty undershirt over which he drew the suspenders of his filthy breeches, and about which he wrapped a printer's apron stiff with ink and grease.

Dirt next to his skin the journalist did not mind. His "clean" shirt hung behind the door on a nail. When it was time to go to his lodgings, Chet would put the shirt over his vile undergarment with no compunctions, and would then consider himself properly furnished for the street.

The occasion for his present melancholy lay in the fact that he had ventured a bit of fantasy in the *Clarion* and as usual it had backfired on him. It was an innocent story—about a purported incursion of "cinder beetles" which were alleged to be working their way into Kansas, causing extensive damage by eating the kingbolts out of wagons, and sometimes even devouring iron footscrapers off front doorsteps. The state was seeking, the story said, "deputy cinder beetle inspectors."

In spite of the obvious foolery, the next day after the appearance of the article Tooley began receiving many letters and personal visits from deserving but thick-headed Republicans, desiring to learn where they could apply for "deputy cinder beetle inspectorships."

Such an exhibition of mass stupidity by his fellow man invariably plunged the editor, who cherished his ideals, into a fit of gloom. As usual on such occasions he sought surcease in a demijohn of corn whiskey. It was thus that Henry found him.

"Horace Greeley," said Archelaus, "greetings."

"Howdy," said Chet without enthusiasm.

"How's the edition coming?"

The editor waved a languid, ink-smearred hand at some column proofs on the table, and Henry walked over to them. They were typical examples of the Tooley journalistic style:

Type for this issue of *The Clarion* was set in a bake-shop temperature which did not, however, discourage the fleas and bed-bugs which were having a fall roundup in all that territory below our shirt collar.

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Another new windmill in town is needed.

The dance held in the court house auditorium was well attended and passed off in fine shape. Miller's Meandering



Mazourka Mandolin orchestra from Dodge City furnished the music, and Jericho's best citizens trod the mazy steps of the dance to the latest favorites, including "If Your Foot Is Pretty, Show It," "The Jenny Lind Mania," and "Bobbin' Around." Our popular fellow-townsmen, Mr. Purd Weaver, called the numbers amid general acclaim for his artistry in inventing new and diverting expressions for the figures.

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Six new buildings up within two weeks and four more contracted for.

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Our esteemed friend, Mr. Henry Archelaus, will buy, sell, or trade real estate property, or anything that walks on four legs and eats buffalo grass.

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The mammoth milch cow staked in front of *The Clarion* office is an advertisement for the nutritious buffalo grass with which every acre of uncultivated land in Blair County is covered. We will soon be compelled to shorten the rope or feed anti-fat.

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Prarie dogs are numerous within fifty yards of our office. A few years hence they will command a premium as curiosities.

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The little five-column "occasional" on the other side of the creek, which calls itself the *Bedestown Argus*, is wormy; its issues are not regular enough for journalistic health. Its remarks do not bother us. We have joined hands with live men for the purpose of building a live town, and intend to succeed, and we shall not be led into a controversy that would give the benefit of our circulation to a paper of irregular issue.

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Mr. Sheridan Quarternight, our able city marshal, has our thanks for discovering and returning the calf which wandered away from its mother cow last Thursday.

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A meeting of the Blair County Booster and Railroad Improvement Association will be held within a short time to settle the matter of the bond election. The task of obtaining the signatures for the petitions will begin at once. A branch of the Dodge City & Amarillo line is a certainty through Blair County according to Mr. Schuyler Holcomb, the universally popular land agent of the D.C.&A.,

and when the election is held it should prove another overwhelming victory for progress.

Archelaus laid down the proofs. "Ain't you jumpin' the gun a little on that Improvement Association?" he asked. "It ain't announced yet."

"The paper don't come out until Wednesday," replied Tooley. "If we think by then that it ain't smart to use it, I'll jerk the item out."

"Well, mebbe by then things will be shaped up. They're moving now. Look at this, friend Chet."

Henry pulled from his pocket the folded copy of the *Bedestown Weekly Argus* and pointed with a broad forefinger at the front page editorial. Tooley's face clouded as he read it. This was the beginning of something he had foreseen. The *Argus* was sounding a battle challenge. From this time forth it would be bitter unrelenting war between the weekly papers of the rival towns.

He and Archelaus were in close understanding; he knew what the boss was after and what his methods were. Men like Henry, the editor conceded to himself, probably were necessary to build up any new country. But that did not make it any more comfortable to be intimately associated with their secret plans.

"You think they're actually going to fight that county seat election after all?" Chet asked.

"Looks that way."

"Well, I guess we took some risks—"

"Nothing's ever accomplished without risks."

"But affidavits might not be so good."

Henry looked thoughtful. "Any man that tries to do anything usually sees plenty of trouble," he said glumly.

"Yeah," agreed the editor.

"It cost me a lot, paid out of my own pocket, to build that little court house of ours. Blair County ought to have some gratitude for that."

"Yeah."

"The census and the election—they were regular enough."

"We-e-ll, Boss. There might have been some little things here and there that weren't strictly Sunday School—"

Henry let the subject drop. He did not wish to be informed of exactly what had taken place. All told, he remembered, another thousand dollars of his had gone somewhere during the election.

"The next move's up to you, Chet," he said heavily.

"All right. What do you want?"

"What do I want? I fail to understand you, my friend. Ain't you the voice of this community? Jericho will expect an appropriate reply to the calumnies of the Bedestown editor."

Tooley nodded unhappily.

"What'll we do about the affidavits Dilly Capehart's talking about printing?" he asked. "If he's got some real depositions, publication might bring the governor and attorney general whooping out here. It would finish the railroad bonds for all time."

He scratched his ink-smeared underwear over the ribs, nervously probed into his bristle of dirty gray whiskers, and finally reinforced himself with another swig from the demijohn.

But Archelaus had now regained his confidence. "You ought to know me well enough," he said, "to be pretty sure I'd have some notions about those affidavits."

"I'm listening."

"Judge Comingo's coming over to my office. Also, I've sent Sherry Quarternight to find Shad Spilker an' Holcomb. Like to have you there."

"Just as you say, Boss."

"Meantime this phase of the skirmish is up to you—raise a warwhoop that'll jam that *Argus* editor's bleat right down his throat. Come over in about half an hour."

Leaving the *Argus* on the table, Archelaus departed.

For a long time Chet Tooley stared at the paper lying before him. He hoped Capehart had not found out about Quarternight's Peoria drummer, and more particularly about his own dog town with the Cincinnati names.

The type lines on the paper danced and weaved before his eyes. By a supreme effort he brought his gaze to a focus and read the offensive screed of his rival across the river. Really, he thought, this is an inferior effort. He felt mildly scornful of Dilly Capehart.

*Scaly reptiles . . . Very poor stuff.*

Chet Tooley sneered outright now. His imagination momentarily was stimulated. If *he* had written that editorial he would have produced something with the original brimstone in it. Something to take the hide off.

Rising, he walked over to the type cases and began to set an editorial without taking the trouble to write it out on paper beforehand. His inky fingers flew, knowing by instinct, without any thinking on his part, where lay the letters in their respective little wooden trays. Rapidly the type lines built up on the "stick" he held in his hand.

After a time the editor stepped over to the window and read

the type, upside down and backward, in the manner of printers. Then he went to the form already locked up for printing. This would be the sounding of the battle cry for Jericho. When the *Clarion* came out on Wednesday with that editorial, the lines would form rapidly in Blair County.

#### 4.

Henry Archelaus walked on down past the Apex Hotel, nodding at the loafers on the porch. He bowed low to two farm women who went scuttling past him with embarrassed giggles, and then twitched their bottoms on up the street, self-conscious over being greeted in such manner by the great man. They would tell their friends of the incident.

This was his kingdom. His smile was a benison, and his frown a curse. His was the responsibility, and the people looked to him with respect and perhaps even with some apprehension.

He passed his own small white office building, turned the corner and saw the blacksmith shop ahead of him.

The smith was a lumpish giant named Leo Matassarini, a Rumanian, topheavy with the weight of muscle in his shoulders, his face foolish with small, slightly-crossed eyes peering from beneath a beetling low forehead that was deeply wrinkled with perpetual effort at comprehension.

Matassarini's blacksmith shop was in a disreputable shed, unpainted and weather-stained. Its front was open to the street, with the forge, anvil, and blower in the rear, and the tools to one side where the smith plied his sooty trade.

Yet drama was inherent in this place as in all blacksmith shops. The smith dealt with fire; and when his hammer fell sparks flew like levin flashes. Sometimes there were thrilling scenes—no sight is more exciting than that of a horse trying to jump right through the roof while being shod, with a helper hanging to his head, the dust swirling, and the smith cursing at the top of his lungs.

Matassarini was a slow, good-natured fool. He permitted small boys to come in and watch him at work. Sometimes he let them make "sizzlers" by heating pieces of iron white hot and then plunging them into the water tub. Occasionally he allowed them to use the horsetail whisk to keep flies off the animals. And once in a while he gave one of them a suffocating

sensation of responsibility and public attention by letting him hold the "twitch" on a horse's nose while it was being shod.

His mind was as ox-like as his body. The strongest man in Blair County, he was in abject fear of a woman who weighed less than half as much as he—his shrewish little wife. His daughter, grown and loutish like her father, was dragooned into joining her mother in abuse of him.

To this female tyranny poor Leo had only one counter: He owned a dog—a little white poodle female with long woolly hair, which he called Notchka. Each evening after supper the blacksmith took Notchka for a walk. Jericho would then behold him, brandishing a switch in a huge fist as he stumped after the little white dog.

"Notchkal Notchkal" he would shout domineeringly. He never struck the dog. He only threatened her with the switch. When he had completed the round of a block he seemed to have fortified himself enough to enable him to return to his house and endure the ceaseless vituperation of his women.

The blacksmith saw Henry and grinned.

"How you, Meester Archelaus?" he called eagerly.

Henry turned into the shop, and an expression of delight came into Leo's dull features.

"I'd like to hold a meeting here," said Archelaus. "It is a farmers' meeting. If it were an ordinary meeting we'd hold it at the court house, but all farmers know this place and feel comfortable here. What do you say?"

"Sure, Meester Archelaus. Sure, any time for you. You joost say when. I feex it."

Henry nodded.

"It'll be some time in the next two weeks." He gossiped for a minute before departing. He had a knack of attaching to him such men as the gross-limbed Rumanian.

Farther on was the town's single small church. It shared the architectural poverty of the community, which it attempted to relieve with an interesting detail—a false steeple. This was an adaptation to ecclesiastical purposes of the false front affected by commercial houses. To one approaching the church—if he were not too discriminating in his examination—it gave the appearance of being a real steeple, with belfry and all. But from the side it was revealed as a sham—no more than a flat signboard, braced from behind to the roof by a couple of iron rods, and limned by some none too gifted sign painter to resemble shingling, weather boarding, and even a pseudo iron bell within the painted bell tower. Jericho accepted it as a permissible if transparent effort at deception, in view of the

price of lumber which would have been required to build a real steeple.

The Reverend Mordecai North, a rough dark man with wrinkles bitten deep into his features, was the minister. Mordecai had one vice—he chewed tobacco. He was reputed to chew it even during worship, and there were great tales among the unregenerate of how the reverend gentleman kept an Arbuckle coffee can on a shelf in the pulpit which opened behind, and how he was so expert that he could prance back and forth on the platform, shouting damnation and hellfire at his congregation, with a quid as big as a horse collar in his jaw—and never missed a word, expectorating tobacco juice expertly and neatly into the can as a sort of emphasizing exclamation point now and then at the end of a sentence.

The good man was talking with a member of his flock as Henry approached—Deacon Putnam Hatch, the sour-visaged proprietor of one of Jericho's two barber shops.

"Howdy, Reverend, Howdy, Deacon," called Archelaus. He had two mannerisms—the ambush-lurking and the hearty, and he used them both to good effect under different conditions.

"How d'ye do, Brother Archelaus," said Mordecai. Putnam Hatch did not speak. He regarded Henry with tight-lipped silence, then walked away.

"I want to talk with you a minute," the preacher said, coming over toward Archelaus.

Henry kept his fixed grin. "Begging again, I'll be bound," he said, with the insulting manner, carefully kept good-humored, which many men with power love to affect. "Always got your hand out, ain't you, Reverend? Why don't you just carry a tin cup an' a sign: 'Help the Starving Preacher?' Well, what is it this time? Hymn book fund? Missionary society? Or are they back on your pay again?" Henry reached into his pocket and took out a roll of bills which he was fond of displaying. He paid for his right to give insults.

But the minister shook his iron-gray head. "For once we aren't asking for money," he said. He knew how to swallow insults and make them work to his advantage. "Don't take that as meaning we won't be around later, though," he added archly. "No, Brother Archelaus, we know we can count on you at need." The last was spoken with the professional ring of sincerity. By it Henry was to understand that he was ticketed for a future contribution. "It's something else," the preacher continued. "We know that you are a man of the highest integrity." Henry nodded. "But there are things happening in this town that are a threat to the moral welfare of the community, and I want to bring them to your attention, feeling

that you can use your influence to bring them to an end. I refer to the disreputable *dive* down around the corner."

"Potlicker's?"

"The same. Everyone knows the prescription counter at Potlicker's is nothing more than a dispensary of strong liquor. And there is a room behind—a veritable gambling hell, as I am informed; and abode of vice and depravity."

Evidently the minister was ignorant of the fact that both drugstore and gambling room were owned by the very man to whom he was talking.

"Have you been there, Reverend?" asked Henry.

"Indeed not! I would not be seen near the place!"

"Then how do you know?"

"Deacon Hatch told me. A customer of his recently was defrauded of a month's pay there at a game called, I believe, stud. But so far as that is concerned, everyone in Jericho knows of it. It is a public scandal, and it's whispered that Mr. Quarternight, the marshal of this town, has a connection with it!"

"You don't say?" said Henry.

A tall, spinsterish woman, with a severe face and black dress passed.

"Good morning, Miss Stimpson," said the Reverend North. "Do not forget the meeting this afternoon of the W.C.T.U."

"I won't," she said a trifle grimly.

"That's new, isn't it?" asked Henry.

"Yes. A thing long needed in Jericho. Without a temperance society there can be little church life in its fullest and most gracious sense."

"You mean that a church that ain't reforming somethin' is kind of short on a reason for being?"

"Well, to a degree that might be true."

Henry laid a broad hand on the minister's black sleeve. "Don't let yourself get too worked up," he said with a half-smile. "This is a frontier town, you know, Reverend. A frontier town ain't as eager for reform as a more settled place. Jericho's all right—sound as a dollar—an' your ministry has been a great thing, a boon to the whole county. But take my advice an' don't try to move too fast. It might upset your whole program of good—I've been watching you an' I like the cut of your jib, an' I want to see you get ahead. But don't go off half-cocked, Reverend." He paused, and removed the hand from the sleeve. "An' when it comes time to raise that budget of yours—come around! Come around! You'll find me still backing the Gospel with my pocket book."

He went on his way. That was telling the Reverend. Neat,

the way he had done it. Nothing the preacher could put his finger on, but Henry had given a subtle hint—that the minister might raise more money if he raised less hell. And all the time with an impeccable front for Henry. A perfect appearance of respectability.

He turned back toward his office.

A thin, white-bearded man, with a crushed felt hat and a black handbag, was crossing the street.

"Doc!" called Archelaus. "Doc Hippo!"

The white beard paused and waited for Henry. He was Doctor Hippocrates Morse, Jericho's only physician. "Doc" Potlicker was only a pharmacist with a courtesy title.

"Doc," said Henry as he approached, "how about that Hogan baby I told you about? In the dugout place south of town?"

"I attended," said Doc Hippo. "Unfortunately . . . black inflammation of the bowels . . . I was unable to do much. The little one died early this morning."

"You stayed there all night?"

Doc Hippo flushed faintly above the whiteness of his beard. "I did what I could—"

"Did they pay you?"

The old man hesitated. "They hardly looked able—"

"Here," interrupted Henry. "I called you on that case, an' I'm payin' the bill. Charley Hogan won't never be able to pay you anything."

He thrust a small wad of bills into the doctor's hand.

"But I—you don't even know the amount of the fee—"

"That's ten bucks. It'll do, won't it?"

"Yes. Ample. Most ample. But I feel—"

"Never mind. Do me just one more favor. Tell Mrs. Hogan to have Shad Spilker take care of the funeral. An' throw in the trimmings. I'm going to see that the little 'un has a decent burial."

He walked on, leaving the physician fingering the folded bills. Largesse. It was his right to give largesse.

His kingdom . . .



## 5.

—Judge Tiberius Comingo was a big, club-jointed man. He had a nose like a grubbing hoe and a wide cavernous mouth with a jutting underlip that always made him look as if he were angry and pouting over something.

The judge added to his forbidding appearance by affecting black clothing—a black frock coat, the tails of which flapped about his knees; black uncreased breeches; shiny black shoes; and a black string tie. His heavy black beard forested his jaws and chin, leaving the front of his bony face clean-shaved so that the culprit being sentenced before the bar could see the awful wrath of the law coming through that canyon of a mouth before the blast ever struck him.

The judge's hair was gray and thinning on top, but his beard was an odd dull black from the temples down. It was black, that is to say, on Sundays. By the following Tuesday, however, a little edge of white could be discerned next to the skin if anyone had ventured to make a close inspection. By Thursday the white line was visible to anyone, and by Saturday it gave the impression that there was some sort of separation between the beard and the man. But Sunday morning found the judge's face hair as dead black as ever, and waiting for the week's growth to work again its wonders.

This eccentric behavior of the judge's beard fascinated strangers. Already, though he had been on the bench only a short time, a legend was growing up about it. There was the prisoner at the bar, for example, who became so addled that he could not take his eyes off the whiskers of the august court, and he did not realize the crime he thus committed until he heard himself sentenced to the utmost penalty provided by the law for his particular crime. After that occurrence nobody ever commented on the judge's beard by look or otherwise, because there was no telling when one might find himself in front of that bench, in a community as skittish as Jericho, and the judge was known to possess a long and rancorous memory.

Tiberius was the last of the group summoned who entered the office of the Jericho Land & Immigration Company.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen," he said, turning

on them the black eyebrows that perpetually scowled, "a matter of business connected with the welfare of the court."

"I always heard that Sunny Brook whiskey is an excellent lubricant for the voice muscles when a weighty opinion is to be read," said Henry, his eyes barely gleaming behind their half-closed lids.

There was a short laugh from the others in the office. Judge Comingo was none too popular among his fellow toilers in the vineyard of Henry Archelaus.

Chet Tooley, his unshaved face dirtier than ever, and Sherry Quarternight, elegant in his well-cut clothing, already were in the office.

"Was it necessary to drag me all the way over here?" growled the judge.

"That was my judgment," said Henry. "You're directly affected."

"How?" There was a sneer behind the question.

"Read this," said Henry. Then he read it himself, emphasizing certain words to give the passage its full meaning: "If there were any justice to be hoped for in a court *at least temporarily* controlled by the sinister interests before mentioned, this evidence would be sufficient . . . That's the *Bedestown Weekly Argus* speaking, your honor. Evidently it regards you as a *temporary* judge, to say nothing of being 'controlled.' Is that, or ain't it, contempt of your honor's court, your honor's self, an' of your honor's political future as well?"

Tiberius Comingo's face darkened.

"So he's gunning for me. The son-of-a-bitch."

"Judge, that sounds like a real good legal description of the fellow that wrote that—Dilly Capehart. What can you do about it?"

Henry knew Tiberius Comingo, and his surly, humorless temper.

"Contempt—I'll have out a bench warrant for him—"

"Think that would be smart? Could you make it stick?" Henry paused deprecatingly before he said the next words: "This here, of course, is a direct slap at you as anybody could see. Over at Bedestown they're likely laughing themselves sore over it. Think they've done something pretty smart. Don't you say so, Sherry?"

Quarternight nodded, and the judge's face grew blacker.

"Make it stick?" he snarled. "Of course! Precedents on contempt number in the hundreds. I'll put that weasel-toothed little rat into the cooler for six months!"

"That's all we wanted to know, judge," said Henry softly.

"That's the beginning of a start against Dilly Capehart an' Bedestown."

"Who'll serve the warrant—Sherry?" asked Tooley.

"If I was goin' to serve it, I'd prefer doin' like Mace Bowman of Texas used to—ram it down on top of the buckshot in a shotgun, an' serve it with the hot lead. That's servin' it fust befo' shootin'—"

Henry shook his head. "Now Sherry," he said patiently, "I know you ain't serious, but it makes me wonder sometimes when I hear you talk. A killin' would just make one awful mess of things. We got things straightened out pretty good now, an' comin' along all right, but there's one thing left to get done that's god-awful important. We got to put over those railroad bonds. That's why it would be a sockdolager move to get Dilly Capehart. He's a harmless little rat, wouldn't hurt a fly, an' scared of his shadow. You don't need no sawed-off shotgun to deal with *him*. But on the other hand he has that little old one-horse paper—an' there just ain't no gain-saying the power of the press, even a bill-poster like the *Argus*. What I want to do is shut the paper down. If we can put Dilly in the hoosegow until after election, Bedestown won't have no editor. Without an editor, they can't get out a paper, an' without a paper they won't be able to do much about printin' those affidavits. Not until after election, anyhow."

"You can't keep Capehart in jail forever on a contempt charge," objected Tooley.

Henry held up a deprecating hand. "We don't want to. Once the election's safe, he can cut loose with his paper an' raise as much hell as he likes. Too late for him to hurt us then. With the railroad committed to run through Jericho, they can file contests on the county seat election by the bushel. Jericho will be established by then—they couldn't take the county seat from us no matter how they yammered, because in any future election it would be just automatic for us to win it back. But I don't think we need to worry much about them yammering *after* the election. They won't file no contest, either. Old Sam Bede will know the jig's up then. They might as well pull stakes an' haul their buildings over the prairie an' move in with us. Bedestown's only chance is to stop us before the election—an' that's what we got to keep 'em from doing."

General agreement and understanding existed around the table, though Judge Comingo still scowled over the *Argus* editorial.

"You look into what you can do about this matter, judge,"

Archelaus said. "Now, men, there's another matter to come before the house."

They regarded him expectantly.

"Carrying this election ain't goin' to be any too easy. A lot of folks is against us. If it's done at all, it'll have to be done by organizin—an' it can't be any Henry Archelaus organization, either. It's got to be a spontaneous movement of the people, with the sole purpose of gettin' the voters to take this progressive forward step an' vote the railroad bonds. Understand me?"

"Where's that spontaneous o'ganization comin' from?" asked Quarternight. "I ain't noticed no prairie fire burnin' fo' them railroad bonds yet."

"Spontaneous organization, my friend, is like spontaneous combustion," smiled Henry drowsily. "An' spontaneous combustion is a convenient phrase that has covered many a fire deliberately kindled. In this case, we'll supply the match, but it'll look as if nature done it for us."

He gazed about half-humorously.

"Gents," he went on, "I have in view the formation of the Blair County Booster an' Railroad Improvement Association. Farmers eat up a forty-dollar name like that—it's gratifyin' to the ear an' sounds big an' important. A few of us here will be members—sort of a steerin' committee." He favored them with a leer. "But it's to be a farmer's organization. We want representative farmers—not just big farmers, but the horny-handed sons of toil, who are the backbone of agriculture. You know what I mean. Men like Frank Chance, down near the Neutral Strip. He's the kind I'm thinkin' of. Three hundred an' twenty acres, an' good improvements. The farmers look up to a man like that."

"Does he owe you money, Boss?" asked Spilker.

Archelaus shook his head slowly with a grin. "No. That's one reason I mentioned him. Stands on his own feet. No obligations. If he gets behind this, he'll be a power. I don't want no down-payment men if I can get out of it—at least not in the first organization meeting of the Association."

"What about Dode Smith?" asked Tooley.

"Yes. Now Dode Smith's the type. An' Herman Wessel, the big Dutchman up north."

"There's Wessel's neighbor on beyond. Simeon Trudge. Bet you can't get Old Man Trudge," Tooley said.

"Simeon Trudge?"

Henry was silent for a moment. Then he repeated the name: "Simeon Trudge."

After a time he said thoughtfully: "It likes me—that name."

Simeon Trudge is full up of religious scruples, an' he's got six hundred an' forty acres of land, an' everybody knows he don't have no truck with Jericho—thinks it's sinful. Simeon Trudge, honest an' upright, a little on the fanatic religious side, is just the kind of a man the Association needs to get if off on the right foot. If we could get him—

“He'll shy away like a mustang.”

“I know. But there might be a way. Simeon Trudge . . . Well, gents, that'll be all for now. I want to think over this matter.”

## 6.

For a long time after the others left Henry Archelaus sat motionless as a boulder in his chair, his eyes barely glittering behind their heavy lids. He was thinking, and his thoughts were not entirely happy.

With what energy and enterprize he had labored to build up his town, only he knew. Jericho was based on great expectations and great ambitions, and Henry had not stinted in the outpouring of his money and labor. At his own expense he graded Main Street, and erected the small school house and larger court house—the latter jerry-built to be sure, but having tenants at last, thanks to his political management. Out of his private pocket he even caused a row of small cottonwood trees to be planted along the main right-of-way, because they provided a hopeful atmosphere—such of them as would live through the drought. He expected, of course, that eventually he could sell these improvements back to the community when it was incorporated, but just now the expenditures stood in red ink on his ledger.

There had been need for an adventuring lumber yard in the new town, and this Henry supplied. The Acme Lumber Company belonged to him; he also had established a wagon freighting line between Jericho and Dodge City.

Henry recalled one of the talks he had with Tecumseh Jackson in the days when they were jointly planning the venture that was to become Jericho:

“The builder's dollar is a great promoter of the circulation of money,” said the banker, his side whiskers bristling with earnestness. “In a booming community hope is buoyant, every dollar turns over four or five times, and activity becomes

geometric. But mark you this, Hank—" he leaned forward to impress the point, "there is a serious defect to the real estate boom. High, wide, and handsome at its peak, it is also subject to terrific collapses. I have witnessed them—seen men wiped out by them in a single night. The building boom feeds on itself, being no self-sustaining industry. It provides a false show in a community. Every merchant appears prosperous. All new money is spread rapidly. But—" now he leaned back again and placed the tips of his fingers carefully together, "—there is need for a collateral rapid-money industry to support the building boom. That, my friend, is why so many frontier town-boosters not only countenance, but eagerly seek for big gambling operations. Do I make myself clear?"

Henry understood him and put the advice to use on the high plains where he sank his location stakes. Gambling and building—they had gone hand in hand. Jericho was booming all right, and it was Henry's task to get his town firmly established while this rosy flush was on. Sedulously he encouraged the establishment of legitimate businesses—even loaned a little money judiciously to the right prospects, and launched two or three enterprises himself. He presented choice lots to his friends, and stimulated the sale of farm lands about the town. He was everywhere, everyone's friend, filled with optimism, good will, bustling enterprise. From him vibrated a score of currents of activity.

Looking back, it seemed a long road he had come. Jericho, rude and blowsy as she was, represented a mighty achievement. In the high and delicate art of town promoting, the promoter is somewhat in the position of the Hindu fakir who, out of an empty cloak, must produce a palace. Henry had himself accomplished a similar miracle. Jericho, Kansas, through his efforts chiefly, stood, a community of almost five hundred persons, where two years before there had been nothing but the buffalo grass, undisturbed by the centuries.

Yet not even now could Henry Archelaus pause to take pleasure in his achievement. No sooner had one objective been gained, than another as difficult, or more so, appeared for him to surmount.

For one thing he was now beginning to learn his true status with Tecumseh Jackson. The ten thousand dollars of his own capital had been used up, and he was dependent now on the backing he got from the Kansas City man. One hurried trip he had made back to Kansas City. There he was shocked to discover that his status had changed subtly—he was now not so much in a position of partnership, as under orders.

Tecumseh held the purse strings. His formidable banker's

eye glittered frostily as he talked, and his manner was far from cordial.

"You've done pretty good. Pretty good—this far," he conceded without a smile. "But don't confuse temporary prosperity with the real thing. You've got your merchants making money, you say, and writing enthusiastic letters to their friends. But it's surface money. It's first-payment money. What your farmers that you've sold land to will do when second-payment time comes is yet to be seen."

Jackson paused with the characteristic tug at his gray side-whiskers.

"The gambling concession is working out, you say," he went on. "Well and good, but it can't last forever. There's only one way, Hank, to make a solid position for a town, and that is to build a territory for it—a trade territory. And there's only one way to do that, these days—get a railroad. If you can induce a railroad to build a line through Jericho, you'll be an empire builder—one of the rich men of your day. If your town is a terminal for the line, fine—and that's what it will be, so long as the Cherokee Strip is in Indian hands. But even if it passes through your town and only breaks bulk there, it will be a tremendous asset. Now I know some railroad people . . ."

Through Tecumseh, Henry was made acquainted with the railroad people, a smiling, expansive crowd. Over a rich dinner at the Coates House they made a plan, and polished it while they lingered over wine and cigars. A railroad could be built, but not in a day, and not without effort. Railroads, Henry was shown, required financial sinews. It was very costly to extend the steel.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Bonds, Mr. Archelaus—county bonds," he was told.

Henry thought that Tecumseh Jackson, sitting opposite him with a very fat cigar, winced reminiscently at the words.

"We will send out one of our representatives," the bland voice went on. "A Mr. Schuyler Holcomb. Our land agent. You will like him—he speaks your language."

With this equivocal comment the dinner broke up. And now Henry Archelaus, back in Jericho, faced a new fight. Holcomb had arrived in due time, oily and suave. The plan he proposed was simple; one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of bonds, pledged by the county, would bring a railroad through Jericho, by-passing Bedestown. In other words, an election was requisite.

There had been another small understanding, strictly between Holcomb and Archelaus. A ten per cent charge-off would be allowed by the railroad for "necessary expenses."

That meant fifteen thousand dollars—for Henry. How well he could use that sum—it would be sufficient to buy himself out of the clutches of Tecumseh Jackson and leave him in sole control of his town. He hungered for that consummation. If he could only free himself—

Henry was wearied of elections but this was vital. The complications affecting it were growing. There was the governor's unexpected balk at appointing Sherry Quarternight sheriff. This was of utmost importance. To have Tobe Shankle—a town hanger-on at Bedestown, and no better—named sheriff, might be disastrous.

Furthermore it was apparent that Bedestown, not content merely to oppose the bonds, was gathering affidavits with the purpose of challenging the validity of the county seat election itself. Uneasiness twinged Henry. He wondered just what the Bedestown people had dug up, and what charges they would make.

Simeon Trudge. The name had been laid in Henry's lap, so to speak. It was like a sending. Trudge might be the key to all difficulties. Henry sat back and the appearance of slumber once more grew profound as the blue circles of smoke curled up from his cigar.



## SIX

### 1.

THAT MORNING Til Rector found that Egypt had for some reason failed to worm her way through the fence during the night, and was hanging around the cowshed waiting for him, with Simeon's three or four lean yearling steers staring enviously and disconsolately at her, knowing they would get none of the mash that the cow always received at milking. Til drove the steers away.

"Old girl," he said, as he greased the cow's sore udder and gently stripped the milk from the lacerated teats, "you're goin' to get yours today."

When he had finished milking he did not turn Egypt out to graze as usual, but haltered her and tied her beside the cowshed, where she nervously worked a mire up under herself while he went about other tasks.

Simeon was full of business that morning. He could hardly wait to finish breakfast before hurrying Til out to look over the sod-breaking plow. Together they hauled it forth from the machine shed and examined it with painstaking thoroughness. It had not been used for months. With an old piece of gunny sacking Til carefully rubbed away the oil and rancid axle-grease with which the steel plowshare and moldboard were covered.

Til prided himself on his knowledge of plows. He straightened this one up and viewed it critically. It was smaller than the standard plow—smaller and flatter. With approval he

noted the extra jut to the share, and the extra length of the moldboard, designed to turn the furrow-slice of virgin sod over cleanly. In the East, people were accustomed to the "stirring plow," with its high bluff moldboard for throwing over the fat fallow. But the West owed its entire civilization to the kind of keen, low, rakish plow which Til was now going over so carefully. "Sod-buster" the prairie farmers called it with affection.

As Til took his time looking over the plow, Simeon fidgeted. Til, however, knew the futility of starting to plow dry sod with his implement in an inferior condition. Therefore he took a monkey wrench and unbolted the share, removed it and took it to the grindstone to "edge it" a bit. Til was a good plowman. He took pride in his furrow, its straightness, and the evenness of the overlay. Good work demanded good equipment.

He discovered a small split starting in one of the seasoned hickory handles and it required more time to reinforce this properly. Then came the nervous business of hitching up the team of half-broken little red mules. This was their first big job, and they were chancy and skittish, but Til had a masterful way of handling them. In spite of everything, however, it was past nine o'clock before the mules were hitched, and he drove away with them, walking behind the trailing plow which lay over on its side.

By that time Simeon was out of the notion of going to Wessel's. With difficulty he preserved his rigid politeness to Til, being careful to precede every instruction with an "If you will," so that his commands did not sound peremptory—for in this independent country officiousness was resented even in the man who paid the wages. Within himself, however, Simeon fumed at what he considered unnecessary time-killing details. The split plow handle, for example, seemed to him in sufficiently good condition to stand any reasonable strain.

Ranny, being only four, arose from his slumbers later than other members of his family. He was hardly dressed when he saw through a window that something was going on at the machine shed, and his mother had difficulty in making him eat his breakfast before he scurried forth from the house, his eyes large and bright with the morning.

Avoiding by some sixth sense a barren sandy area which lay thick-scattered with spiny bull-nettles to bring grief to bare feet, he arrived beside the plow over which his hero Til was laboring. At once he began his favorite pastime asking questions. Patiently and with good humor Til answered. But

Simeon lacked both patience and good humor. He considered that the child was causing Til to go even more slowly with the preparations. Perhaps as much to relieve his resentment against the hired man as anything, he suddenly burst out at Ranny.

"Get away from here!" he shouted. "Can't you see we're workin'?" Gary! Gary! Call this kid an' get him out from under our feet!"

Gary's inquiring face appeared at the back door, and that further irritated Simeon—in spite of the fact that he had just called her. This, in the yard, was a purely male activity to his thinking, and he felt like screeching at her to keep to her own affairs of the house. He controlled himself and Gary called Ranny to her.

She retired into the kitchen and stood at the window, watching Til going over the little hill, striding along behind the mincing mules. How long she thus stood and watched she did not realize until she heard Ranny asking: "Ma, what you lookin' at?"

That recalled her to herself, and she was very glad, too, for Simeon opened the door. A minute earlier he would have caught her looking after Til Rector. She was confused by the narrowness of her escape, and puzzled at herself. What was the matter with her? She hardly heard Simeon's words.

"Did you hear me? I want for you to go to Wessel's," he said, repeating his first sentence.

"With the cow?" she asked, no surprise in her voice.

"Yes."

Her hands were covered with flour. "I'm right in the middle of baking," she said, hesitantly.

He gazed undecidedly at her. "Well. I guess you can do it this afternoon."

He went outside, and Gary returned to her interrupted work.

She liked baking bread when it was not too hot, and this morning, with the window open, not even the cook stove could make the kitchen entirely unbearable. She took the dishpan containing the sponge from where she had placed it on the bench while she cooked breakfast, and turned the great mass of dough out on her well-floured bread board, observing how it had more than doubled in bulk during the night. It felt soft and yielding to her fingers—and sticky. Before kneading she added more flour to it, and also floured her hands well.

In her girlhood she had seen her mother knead with the palms of her hands until the dough was a flat cake, then

fold it once, repeating the operation until the dough was perfectly smooth and elastic. But Gary preferred the true kneading method, with the fists and fingers. Hard and quickly she pressed, "working down" the bread and dipping her hands in the flour when the dough became sticky. As she worked it, the dough blistered and popped. That was a good sign; first-class bread always popped when kneaded. Gary liked the crisp sound.

Bread-making is largely elbow grease. Under her vigorous manipulation the sponge rapidly lessened in size. Ranny came into the kitchen. No time to stop for him now.

"Push a chair to the table and climb on it," she told him. "Mother will fix you some dough to make biscuits."

Ranny assented eagerly. He dragged up the chair and clambered on it while Gary pinched him off a little piece of the dough and gave him a thimble to cut out biscuits. Soon he was deeply occupied, the dough in his grimy little paws growing blacker and blacker as he worked with it.

Glancing again through her window, Gary saw Simeon craning his neck up at the windmill. Simeon is aging, she thought. It was the first time she had really considered this, and the realization gave her a shock. Odd that she had not before noticed that stoop to his thin back . . . surely it had come since they moved out here to Kansas.

Til Rector had no stoop. His shoulders were wide, and he carried them with a free power and grace. His back was as straight as a young tree, and he cocked his hat at a jaunty angle over his eye. How much older Simeon was . . .

This sort of thinking brought her up with a sudden jerk. It was comparison—dangerous—she must not have any more to do with it.

Determinedly she finished working down the bread and began to mould it into loaves. Side by side stood her bread pans, like small brown barges in a row at dock, each greased with butter. Gary pinched off a quantity of the dough—how she knew exactly what to take she could not have told, but long practice had made it instinctive. The sour yeasty smell came to her nostrils, and the loaves were almost as exactly similar in size as if she had measured them by scientific weights. One by one she set the filled bread pans for the second rising, patting the springy loaves with decisive little pats, and placing them where they could grow large enough for the oven.

"Ma, I got my biskwits all done. Look, ma." Ranny's voice interrupted her thought.

She saw the small round "biskwits" of dirty dough, over which her son had labored with pride. The prints of his fingers were in the flour on his corner of the table, and he had a white smear on the end of his nose. The thimble was full of dough now, and would have to be cleaned, but Ranny was happy—and that meant that Gary, for the moment, was happy too.

Carefully she placed the little round pieces on a pie tin, and put them with the other bread to rise while Ranny looked on pridefully. He was so dear to her when he was filled with joy and interest that she wanted to hug him—except that her hands were all floury.

Ranny had made life so much better. After he came Gary was busier than ever before, but she begrudged none of the extra effort she put forth. Ranny was company for her. Simeon never had been neighborly, so she rarely saw anyone from off the farm. But even while he was a baby, before he could walk or talk, her little son was a comfort to her.

It went to her heart, the way he depended on her. After Ranny learned to toddle and would come running to her, that act had the power to thrill her beyond anything else. And there was the way he handed to her, automatically, all things which he did not want. He had a cunning way of sticking out a little fat hand, without even looking where she was, serene in his belief that she would be there to relieve him of whatever it was he wanted to be rid.

Once he picked up a bee in that small hand, and held it there after it stung him, screaming with pain and fear, the big round tears running down his face—yet he was complete in his faith that his mother would come and take the bee away and ease the hurt. With reassuring words she forced open the tiny fist and plucked the crushed insect from the pink palm. Then she pulled out the sting and bound the hand with a poultice of moistened baking soda. The swelling was not serious and Ranny's pride in his "bandwidge" made up for all his anguish.

Such small matters drew Gary close to her son. She watched the bright beginnings of his intelligence, treasured his first awkward words, even took joy in his little passions, as indicative of future will-power and initiative.

Her pride in him had flowered and bloomed as he grew. There came a stage when she longed to see Ranny with other children, so that she could compare them. And when these rare opportunities came, she, like all other young mothers, told herself with pride that there was no question that he was cuter, smarter, prettier than the others. And, like other

young mothers, she was at times almost moved with compassion for mothers of other babies—because their children seemed so lacking by comparison with her own.

Ranny had grown bored with bread-making, and ran outside to play. His mother seated herself by the kitchen table with a pan of potatoes in her lap, to begin preparing dinner. In less than two hours Til would be returning from the field . . .

She caught herself. *Til returning from the field. Why did she count time by that?*

## 2.

Til was glad to work that morning. He had been able to shake off his depression of the night; the little sod-buster was keen; and the sod, tough and dry as it was, broke surprisingly well. Using a distant clump of yucca spikes for a marker, he set the flighty little mules marching toward the bristle of green bayonets.

The plow took the sod sweetly. The clean rip of it through the mat of grassroots which wound and twisted in the topsoil, was satisfying to hear, and his nostrils took in the good smell of fresh earth. That smell, of earth freshly turned and sweet, is made for man, and man for it. Never was a man, since Eve's first birth-giving, who has not in some measure taken pleasure in the odor of new-broken soil.

Til held the little mules straight at the distant yucca clump. This was a considerable feat, for the animals were nervous and half-broken. They walked with quick, mincing steps, their shaved tails with the tassel ends clamped tightly against their shrinking rumps, almost tucked between their legs. Til called them Poco and Tiempo, which, someone had told him, were Spanish names meaning "pretty quick."

The mules were quick enough, beyond question—they would run at the flick of a tumble-weed or the whisk of a rabbit, if he did not watch them every minute. But as for being pretty—that depended on the viewpoint. To Til the "pretty" went as it was meant. He had broken those mules himself. They were not yet three-year-olds, and he was proud of how they had learned already, under his training, to pull together. If they were not spoiled those mules would make a good team for their weight; though they probably always

would be inclined to scare easily when in a good condition of flesh.

He watched them almost with affection as they went along with their heads high and ears cocked back, the blinders of their bridles preventing them from seeing what was going on behind them. Fairly aching for mischief, they were. A tug under a hind leg, or a line under the tail, might create excitement. But though Til watched narrowly, he drove his furrow straight and with an ease that spoke of his all-around competence in handling animals and a plow.

Probably, he thought, the mules would be a lot better behaved by the time they finished these forty acres of sod. Pulling a sod-buster in buffalo grass turf, dry as it was, would wear down any team, in spite of the fact that the plow was scouring beautifully.

Unerringly he kept them pointed at the yuccas, and when he reached that point and glanced backward, he found that for all their nervousness he had managed to leave a straight furrow. A man perhaps might do a little better with an experienced, steady team, he thought, one that looked ahead and found out what marker was being aimed at, and walked for that without much guidance; but this was not so bad.

Just ahead was the road. This was to be the corner of the field. He swung the team around, hauling back the plow as he did so, in order that it might take the turf neatly at right angles with its former furrow; and started on a course parallel with the road, toward a fence that marked the Trudge southern boundary.

Again his furrow was passably straight and true. By ten o'clock he had made three full rounds of the field and the mules were beginning to get the hang of it. Poco, the off mule, had learned already to walk in the new furrow; and Tiempo, the near mule, stayed at the right interval from his mate, on the unbroken sod. Thus the plow followed at the correct distance to cut a full slice of turf, turning it over to fill the furrow on the right, while the constant slipping of the earth over the share and moldboard kept them burnished like silver mirrors.

Til noticed with surprise that a hint of moistness still remained beneath the ground's surface in buffalo wallows and other low places, but dust rose from the plow, and hard lumps and clods raised here and there, at which Til shook his head, for that meant discing and harrowing before the lumps were broken up enough for crop planting.

From the slough at the bottom of the slope blackbirds came

flying, to waddle alertly behind the plow, eyes bright and pinions ready, to pounce on any grub or worm that might be turned up into the unaccustomed light. Little such loot fell to them. The ground was too dry.

All at once the mules shied sidewise and lurched forward. Til hauled hard at the lines, bringing the team to a standstill where the animals stood snorting and quivering. He saw what they had leaped aside from. A brown, mottled whip of vicious deadliness poured across the grass with the dry rasp of rattles trailing behind it.

With a face of revulsion, Til seized and flung a clod; the rattlesnake twisted into an ugly coil of menace. Hate and fascination were in the man's features. Slowly he walked up toward the reptile, carefully watching every movement of the ugly triangular head, and suddenly began to rain blows upon it with all his might, lashing with the whip he carried. The snake winced, struck, lurched, twisted over so that its shadbelly under parts showed, and tried to crawl away. But its back was broken. It could not escape. In a fury of loathing Til beat its head into the ground, and with a grimace of disgust threw the still twisting body with the stock of his whip out across the plowed soil.

His nerves were still chilling as he returned to the plow handles. In him the primal abhorrence of the serpent was intensified. He hated and feared snakes more than most men; a shuddering horror which he could not explain any more than he could control it.

The mules stood with their heads high, listening to the blows they could not see because of their blinders. He took the reins and started the plow again. Now for the first time he noticed that the mules were beginning to heat. Dark shadowings of sweat came out along their necks, their flanks, their under parts. But they moved along at the same rapid pace, ears cocked back, champing at the unaccustomed bits—as if they would welcome the chance to bolt.

Til sympathized with that desire. Many were the times when he would have bolted, would have left behind him the inflexible realities of his life—if there had been anywhere to go.

He, too, had long been harnessed to a plow—of existence. And forever, since the very first minute of it, he had been pulling futilely, getting nowhere, round and round, the furrow of his life accomplishing nothing more than to break the ground for others. Always there had been his succession of dull, monotonous jobs. The store, the coal picking, the



series of farms succeeded one another, and with each he looked hopefully for a change in his ceaseless frustration.

He bent his strong young back to the toil because of his pride in his strength and his inborn desire to return a good day's work for each day's pay. But he was beginning to wonder. Was he doomed to wear out his life at pittance wages, until his strength at last unraveled and he died?

A thought came which did not belong to him. The thought of Gary Trudge. He had sternly told himself that he must put Gary out of his mind, but the polished copper of her hair and her sweet thin face would not stay banished. At times his thoughts of her abashed and almost frightend him. He knew she was flesh and yet she seemed to him wholly spirit. As the clouds are above the ground, her purity was above him. He knew of the nightly embraces of her husband, and yet he could beatify her in his heart. This relation of hers with Simeon—the young man told himself that he could not think it any part of her, really. He could, in fact, hardly be jealous of Simeon, because something in him said that Gary gave her husband . . . nothing.

Thinking of Gary strengthened him. He set his face toward his work and strode forward behind the little mules. When the sun stood high above, he unhitched the team and drove it back to the farmhouse.

### 3.

In the music of jingling chains and the muffled thunder of hoofs, Til drove the team down the hill past the house.

Their harness was kirtled up about the little mules, and the chain-ends of the tugs clinked merrily, as the animals headed for the barn. Tired as they were, they still went along with their heads back, their ears at a slant, their tails tucked tight beneath their rumps.

Time would be required to work the wire edge off the team, thought Til. And with a slight flush of pride he considered that as they were in this moment, nobody could handle the mules but himself. He wondered what would happen if old Simeon tried to do anything with them. The idea was laughable. Simeon was that fidgety—and it took a firm hand and an understanding of mules to handle these creatures.

Beside the stable he brought the team to a halt, unhooked the snaps from their bits and looped the lines beside their hames. Then, while they sucked noisily at the scum-covered water tank, he went into the small barn, leaving open the door to the stalls. Old John, the buggy horse, was there chewing morosely. Til judged that Simeon intended to take the cow over to Wessel's that afternoon.

From the barn he took a four-tined pitchfork and went out to where a heap of prairie hay stood weathering outside the corral. One side of the rick had been opened, and the hay gleamed fresh and yellow. He gouged out a big swag, stabbed it to the heart with his fork, and brought up the fragrant mass, almost as broad across as he was tall—few in the Cimarron country could hoist a load like that. Then he walked, a moving man-stack of hay, into the barn where he filled the entire manger for the mules with the single giant forkful.

The mules, having filled themselves at the water tank, eagerly crowded inside, and Til removed their bridles and substituted rope halters. The sweetish dry smell of the cured grass was pleasant in his nostrils. He could hear the mules' grinding of the hay, and the sounds of the fluids working within them.

A clangor sounded from the house, and Til stepped outside, brushing the hay from his shoulders. Gary stood slimly at the kitchen door, the brass dinner bell still in her hand. From the machine shed ahead emerged Simeon, and started directly for the house—not waiting courteously for Til to catch up, but stalking doggedly up the path alone. Til did not follow at once. He took a tin mash tub, rinsed it, and filled it at the tank. This he set in the shade of the barn, then doffed his shirt, dusty from the morning in the plow field, and began splashing the tepid water over his bare shoulders, head, and torso. The coolness of it was very grateful to him.

Simeon was washing his face and beard, and arranging his scanty hair with a comb in the kitchen, but his wife did not look at him. Gary could not help the wandering of her gaze out through the window to where the young man was splashing down by the barn. The lean, muscular body made a long curve. The skin of Til's body was white—white as her own, she thought, except where the sun had bronzed his neck, face and arms. Tufts of crisp dark hair gleamed in his armpits and curled slightly on his chest. She gazed from behind her curtains forgetting that her husband was there in the room with her.

She realized with a start what she was doing and turned

abruptly to her work, glancing apprehensively at Simeon. But the farmer, dully, had not noticed.

The picture of the clean-muscled white torso would not go out of her mind. Til was the first young man whom Gary ever had been able to know intimately in her home. She had no brothers, and the young men she had known in Indiana were bashful and awkward. Toward them she herself had been excessively timid, unable to master the easy give-and-take which seemed to come naturally to some girls.

Since her marriage she had had opportunity to study that inexplicable creature, man, closely enough—but her husband was not young. Things done by him and by Til Rector—even if they were the same things—had a different meaning. When Til sprawled in a chair, his long legs, so muscular and strong, had the power to bother her. And when he rolled on the floor, romping with Ranny, laughing with tousled hair, to Gary they seemed like two children playing together, and the sight sometimes brought a lump to her throat.

She shook herself out of the mood with something akin to desperation. When a woman marries an older man, she must accustom herself to him because his character is hardened and not to be altered. Even if Simeon was sometimes surly and lacking in understanding, he was after all the "good provider" so widely advocated to her. And he was just and godly. Her dream was there, the dream of perfect wifehood:

*A worthy woman who can find?  
For her price is far above rubies.  
The heart of her husband trusteth in her . . .  
She doeth him good and not evil,  
All the days of her life.*

Why was it necessary for her to make resolutions? The heart of her husband trusteth in her. She clutched the words like a talisman to her breast.

Til, having donned his shirt once more, came into the kitchen to comb his thick hair. He looked fresh, the dust brushed from his clothing and his tanned face clean. They sat down to eat and Simeon, after the blessing, champed on his food for a time before asking:

"How you gettin' along, Tilford?"

"Why, fair," replied Til briefly.

"Sod purty hard?"

"I mean to say! I reckon, though, if she don't dry out some more, I ought to be able to finish up that one piece. I could get three-four acres a day—say ten more days for the forty."

Simeon considered a moment. "Better give them mules some extry barley," he said. "I want that there field finished."

There was another silence.

"I killed a snake up on the hill," Til said presently.

"Rattler?" asked Simeon.

"Yes."

"Too many of them things around here," grumbled the farmer. "I believe the sand hills attracts 'em. How many rattles?"

"Don't know. I never counted them."

Gary's shoulders twisted in a shiver. "I hate those things," she said.

"So do I," admitted Til. "Always did. They give me the crawls. The boys used to devil me about it. Some folks don't mind snakes. Them women, in the circus side-shows—they'll let a snake crawl all over them, an' they say a snake won't bite 'em, or if it does it don't even hurt 'em."

"I knew a man once would grab a rattler right by the tail an' snap off its head," said Simeon, contemptuous of such squeamishness.

Til's face showed his distate. "I seen that too, but I can't bear lookin' at the critters. Two fellers over to Jericho had a rattler in a box with a glass lid. The snake was in there, coiled up. You could see it, an' it could see you, but it couldn't get at you.

"They'd bet you a dollar that you couldn't put your hand on the glass an' hold it there. Mighty few could. Even when a man knew the snake couldn't touch him, he'd jerk his hand away when the rattler struck up at him. As for me—well, I couldn't even lay my hand down on that glass, it give me the fantods so bad."

He grinned shamefacedly.

"Humph," said Simeon.

But Gary understood Til's feeling and defended him. "I can't bear to look at them," she said. "If I see a snake it just freezes me up."

"All this ain't neither here nor there," said Simeon suddenly. "Talkin' about snakes ain't goin' to get that forty plowed, Tilford. I reckon them mules has et, an' I got some work to be doin' myself."

With a scraping of chairs the men rose and Til went out for his team.

#### 4.

As soon as Til was out of the house, Simeon turned to Gary. "If you're through with your bakin', wisht you'd take the cow over to Wessel's now."

She nodded.

"I'll give you a note," he continued. "It'll cost a dollar. I'll give you that."

He fished deeply in the pocket of his overalls and drew forth a leather purse, shiny and black with age and use, and equipped with a very strong metal catch. From this he extracted a silver dollar, held it in his hand for a moment as if loath to part with it, then suddenly thrust it at her.

"It's too much for breedin' that dratted bull of his'n," he grumbled. Then: "I'll write the note."

For a few minutes, as she washed the dinner dishes, he crouched in pencil-chewing concentration over a blue-lined sheet of cheap note paper. When he completed the message, he placed it in an envelope, sealed it, and wrote on the outside: *Mr. Herman Wessel, Esq., Courtesy Mrs. Trudge.*

Gary was putting on her good dress and the hat with the little blue forget-me-nots that she wore on the rare occasions when Simeon took her to town. She wished he would not seal that envelope. Not that she had any desire to read the letter, but it was a gesture that seemed to belittle her, to place her in a category with children or perhaps outsiders, diminishing her in the opinion of other people. While she finished dressing Simeon went down to the barn and harnessed up the horse—old John, the bony, sway-backed gelding. The buggy stood in front of the house by the time Gary, having scrubbed the protesting Ranny, emerged.

While she lifted the child into the vehicle and climbed in after, Simeon led the reluctant Egypt from the cowshed and tied her to the back of the buggy.

"You can get going," he told Gary.

"I'll be back to get supper," she replied, urging old John into slothful motion.

The midday sun was hot and the regular afternoon wind was beginning to blow. One or two high, buoyant clouds sailed in the sky, just enough to bring out by contrast its hard

blue. But Gary's young heart rose as she drove out of the farmyard.

Birds twittered and fluttered on the prairie. A pair of lark buntings, glossy black with vivid white shoulder-spots, whisked past. Scattered tall milkweeds nodded and danced in the breeze, with here and there an occasional dark-green tumbleweed, and on the unbroken buffalo grass Gary could see whole acres of gorgeous red and yellow wild gaillardias.

It was tonic to be out, on the road, going somewhere. This errand would require two or three hours, and Gary would have a chance to visit—with fat Emma Wessel, to be sure, but nevertheless with another woman. Simeon's note and the silver dollar would take care of the business to be attended to, without further concern on Gary's part, and she could go within the house, sit on a split bottomed rocker, and rock and talk, until whatever was to be accomplished with the cow was accomplished.

Beside her sat Ranny, his short legs straight out in front, a small hand grasping the iron rail beside the seat, his mouth filled with incessant questions.

"Why does John switch his tail, ma?"

"To drive the flies away."

"Why does he want to drive them away?"

"Because they bite him."

"Why?"

"Why?" was his favorite of all words, and he used it until Gary laughed. She put an arm about his warm little body and hugged him with hungry joy. With fond pride she looked at the dimples on the back of his baby neck where the dark hair came smoothly from under his straw hat. This was herself—just as truly as any part of her soul and body—this wriggling, question-asking morsel of humanity. She was content at that minute in the slow-moving buggy, just to feel his intimate small body in her arm's circle.

She wondered how Ranny would be when he grew up. Like his father? The thought unexpectedly was repellent. Ranny like Simeon Trudge? It was the first time she had put the question to herself and her feeling about it almost horrified her. It was instant, upsurging rebellion. And yet why?

She began to blame herself. Something was wrong with her; she felt she must be evil.

Yet the repulsion would not down. She could not help it. She did not *want* Ranny to become an undersized, dried-up man, with no humor and no lightness in his outlook on life. Instead he should be something else—big, perhaps, with wide

shoulders, and a fine free stride . . . and maybe his hat cocked a little over one eye.

Again her honest soul confronted her: was it Til Rector on whom she would model Ranny? She was smitten by the belief that the thought was disloyal, almost *immoral*, and the latter word had a power to appall her as nothing else had.

The buggy topped the rise. Below stretched the road. Coming across the field toward her, with the plow, was Til Rector, a long clean weal of new-turned turf stretching behind him.

Til held the team at an even pace, and the ears of the mules now pricked forward toward the moving vehicle on the road. Gary saw that he would reach the end of his furrow near the highway at about the time the buggy arrived at the same point. She almost pulled old John to a halt, but considered the awkwardness of that, and went ahead.

Beside her Ranny shouted: "Till Till"

Almost without volition Gary pulled on the reins.

Having stopped, she realized the young man had not yet reached the end of the furrow, and there was embarrassment in having to wait until he came up. She hurriedly tried to invent some explanation for her bold action in stopping at all.

Gary was utterly unable to understand herself. Even as she condemned herself, she could not help taking pleasure in the strength of Til, and the way he strode along. He was leaning back against the reins which were looped over one shoulder. Big firm hands gripped the crooked plow handles and one fist held also the five-foot stick with its two lashes of whang leather, which was his whip. Almost pulled along, it seemed, by the implement he guided, Til progressed toward her with the bent-legged, shuffling step immemorial in plowmen, deeply intent on his workmanlike furrow.

White teeth flashed in his brown face as he grinned when he swung the team around, pulled the plow over to the transverse furrow, and said, "Whoa!"

He tipped back his hat to wipe the perspiration from his forehead and dash it with a flipping motion from his finger tips before he came over toward the buggy.

"It's powerful hot," he said.

Her mouth bent in a smile; a prim, self-conscious smile.

"Ranny wanted to stop and say hello to you," she said with sudden merciful inspiration. "How is the plowing?"

A casual question, a simple one, an obvious one, and she wished she had something better to say than that banal question.

"The sod's cuttin' better'n I figgered," he told her.

Red hair, he was thinking. No, not red—something else. Brown and gold and red all blended together, rich and wonderful. God, why does a woman have to have hair like that when a man wants to keep his mind off her?

But he did not want to keep his mind off her. Here in the compelling presence of her he knew that he wanted to think about her.

Gary smiled again. She was pretty when she smiled—more than pretty, Til thought. Her teeth were so very white and even and her lips had a sweet way of parting.

"We're goin' to Mrs. Wessel's," Ranny suddenly volunteered.

The man and woman laughed, without reason. A tension seemed to have been broken.

"I got something for you," Til said, fumbling in his pocket.

"What?" asked the child.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Gary. "Snow white."

It was a beautiful Indian arrowhead of purest quartz.

"I plowed it up back there," Til explained. "How long it's been there nobody can say. Han'some thing, ain't it, an' made mighty cunning. Funny, findin' a beautiful thing like this arrowhead an' a ugly thing like that snake, both in the same field. It's a little like life ain't it?"

Ranny stared at the white object which Til held in his hand, scraping the caked dirt off from one place with his thumb nail.

"Used to be Injuns all over," said the man, resolutely keeping up the conversation as if he feared that should he let it drop Gary would drive away. "Mebbe this arrow was shot in some Injun ruckus right here. Or mebbe buffalo hunting. They tell me the buffalo was thick. You'd sure never think it now. After they killed off the buffalo, the cattle come up from Texas, jest as plenty. This whole country, the old-timers say, used to be fair covered with big herds of Texas cattle—three to five thousand head to the herd. Well, the cattle is gone too, all except a few scatterin' here an' there. Injuns, buffalo, cattle—they're all gone. Nothin' but farming here now. Things sure go different in jest a few years."

In Gary's heart grew a warm little feeling toward them. His talking on had enabled her to cover her agitation.

"I want the awwow," said Ranny suddenly.

Til reached over and gave the gleaming bit of stone to the child.

"What is it for?" asked Ranny.

"The Injuns," explained Til, "used them to kill things."

"What fings?"



"Oh, Ranny!" Gary laughed.

Her eyes met Til's and they crinkled with mirth. Those eyes were warm brown, and across her nose were two or three little summer freckles. Part, at least, of the constraint between them had departed. She gathered up the reins. Desperately he wanted her to stay, but he did not know how to keep her.

A jingle and a sudden plunge caused him to whirl around. "Whoa!" he cried sharply. "Whoa, boys!"

Tiempo, the left-hand mule, wickedly reaching with a rear hoof as if for a fly, had succeeded in catching a tug under his leg. Perfectly well he knew what a tug was. But he began to treat it as an appalling menace. Snorting, he threw himself sidewise into Poco. The latter, delighted at a chance for hysterics, leaped also.

In an instant the mules were plunging wildly in a semi-circle to the right—a semi-circle which would bring them into full collision with the fragile buggy and its occupants.

Old John stood stock still. He cocked his ears forward in mild interest at the sudden struggling action, but his dim intelligence failed to apprehend any peril in this to himself. With the plow leaping behind them the mules swung suddenly broadside on the buggy.

Too frightened to move, Gary watched the violence of the moment with a curious dream-like feeling.

Then Til acted. With a leap he reached the plow handles over which the lines were looped and clutched the leather ribbons in his big capable hands. High in the air, their fore hoofs thrashing, the mules reared at the sudden curb on their bits. Then they plunged forward and the plow hurtled wickedly after them. If it once bounded far enough to catch a fetlock, the bone would crush like an eggshell.

For as much time as she might have counted ten, Gary saw Til hold the bucking beasts, sawing at the reins, while she sat frozen in her seat. She saw Tiempo kicking like a fiend and Poco pulling away so that the mules seemed to be held together only by the leathers attached to their bits. The plow leaped again, narrowly missing a pastern. Ranny wailed.

Then Gary suddenly knew that in the midst of all the explosive action there was calmness and cool understanding. No panic was in Til's straight, supple back. His hands were strong and steady on the jerking reins and his voice was calm. Under the steady pull, and at the assurance of the remembered voice the mules plunged less violently, came to a

stop. Before any damage was done Til had halted them; and though Tiempo still was kicking viciously with the leg that was galled by the trace, the animals were under control.

It was tense, hair-trigger control, to be sure. The mules were wall-eyed and blowing—but they listened to the voice they knew.

Shortening his grip on the reins, Til moved cautiously up to the kicking Tiempo. Still speaking soothingly, he stooped and unhooked the tug. Instantly, when the pressure was removed, the mules became quiet, and though they still trembled with excitement, Poco and Tiempo once more stood still as Til hooked up the trace again.

Gary gave a long sigh, realizing suddenly that she must have been holding her breath through the whole swift drama.

Once more Til swung the team around and brought the plow to the furrow head.

"What you yipperin' about?" he grinned at the wailing Ranny.

Then he looked at Gary. She was still breathless.

"I hope you wasn't scared," he said gravely.

"No—I—why?" she stammered.

"You was callin' to me."

"I? Calling?" She was aghast. What had she been saying? She could not remember opening her mouth. But then—she had been so excited she might have said . . . dear knew what . . .

She gathered the reins in panic. "I must go," she said. "It's time I was going." She slapped old John with the reins.

The buggy moved forward. Ranny, his face streaked with the tears of his recent weeping, waved enthusiastically back at Til. The cow lumbered behind the vehicle, lifting her tail to void wetly in disgust, spraddling along in the dust.

Til watched them go, his grip tightening on the plow handles.

She had called out wildly. His name . . . Til. He would remember that.

She did not look back.

## 5.

Birdlike, Simeon cocked his head and squinted up at the windmill. The wheel turned; and as it turned, it creaked—not loudly as yet, but in such manner that Simeon, out of his experience with windmills, knew that it would grow worse. The mill needed greasing.

He released the catch on the brake chain, so that the vane swung around and the wind was spilled out of the galvanized iron sails. The wheel at once ceased revolving, the clanking pump grew silent, and the gurgle of water ceased.

Simeon held in his hand a yellow can. On the side of the can the word MICA was lettered blackly, with smaller lettering giving directions. It was a can of axle-grease, the uses of which, on a farm, were manifold. Hooking a finger through the bail of the can, the farmer slowly began to ascend the ladder which led up the side of the weathered wooden tower.

High above, the wheel veered slightly in the breeze, but rotation had ceased. Simeon liked to tinker with things. There was surety in the way each cowhide boot took its firm position on the ladder rungs as he ascended; and also in the manner his lean hands supported his body as he went up. His face was turned skyward, his hat far back on his head, his gaze on the machinery above.

Through the opening in the high platform he levered himself and stood erect by the tower cap, examining the grease-blackened cogwork. The wind clutched at his thin body and he steadied himself with a hand on the shifting vane, the metal surface of which displayed the huge black letters SAMSON.

Tell-tale gleams of bright metal showed in the gears. The wind of the previous night was to blame. Ball-bearings were not known in western Kansas, and the gale had caused the mechanism to eat up its lubrication.

Bracing himself against the stiff prairie breeze, Simeon removed the lid from the axle-grease tin. Within was a dull yellow jelly, pocked by the wooden grease-dipper and cracked and blackened at the edges from exposure to the air. On the yellow surface Simeon could see curious reddish smears. Ah, yes, Tilford had been using the axle-grease to treat old Egypt's torn udder. Those were blood streaks.

Thought of Til caused Simeon to raise his head suddenly and gaze southward in the direction of the field which was being plowed. He had not previously realized it, but the windmill platform, lifting him twenty-five feet above the ground, placed him in a position from which he could see down over the crest of the hill to the hollow beyond, where the road ran.

Simeon gazed, and as he did so the lines in his face deepened. He saw the plow and team at a standstill beside the road. And he also saw the buggy. Standing still. Til Rector was beside the buggy and even at the distance Simeon thought he could see a suggestion of intimacy in the way Gary and the hired man bent toward one another, which sent a cold feeling through his heart.

Expression drained from Simeon's narrow features. They were talking together—what could they be talking about, with their heads so close together? How long had they been talking thus? Mentally he computed time. Wrath gathered in his eyes. They must have been quite a while together down below the crest of that hill. Discussing something—behind his back.

The windmill was forgotten, and the axle-grease. Had Simeon mounted the tower only a moment sooner he might have witnessed the little drama of the mules and Til; might have been spared the bitterness of his suspicion. But when he first looked the mules had been quieted and Til and Gary were as if they had stood thus for minutes. Almost guiltily the buggy resumed its progress up the hill and the plowman went back to his furrow.

To Simeon Trudge it seemed that for the first time he felt his age. Slowly he climbed down the windmill ladder until beneath his boots he felt once more the spring of the buffalo sod, and he pressed his feet on the turf as if he craved the comfort of solid earth.

Loneliness was a secret part of him always. It now possessed him anew. His mind refused to accept any interpretation of what he had witnessed, save the worst possible. He leaped to the thought that this was a secret tryst, planned intentionally.

Simeon might have considered the casual and accidental probabilities of this meeting and reasoned that nothing very untoward could take place on an open country road. But it was his misfortune and weakness to be unsure of himself. It had been so all his life. To him it was instinctive—because of that lack of assurance—to discount any factor in a situation which seemed to favor himself. Always he was prone to believe the worst, a habit that in the final analysis was no more than an armoring of himself against adversity, since it

appeared to him that if he discounted all but the gravest misfortunes in every category he might escape the deepest hurts when his morbid expectations were realized; and on the other hand, anything less than the ultimate worst was a surprise correspondingly unexpected and happy. It never occurred to him that he went through endless unnecessary misery because of this habit.

Simeon left the windmill tower and walked head down toward the shanty, gnawing his hairy under lip. By now his mind was racing even farther. It was beginning to seem certain to him that there was something over and beyond this single meeting between his wife and the hired man. An understanding existed between them—*must* exist, he told himself. He tasted the bitter gall of that inferiority which an older man feels when he is subjected to the thoughtlessly cruel competition of attractive youth.

There was one flash of acid triumph: those two had never guessed that he would climb the windmill tower just when they were having it so thick together at the bottom of the hill!

They would have gone on about their business pretty fast if they had known he was watching them . . . he began to gloat over the guilt and fear which they, presumably, would have felt.

He possessed a curious streak of detachment. His very jealousy now made him consider that in the place of Gary and Til he might be doing just as he believed they were doing.

He thought: If I was in his place, with no religion an' all, I'd jump at the chance. If I was him, an' he was me, wouldn't I put the horns on the old man!

He nodded to himself and licked his lips almost with a grin. Just to think of himself in this queer reversal of fact gave him a momentary lascivious pleasure. Simeon Trudge—who never had enjoyed any kind of romantic adventure—slipping behind another man's back . . .

But the expression settled again into bitterness. After all, who was being cuckolded? Simeon Trudge! Another man, a younger man, was robbing him of something that belonged to him. Something which belonged to him . . . but never had quite been his.

Even at the distance he had been able, from the windmill tower, to make out the straightness of his wife's slender back. It was that invariable erectness of hers that held him most strongly and inflicted on him his deepest frustration. It was what first had attracted him and it had remained a sort of symbol of something against which he fought with futility,

dashing himself in vain against the impervious chambers of her reserve. In all their life together he had never once been able to bend that slim, straight back. If only once he had seen Gary bend—in humbleness, or supplication, or abandon—it would have meant something unexpressed to Simeon.

Her straightness had changed Simeon's whole life. He had been measurably content back in Bethseda community, in Indiana, before he saw that back of hers. The first time his eyes had rested on Gary was in Bethseda Meeting House, the chapel of a queer, strait sect living in the community. The girl came in that Sunday morning and sat down two rows ahead of him.

From that moment Simeon had difficulty keeping his attention on Elder Morrison's exhortation. She was with her father and mother, new farmers in the community, whom he had met previously. Again and again, in spite of himself, his eyes wandered to the girl's figure. Her basque, close-fitting above the full flounce of her skirt, revealed the hollow of her spine and the tightness of her ribs, and the beginning of the swell of her breasts below her armpits.

From under her bonnet came the splendid flare of her hair. Simeon kept his eyes devouringly on her and he noticed that never once throughout the lengthy service did the girl's spine slacken; never once did she lean back in the rough pew; and though she bowed her head devoutly at the prayer, from her shoulders down she did not bend. It caught him and held him, that proud unbending trait in her.

Looking back on it, he realized it was the fascination of it that brought him out on these Kansas plains, and he had time to wonder at that, because remembrance of Bethseda Meeting House still was one of the few things completely satisfying to him.

The Reformed Psalmists were a small sect, an offshoot of one of the strictest evangelical denominations, making up for their lack of numbers by a compensatory zeal. In matters touching the Word, they were strictest interpretationists, taking a stubborn pride in it, and feeding on the penalties that their creed exacted from them.

A chief tenet of theirs was that the Bible did not recognize the singing of *hymns* in worship. *Psalms* alone had scriptural consent. On that tenuous point they broke from other churches, and even here in western Kansas, Simeon brought himself with difficulty to enter a church with views less extreme than his own.

In the austere life of the Psalmists, Simeon had discovered an environment that he still remembered with nostalgic pleas-

ure. From boyhood he had been unhappy. His companions in youth shunned him because of his reticence, which in turn was due to an essential timidity engendered by his meager size and strength. He had been brought to think of himself as a "runt" and he never participated in sports such as fishing, swimming, bird-nesting, or wrestling with other boys— either because they did not interest him, or because he felt too deeply his own physical inferiority. Five feet four inches he stood in his cowhide boots, and he shrank, in his secret soul, from other men.

At his first contact with the Reformed Psalmists he heartily disliked them. They were queer and clannish. But one Sunday, lacking other occupation, he slipped into Bethesda Meeting House during services. From that day his life changed.

In the chapel all men were silent and decorous. Decorum was pleasing to Simeon, mainly because in complete, austere decorum there could be no challenges, no disturbing attitudes. He sat silent with the others and in the churchly atmosphere he felt that he was accepted fully by those about him.

The sensation was new and pleasing. Listening to Elder Morrison, the farmer-pastor, he felt a new importance; he was informed that his soul was of value, and loved greatly of God, who was much grieved if it were lost. He even became persuaded that he was of the Elect, a conviction he found deeply flattering.

Almost hungrily thereafter he mingled with the Psalmists and grew to know them well—Elder Morrison with his flat-crowned black hat and white beard; slab-sided old Eunice Appleby who always wore black fingerless mitts; the gloomy MacIvor brothers, Matt and Bob, who never had been known to smile, and many others.

As the months grew into years, Simeon embraced membership and plunged deeply into the life of the religious community, and after a time it was recognized among the Psalmists that none observed more strictly than he the harsh tenets of the sect. To himself he denied all reading, save the religious; all luxury in clothing or food or drink; all entertainment, save church attendance only. He was notable even among the Psalmists; a pious, stern figure, much esteemed and respected. When, one day Elder Morrison publicly expressed admiration for Simeon's power of praying, it was felt that he had ascended to a place in the community and church second only to that of the Elder himself.

In one respect Simeon transcended the teachings even of the Psalmists. He never had married. He was a celibate, a veritable celibate. Women he shunned utterly, not because

that was enjoined upon him, but because it was another demonstration of his asceticism—though he did not then know the ecstasy and excitement of possessing a woman.

As the years passed, however, he found living up to this renunciation not entirely easy. In a dim way he knew that he suffered from a cogent lack—something which on occasion caused in him longings, nervousness and depressions. Women, he discovered, could not be insulated entirely from his life.

Occasionally he experienced stirrings that were alarming, at certain manifestations of women, for even among the Reformed Psalmists women could not forever remain sexless. A dress pressed about a rounded form by the wind; a body turned in a pew, inadvertently showing the pleasant curve of a bust—things like these had power to plague him, to wring sweat from him.

By strict disciplining of himself, however, he managed for years to keep his thoughts from straying too dangerously. In part—a larger part than he admitted even to himself—this was because in the presence of women he was frightened. They baffled him, and they also infuriated him. In his childhood girls had laughed at him. He fled even now from the remembrance of that laughter.

An only child, he inherited his father's farm, and became a man of substance by the standards of the community: yet he did not take a wife—until Mr. and Mrs. Conrad Taylor moved into the community, with their red-haired daughter. Taylor was respected but poor, and the girl, Gary, taught the neighborhood school. She passed Simeon's farm in going to her school house, and often Simeon, working in his corn, watched her as she walked to her classes.

The long-distant stolen glances fixed the girl upon his mind. He began to think much about her, until at last she became a need. Then he summoned the courage to speak haltingly to her father.

The matter, after all, was easily arranged. The poverty of the Taylors gave them a sort of timid eagerness in welcoming the prospect of a propertied husband for their daughter, and that eagerness pleasantly fed Simeon's vanity.

Gary obeyed the wishes of her parents dutifully and silently. Simeon observed and approved her piety in this matter. Even during his curious cold courtship he was making plans to go West. Though he had reached a position of respect in the Psalmist community, there still were men who remembered his ineffectuality, and when he went to the nearby town, he felt the derision of these, or thought he did. It was



beyond endurance that when he took to himself a wife he should encounter low regard of this order.

He would take himself away to where he was not known, and where his new-found means would create a different impression. So, after the marriage, he and Gary departed almost at once for the new country of Kansas.

Thinking these slow thoughts, Simeon found that his steps had brought him to the door of his house, and he stopped and swept a glance about him. This land was his—six hundred and forty acres of it, a full square mile. This house was his, and he would build a better as soon as lumber became a little cheaper. The livestock, the machinery, the crops—all were his.

But the woman who lived in this house—was she his? He did not know.

When first they were married he went to Gary in their bed timidly. But afterwards came an eagerness almost brutal. Suddenly it seemed that he must make up for all the years he had lost—twenty barren years in which other men had been possessing women while he had not. Twenty lost years which suddenly cried out insistently . . .

The long celibacy was a mistake, a fearful error. He now perceived that he had cheated himself, starved himself, and he sought to make amends for that long frustration. Gary had been placed by the law and the consent of the church in his possession. He tried to make her compensate him for the accumulated unfulfilled lust of his barren lifetime.

She was submissive, unprotesting, silent. Never once did she refuse him, but uncomplainingly performed what she took to be her duty. She became pregnant and went stoically through childbirth. He waited for the period of convalescence to end and returned to her—and she was just as cool, just as emotionless, just as obedient as formerly.

Simeon was baffled by her impersonality. Somehow she gave the impression of being able to divorce her spirit from her body. The flame in him awakened no answering spark; sometimes he believed he was completely distasteful to her. Spiritually she held him away from her; the essential Gary was as unreachable for him as the polar star. And this humiliated him savagely.

These were the cumulative reasons why the unbending nature of Gary's back had become a symbol of defiance to him. If only he could cause that back to bend—in fear, perhaps, if nothing better—he would achieve a compensation for his twisting emotions.

But he knew he could never bring about that bending. An-

other man would bring it, perhaps. Tilford Rector? And would he see the graceful bending of her surrender?

Youth. Oh, God, youth!

Simeon's chin sank upon his chest. This was his self-flagellation.

## SEVEN

### 1.

GARY WAS rigid; her face circumspect, as she drove into the Wessel farmyard, the fine dust puffing between the fellows of the buggy wheels and scuffing from old John's heels. A middle-aged man, wearing the blue galluses of his overalls on the outside of his soiled vest, came over, walking spraddle-legged: Herman Wessel.

A wad of tobacco in his cheek deformed the broad, flat Pennsylvania Dutch face, and little piggy eyes peered cunningly out from under his bushed eyebrows. Foresting his throat and jowls beneath his clean-shaved chin, a tangle of brindle hair seemed to set his face out with a sort of hirsute support. Wessel reputedly was a renegade Dunkard. His little eyes traveled over Gary's body until she felt awkward and indignant.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wessel," she said coldly.

Wessel stepped widely toward her; his gaze shifted, taking in the buggy and the restless cow.

Gary held out Simeon's note and Wessel grunted as he took it and read with slow, purse-mouthed attention. Suddenly he glanced up.

"It giffs a dollar—"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I have it." She dug into her purse, ashamed that this dollar was all that was in it.

"Yah. So." The man's thick lips smiled as he took the hard,

shiny silver disc. "I take dot cow. You go in. The missus, she iss inside."

Belatedly he displayed a rudimentary courtesy, lifting Ranny over the wheel and then assisting Gary to alight. She took the child by the hand and started for the house.

Behind her, Herman was tying the horse at the hitching post and going back to loose the cow.

From the barn came a great, imperious bellow . . .

## 2.

In the door, laughing grossly, stood Mrs. Wessel.

"Come in, come in," she said. "Ach, if I had know'n company wass coming! My hair iss like a mop, an' I look like a sack of bran tied in the middle."

Gary thought the description apt. Emma Wessel's faded Mother Hubbard dress was girdled tightly about the fatness of her midriff, and her vast hips and immense flaccid breasts were accentuated vulgarly beneath the thin cotton.

A rush of tow-headed children stampeded around the corner of the house like a herd of wild young animals.

"Mal Pa's gonna breed ol' Alladeb. Oscar's gonna get to help. Kin I watch? Kin I, ma?"

Emma chuckled.

"You boys go 'long. Whatever you be doin' iss your pa's business. But you, Kathy, you stay here by me. Breedin' bulls ain't for liddle girls. It ain't ladylike. Anyway we got company. Here's a liddle boy for you to play with. See that you should treat him good, now!"

"Ma—" wailed Kathy beseechingly.

"You hear me!"

Kathy's face was poignant as she watched the triumphant rush of her brothers for the barn, and Gary tried to swallow her own sense of shock at this permitting of mere children to witness animal functioning which was so beyond the pale of polite conversation or even polite thinking.

After the boys had disappeared Kathy turned with resignation to her guest. She was small, with watery blue eyes, and she regarded Ranny with a look which clearly told how unexciting she found him in comparison with the spectacle she had just been denied. Ranny showed at first no disposition to

leave his mother. He was unused to strangers—strange children particularly.

“Go with Kathy,” encouraged Gary.

“Kathy’ll show you the new pigs,” urged Mrs. Wessel.

Kathy, a year or two older than Ranny, came slowly down the steps of the porch and thrust out a grimy paw. After staring at her for a moment, Ranny wordlessly placed his hand in hers. Without a sound and with no alteration in their expressions, the two children marched solemnly away.

“Now you, Gary Trudge, you come in,” said Emma. “I’m that starved for talk—”

Waddling, she led the way within and sank into a rocking chair, her thighs spread widely to permit her great belly to hang down between them. Beneath the torn hem of the old Mother Hubbard her fat stockingless legs bulged white and doughy above loose men’s shoes with elastic sides.

Emma was practical—far too practical to make a futile effort at looking well with the kind of a figure she had. Long ago her interest had gone to other matters. She picked up a handful of fresh green plants with whitish small flowers which lay on the kitchen table.

“Boneset,” she said, “an’ I like to wept with joy when I found it, growin’ right down in the draw of the pasture. Ach, yah. Took me right back to Pennsylvania. I’ll dry some right off. It’s a grand medicine—sweat plant, I call it. When you’ve got a fever, jest make a tea of this an’ drink it—I mind once when ol’ Henry Dasbach had the break-bone fever. He couldn’t sweat, an’ he couldn’t sweat, an’ his skin was dry as a buffaler bone that’s laid out in the sun for ten year. They sent for me, an’ I told ’em to put some hot water on. God kin strike me dead, if Henry didn’t begin sweatin’ jest as soon as the smell of that tea hit him, an’ he sweat a couple of buckets before they could get the sheets off an’ dry ’em. He’s a well man today, if he ain’t died since, an’ all because of that bone-set tea.”

The fat woman was known to Gary to be a herb doctor with no small local reputation, and a midwife on occasion.

“Do you find many herbs here in the plains country?” she asked politely.

“Ach, no. Only a few. I brought most from Pennsylvania, an’ I’m about all used up. I should got to send back home for more. I got my herbs an’ leaves in the root cellar—sassafras for bowel complaint, spice bush for chills an’ fever, slippery elm bark for cough, elder berry for movin’ the bowels, witch hazel for cuts or burns or any kind of soreness. There’s one good thing here on the plains—puff-balls. They grow right

out on top of the grass, an' you pick 'em an' let 'em dry. When they're dry they got a real soft brown powder in 'em—the best thing you ever see for stoppin' nose bleed, or any other bleedin'."

Emma was coarse and jovial and warm-hearted, and talk poured forth from her like a head rise on the Cimarron. Cordiality was in her tones and an avid curiosity . . . a desire to know *everything*, intimate or otherwise, that she could wring from this fellow feminine creature.

After the first necessary personal questions, gossip flowed. Had Gary heard that Dod Tillinghast was going to marry again?

"No," said Gary, surprised at this turn in the affairs of a seventy year old bachelor living near Jericho.

Dod was old enough to know a sight better, asserted Emma with conviction. Just the same he was marrying again. She had it straight from the Star Route man. A widow from Sparville.

"She can't be such a much, or she'd see through Dod," said Emma. "Well, pore critter, she's in for it now." She clucked her tongue loudly. "Ol' Dod's wore out four wives already. What she could *want* of the old goat, I don't know—but I do know what she's goin' to *get!*" She cackled lewdly.

Gary, shifting the conversation, commented on the weather.

Yes, indeed, it had been hot, assented Emma. If it didn't rain pretty soon, the crops would be finished, and that would go mighty hard with some folks. That brought up the subject of the Phelpses.

"Ach, the sale," said Emma with enthusiasm. "That poor Carrie Phelps! A saint on earth if there ever was one, an' she ain't got a better friend in the world than me, that cured her of the fallin' fever an' the liver complaint! After her own doctor give her up, it was. I used golden seal an' kingroot tea. She was up in five days."

She cackled in self-approbation.

"That Thruston," she hurried on. "Ach, the poor man. No business sense, Herman says. Poor Carrie! She *does* have a cross to bear. But do you know—" Emma hitched her chair forward with sudden eager greed, "—she's got some real nice things. A body could pick up hand-paint china an' linen an' sech, cheap—sol I should haff my eye on that tea set of hers for a long time now, an' some of her silver, too. I wass figerin' mebbe there'd be a sell-out. They are iron-clad contract people you know. Why, I knowed a woman oncet who fitted out her whole house with bee-you-tiful things she picked up at sales like Carrie's, an' for jest a song only!"

Gary's dislike of public sales with their cruelty kept her silent. Here again came up reference to Henry Archelaus and his "iron-clad contract" farms. She remembered Til's bitter outburst.

But Emma, utterly unconscious of any inconsistency between her professed friendship and her rapacious willingness to take advantage of a friend's misfortune, rushed on to a new subject:

"Haff you heard about the scandal in Jericho? No? A new girl there, waitress at the Bon Ton she iss, an' a regular liddle hussy too, they tell me. Paints an' dresses to kill. I hear a crowd of men follers her around all the time like dogs after a slut in heat. An' her that pert! Why she sashays around town as big as anybody, an' elbows you at the dry goods counter, an' walks down the street like the Queen of Sheba. Ach, some of them Jericho women iss mad; An' they should better be watchin' out for their husbands, too. I'm bound. They say that she now hass a reg'lar, though. An' who do you think? Sherry Quarternight—you'd think he should know better. Ach, no tellin' what a man will do for the flirt of a skirt-tail!"

Gary lifted her head and nervously tried to see out of the door.

"The children—I wonder where they are?" she asked anxiously.

"Them! Oh, they be all right." Emma hoisted her hugeness up from the chair and waddled to the door, her great hams shaking beneath her loose dress. For a moment she stood, bulking immensely. Then she came back.

"They're down by the chicken house," Gary sighed with relief that her diversion had produced a change of subject. "Kathy's goin' to show your boy the settin' hens. As long as they're quiet they ain't in no trouble, I always say. When they start to howl is time enough for worryin'. I thought I seen a buggy comin' down the road a piece."

She seated herself again and started rocking. "How's your husband, Gary? Such a fine man, Simeon."

"Mr. Trudge is well, thank you," Gary said primly.

"Ach! *Mister* Trudge. I almost forgot the way you have with you. I never called Herman 'mister' in all my life. Formality—it ain't no good in married life. Lookit me. Seven children."

Her blubbery features grew arch as she glanced sidelong at Gary.

"How old iss your liddle boy? Four? Ach, yah! Two years younger than my Kathy. But before Kathy never was more than two years between any of my children. Oscar iss the

oldest. Kathy iss the youngest. An' between, the *kinder* come frequent. It ain't my fault they've stopped, neither. Men don't keep their power like you'd think. An' this child your only? Ach, if you ask me, too much 'mister' in your family life, Gary. Hee, hee! Politeness—it ain't for the bedroom. One—why one child ain't even a good beginning."

Gary felt a coldness within. This porcine woman was hinting at what was the very reverse of the truth. Yet it was repulsive even to think of going further with the discussion. She began: "I think Mr. Wessel is through with the cow—"

"Yah, it iss easy," declared Emma, genially ignoring Gary's effort to turn her thought. "All a woman should got to do iss be willing. The man will do the rest. I never seen a man yet wouldn't, give him the chance." She leered and pushed at Gary's knee. "It's the woman that decides them things. When she iss ready, the man iss always ready. Like your cow an' our bull out there. It's naturall Seven I've had, an' five I've raised. Herman? Poohl He was jest like a bag of seed potatoes, dearie. I wass the field an' the grower, too. An' the crop—I harvested it. The men think they're important, but we know better. It's the women that does all the important things in life—the feedin', an' the beddin', an' the bringin' up of the children. It don't pay to put all your eggs in one basket, Gary—"

Gary rose. "I must go. I have to get supper."

Emma followed her to the door. A buggy was turning in at the lane.

### 3.

Emma shaded her eyes with her hand.

"It's ol' Tobe Shankle," she announced in a voice that must have carried clear out to the newcomer himself, as he drove toward the house. "I hear that Bedestown's put Tobe up for sheriff against Sherry Quarternight—askin' the governor to appoint a Bedestown man for a change after all the Jericho people he's appointed."

She paused as if suddenly remembering something. "Another thing—oh, it almost slipped my mind. Tell Simeon—*Mister* Trudge—that they're circulatin' petitions again—railroad petitions. The Jericho crowd. They figger to hold a spe-



line. Reckon he got tired of so much sand in his coffee, like to be town constable, pulled stakes an' went up to the railroad. "Only jest a couple days ago. Or Bill Hungate, who used

"No!" cried Emma. "When did that happen, Tober?"

"Tober's the new city marshal at Bedestown," said Herman Wessel.

to come around an see him one of these days." "If it ain't Miz Trudge, it shorley is a sight for sore eyes. You leavin' Hate to see you go so soon after I got here. My regards to Simeon. Tell him I sort of aim

juice. "If it ain't!" he said. "If it ain't Miz Trudge, it shorley is a juice. aside one of his immense mustaches to expectorate tobacco one hand he removed his hat while with the other he pulled The man's china-blue eyes widened with pleasure and with

"How do you do, Mr. Shankle?" she asked pleasantly.

"How do you do, Mr. Shankle?" she asked pleasantly. of dislike, was doing on the south side of the river. Jericho nominee for sheriff and therefore a particular focus pondered what this man, an outright candidate against the buy something. But Gary, looking at him, thought not. She Shankle had a right to go to the sale. Maybe he wanted to with the auctioneer and clerk they had secured. Well, Tober ready the Phelps had given their sale a Bedestown tinge. This was a surprise. Shankle was a Bedestown man. Al-

"I reckon I'll see you there."

"Why, come to think, we was figgerin' some on it." "Howdy, Miz Wessel," he said. "Jest stopped over to see Herman on some business. You're lookin' mighty peart an' about the whip.

"Why, come to think, we was figgerin' some on it." "Howdy, Miz Wessel," he said. "Jest stopped over to see Herman on some business. You're lookin' mighty peart an' about the whip. strengthened by the fat that sagged about it. He cramped which only accentuated the retreating chin which was not Shankle was a fatish, bald man with a sweeping mustache

way?" "Howdy, Tober?" called Emma. "What you doin' over this stood that of the newcomer.

accompanied by Emma went out to her buggy, beside which and Ranny bringing up the rear. Gary called to Ranny, and The Wessel children came around the corner, with Kathy talking to the man in the newly arrived vehicle.

and saw her cowed to the back of the buggy. Wessel was importantly at home. She walked down the front porch steps Here was real news and Gary knew it would be received tion comes up this fall."

cial election on the bonds at the same time the regular elec-

you're bound to get here where the wind blows so all the time."

Tobe descended from his buggy and elaborately assisted Gary into her vehicle, then lifted Ranny beside his mother.

"Sure improves a man's manners to run for office, don't it, Tobe?" cackled Emma.

"I don't know, Miz Wessel. I don't know. It's a pleasure, allus, to be at the service of beauty."

"Oh, *gwan!*" The huge woman shrieked with laughter.

Gary clucked to old John. She was relieved to escape the endless talk, and the crudities, yet there was a warm place in her heart for gross, kindly Emma Wessel. She drove out of the lane, steadying Ranny in the seat, and as she turned the corner into the main road, she could see Emma still standing, waving her apron, her shapeless body bulging almost as if it were deformed, in the stiff wind which blew the Mother Hubbard dress taut against it.

Antlike across the great flats on the very road which ran between Jericho and Bedestown, crawled the Trudge buggy, with the cow following behind at the end of the rope, and the young mother driving the old horse with one hand, and cuddling her child with the other. Emma Wessel's words still rang in Gary's ears. *They're circulatin' petitions again—railroad petitions. The Jericho crowd . . .*

Trouble might come out of this. The feeling between the two towns had grown more and more bitter since the high-handed county seat election. If Jericho was pushing the railroad bond issue, it was a certitude, even to Gary's inexperienced mind, that the railroad was to be built to Jericho. It was also sure that Bedestown, having been left out of the calculation, would oppose bitterly the voting of those bonds.

Many persons would find it impossible to avoid being drawn into the contention. Gary remembered with a thrill of apprehension her husband and his stubbornness. And Til . . . his bitterness toward Henry Archelaus, the townsite man.

#### 4.

Simeon was silent that evening. When they sat down to the supper table he rejected an offer of conversation from Til, and when Gary ventured: "The Wessels are going over to the Phelps sale," he did not reply, but bowed his head and prayed.

This he would have done had an earthquake been in progress; but his manner in doing it was unusually brusque.

A new and somber note was in the prayer this evening. It was a curious prayer, a fierce prayer, even though it besought forgiveness—forgiveness of “them that transgresses Thy holy ordinances, an’ defies Thy almighty goodness.” A minute later it changed from a petition for mercy to a quivering demand for punishment “of the blasphemers, an’ the ungodly; those that don’t obey Thy laws, O Lord, an’ conspires an’ plots to overturn Thy holy commandments. Sear them with Thy everlasting fire, God, an’ let them be condemned forever an’ ever an’ ever to perdition. Amen.”

There was a moment of silence after the final sentence, and Til found himself wondering just what it was that Old Simeon was steamed up about now. Gary sat puzzled and uneasy. She knew her husband, and the quality of his words and voice gave her the feeling that something was wrong with him. She glanced over at Simeon, but his eyes were on his plate and he was beginning to eat.

Simeon had been thinking all that afternoon. His thoughts had been bitter and the conclusion of them unsatisfactory. After considering everything, however, he realized that he lacked any real basis for the suspicions of Gary which had been rankling in him. There was nothing tangible to corroborate his black doubts—not even the sight he had of Gary and Til talking at the new field. Yet he could not forget those doubts. He sat in silence and fury, while jealousy gnawed at him.

Eventually, to relieve the puzzling tension, Gary gave them news.

“Jericho is circulating a railroad petition,” she said.

“Yes, I reckon we’ve got to go through that,” assented Til, taking up the lead to fill the awkward pause as Simeon glowered at his plate.

“Don’t you think there ought to be railroad?” she asked, glad of a topic.

“Not that way. It’ll mebbe help that Jericho ring. But issuing bonds is only goin’ to mean more money took out of the pants of us poor farmers.” He said *us*. He was thinking of his own barren acres.

At the word Simeon glanced angrily up as if for a moment he had a mind to deny Til’s right to claim any other estate than that of a hireling. But he did not open his lips, and another silence fell.

“Tobe Shankle drove in to Wessel’s just as I was leaving,” Gary said after awhile.

At the mention of Shankle, Simeon glanced up irritably again but said nothing.

"What's Tobe doing?" asked Til, loyally supporting Gary.

"He's been made marshal of Bedestown—Hungate's left for the north."

"Sort of givin' him a chance to practice, ain't they? They figger that it he's lucky enough to beat Sherry Quarternight out as sheriff Tobe ought to know at least how to wear his star without havin' somebody steal it off'n him."

"He told Emma Wessel and me that he was going to be over at the Phelps sale tomorrow."

"Well," said Til with surprise. "It's a Bedestown outfit runnin' the sale—Len LeForce an' Dilly Capehart an' all. But Tobe better watch out. Sherry Quarternight might show up too—it's his side of the river."

"Do you think there might be real trouble?" she asked. She had a woman's fear of violence in this raw country. Quarternight was reputed to be dangerous, and she remembered that she had heard he had killed two men in Texas. There was for her a kind of deadly fascination about him. Gary had seen Quarternight a few times—tall and fastidiously dressed, with black mustache and neat goatee, and a black frock coat under which he was said always to carry a pair of pistols. She compared him in her mind with the slovenly Shankle, fat and not too inclined to cleanliness, a good-humored loafer, everybody thought, but quite evidently in the inner councils of Bedestown.

"I guess it ain't likely that Quarternight will come to the sale," said Til after a moment's consideration. "He knows he wouldn't be no where near welcome. An' then, even if he did come, there ain't much chance of any ruckus. Sherry might fight—but not that flabby-chinned Shankle by no stretch of the imagination."

Again Gary was grateful to Til for helping ease the supper-table tension.

And Simeon, eating silently, had come to a final decision. Tilford Rector had to go.

There might be nothing between him and Gary, but he had to go for the reason that Simeon could no longer stand to have him around.

Even with the decision, however, the farmer began to worry over how he should go about the business of discharging Til. A thing which would have been easy for most men presented to Simeon a bristling array of complications. His inherent timidity caused the confusion and the cross purposes; he shrank from an arbitrary dismissal, which was the only

direct and sensible approach to the problem, because of the painful situation it would provoke.

Simeon pictured the scene which inevitably would take place: Til would demand to know why he was being dismissed. His work was satisfactory, and he knew it. Even in his growing hate, Simeon was forced to admit that few farm hands in the Cimarron Valley were willing to accept responsibility as did Til, or to perform the labor that Til performed. Til did more than he was paid to do—the breaking of the red mules was an example of that.

Nor would it do to make the excuse that the hired man no longer was needed on the farm. Harvest was just around the corner. Til, moreover, knew that the sod-breaking in which he was engaged was important, and there would be more cultivating in the kaffir corn.

Even had there been excellent arguments to support his action, however, Simeon would have shrunk from it. Discharging Tilford Rector would create tension, and Simeon hated and feared tension. Til might become angry. The mere thought of the young man's fury against himself terrified Simeon. The inherent fear of other men had ridden him all his life long. He decided to put off for a time the break with Til. He would await a better opportunity.

This decision was bolstered immediately by what seemed to him a brilliant inspiration.

He would cause Tilford Rector to discharge himself!

That was it . . . the whole problem would be solved. The plan was so dazzling that Simeon almost caught himself grinning. He checked the impulse, however, and began rapidly to plan the best means of achieving this suddenly clarified goal, leaving conversation to the others at the table.

The way of doing it would be to force unreasonable labor on Til, and at the same time make life calculatedly unpleasant for him. This could be accomplished in many devious ways. And always with a fair pretext, a bland attitude that all was aboveboard and just. He even pictured how he would feign astonishment if Rector rebelled. But he hardly thought the hired man would make any kind of objection. Simeon had seen pride in Til. He knew that the young man, when he felt a situation had become unbearable, would say nothing, but would leave, no matter what considerations might hold him.

That was the way of it . . . the move would be up to Tilford.

His first step would be to make it impossible for Til to attend the sale. The hired man expected to go; Simeon himself had planned taking him, to bring back the machinery if he

bought any. A sale was considered a sort of legitimate holiday for the country-side. When Simeon discovered some reason for keeping Rector at home, it would create in the latter a sense of being unjustly used; would plant the first feeling of discontent and lead to the inevitable decision, when coupled with other causes, to depart.

For the first time since he had climbed the windmill tower that afternoon, Simeon felt pleasure. He was gratified at his own cunning. It was planning that suited his nature exactly. The mere contemplation of the probable result endowed him with a feeling of power at the circumvention of the younger, stronger man beneath his roof.

Even yet that night, however, he suffered a new jarring complication. As they were going to bed, Gary said:

"Mr. Trudge, I don't think I'll go to the Phelps sale."

"What?"

"I don't feel like going to the sale," she repeated.

Simeon was startled. Ugly suspicion crowded anew. Had she read his mind? How could she know that he was planning to leave Tilford at the farm? He had not opened his lips. Reason came to Simeon's rescue. Gary's motives were not connected with Til, since she could not know. Just the same she must go to the sale with him, since he would not leave her at home under the circumstances.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I feel sorry for Carrie Phelps."

"That ain't no reason."

"She's being sold out under her own roof. She's losing everything she owns. And she's old. Can't you see? The poor old soul—I'd—I'd rather stay here, and not see it."

"That's nonsense," said Simeon roughly. "Of course you're goin'. What would folks think if I left my wife to home—with the hired man?" The last was a sneer.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Tilford Rector ain't goin'."

"Oh." She stared at him, as if he utterly defeated her. "I didn't know that," she said finally.

"Well, you do now." He was harsh. "You can fix him up a lunch. But you an' the boy is comin' with me."

He rolled over with his face to the wall, but for a long time he did not sleep even after Gary's soft breathing showed that she did.

## EIGHT

### 1.

LEN LEFORCE walked through the crowd at Phelps with a feeling of power and glory. This was his day. All other days were lived for such days as this, when he could be the central, dramatic figure at a public sale.

To Len, auctioneering not only was an occupation but a major passion. It stimulated him in ways nothing else could approach. When he stood on the block he was able to shake off completely the doubts and hesitations which sometimes assailed him elsewhere. Being an auctioneer was no small matter. Sale-crying in itself required ability of an unusual kind, coupled with sedulous practice. The auctioneer's song was an accomplishment denied most men, and he was a personage in his community because of his mastery of it. It had been difficult at first. He remembered how he had sweated and halted and stumbled in his first minor sales long ago. There had been misery in those months when he was a laughing-stock. The thing that saved him was that his auctioneerings were unimportant and his services contributed free "for practice."

But that was many years back. Len considered himself now finished in his art. He was completely confident of his own magnetism when the chant was rolling, and in the quickness of his perceptions, to see and seize upon bids, and to direct the minds of his buyers so that they should extend themselves. The jargon had become so much second nature to him that it required no conscious effort now. Once he received his first

bid, the muscles of his throat and larynx worked almost without volition, the words running into each other with liquid "I" sounds interspersed, so that no time was given his listeners for hesitation, or thought, or escape from the semi-hypnosis he threw over them.

Admittedly LeForce was the only real auctioneer in Blair County. Jericho possessed none, certainly. Unfortunately public sales thus far had been few in this new country. Settlement was too recent. The great dry land had not yet bitten deeply enough into the people; not yet had they had time to run through their resources sufficiently to make them spoils for LeForce's profession.

The auctioneer, however, was willing to bide his time. Not in vain had he considered the many factors in this vast arid flatness. And far from the least was a certain policy which, he had recently learned, was followed by Henry Archelaus of Jericho in his farm transactions. The "down-payment" sales with the "iron-clad" contract.

From just now on, Len anticipated, there should be a cumulative trend from which he would profit. The Short Grass County—and Hank Archelaus—would get 'em. Men and women who had come here with high hope, already showed the effects of the endless struggle. Crops were scanty and often failed completely. When the settlers broke the buffalo sod they ruined the plains for the solitary thing in which they were supreme—stock grazing. Blistering sun and oven-heated wind in summer, ice-fanged blizzard in winter, now were beginning to take their toll.

The Phelps were among the first to give up. But there would be others. LeForce was one of the few in the Cimarron country who had no fatuous optimism about the prospects of this part of the West. Long ago he would have departed for a clime more hospitable—had he not been an auctioneer. Now, however, gazing at the faces about him, he considered that if he made a success of this sale there would be others—plenty of them—to conduct before long. In many respects an auctioneer resembled an undertaker. In the end all things came to him. LeForce could afford to wait.

Moving around, "sizing up the crowd," Len was a unique sight in that gathering of loose-jointed, tobacco-eating, hairy farmers. In all the Short Grass he was the only man who wore a derby. It was seedy and battered and once had been pearl-gray. He wore it on the back of his peanut-shaped head, thus accentuating his boldly curved nose and sly mouth. Between his teeth he clenched a long, crooked Pittsburgh stogie, which



gave him further individuality in this district of pipes and only occasional cigars.

People were milling about the Phelps place, staring at the articles advertised for sale. A pretty fair crowd, thought LeForce, shrewdly appraising. From both sides of the river, ten miles up and down. He recognized a good many rigs—spring wagons, buggies, buckboards. That two-wheeled cart by the fence was his own—the only one in the County. He enjoyed the affectation of sportiness. Further down stood a row of heavy lumber wagons, with the horses at the end gates, unhitched and fighting flies.

The nearer neighbors of the Phelps were present. That surey with the fringed top would be Herman Wessel's. Simeon Trudge had brought his wife and child in the buggy—but where was young Til Rector? The auctioneer remembered that he was now working for the Trudges. Rector's little sand hill place was due north of the Phelps farm. LeForce speculated momentarily on how soon Til would be ready to sell out in his turn. There were not many pickings on that barren spot, even for an auctioneer. He wondered what old Simeon was angling for in this sale. If he could discover what it was, he would make the farmer dig a little deeper for it. LeForce was prejudiced against people who were always quoting the scripture.

Old Lady Phelps was welcoming the womenfolk into the house with too-obvious cordiality. She explained to each new arrival that things were a little upset . . . she didn't always keep her house this way . . . they would just have to excuse it. A high, semi-hysterical note strained her voice. LeForce hoped Carrie Phelps would not crack up today.

He noticed Gary Trudge, crossing from the kitchen to the pump. She was helping the old lady, and the auctioneer was struck by her youth, and the brightness of her hair. How that dried-up old ape, Simeon, managed to get himself a young woman as pretty as that, and as clever, clear beat Len LeForce.

A chorus of shouts and greetings hailed a new buggy driven in. Tobe Shankle. Len hastened over to greet the newcomer. Now that Tobe stood a good chance of being appointed sheriff by the governor, it paid to be on good terms with him. Tobe drew up his rig and waved.

"Howdy, Colonel," he shouted jovially to LeForce. He looked purse-y and disreputable, but two or three men walked quickly up to the buggy and spoke, some jocularly, others gravely. In his new role of a public character, Tobe cultivated

an expansive air. He waved and joked with everyone before clambering down from his vehicle and loosing the checkrein of his horse. Then he began at once, in the manner of politicians, to shake hands all around.

"Tobe's sure out runnin', ain't he?" said a slow voice behind LeForce. "He's busier than a street-walker at an Elk's convention."

"Yep," replied the auctioneer. Without looking he knew the speaker. Dilly Capehart. A thin, loose-mouthed man, perpetually grinning and showing a pair of diseased rodent teeth. Through LeForce's philanthropy the unprosperous Bedestown editor was clerk of this sale. He was lazy, but he had an easy-going humorous way with him, which made him a good sale clerk.

A tall, cadaverous man, very short-waisted and long-legged, wearing a dirty "boiled" shirt without a collar, but with the gold button carefully in its place, stalked by, very much like a crane, followed by an almost equally tall, slab-sided girl in a dress of screaming cobalt blue with an immense bustle.

"Who's that?" asked Dilly.

"Purd Weaver. Hay contractor over at Antelope Lake."

"That his daughter?"

"Yep. Name's Phoebe."

"Favors him, don't she? Especially in the legs. She's split clear up to her appetite."

A moment later Emma Wessel, huge buttocks wabbling beneath her voluminous black alpaca garment, hove into view on the porch.

"Jesus," said Dilly with awe, spitting a brown stream of snuff juice. "Old Lady Wessel's certainly built for settin' down."

LeForce grinned. "It's near startin' time," he said. He led the way to the barn where Thruston Phelps was showing off a roan saddle horse to a semi-circle of men; walking the animal back and forth.

"When do you want to get goin', Thruston?" asked the auctioneer.

The question was a matter of form only, since LeForce had the authority to start or stop when he wished. But Phelps snatched eagerly at the courtesy.

"Whenever you say the word, Colonel," he replied with forced heartiness. The title of "colonel" always attached to the office of auctioneer. Phelps fell in step with LeForce and they turned toward the house, the others stringing after, ejaculating tobacco juice and joking. Above, the sky was fleckless, and

from it the sun beat down until far out on the heated plains the horizons shimmered dizzily.

"I'll be glad to get this over, an' the cash in hand," the old man was saying, feebly brisk. The auctioneer nodded. Precious little would be left the Phelpses from this sale after expenses were taken out and debts paid. The household goods, livestock, and machinery only were for sale, since the land and improvements went back to Henry Archelaus.

"Carrie's been pinin' for months to get back to Missouri," the old man continued, unconvincingly. "We figgered once on leavin' last fall. I got kin around Springfield—well off, an' jest houndin' me an' Carrie to come stay with 'em. After all, blood's thicker'n water, ain't it?"

There was a pleading note in the question as if old Phelps begged for assurance.

"I reckon," said LeForce shortly.

Phelps brightened. "That's the way I figger. A man's a dum fool to wear hisself out workin' when he's got kin an' prospects back in a country like around Springfield—don't you think, Colonel?"

It was pathetic to hear him try to keep up the fiction, when everyone knew it was fiction. Thruston Phelps was perhaps sixty, but he looked older. His face was accentuated by three outrageous features—a battered and bottle-shaped nose; a forehead to which baldness gave a fictitious counterfeit of loftiness; and immense ears with great soft lobes, covered with hairs. His drooping white mustache failed to hide a perpetual uneasy grin which he wore even in the face of his own ruin. Len could hardly sympathize with Phelps because of that grin.

The auctioneer hurried to the narrow front porch and mounted it. With a two-foot section of an old harness tug he had picked up in the farm yard, he slapped one of the porch posts. Beside him stood a heap of the articles listed on the sale bill as "too numerous to mention." He pushed the soiled gray derby back on his head and removed the stogie from his mouth.

"Now folks," he began as the crowd assembled, "the way the weather's been around here, I didn't know whether we'd have much of a congregation or not. The least you can say about weather in the Short Grass is that there's sure plenty of it. However, I see a lot of fine folks here, an' you see a lot of fine things you'd like to have. Let's take a look."

Under Thruston's anxious eyes he pawed through the articles on the porch as if deciding what to start with. At last he laid his hand on a heating stove with isinglass windows and

trimmings of nickel plate. With his stogie he motioned his audience in closer.

"This here's a Franklin stove that's in A-1 shape, an' it's gonna sure be worth the money," he began. "See, lift's automatic." He made an effort to demonstrate but the catch failed and the stove front clashed down. "Well, that's the idee anyway," he said. "You soon get the hang of it—after you get the bang of it." Expectantly he paused, and bowed to the ensuing titter. "I'd like to have it myself," he resumed briskly, "but don't know how I'd get it home. Now who'll say five dollars for a stove that's worth twenty? A man over yonder has raised his hand. Who'll give six?"

His glance swept around, and he broke suddenly into the rolling auctioneer's chant. It rose and fell, very rapid, so that the sounds ran into each other almost unintelligibly. As nearly as it can be written down, this is what he said, although the machine gun speed of his utterance cannot be reproduced, or the indescribable effect of it:

*"At-a-five-five-diddle-five — goin'-at-a-five — hut! — anna-five-where's-a-six? — hut! — anna-five-anna-half-gimme-six — there's-my-six-anna-wanna-half-gimme-half-yessa-half — Thank you, Joe—anna-wanna-seven-jessa-liddle-seven-diddle-seven— hut!—"*

Never halting, never pausing, the auctioneer's jargon rose and fell, hypnotic, an urgent current that kept his audience gape-mouthed and bidding. The crowd listened with appreciative ears. These men were connoisseurs of this bucolic accomplishment with which all were familiar. Many never before had heard LeForce "call a sale" and some of these now turned to each other with knowing looks, and winks, and even nods, signifying approval.

A thick-set burly farmer named Bob Armstrong bought the stove for seven and a half dollars, and grinning through his bushel of red whiskers, pushed forward to claim his prize and give his name to Dilly Capehart.

Already the auctioneer had pulled forward a new article.

"Who'd ask for a more comfortable rockin' chair than what I'm gettin' ready to sell at this minute?" he demanded rhetorically. He slapped the porch post with his strap, pulled at his stogie, and blew a white cloud of smoke. "Folks, times may get hard, an' they may get good, but if I had that chair in my settin' room, an' my feet up on somethin', I'd forget there ever was sech a thing as trouble. Now I ain't goin' to ask much to start this chair. Who'll say a dollar . . . jest one lonely dollar?"

Standing in the rear of the crowd, Gary Trudge saw a face at the window. Carrie Phelps, a thin sliver of an old woman,

with a sunken haggard face, thin petulant mouth, and glasses too large for her, was looking out. She snaked her hair back from her hard round forehead—hair of a mousy gray, very fine and scanty—and her skin was brown and beaten, the flesh fallen away from her neck until the cords and veins of it were laid out almost as if by the dissector's knife.

When Carrie talked, her voice had a thin, creaking quality like a grasshopper's, but she was not talking now. Gary saw the look she gave the battered old rocker through her window. That was Carrie Phelps' rocker—where she had solaced her weariness and her age. To her it was something more than just a rocking chair. It was a companion, a friend, almost a person. And now the auctioneer was saying: *One lonely dollar . . .*

The old gray head disappeared from the window. Other women crowded about, hard-eyed, avaricious, prodding their husbands to bid.

## 2.

Noon came and the men formed a line at the pump to "wash up." The more important items in farm equipment and live-stock were to be sold right after dinner.

Women began to lug out baskets covered with napkins, and crocks lined with paper. It was a "throw together"—the net resources of the crowd being pooled and spread out on temporary tables of planks laid across saw-horses, from which everyone helped himself. In this locality the men went first to the table, crowding about, each selecting with deliberate relish a half-dozen chunks of fried chicken, two or three sandwiches, a big heap of cottage cheese, about a pint of potato salad, and a couple of pieces of cake or maybe pie; and with all that pyramided on their plates, they eased out carefully to a shady spot somewhere in the lee of the house or down by the barn, and went to eating.

The high plains believed in the consumption of food in large quantities. A hearty appetite was held to be the hallmark of a good conscience. Dieting was unknown, and most persons worked hard enough at physical labor to keep off surplus fat; or else they had ailments of one kind or another that achieved the same results for them. Emma Wessel was an

outstanding exception to this, although it is true that most of the women did run to meat a little more than the men, particularly around the bosom and the haunch. A little healthy plumpness was considered becoming to a woman, and the matron who did not look matronly was suspected of having something wrong with her.

The men scattered out to eat, it being male nature to go off alone like a dog with a bone when consuming victuals. But the women gathered in close groups inside the house and on the porch, and the shrill stridence of their voices, all talking at once, rose in the air.

Carrie Phelps and her old husband passed through the crowd with buckets of lemonade and tin dippers, to fill and refill the cups or glasses held forth to them. Lemonade, was the only thing in the refreshment line the Phelps were furnishing, and that was a prime indication of the class of this sale. A sale to settle an estate, or to retire, or for profit, or anything having to do with prosperity, was marked usually by some slight ostentation in the amount and quality of the viands served at the expense of the owners. But a "sell-out" like this, a poverty sale, always saw people bringing their own provender, not so much a kindly as a self-protective gesture.

It took the men almost no time to stuff the last pieces of fried chicken into their mouths, wolf the last hunk of cake, and drain the last drop of lemonade. They clambered to their feet, dusted away the crumbs from the bibs of their overalls and carried their plates and cups to the back door of the kitchen where the women took them.

Then by twos and threes the men lumbered down to the barn, while the women busied themselves with washing the dishes, tucking them away in baskets for the homeward return, tidying up, and the continued vocal exchange of matters of strictly personal feminine interest.

The stable became a male comfort station, and the talk within it was strong with barnyard humor. Having severally relieved themselves, the farmers dawdled in the areaway where the waste hay lay in front of the mangers, a group extensive as to face hair, chewing tobacco, and overalls.

Simeon Trudge had been a silent and somewhat aloof spectator at the morning auction. He had no particular standing here, in spite of the fact that relatively speaking, he was one of the prosperous men of the district. Several farmers, however, greeted him, and he ate his meal in the company of Purd Weaver, the hay man, who sat with his back to the wall of the house and his long legs drawn up, conversing only

in unsatisfactory monosyllables as he stuffed slabs of chicken and bread-and-jam beneath his porch-awning mustache.

His meal finished, Simeon went to where a crowd stood around the rear door of the stable, in the corral, speculating on two mare mules which the Phelpses had up for sale.

"Smooth mouths," said a short, important-acting man from over near Bedestown. "I mouthed 'em awhile back. Ten years old, mebbe eleven."

Both animals, on their shoulders, showed the white patches of hair which betrayed old collar scars.

"You never seen pullers like them," interjected old Phelps with shrill heat. He had come down to the barn to face this very contingency of criticism, but he could not conceal his irritation. "Them mules is only nines. Broke 'em myself—brought 'em all the way from Missouri, where the real mules grow."

He looked around with his grin, hoping that somebody would answer it. Nobody did. Politely, they did not take issue with him, but every man present considered himself his own best judge of mules and of horseflesh in general. None of them believed any assertion unsupported by his own appraisal. Each had formed his own opinion privately concerning the age and capabilities of those mules, and although none of these men had compared notes, there was not six months of variation in the group guess on the true age of the animals—which were what was known as "long tens," that is, going on eleven years.

The men all expected Phelps to lie about the ages of the mules. It was part of horse-dealing, and a man was presumed to be capable of protecting himself by his own judgments. Perhaps there was even a shade of contempt for old Thruston when he did not lie more speciously. He could have called the team eight years old—that being the age when an animal becomes smooth-mouthed—as easily as nine.

At the opposite end of the passage along the mangers through the stable, another interested group was being entertained in a different way. The knot of men gathered closely about a central figure—slack-chinned Tobe Shankle. Tobe left the importance of his candidacy for the sheriff appointment. Never before had he so occupied the spotlight, and he was enjoying the sensation to the full. Just at present he was earnestly condemning the proposal of "some interested parties" to vote bonds with which to "bribe a railroad to build through the County." There was graft in those bonds, Shankle asserted. The issue was just coming to the fore, and feeling on it was not yet strong. His audience listened noncommittally.

Simeon detached himself from the group that was judging

the mules and made his way toward the crowd about Shankle. It was significant that nobody paid any attention when he left one group or joined the other. This always happened. The old, secret feeling of inferiority to other men came back to him in crowds like this. He felt that he was discounted, and shrank back against the wall. All eyes were turned on Shankle, all faces were avid with a question which had just stirred a new heated interest.

"That was a lie, gentlemen, started agin my rep'tation," Simeon heard Tobe say deliberately. "It would be ridic'lous, if it wasn't so God damn annoy'n'. Any of you ever see the Shintaffer place?"

Simeon's attention focussed. He knew now what this talk was about. It concerned an ugly, dirty little story, of the kind that is always running through every rural community which is starved for something to vary the dull round of its existence.

Hattie Shintaffer, Simeon knew, was a "lone woman." Public curiosity naturally attached to any woman who, in that day, chose to live by herself, in independence of all men. The Shintaffer place was on Cow Creek, in the remote southeast part of the County, almost in the sand hills. Except for her name, nobody had very much information about Hattie Shintaffer. Whether she was a widow, or an old maid, or simply had been left by her man, never had been learned. The woman owned a sod house in a straggly grove of cottonwoods, down on the creek bottom, and a small farm around it.

No man, so general report said, ever had entered the squalid dwelling which the Shintaffer woman called home—unless it was this very Tobe Shankle. Simeon had seen the soddy just once—a hint of earth-gray wall glimpsed through tree trunks. Except on rare occasions when she went furtively to Jericho for a few meager supplies, the woman never was known to leave her land, which she worked like any man, plowing with her team of crow-bait horses, hoeing the corn, and doing other labor in men's shoes, and even men's overalls, with a ragged man's coat on her back.

Yet there was about Hattie Shintaffer a mystery, and a hint of wild handsomeness—a harsh, weird face of brown skin and black eyes and sharp-cut features. Most men were interested in her when they first caught sight of her. What she could have been had she chosen to adorn and dress herself as did other women, was fascinating to speculate upon. Hattie might have had a man had she wanted one. There was no question of that. The country was filled with lonesome bachelors, every one of them aching for a woman to cook his meals and warm his bed. Some of these even had visited Hattie, but none ever



went back the second time. She was like a caged animal, they reported. It fair made the hair rise on the back of a body's head to see her glare at a stranger—a male stranger, anyhow.

"Some of you know Mrs. Shintaffer," Tobe was saying. "I admit I done some business with her—sold her that team she's usin' now, for one thing. But I ain't now, nor never have been, on what you'd call close terms with her. Now as to that story—I ain't denyin' that I'm a ordinary male man, not no little tin Jesus." He turned a loose-lipped grin around. "But I wouldn't no more think of techin' that woman, an' I'll tell you why—"

He paused and glanced about, observing with satisfaction how his audience hung on his words.

"Any of you remember Burl Yarbro, the peddler, that used to sell Dr. Turnbull's Prescription for Expectant Mothers, an' Mrs. Spillsbury's Soothing Syrup, an' them other patent drugs? He left here last February. Well, here's what he told me himself:

"Burl, he lives in his wagon, as you all know, an' occasionally he'll get oiled on his own medicines, which is long on alcohol—some of 'em. He told me oncet that you could get a respect'ble jag out'n one bottle of Demonic, the Tonic for Young an' Old. Last Christmas day he'd been a-samplin' his stock purty extensive—Putnam an' Pyle's Painkiller, Dr. Larigo's Stomach Bitters, Golden Miracle System Restorer, an' all—an' he'd got to feelin' irrespons'ble an' gay, when he druv past the Shintaffer place.

"Feelin' that-away, he concluded to turn off an' visit the woman, on account he'd had a feelin' for her for some time. He knocked on the door, an' out she come, a-shettin' the door behind her. Yarbro started honeyin' her, an' wanted to go inside, but the more he wanted the less she'd let him. One thing led to another, until Burl tried to get his arms around her. Yessir, he actually done that, bein' drunk, you see. He got holt of her an' wrassled her down on the ground, I guess. An' jest at that point, he told me, somethin' dretful happened. She fell back, an' commenced a-foamin' at the mouth, an' a-throwin' of herself around, an' kind of squawkin'. Yarbro, he backed off. It turned him cold sober, seein' her throw a fit that-a-way. Why, he wouldn't have teched her with a ten-foot pole after that. Nor I wouldn't. Nor any man wouldn't, that was a gentleman!"

They listened raptly. This was raw, red scandal, a rich morsel.

"Now who do you think would start a lie like that about me?"

Shankle looked about with a kind of triumph in his eye.

"Well, who's the ladies' man at Jericho? Who is it runs the barrel house an' gamblin' joint? Who is it that's took up with that new chippy they brought over from Spearville? I lay them questions before you, gentlemen, to answer for yourselves. It's that kind of a person who'd start a story agin a decent man like me. An' I say further that the polecat who would start a story like that for selfish reasons, to throw a shadow on somebody who might be fitter'n him for the sheriff's office, an' who wouldn't hesitate to drag in the name of a unfortunate pore afflicted female to do it, ain't the kind of a man this County needs!"

A call came from the house, high-pitched and unmusical, broken in two in the middle.

"That there's Miz Phelps callin'," said Tobe briskly, having made his point. "Must be time for the sale to take up again."

### 3.

Shankle led the way from the stable, and Simeon, at the tail of the procession, could hear the comments.

"Tobe's mighty bold with them remarks, don't you think?"

"Yeh. Wonder if he's tellin' the hull truth."

"Mebbe he is, mebbe he ain't. I ain't never seen the Shintaffer woman fer a long time. How's she look?"

"'Bout like a she-coyote."

"Well, you know the sayin': 'Hot as a bitch-wolf in a prairie fire.'"

"Haw, haw! But I wouldn't want to try an' cut this 'un."

"You get the connection of who he's talkin' about startin' the story, don't you?"

"You bet. Any fool would savvy that."

"Think Tobe's mebbe been reinforcin' hisself with the juice of the corn?"

"That might explain it. Sherry Quarternight ain't the man to let anything like that pass if he hears it. Quarternight's tough."

"Extry tough."

"Tougher'n a boot."

It seemed to Simeon, however, that there might be merit in Shankle's accusations, since Quarternight, as a rival candidate for sheriff, was the one person who stood to win by discrediting the Bedestown man. It surprised him, in view of Quarternight's

reputation, that Tobe Shankle, who appeared something less than intrepid, should have come so close to an open accusation. But a minute later, when he stood close to Tobe, he found the surmise he had overheard justified. Shankle reeked of whiskey. This was pot-valiance.

Sentiment of the crowd on this question quite evidently was divided. Some disparaged Shankle, and others disparaged Quarternight. Opinions were not vehemently expressed, nor stated with the bitterness of violent prejudice. The bitterness was to come later. For the present, however, the cleavage was revealed in the main along the familiar lines of support for Bedestown or Jericho, and the Cimarron River was the dividing line.

"Ladies' man," Shankle called Sherry Quarternight. And he referred to "that new chippy from Spearville." Simeon pictured the tall, sleek Texan. And with the picture came also one of the girl in Jericho whom he had seen just once, but whose name was being openly associated now with Sherry Quarternight. Her name, as he remembered it, was Gussie Gosney, and she was bold, hip-swinging, insinuating. Simeon's lips closed in a tight uncompromising line. Indubitably she was bad. Bad women were mysterious and frightening to him, not because he had ever been exposed to them, but because they had the power to capture his imagination in spite of himself. For sheer safety he made it a life habit never, under any circumstances, to have anything whatever to do with them, because he did not know what secret potency they could exert over men to lead them to their downfall.

He lagged behind the crowd, thinking, and as he did so, he saw waiting for him a pair of newcomers, both of whom were regarded sourly by the Bedestown contingent. One of these he knew—Shadrach Spilker, the one-armed, weasel-like Jericho undertaker-coroner. The other man was a stranger—plump, cock-sure, with a high-crowned hat and a long-tailed mohair coat. He had round jaws, a smooth curving mustache and small goatee, and he wore considerable jewelry.

"Simeon, I'd like for you to meet my friend Schuyler Holcomb," said Shad, halting Simeon.

The stranger extended a hand and Simeon took it mechanically—a soft, plump hand, very moist as to the palm, with an elaborate diamond-set Masonic ring on its third finger.

"My card, sir," said Holcomb. "I have the honor of being land agent for the Dodge City, Amarillo & Southwest Railroad Company."

So this sleek stranger was connected with the railroad petitions which were reported in circulation. Anxiously Simeon

glanced around, but the crowd had gone on. Already the men were gathering about Len LeForce, who was extolling the value of a plow about to go under the hammer, at the other side of the farm yard.

"I am informed," said Holcomb suavely, "that you, sir, are one of the progressive and substantial citizens of this district. From what I have learned of you, sir, you're the kind of a man who is always a leader in the community. A leader, sir, in every movement for the public good. Have you, by any chance, considered the proposed railroad bond election—"

"I ain't interested," said Simeon. He wanted nothing to do with this controversial subject. Besides he was anxious to get to the bidding. The bull-tongue might be next on the list.

"Just one moment, Mr. Trudge," said Holcomb, laying a detaining hand on Simeon's arm and dropping his voice confidentially. "I am wondering if you've heard anything about the projected right-of-way."

"No," said Simeon shortly.

"Now don't quote me. But from what I've seen of you, I have taken a liking to you, sir. Therefore I'm going to take you into the strictest confidence. Mind, the survey hasn't been made yet. But I will tell you—not to be revealed to a soul, remember—that the best location for a bridge across the Cimarron River is right where the present ford is. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Simeon shook his head, but now his mind was beginning to move rapidly.

"Then let me suggest, sir, that you look over that layout. Why man, as I figure it, it would bring the right-of-way directly across your farm to Jerichol!"

With a startled sensation, Simeon considered this piece of information. Why—it meant money, important money, to him. If, as Holcomb hinted, the railroad should cross his land, it would mean damages—right-of-way damages. And damages meant cash. He had heard of men who got as much as twenty-five thousand dollars for railroad rights-of-way across their farms. His apathy to the railroad bond issue vanished.

"I'd like to have you consider it, sir," Holcomb was saying in his purring voice. "As a public-spirited citizen—"

"I—I have considered it," said Simeon, almost stammering. "I've thought for a long time that Blair County never would amount to nothin' until it had a—a railroad."

"Ah!" Holcomb's tone was gratified, and yet speculative. "I would have expected as much, sir, from a man of your evident qualities. You have, I take it then, considered carefully the

advantages to this community of the building of the D.C.&A. line through here? In that case you must have realized how necessary it is to pass the bonds to insure the coming of the railroad in this direction."

Simeon nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"By the way, have you signed the petition, sir? No? If you would care to step down to my buggy . . ."

Simeon, his hand trembling, found himself signing at the bottom of a long sheet of legal-cap paper, with close writing at the top. A moment later he was shaking hands with Holcomb, while Shad Spilker grinned, the drop of moisture at the end of his nose threatening imminently to fall off.

"This here's a good day's work, Simeon," Shad said eagerly. "The railroad's bound to come. You'll be better off an' so will the whole County—"

In a daze Simeon listened. He was already beginning to be afraid of what he had done—he had acted on impulse and he might soon regret it—by affixing his signature to a petition which might result in serious complications. He wanted to get away from the men who had led him into this danger. Their company was distasteful. In the distance he distinguished LeForce's voice:

"Now, folks, this here's one of the choice items of the day. This bull-tongue's near to new. Used only one season. Did I hear someone say ten dollars?"

"I gotta be going—" said Simeon to Spilker, anxious to escape.

"One last thing, my friend," came Holcomb's smooth voice. "Now that you've signed, you become in effect a member of the newly organized Blair County Booster and Railroad Improvement Association. It's non-incorporated, non-profit, and benevolent. There's no dues. We're holding an organization meeting in a few days at Matassarin's Blacksmith shop in Jericho. We'd like to count on you coming—"

"Well, I suppose—"

"Fine! It's settled then. We'll notify you. You've increased greatly your stature in Blair County, if I may say so, Mr. Trudge. My congratulations. Until we meet again, then, good-bye, sir."

Simeon almost stumbled away toward the direction from which LeForce's voice, rising and falling, rolled the pattering auctioneer's song. He pushed his way into the crowd and made a bid on the bull-tongue. He bid again and again, his thoughts confused. With only one part of his mind he heard the auctioneer's voice. With another he was thinking of the railroad bond petition, and the thought was unnerving, yet he saw for

the first time that it built in him a curious mounting excitement. Absently he raised the bidding again and again until he heard the bull-tongue being knocked down to him. Twenty dollars. More than he had planned.

Much more.

#### 4.

Long dusty hours ended, and the last article on the Phelps place had been sold by Len LeForce. The old couple was assured of enough money to buy passage back to Springfield, Missouri, where relatives of presumably charitable instincts awaited, but little more. The land was going back to Henry Archelaus, and Simeon made his arrangements to dispatch his hired man over for the bull-tongue the following day. He was still vexed at the price he had permitted himself to pay for it.

The crowd broke up and in heterogeneous array departed, driven out from the farm by a centrifugal force, now that the attracting force of the sale was abated. Gary slipped back into the house to speak to Carrie Phelps. The old woman was tight-lipped, pale, defiant.

"I just wanted to know if there was something I could do—" began Gary.

"Go along with you," interrupted the old woman harshly. "You got what you wanted, didn't you? Everybody got what they wanted. Emma Wessel, she got what she wanted, too. She set around on that fat bottom of hern an' waited till the time come. Forty-five cents for my coffee urn! An' her claimin' to be a friend!"

Gary saw no good was to be achieved here. The old woman was too hurt, too bitter. For the time being everyone who had attended the sale was an enemy to be hated. Gary retreated, her heart filled with pain, knowing how the reaction would come and how Carrie Phelps, when everyone was gone, would look about her at the emptiness and collapse slowly into grief and despair.

When Gary emerged from the house, Simeon was sitting impatiently in the buggy. He was angry with Ranny. The child, worn out from the long day, was fretful. That raveled Simeon's already fraying nerves.

"Shut your head!" he shouted, with violence that scared the whimper right out of Ranny. When Gary reached the buggy,

the child was silent, but his brown eyes were welling with tears.

She climbed in and lifted Ranny into her lap. The tension of the atmosphere was evident, so she said nothing, merely cradling her little son's head against her breast as Simeon slapped old John with the reins and swung out into the road.

Simeon was silent. Never in his life had he thought so hard as he was thinking now. A new, somewhat menacing situation faced him. He began to realize how he had been cajoled into signing that petition, when he had said he never would sign it. And he began to wonder. How much truth was there to the suggestion that the railroad would cross his farm? He remembered now how very carefully Holcomb had hedged every statement he made. *Don't quote me. Mind, the survey hasn't been made. As I figure it, directly across your farm.* Not a straight-out statement in the lot.

But with this, to his astonishment, he discovered a new determination growing in him, something almost unknown and foreign. For once there was a clear decision ahead. He forced upon his own mind a desperate belief in the railroad and what it would do for him, and rigorously banished his skepticism of a moment before. Almost deliberately he refused to admit to himself the possibility that the railroad might not cross his farm at all. It was as if he had committed himself to a gamble in which he had placed all his stakes, and was now prepared to see it through blindly to the end, regardless of consequences.

If the railroad were built across his farm he would profit greatly from the "damage money," and the land would not be injured much, being as good as before—save for the narrow strip of right-of-way. Meantime, he began taking into consideration the resentments which might be aroused over the position he had taken, and found himself almost defiant. If he was not strong and aggressive, Simeon had at least the quality frequently found in weak natures. He was stubborn.

Gary, beside him, did not know what had come over Simeon, why he was so silent. She waited until she judged he had time to have recovered from whatever irritation her delay at Carrie Phelps' might have caused, and tried a conversational feeler.

"Tobe Shankle was there, wasn't he?" she asked.

He grunted.

"The women were saying Sherry Quarternight started some kind of a story about him."

He glowered at her. "Tobe never mentioned Sherry's name.

He done a lot of talkin', an' he'd been drinkin'. A drunk man ain't responsible."

Gary became curious. "What was it they were telling about Shankle?" she asked.

"Tain't fitten for a woman's ears," he said shortly.

And that was all she could get out of him. But her question had set his mind to picturing vividly the scene described by Shankle at the isolated Shintaffer soddy, the day Burl Yarbrow, the drunken medicine peddler, came. It filled him with violent curiosity and at the same time incomprehensible loathing. He disliked dwelling on it, and here Gary had brought it up and virtually forced him to turn the whole disturbing matter over again in his mind.

"Oh, well," she said at length, half to herself, "I guess I can find out—"

Suddenly his anger flamed. This was defiance of him, this going on with a subject he desired closed—and actually threatening to go outside him for information he did not wish to give.

"Good! You go ahead an' find out," he sneered. "I guess you can do it easy enough. I guess you won't have to go very far!" Gary turned quickly to him as if to see into him.

"What do you mean?" Her voice contained sharp, unbelieving protest. She *had* seen into his mind.

"What do you mean?" he mimicked, mincingly, raising his voice to a ridiculous falsetto.

She went silent, her profile to him now, her eyes fixed ahead, cold and hurt. And all at once his pent rage burst forth.

"I know what you're a-hintin'!" he snarled. "I know who you'll get to tell you. Well, you don't need to hint—not no more! I ain't no utter fool. I can see a plain thing before my nose!"

"Mr. Trudgel!"

"Don't you Mr. Trudge me! I seen you, I tell you! Sneakin' out when you thought I wasn't watchin'—I seen you from the place you never thought of—top of the windmill tower! I seen you stoppin' an' talkin' an' honeyin' around! Demeanin' yourself. *Demeanin'*—with a man that ain't nothin' more than a pauper an' a tramp! I seen you—an' the only thing I'm wonderin' is how long this filthy thing has been goin' on, an' what you been doin'—you, my lawful, wedded wife, that promised to love, honor, an' obey, an' cherish in sickness an' in health till death do us part—sneakin' behind my back like a lyn', treacherous harlot—"



He had lost control of himself, but he suddenly hesitated and stopped.

Gary stared at him stunned. She could think of nothing to say, nor did she really wish to say anything. The injustice, the utter monumental injustice, crushed her. She drew over in a knot, staring unbelieving, wounded beyond any power of expression.

Simeon looked at her, sitting with the uncomprehending child in her arms. Suddenly there came conviction. He had been *wrong*. Gary was not guilty of the things of which he had accused her. What had he done to her . . . to himself?

She had drawn far over on her side of the buggy. Her face was averted now, and she placed a hand on Ranny's head, pulling the child's face down to her breast. Simeon could not see her, but he knew she was crying in the dusk—crying deep inside of her, not sobbing or weeping, but breaking far within, her tears being of the soul and infinitely more poignant than any tears of the surface.

He said no more. The steady thud of the old horse's hoofs on the dirt road, the slight rattle of the buggy, the sudden clear evening trill of a field sparrow by the roadside, quiet and filled with its infinite sadness—these and the all-pervading freshness of the oncoming prairie night came to his senses without his noticing them. He sat silent. Grimly, stubbornly silent.

## 5.

The next few days Til deliberately threw himself into his work and stayed away from the house. Something was wrong; what it was he had no way of telling. Simeon was glum and sour as an old boar, and Til was getting mightily weary of him. The farmer spoke rarely but when he did speak there was a sharp rasp to his voice which made Till's hackles rise in antagonism.

So the hired man stayed away from the house as much as he could, keeping hard at the sod-busting, and obtaining some satisfaction out of the way the little red mules were working. He had at last taken the edge off them and although they still chewed their bits and clamped their shaved tails down hard on their shrinking bottoms, they displayed far less of the tendency to start and shy which had made him so careful of

them at first. Given time he would have a splendid team in those mules. His pride in them grew almost to affection—the feeling many a man has had toward the wild creatures he has tamed and taught to work for and with him.

Gary was even more silent these days. Til watched her come and go, and something about her levied powerfully on his pity. The pity created in him a kind of mild rage; the rage a man feels when he sees something of which he is fond in need of pity, and when there is nothing he can do about it.

He would have spoken to Gary; in fact he almost obeyed the impulse to do so, once or twice. But he hardly knew how to begin, and moreover he was fairly certain that she would welcome no questions of his, much less give him any information. This was a personal matter of some kind, which her nature prevented her from sharing with anyone. She was driving herself wilfully, her whole life turning on the work her hands could do, as if she sought refuge from thinking.

But there were times when thinking could not be banished entirely—when she had to sit at sewing or peeling of vegetables, or when she stood at her table and kneaded the dough for her bread. At such times Gary could have cried out for an idiot's vacant mind.

The accusation Simeon had made was a mortal hurt. If there was one thing on which she had leaned in pride and assurance, a thing to uphold her in life, a thing right and good and praiseworthy, it was her unassailed and unassailable position as a wife.

*The heart of her husband trusteth in her . . .*

But Gary's husband did not trust.

The ground was cut out from under her feet. At times she searched blindly for support to re-establish her confidence. Til came into her consideration. Unwillingly, but inevitably so. There were times when she longed to have him say something to her—and when she would be utterly terrified by the thought that such a thing *might* occur.

She conceived that it was utterly unthinkable that Til would say anything—and yet, examining the thought a little wildly, it seemed to her that a kindness from him would be sweet. He was so strong; and she needed strength.

But she was alone. Her emotional upheaval shook her usually fine balance. Little things went wrong and had a power to disturb her as never before.

One day she found herself on her knees, hugging the weeping Ranny to her breast in a passion of self-blame. She had just slapped him.

Oh, baby, baby, she thought. And now I'm taking this out on you . . .

It was that very evening that Til came straight to the point with Simeon.

"I want my time," he said.

It was after supper. They had just risen from the table. Gary heard it with an inward leap of passionate dissent.

But Simeon seemed strangely complacent.

"Whut's the matter, Tilford? You got any complaints?" he asked.

He knew what the complaints were, if Til were to voice them—extra work, extra chores at night, a Sunday in which the hired man was kept working a full day, that slight of being left at home on the day of the Phelps sale, many things intangible.

But Simeon knew Til Rector would not state his complaints.

"I finished the sod-busting," the young man said. "I aimed to quit when I done that. Things don't suit me."

"Tilford," said Simeon, "you don't mean to tell me that you're leavin' me—right now, with the harvest startin' in a couple of days?"

It was a masterly reply. By it he jockeyed Til into the position of appearing to be doing an injustice, of taking advantage of a bad situation. It exactly suited Simeon.

Til thought it over. Mad as it made him, there was nothing much he could do about it. He had been outgeneralled.

"I'll stay with you over harvest if you want it," he said at last, unwillingly and harshly.

A secret look of triumph was in Simeon's eye.

## NINE

### 1.

UNRUFFLED BY the currents of conflicting emotion which played above his undiscerning curly head, Ranny Trudge went about his small affairs serenely. Much was toward on the farm. He observed the mounting preparations for the climactic days of the summer—the wheat harvest.

Til drove over to Wessel's and borrowed a header-barge, a curious contraption of the plains country, something akin to a hayrack but with one high side and the other low, the latter to accommodate the elevator of the heading machine, which was devised and adapted especially for cutting the short wheat of the plains farms. The heading machine, or header, was an outgrowth of necessity. Wheat would grow on the high plains—in some seasons at least—but drought and poor land limited its height so that at times it was virtually impossible to bind it, because of the shortness of the straw. The header was a combination of mower and reaper. Its ten or twelve-foot sickle cut the heads off the grain; a great reel caught the severed straw and wheat heads, causing them to fall on an endless canvas belting which carried them up the elevator, from which they were discharged into the header-barge which was driven alongside the machine.

Two barges worked with a single header. Each barge had a crew of two men, and these alternated at driving and loading. When one barge was filled, the other took its place with the

header, while the first drove to the stack to pitch the golden masses of wheat on the stack, where the stacker, an expert in handling the loose, sliding masses of straw, managed skilfully to build his substantial mound.

Simeon had an interest in the header, which was owned jointly by several farmers, being kept at Wessel's, as a central point. He employed extra "hands" for the length of time necessary to cut his quarter section of thin wheat.

Meantime Gary made ready still further to extend her labors. Harvest hands must be fed, and are proverbial for the voracity of their appetites, and Simeon had not even considered providing her with extra help. This was owing not so much to niggardliness as to his obliviousness of her problems and needs. From long before daylight to far after night she toiled at a speed which represented an acceleration even beyond her former exertions, and because of this there was even less time in which she could amuse her small son.

Ranny lived close to the ground. His little fat legs were very short and his brown curly head was no more than three feet higher than his bare toes. At first he hung about the house, but he found that his mother was too busy to devote time to him. She never told him stories these days. His father, moreover, was much about the place, and was to be avoided since his temper seemed perpetually bad.

One noon Ranny heard talk at the dinner table that harvest would begin the following morning. The Wessels and others would be over early. Ranny sensed excitement and doings of great moment.

But nobody could spare time to talk to him, so after the meal he wandered out into the hot afternoon to seek amusement. In his world all small things were magnified. A low place by the watering tank, where the water had run out and stood in a muddy pool, became a lake with the blue sky reflected in it. The pokeweed bushes on its border were a forest of trees. Ranny delighted in imaginings. Lying on his small round belly, he rested his chin on his chubby hands and pretended that a pokeweed was a tall and stately cottonwood, the ants at its base cattle and horses, and the gnats in its foliage birds.

An hour was consumed down by the stable, where Ranny watched the antics of a tumble bug, rolling its round ball of dung laboriously through the dry buffalo grass. The persistence of the creature amazed him; also what it possibly could desire of the noisome globule of manure.

Next he rolled under the corral fence and investigated a small gully which cut across the edge of the pasture nearest

the barn. To him it was a mighty canyon with precipitous sides, and the exploration of it a high adventure.

It was hot in the little ravine, and presently he sat down to rest. Even for a four-year-old, Ranny was dreamy beyond most children. He was timid, not easily won. In the presence of Simeon he became silent, lurking out of sight where possible, a fact which Simeon recognized and resented. On the other hand, with Til Ranny was shy and adoring. Sometimes he would find the big hired man down at the stable and trot at his heels at his favorite pursuit of question-asking. And Til, with humor and patience, would lift him up to harvest eggs out of a hen's nest high on the hayrick, or pull to pieces the burrs of the bull-nettle, showing how the individual segments appeared to be miniature buffalo skulls, with tiny horns, nose and hump. With no one but Gary did Ranny fully unfold, and this only when they were alone. He had been given plenty of opportunity to create a world of his own, and in that world he dwelt most of the time.

Down in the bottom of the little canyon now, he could hear the whining of a small swarm of gnats, and feel the refraction of the heat from the sun on the bare walls of the dry wash. It made him sleepy and he decided the place was too warm.

Trudging along the bottom of the ravine he came at last to a washed-out place where a small pool of stagnant water stood. There he paused to watch two water skaters and wonder at the manner in which they walked on the surface of the water without breaking through. The feats of the striders eventually grew monotonous and he climbed out of the draw at its lower end and trotted on down deeper in the pasture.

As he went along, Ranny hummed to himself, stopping to poke with a dry iron-weed stem into the hole of a striped ground squirrel. The squirrel emerged from the ground at a point where its labyrinthine burrow opened at another entrance, many feet away, and sat watching him, bolt upright, bright deer-like eyes alert, twittering its birdlike whistle.

Having explored the hole as far as his stick and patience would permit, Ranny presently rose to his feet and resumed his journey. Now he came to a rank growth of prairie milkweed. Once he had found there a bird's nest. It was an empty nest, to be sure, but he had been able to see where the bird had sat, and the pieces of whitish, brown-spotted eggshell from which the small birds had hatched. With a child's wisdom, Ranny understood about the hatching of eggs. He had witnessed the process when a clutch of hen's eggs one day came to life before his startled and delighted eyes, the shells breaking, and the little balls of cheeping fluff coming forth.

Kicking at the milkweeds and trying to find a pod which had ripened enough to furnish cotton down, he wandered on through the tangle.

Suddenly he halted stock-still.

Never in his short life had Ranny seen anything like that which lay quietly along the ground just ahead of him. It was longer than he, and wonderfully shaped. He noticed how its flattened body cupped into the every hollow of the ground, avoiding a clump of spiny prickly-pear here, pouring across a small bare space there; and how the brown spots regularly mottled the sinuous back.

A snake; and a child. Motionless the two eyed each other.

The big rattler was old and experienced. He had come down into this pasture to hunt ground squirrels, it being a favorite hunting ground of his. The snake did not know fear. In the past he had occasionally felt the jar of heavy feet near him, and had shrunk back to avoid being trampled by heedless horses or cows, but always in his experience, all creatures which saw him gave him immediate wide berth.

His eyesight, like the sight of all snakes, was bad; and so he had never seen human beings to recognize them. This assuredly was the first time he had been close to one. What the creature before him was he did not exactly know, but there was nothing in his cold heart but confidence in the poison sacs at the roots of his striking fangs, making him contemptuous of all other living creatures.

The child knew no fear, either. Charmed by the beauty of the reptile, Ranny took a step forward, then another. And suddenly the supple gleaming thing on the ground made a sharp, menacing movement. All in a single whipping motion, the rattlesnake shifted from an extended prone position, to that of a coiled spring.

The loops of his body arched back, his flat ugly head poised slightly crooked on his slender neck, and the tip of his tail rasped angrily with the long dry warning rattle, as his tongue flickered out of his mouth like a tiny streak of black lightning.

Ranny was at the snake's mercy. Not two feet from the broad arrow-shaped head with the darting tongue, was the child's plump leg.

Some instinct now for the first time congealed him into a terror-stricken little statue. Fear swept over him in a horrible wave—fear of the inexplicable; fear of death which he knew not, but which he suddenly saw coiled on the ground so very close to him.

Had he moved, death would have found him inexorably at that moment. But behind him a voice spoke:

*"Ranny, stand perfectly still."*

Calm voice. Unexcited voice. Voice with authority and certitude.

Ranny obeyed the voice.

## 2.

Gary was frightened and worried. Ranny was gone. She had called for him, then searched for him—down around the barn and wherever she could think. She could not find him. Simeon was no help. He was only exasperated by the nuisance caused.

Coming in from Wessel's with one of the header-barges, Til put his team away and went to the house to find Gary pale and distraught.

"I've looked everywhere," she said, after telling him that Ranny was missing.

"He ain't gone very far," said Simeon bitterly. "Wait'll he gets hungry. He'll soon show up."

This failed to reassure Gary. She acted as Til never had seen her act, looking about wildly. He slapped his dusty hat against his leg.

"I'll take an' give a look for him," he said. "You looked around the barn?"

She assured him that she had, but Til decided to try once more anyway. Ranny was not in the barn, he soon discovered, and he stepped out into the corral. Perhaps the child was asleep somewhere in a fence corner. He went to the gate of the corral and cast an eye over the pasture to locate old Egypt, if she was in sight. It was then he saw, a furlong or so down the pasture, the bobbing head of the wandering small adventurer.

Til grinned. He would go down, overtake Ranny, and bring him home on his shoulder, rather than shouting at him. Perhaps he might even take the little fellow pick-a-back and go hunt the cow. That was a supreme delight to Ranny.

With long strides Til started across the buffalo grass. Ranny had gone into a clump of milkweeds which grew almost to his shoulders. Suddenly Til saw the child stop short and stare at something on the ground in front of him.

Til lengthened his stride, his face growing taut with fear. A moment more and he saw . . .



The rattlesnake was coiled ready to strike, its eyes glassy, and the man's aversion for the snake brought the goose flesh crawling on his arms. The creature was loathsome, the coils, the flat bloated body, the deadly head. Ranny stood gazing at it with a queer birdlike fascination.

Til spoke. Into his voice he tried to put every bit of assurance, every bit of authority, he could summon.

*"Ranny, stand perfectly still."*

His heart was in his throat as he said it. What if the child, startled by his voice, moved? Ranny's body tightened, but he obeyed. That was Til behind him, speaking, and Ranny trusted. Sturdily he stood, with his small face serious, facing the horror on the ground.

Til knew that what was to be done must be done quickly. Ranny would not stay in that frozen position for long. Even if the youngster did remain stationary there was no telling when the head of the snake, poised intent, ready to destroy, might lash forward.

Til's glance whipped about him. Anything—a stick, a stone even. Buffalo grass and lush, soft milkweed stems were all he saw.

He could think of only one thing to do, and he did it. He leaped—high in the air. Down he came, his heels stabbing at the center of those twisted, convoluted coils. If the snake bit Ranny, Ranny would die—that was the single thought in Til's mind as he leaped.

The snake flattened suddenly, its ugly triangle head shifting. But the heavy boot heels landed, and on top of them was the one hundred and seventy pounds of Til's muscular weight.

Back shot the livid head, a forked streak up the man's leg. Shattered, back broken, the rattlesnake turned over and over, the sickly gray belly making kaleidoscopic changes with the mottled back.

But in that moment Til had felt a deadly flash of pain.

He stamped the reptile head in the ground and seized Ranny in his arms.

He was snake-bit. The rattler had found him on the right ankle, just above the top of the elkskin shoe.

Queer how it had happened. It didn't pain so much—just a frightening sting. But he knew the venom was in his veins.

At first Til did not even stop to look at the wound. He wanted help; wanted it almighty bad. With Ranny in his arms he started half-running toward the house. But before he had taken twenty steps he felt the growing numbness.

He stopped, set Ranny on the ground, and rolled up the leg

of his overalls. There were the two tiny holes. Blood had been in them, but they were turning black already, and about them the flesh was beginning to swell and puff horribly.

With a strong jerk Til ripped up his overalls leg and tore from it a broad strip of the canvas-like fabric. Around and around he bound it, tightly as he could, just above the knee, twisting the knot with a piece of stick to stop the flow of blood.

Then he stumbled on. He did not try to carry Ranny now. He felt sick and weak. Ranny followed, running.

A dreadful nausea swept over Til and the earth swam.

Dimly he saw faces. Gary's face. Simeon's face. Their lips moved and their voices came. What is it? What is wrong? What's happened?

"I'm snake-bit," he croaked.

"Big worm look at me an' Til jump on it," came Ranny's explanatory treble.

"Snake? Rattlesnake?" Disbelief, then belief, finally horror flashed in succession over Gary's face.

"We've got to get him to the house. Mr. Trudge, take his other arm. We've got to get him to the house!"

Til could not travel fast any longer. The numbness was climbing to his knee and he knew by that his leg was swelling terribly.

Snake-bit. To be snake-bit after all these years and all his care. The hundreds of snakes he had seen and avoided. His horror of them. And now to be bitten by a snake after all . . .

Another great spasm of vertigo overcame him. They had reached the corral gate. He halted, gripping the gate post with clammy hands while he fought the sickness.

He heard Simeon say helplessly: "What'll we do? If we only had a madstone. I knew a woman in Indianny had a madstone—"

Gary's voice, decisive and tinged with a strange new authority cut sharply across this futility:

"Hitch up the buggy and go for help. Go to Wessel's. Emma Wessel knows a lot about sickness. Maybe she knows what to do about snake-bite."

Strange how instinctively she turned to practical, experienced Emma Wessel. But Simeon hesitated.

"The Wessels," he said, "what they got that we ain't?"

"Don't you waste a single second!" said the same strangely authoritative voice.

Simeon went, and Gary half-supported, half-dragged Til to the house.

Once more vertigo twisted his bowels. When it was over,

Til perceived that this time he had vomited, his shirt front and overalls bib all covered. Then he was lying down. On a bed. His own bed.

He lay half-conscious and someone was working over him. Gary. His overalls came off and he did not care. A quilt covered him.

Gary said something aloud to herself: "I've got to get off that shoe. The foot's swelled until it fills it clear up."

She was gone for a minute, and back. Rip, rip. Knife edge, severing whang-leather shoe strings. The shoe came off and after that the sock.

To Til's dim perception the leg now felt like a stick of wood, a monstrous, misshapen stick. He knew it was puffed up, diseased, like one of the bloated prairie fungous growths that came out sometimes after a rain.

"Lie quiet, now," he heard Gary say. "Don't do anything to stir up your blood. Help is coming. You must lie quiet."

He obeyed. He had no volition of his own. Aeons passed and then outside he heard the rattle of a buggy driven fast.

Emma Wessel's voice: "Hand me that basket. It's got the whiskey."

Simeon, scandalized: "Whiskey? In *my* house?"

And Emma: "Yes, you jack-fool! Whiskey's the one thing that's good for snake-bite. Get out of my way an' show me where he's at."

Now she was lumbering in the room, seeming half to fill it with her bulk. Her pudgy fingers pressed at his leg's pudgy swelling.

"Right here—h-m-m-m. Hold me a light!"

Light glimmered. Til felt it shine through his closed eyelids.

After a moment: "Thought so. A piece of the fang's caught in there. It's got to come out, an' no doctor this side of Jerichol Ach, what a country to live in. Well, only one thing to do. I should have to butcher it out. Gary, your sharpest knifel"

Quick step gone from the room. Quick step back.

Can you do it? Can you do it? Concern and fear in the questions, firm determination in the reply.

Emma's voice again: "Simeon, you go out an' get me a handful of them sharp yucca points. Run now. There's a clump right by the place where the road turns in. I marked it. You get me them yuccas an' hurry!"

Simeon was gone, and Emma's bulk was leaning over the bed.

"Til, you hear me?"

"Yes." Whisper.

"I got to cut you, Til. Ach, it's goin' to hurt. Can you stand it?"

"Yes." Barely an exhalation.

He was like a child in the vast woman's hands. Her arm slid back of his shoulders, lifting him. Whiskey. He had not tasted it for a long time . . .

His eyes flickered open. Simeon's face was back at the foot of the bed, disapproval strong upon it; Gary's face was nearer, mirroring concern and fear. Emma's face was above him, the moon-fatness of it moist with sweat and tight with concentration. Against his lips was the open mouth of the bottle.

Gulp, gulp. Fiery liquid swirled through his system, a comet of internal sensation dragging its endless tail of burning behind it. Whiskey came too fast and he pushed it aside, coughing, the sour wetness of it all over his face.

He felt like retching; suddenly he didn't feel like retching. Somehow the bite of the alcohol had numbed his sickness, expunged it from the core of him, where it had coiled before.

"Take more," Emma was commanding.

Too dazed to question, he obeyed. Again the fiery, strangling gulps. The bottle was gone. His stomach felt a little warmth here before was only loathly sickness.

"Where'd you put them yuccas, Simeon?" demanded Emma. "On the chair? Hand them here. You, Gary, fetch some coal ile. Simeon, you hold that leg."

Til felt the big woman turn her immense rump to him, the butcher knife in her hand.

Sharp, searing anguish shot through his leg. Then he relaxed. After all it didn't hurt so much.

Emma spoke: "There. It's out. See that liddle tush? Ach, he couldn't never get well whilst it was in. Ain't that blood black, though! Always it turns that way in snake-bite—dead blood, where the poison's been at it. Gimme some rags. Now, Gary, you got that kerosene?"

Another long pull for Til at the whiskey bottle. Suddenly sharp lancets punctured his flesh. Wielding the yucca spears as a handful of daggers, Emma stabbed again and again at the wound and the swollen leg, stabbing and striking with all her strength. Black blood ran in oily ooze from many holes at once.

"Now, Gary, the coal ile." The smell of it was in the air, and the burning of it in his wounds.

Blackness swept over Til Rector and he knew nothing more.

### 3.

With dreadful monotonous regularity his foot and leg throbbed. Each beat of his heart was a hammer blow at the anguished mass. He sought to move it, and it did not stir.

He opened his eyes.

It was night. The yellow light from the little kerosene lamp beat back against the darkness, but it could not illumine the far corners of the room where the harness nets and the potato sacks were. Somebody sat beside the bed.

Through thick lips he said feebly: "Where's Mrs. Wessel?" "Gone." The voice was Gary's. "Lie still."

Once more sickness swirled over him and he retched weakly. "Whiskey," he mumbled.

She brought it, and its fiery impact seemed to settle his stomach. Again consciousness slipped away.

The experience seemed to repeat itself. This time it was a different face which bent over him when he awoke. Lean face with white goat beard and glasses. Doctor Morse. Hippocrates Morse of Jericho.

"I say that he'll make it," said the goat beard. "With all that whiskey it's a wonder, though. The whiskey, in my professional opinion, is worse than the snake-bite. Where'd the Wessel woman get her treatment of yucca daggers and kerosene? I've heard that the Mexicans use it in the Nueces country of Texas. This tourniquet has served its purpose. I'll take it off. It'll make him more comfortable."

Fingers fumbled and a great stricture eased. Needle prickles of a restoring circulation crept down the leg. The throbbing became all at once less severe.

"I'll look in again tomorrow." The old doctor shambled out.

Another period of blankness. This time when he knew his surroundings it was Simeon sitting at his bedside. Light was breaking. From the kitchen came a smell of cooking food. Gary entered with a pitcher.

"Milk," she told him. "The doctor says warm milk."

He was propped up and some of the milk was forced between his lips.

Immediately his gorge rose. The milk cascaded to the floor.

"Let him rest," said Gary's compassionate voice. "We can try again a little later."

Cool, smooth fingers, a grateful pressure, were on his heated forehead.

"Why?" Til heard Simeon's complaining voice. "Why did this have to happen? With harvest startin' today—"

Gary interrupted fiercely: "*Don't you realize that he did it—knowing it was going to happen—for Ranny?*"

How did she know that, Til wondered. He had not told her. Nobody had told her.

But his mind was too numbed to concern itself. He lay back on his pillow and his consciousness once more departed from him.

Long afterward he heard someone moving about the room and opened his eyes, dragging the lids back from them slowly, drugged, his mind reluctantly rousing from the sluggish numbness.

An ache compounded of all the aches that ever crushed and macerated human nerves pounded at his brain.

Til allowed his eyelids to close, and groaned. Coolness pressed on his forehead. A damp cloth. He opened his eyes again. Gary was bending over him.

"How are you this morning?" she asked.

His gaze turned slowly to the window. It was broad day. But the mere effort of shifting his gaze created a new and tearing anguish in his head and he closed his eyes once more.

"My head," he said thickly. "My head . . ."

"Lie still," said Gary's voice, vibrant and kind.

After a time she asked a question: "Do you feel like eating something?"

He did not. Violent illness still possessed his stomach.

"I guess . . . it was the . . . whiskey," he muttered.

She laughed, and it was a fine thing to hear.

"You've been awful sick," she said. "Doc Morse says nobody but a young giant would have come through it. I—we thought you might not make it for awhile. And that would have been too—too awful—after what . . . you've done."

At the catch in her voice he opened his eyes wide and gazed at her in astonishment. She sounded as if she were going to cry. But she rose quickly.

"I chatter like a magpie," she said. "And I have to get dinner for the harvest crew. You must take a little chicken soup. I'll bring it."

And now through the open window he heard the distant dry rattle of the header. He had not noticed it before. The wheat cutting had started then.

And he was not with them. It would be long before he could do any hard work.

## TEN

### 1.

EVENTS SOMETIMES are predicated on the nature of the day. Often a brave, high, buoyant day is a day of great deeds and great dreams. A soft and smiling day soothes the ragged edges of the soul. A fierce, stormy day may give inspiration out of the conflict that pulls and tears at it.

This, however, was such a day as only western Kansas could produce. The wind had started at dawn, gathering heat as the day progressed. Long before noon it was blowing steadily, a searing edge gathered from a thousand miles of sun-blasted plains and cactus flats, with never a lake or a grove of trees to cool it.

Sherry Quarternight tucked a dotted blue handkerchief inside his collar, and straightened up in his saddle.

He was on his way to Bedestown. And he had little stomach for his mission, which was to arrest Dilly Capehart, the editor of the *Bedestown Weekly Argus*, on a bench warrant issued by Judge Tiberius Comingo, assessing against the said Capehart sundry charges of contempt of the august district court of Blair County.

It was, Sherry reflected, easy enough for Tiberius Comingo to issue a warrant like that. He was perfectly safe behind his bench in the court house at Jericho, growling. "Go over and bring in Dilly Capehart."

The order sounded far more simple than the execution was likely to be. Dilly Capehart, to be sure, was an inoffensive

fellow, no more formidable than a prairie dog. Under some circumstances it might have given Sherry a little amusement to browbeat Capehart, whom he did not like. With the right kind of a reputation, browbeating people was not difficult. As a matter of fact, men seemed quite eager to browbeat themselves.

A Texan who bore a faint hint of death about him could walk into a well-filled room and observe an immediate diminution in the noise of conversation. Quarternight, silent on his past but knowing the talk about him, saw that all men were scrupulously polite to him, and that in some company he even received a hero-worshipping sort of adulation. He was well-advertised as Jericho's "fightin' man." Thus far nobody had challenged his championship.

But these considerations did not down the uneasiness which tickled his chest now. Nervously the marshal felt for the twentieth time inside his coat and fingered the crooked handle of the revolver in its armpit holster. Any one of the men who had daily doings with him in Jericho might have been astounded at what was going on in his mind . . . with the possible exception of Henry Archelaus, who seemed to have the power to look very deeply into a man.

Sherry Quarternight, for all his expressionless face, was on the verge of a blue funk as he rode toward Bedestown. He did not want to make this raid. He had been, he felt, trapped into doing so, and he could not back out of it. It had almost seemed to him that he detected a sardonic glint in the slitted eyes of Henry Archelaus when the townsite man arranged matters in such wise that Sherry was forced to accept the duty of making the arrest of Capehart—or welsh on his reputation.

Sherry put down a sudden strong desire to turn back. This was not merely to be Sherry Quarternight against Dilly Capehart. It might very easily be Sherry Quarternight against all of Bedestown, and he disliked to think of that contingency.

The Cimarron ford already was far behind him and the ugly cluster of buildings which was Bedestown was just ahead. Sherry began a confused consideration of how he was going to accomplish the task he had been set to do.

Here alone with himself on the prairie, he could admit a fact of which he was most anxious to keep his Jericho associates in ignorance. Sherry Quarternight was afraid. This law-enforcement was not only pleasureless to him—but he was not fitted for it, by experience or bent. He had been marshal of Jericho for some months, it is true, but had encountered no serious difficulties. Scarcely, indeed, had he been under the necessity of raising his voice. There was the charivari incident—and it



was notable that the drunks rapidly sobered when they saw the approach of the marshal. In this manner the killer reputation and the bizarre garb he wore served Quarternight well.

He observed now that Bedestown's main street was wider than Jericho's—as wide as the landscape, in fact, for the business buildings stood only along its west side, leaving the east side to spread on clear to the horizon. Front Street, this was named, because the town literally fronted on it. A dozen frame structures with the inevitable false fronts and commercial signs straggled along the curious thoroughfare. One building only was of two stories. It had four huge letters painted above its upper windows: I.O.O.F. Sherry remembered that as one more token of the schism between the towns, Bedestown ran to Odd Fellows, whereas Jericho was strong on Elks and Masons.

In that part of the hamlet behind the Front Street stores, some twenty dwellings and barns huddled, facing in every direction without plan or order, topped by a handful of sentinel windmills. That was Bedestown, and as Quarternight approached it, he noted with relief that not even a lounging loafer was visible on any of the store platforms. This was why he had chosen late morning for his arrival. The farmers would not yet be in town for shopping, and since the sun beat hot, and no shadows would be cast on Front Street until the meridian was passed, the citizens of Bedestown were taking their leisure inside.

Quarternight's fine claybank horse slowed from a trot to a walk, and then came to a stop before a small dumpy building where the rider had guided it. Sherry dismounted, tied the animal to a hitch-rack, and surveyed the structure. The windows were dirty, and waste paper littered the ground. It was the office of the *Bedestown Weekly Argus*. Sherry found time to wonder why all newspaper offices seemed to be so filthy.

From within issued the faint clank of machinery. The printing press was in operation.

Sherry opened the door and stepped into the office. The print shop was partitioned off from the front room, but the visitor heard a bell tinkle as he opened the door, and the press stopped its clatter.

Quarternight's eyes darted about the room, and came to rest on a battered roll-top desk in the corner. The desk was stuffed with an indescribable litter of papers, but on top of the heap was a sheaf of written sheets which brought the marshal quickly over.

He read the writing at the top of the first page:

*State of Kansas, County of Blair, ss. On this 15th day of*

*June. A.D. 1889, before me, the subscriber, a notary public in and for the City of Bedestown, Kansas, came William Ainesworth and made the following answers and deposition . . .*

William Ainesworth—the name stirred recollection. Why, certainly. He was one of Shad Spilker's "bona fide residents"—an old billy goat who had been driving through with a covered wagon when Jericho was collecting names for the organization of the County. This, then, was an affidavit—one of the very affidavits, beyond question, that Dilly Capehart had announced his intention of publishing.

Someone had come from the print shop and stood in the door.

At first Sherry hardly recognized Dilly Capehart, in his apron and green eyeshade.

"Hello," said the editor. "What you doin' here in Bedestown, Quarternight?" Just the faintest shade of apprehension was discernible in his voice and this encouraged Sherry.

"Business."

"Covers a multitude of sins."

Sherry wished more fervently than ever that he was back in Jericho. Being marshal—he had not minded that, as long as it was a sort of figurehead position. But here he was, alone in an unfriendly town, to make an arrest he did not wish to make but which sheer circumstance made it necessary for him to make.

"I come fo' yo', Dilly," he said, putting a bold face on it.

"Me?" The journalist gaped, his rodent teeth glimmering in his ink-smearred face. "What for?"

"Contempt of court. Now yo' come peaceable, an' yo' won't get hurt." Quarternight reached into his coat and whipped out the revolver.

Capehart paled. "There's no call for you to do nothin' rash, Sherry," he said quickly.

The marshal looked at him, debating how to proceed. He had to get his man out of town and twenty miles across the prairie to Jericho before his job was finished.

"This here's a bench warrant issued by Judge Comingo, on account of that editorial yo' wrote," he said more to keep up the conversation than anything.

Capehart looked unhappy. "I don't see no cause for the judge to get steamed up over that," he whined. "It wasn't personal—"

"Get ready!" Quarternight, out of his nervousness, barked the order so that Dilly jumped.

"All right, all right. You got a rig?"

"No."

"How you goin' to take me?"

"Where's yo' hoss?"

"I ain't got but the one mare. Lent her to Thad Hansford yesterday to ride to Dodge. He won't be back for three days."

Quarternight cursed under his breath. This was an unexpected contingency.

"I could ride double with you," suggested Capehart.

But to take a prisoner behind him on his horse appealed to Sherry as manifestly foolish and dangerous.

Outside he heard the tramp of boots on the wooden sidewalk. His stomach tightened as the steps came abreast of the print shop door and stopped. Then they went on. The men evidently had only halted to look at Sherry's horse.

The incident awoke him to a new danger. Bedestown was beginning to arouse to its noon-day life. He had to do whatever he did quickly.

A feeling of helplessness came over him. Again he swore, this time at Judge Comingo and Henry Archelaus who had maneuvered him into his unhappy situation.

His eye fell on the stack of affidavits and another thought came. The affidavits were what Archelaus wanted, weren't they? He could take them—and avoid most of the risks that would involve him if he attempted what would amount to the outright kidnaping of the editor from the heart of his own town.

Quarternight by now was berating himself for this foolhardy entrance. Archelaus or no Archelaus, his gambler's instinct assailed him. As a gambler he deplored unnecessary risks. Play the percentages—always the percentages. That had been his settled life policy—yet in this matter he had taken unnecessary risks like a tyro. The affidavits offered him a welcome chance . . . to hedge his bets.

Still threatening Capehart with his revolver, he backed over to the roll-top desk.

"Dilly," he said, "I reckon I'll leave yo' afteh all. I'll jest take these here, instead."

He plumed himself so greatly on his quick thinking, as he stuffed the affidavits in his pocket, that he almost forgot to be afraid.

"I'll plug yo' sure as there's a hell, if yo' try to follow me!" he snarled, with unnecessary loudness, as he stepped out of the door, shoving the pistol back into its holster. Two men were walking along the sidewalk a block away with their backs to him, and nobody else was in sight. In a moment he was in his saddle, going out of Bedestown at a gallop.

He glanced back. Dilly Capehart's shambling figure had just come to the door and even at the distance Quarternight could almost make out the astonishment still on his face.

As Bedestown grew small in the distance and no pursuit seemed to be gathering there, Sherry breathed deep with relief. Now he began to feel a surge of satisfaction. Taken by and large, he thought the episode just passed was not discreditable. It would create talk—the right kind of talk. He imagined how the story would run: the bold entrance of Sherry Quarternight into a hostile town in broad daylight, the single-handed invasion of the newspaper office, and the escape with the precious affidavits. It added up to no small exploit. He had feared that out of this his reputation might be injured if not destroyed. Instead he had come out of it with what surely would be added celebrity.

He had not brought Dilly Capehart, but the affidavits were as good—perhaps better.

It was intensely satisfying, the thought of what a stimulation this would be for the legend of Sherry Quarternight. For the moment, as he rode back toward Jericho, he almost believed it himself.

## 2.

Before the level thirty-mile gale of heat, brown tumbleweeds, left over from last year, rolled and bounded across the country like shaggy animals. Sand was in the air and the sky wore a sickly yellow overcast through which the sun shone futilely, seeming to hang so low that a man might almost stand on the highest of the sand hills and lash it with a bamboo fishing pole.

The spirit was beaten down by the oppressive heat of the wind, and Simeon Trudge, hunched over the reins, watched the swinging head of old John, and found in the sight nothing to lift his soul.

Simeon was driving to Jericho. He was the more discontented on this day, because he had desired Gary to accompany him, and she had refused because of Tilford Rector, who still lay helpless, and who needed her attention, although the swelling of his leg seemed nearly to have gone down.

On this hot day Simeon looked dull and tired. The old buggy was beaten by sun and storm, and the horse was ancient and

dejected. Out of the sand hills the road led directly south, then west toward Jericho. He saw his wheat stacks, their smallness advertising the poor yield.

Farther on Simeon observed that Wessel had added a new stretch of barbed wire. Crabbedly he wondered how Herman found the money for it. The times acutely worried him. What little corn there had been was short and sickly and this wind would suffice to kill the weak life remaining in it. Even now, it seemed to him, the hot wind brought a scent of curling, burning leaves to his nostrils, with the all-pervading smell of the dust.

Would there ever be an end to this drought? All moisture seemed to have been sucked out of the ground. The buffalo grass was sere and a gray tinge was modifying its brassy color. Sorghum shoots were crisping in the burning air. Grasshoppers were bad too. They were bad everywhere, but it seemed to Simeon that the sand hills bred them in uncounted swarms, and his fields nearest the hills suffered more than any of those more remote.

On the road a quarter of a mile ahead was another buggy. Still farther beyond he descried two or three other vehicles.

So many rigs headed toward town today indicated much interest in the meeting which had been called. Some of the buggies and wagons carried more than one passenger. Their drivers had picked up friends and were taking them to town. But Simeon rode alone.

He wondered what was the matter with people; why they were so stand-offish with him. Nobody ever drove a buggy up to the Trudge place and called him to come out and talk. Gossip ceased just short of his boundary fence—and loneliness set in.

He shook the reins on the back of the horse in an effort to urge the animal to a trot. Old John, however, did not heed this feeble gesture of urgency. He dawdled, his hoofs scuffing up clouds of dust which instantly were whipped away by the wind. Slowly Jericho drew nearer.

Quick thudding of a cantering horse came from behind, and Simeon turned his head. The horse went by at a gallop, and the rider nodded grimly. Though he returned the nod, Simeon did not smile. He knew the rider, Sherry Quarternight. The Jericho "fighting man." Texan with a pistol in his armpit holster and boots with high heels and embroidered sides, right out of the cattle country.

Simeon looked after the dark, spring-steel figure with a little frown. What had Sherry been doing in this part of the County?

He must have come from over the ford—from Bedestown way.

Quarternight was a sign and symbol of something new which had come into the Cimarron country—or rather, something old which had been banished and was trying to force its way back. Why should Jericho need a fighting man? This was not fighting country. Not any more. The lawless days on the high plains were long gone—gone with the cowboys and their wildness and their scorn for the restraints of orderly processes and of law. Men in this country now were sober farmers, Simeon told himself; or else they were merchants and professional men in town, going about legitimate business and seeking no trouble.

Simeon's eyes took in his own boots. Broad-toed, low-heeled, with boot-straps on the sides. Thick, strong, prosaic farmer's boots, they were. Those heavy boots of his were in symbolic contrast with Sherry Quarternight's elegant horseman's boots. The footman and the horseman. The toiler and the rider. The farmer and the herder. Civilization against a recrudescence of the wild nomadic frontier . . .

Old John's languid progression brought the rattling buggy by imperceptible degrees nearer to Jericho, until at last Simeon found himself entering the ruddy main street of the town. He guided old John directly to the Apex Livery & Feed Barn, which was run in conjunction with the Apex Hotel, both enterprises being owned by Henry Archelaus.

As he wheeled into the wagon yard, he heard from the stable the keen, excited peal of a stallion's whinny. Horse breeding was one of the side interests carried on by Archelaus, and the stallion in the building had scented a mare somewhere on the street outside and sent forth his shrill demand. A broad sheet of paper was pasted on the wall, with a woodcut representing a draft stallion, and large letters proclaiming:

D E N V E R

Weight 2100

The Red Imported Belgian Stallion Denver 8249 will stand for *Public Service* during the season of 1889, at the Apex Livery & Feed Barn, Jericho, Kans. *Due care will be taken to prevent accidents, but should any occur, owner of the Stallion will not be held responsible.*

Terms: \$10.00

I guarantee colt to stand and suck.

HENRY ARCHELAUS, Owner,  
Jericho, Kansas.

Another peal from the stable was curdled by the sonorous, saw-edged bray of a jack. Someone must have brought a rutting mare into the barn for service. There would be much sound and suggestion in there until the lust of the beasts was assuaged.

A lounging stable hand came forward to help with the horse, and Simeon climbed out of the buggy. As he stepped on the street he saw on the other side the tall figure of Sherry Quarternight. Black frock coat, fancy vest, high-heeled boots, broad Texas hat—the gambler and gunfighter stuck out all over Sherry. This was a figure from another world, and Simeon unconsciously stepped back into the gate of the wagon yard. Again he wondered what errand had taken the Texan beyond the river.

A woman was passing on the sidewalk across the street and Quarternight raised his hat. It was a girl, rather than a woman, Simeon now saw, with a saucy, challenging face, and an insinuating figure in a full over-draped red skirt, black velvet jacket, and a bonnet piled high with artificial flowers and tied under the chin with a velvet ribbon.

Simeon observed the cool, appraising eyes with which the Texan measured the girl's figure as she passed him, and in his heart the farmer knew that she was aware of the appraisal—and was undisturbed by it. The thought filled Simeon with surprise. Women were supposed to resent stares of that kind. It was as if Quarternight looked through the fluffy clothing of the girl, right to the nude form beneath all that fabric. And the girl, knowing it, did not object.

Suddenly it seemed to Simeon that this creature might well be accustomed to being seen by men—naked. Verily, this was a woman of the streets. The Scarlet Woman.

### 3.

Sherry Quarternight was completing a report in the office of Henry Archelaus.

"It was plumb easy," he said with his drawl. "As soon as Capehart got a look at the hawg-laig, he seen sense. I shown him the warrant, an' there wasn't nobody around to object. I could have brought him along jest as easy—if I'd thought to take a hoss fo' him. But the affidavits is the main thing we wanted, anyway. Eh, Boss?" He allowed himself a momentary

chuckle of complacence. "I suppose mebbe afteh Dilly come to realizin' what it was all about, he raised consid'able fuss. But by that time I was clear acrost the Cimarron. Hyar's yo' bundle."

Archelaus accepted the sheaf of crumpled papers which Quarternight pulled out of his pocket.

"I suppose, Sherry, you realize," he said, "that your somewhat abrupt procedure will warrant your bein' careful in the future?"

"What do yo' mean?"

"You'll be plenty *persona non grata* with every gent in Bedestown. Mebbe they'll even issue a warrant for your arrest."

"I done nothin' outside the duties of my office. Hell, I ain't scared of their li'l old warrant."

The man was blustering. Archelaus smiled again.

"Just the same, my friend, it'll pay you to watch out when you're away from Jericho. Plenty of men have been dry-gulched for less than you did."

Quarternight said nothing, but pulled his hat a little lower over his eyes.

"Why didn't you bring that editor as you were told, you fool!"

The question came with sudden, unexpected, crackling heat.

Astonished, Quarternight looked up. Archelaus had entirely lost his attitude of sleepy good humor.

"Why, Boss, I thought—"

"You thought!" cried Henry bitterly. "When did you ever show any indication of thinking?"

"The affidavits—it was them we wanted, wasn't it?"

Henry Archelaus did not answer for a moment. When he did it was in an almost pitying voice, as if he were explaining something perfectly obvious to a child.

"Affidavits, my friend, are affidavits. They were got—they can be gotten again. One week—two weeks—a month, mebbe. Dilly Capehart will have all his ammunition back, from the original sources. Do you see what I'm drivin' at? If we had Dilly, now, instead of his affidavits, we'd be safe. As it is we ain't gained a thing, but mebbe a little delay. An', unless I miss my guess, Bedestown's goin' to be twice as sore an' five times as hard to handle, now that you've made 'em a present of this prize misfire of yours!"

He let that sink in.

"Try to act accordin' to plan, next time, my friend. You're in this as deep as mc, an' we can't afford no more bloomers



like this. Jesus, I wisht you'd quit playin' Billy the Kid, an' buckle down to business."

Quarternight's face darkened and he opened his mouth as if to speak, but Henry restrained him with an uplifted hand.

"This here's done," he said. "It can't be helped now. An' I ain't goin' to say no more about it. It just makes it that much more important for us to work fast on this bond election. An' that reminds me. We got a job on our hands this afternoon. The farmers are gathering over to Matassarin's. We're organizin' the Association. Keep mum on this Bedestown affair, whatever you do. You walk over with me, an watch my cue. Mebbe we can do enough good here to make up for Bedestown."

#### 4.

The blacksmith shop was crowded when Simeon arrived. Here and there he recognized acquaintances—men like Quarternight, Weaver, Spilker, Holcomb, and others. Work had come to a halt in the shop and no smoke now hung under the roof. The inside of the shed was murky with soot. Grimy sale and breeder's bills festooned the walls, together with horse shoes, arranged according to sizes, and various oddments of machinery. Beside the forge stood its vast-limbed, leather-aproned votary.

Growl of talk filled the interior, and Simeon, moving through the crowd, smelled its odors—body odors, manure from boots, horse perspiration, tobacco smell, and the tang of crushed vegetation—the medley of odors that make up the over-smell of any crowd of men devoting their lives to hard labor close to the earth and its creatures.

Henry Archelaus was there, talking with heavy good-humor to a group of farmers. To Simeon's surprise, when Archelaus caught sight of him, he excused himself and began pushing his way over, followed by the edging Shad Spilker.

"Now I *am* glad to see you, Mr. Trudge," boomed Henry, offering a plump hand. "It's representative men like you this organization needs. Mighty glad you're here!"

Simeon was amazed and delighted by the reception. He could hardly believe that it was he to whom this attention was being devoted, and he could not help noticing the way the other farmers were looking his way, and the dawning respect

in their eyes as he received this evidence of the townsite man's favor. Under the cordiality of Archelaus he lost his diffidence and became almost genial. He did not understand it, but he was grateful for it.

Spilker was at Henry's elbow, the everlasting drop glistening on his nose, the stub of his missing arm evident.

"We think we've got plenty of names, Simeon," Archelaus went on, "but we may run into opposition, even a challenge, so we're gettin' all we can, to be safe. How about that man of yours—Til Rector? He's eligible to sign the petition."

An ugly spasm shot over Simeon's face at the mention of Til. Then he considered. He had not thought of Til in this connection but it was true that the hired man owned land—at least at present. How much longer he held it depended on Archelaus. Simeon left contemptuous of Tilford Rector's lack of judgment, and this made him feel better.

On consideration he decided that he ought to be able to obtain his hired man's signature to the railroad petition. Til had been waited on and coddled and petted during his illness, the way Simeon looked at it. If only out of gratitude, he ought to sign when Simeon requested it. But he hedged cautiously.

"Tilford's sick right now—snake-bit," he began.

"Yes, I heard," interjected Shad Spilker. "Recoverin' though, ain't he?"

A note very like regret was in the question. Shad Spilker, undertaker and newly-appointed coroner, could not help experiencing a twinge of frustration whenever something like this occurred. He did not desire the death of anyone. Only, when there was a legitimate reason for death, and death appeared certain, and nobody was to blame, it seemed very disappointing when people perversely went ahead and got well.

"Yes, he's a lot better," said Simeon sourly. "He ought to be, the way my woman runs after him."

Shad grinned nastily with yellow, unclean teeth. "Women is that way," he said cryptically.

"Well," boomed Archelaus, "layin' in bed an' gettin' free board an' keep ain't goin' to cripple young Rector so he can't sign his name, is it? I understand the snake bit him on the foot, not the arm." He chortled jovially.

"Yes, he can write," agreed Simeon. "An' he's got an appetite like a horse."

"Look here, Simeon. You take one of these petitions home with you an' get him to sign it."

The farmer accepted the proffered paper, nodding in agreement, and Archelaus walked ponderously over to a block of

wood, a solid section from a cottonwood log, cut out and brought here for an anvil base. This he mounted, with a fat man's awkwardness. Conversation in the blacksmith shop died down. Here were fifty men; Henry recognized all of them and knew that they were personally interested in the thing about which he was to speak. Some of them might be disappointed later, when they discovered that the railroad would not run where it had been *hinted* it would run. Almost every man present had reason to believe he was in possession of secret information that the right-of-way would cross his particular property. Of course no line could possibly cross all those properties, but Holcomb, Spilker, and Archelaus had been very careful to avoid making direct statements. Nobody could accuse any of them of lying outright.

Self-interest, it was Henry's theory, was the great motive of life. These men were alike in one thing—they all wished to live, to wrest something from the soil of these plains, to win more than a bare existence if possible. They had wives and children at home, and those wives craved little comforts. They were growing older, day by day, and these men greatly desired to secure themselves from the terror of penniless old age. This was a small section of the ferment of the world—the crawling, swarming humanity, which struggles and strives in its weakness, trying to achieve something above its maggot existence.

Archelaus knew how to draw together men and how to use them once he had drawn them together. He looked down upon these men before him with his thick lips parted in a vast, benevolent, purple-and-yellow smile.

"Men," he said, raising his voice, "you've been called together when most of you are busy an' don't want to be unnecessarily delayed. You know what the business is. The organization of the Blair County Booster an' Railroad Improvement Association. Now I'm just here to call the meetin' to order an' listen to nominations for president."

A voice spoke up instantly—Henry had left nothing to chance—nominating "a man who represents the intellectyooal side of this community, the editor of our esteemed journal, the *Jericho Clarion*—old Chet Tooley."

A perfunctory clapping of hands and Tooley, duly elected, advanced, blear-eyed and grinning, to take the "chair." It was all cut and dried, and Tooley had his instructions in advance.

"Gents," he said, "I won't make a long acceptance speech. We got important business ahead of us. However, before anything else is done, we need a secretary-treasurer. Do I hear nominations?"

"Purd Weaver," said a farmer.

"I nominate Shad Spilker," said someone else.

But Spilker and Archelaus had been whispering and the former now advanced close to the chairman's block.

"Friends," he said, "we need somebody we know an' can trust, an' we need a representative from out in the county. Jericho shouldn't hog all the honors. I got a man that you all know an' respect—a hard-workin', upright farmer, like most of you. He don't know I'm goin' to nominate him, but I do it now—Mr. President, I wish to put the name of Mr. Simeon Trudge up for this office."

It was a masterly move. The farmers applauded with enthusiasm, not because any of them had any particular good will toward Simeon, but because he was of their class, and they felt that they had been given recognition. Moreover, Henry's subtlety in giving public recognition and greeting to Simeon, had its effect in convincing the other farmers that Trudge was perhaps of greater weight and importance than they had understood.

As for Simeon, surprise and warm gratification flushed through him. He had expected nothing like this; and to his starved soul the little tawdry honor seemed something desirable and lofty. He was filled at once with terror that he would not be elected. There was Purd Weaver, and there was Shad Spilker—both well known, both far beyond him in numbers of friends. They were not hampered as he was by timidity or backwardness. Had he known how to do it, Simeon would have withdrawn from the race before the vote was taken, to save himself the humiliation of defeat. But he knew too little of parliamentary practice, and already Tooley's voice was calling for a show of hands. All those in favor of Purd Weaver, indicate by the uplifted hand . . . I count thirteen. All in favor of Shad Spilker . . . eight. All in favor of Simeon Trudge, same sign . . . ten, twenty—twenty-three. Mr. Trudge is hereby declared elected. Congratulations to Mr. Trudge, and will he step forward and prepare to take the minutes of the meeting.

Dazed, Simeon stumbled forward, seeing the friendly grins about him and even feeling a pat or two on his thin back. Paper and pencil were miraculously provided—Henry Archelaus overlooked nothing. With an overturned wheelbarrow for a desk, and a wagon tongue as a seat, Simeon Trudge, childishly happy, took office.

From the first it was apparent that the meeting was well organized. Archelaus stood in the outskirts, but he hardly

had to do anything. Motions were made, seconded, and passed, with orderliness and purpose. Within fifteen minutes the new Association had voted to submit to the county commissioners the petitions for a special railroad bond election, and to underwrite "reasonable costs" in the campaign for votes to follow.

"What about Bedestown?" someone asked suddenly.

"To hell with Bedestown!" cried an enthusiast, and received a laugh and shouts of encouragement.

"To hell with Tobe Shankle!" yelled another. Eyes were directed at the figure of Sherry Quarternight.

The Texan spat and said something in an undertone to Purd Weaver.

Archelaus was seen moving toward the speaker's block, his face serious.

"Men, I'd like to say a word," he said earnestly.

"Quiet!"

"Listen to Henry!"

The blacksmith shop grew still.

"Men," he began, "I've heard the name of Bedestown mentioned. I have heard the name of one of the Bedestown men." He paused.

"We need not pretend that we do not know the influences which are seekin' to overturn every effort of Blair County toward progress," he continued. "Jericho's the leader—Bedestown's the obstructionist. Is that statement right? I ask you! Right as a nigger's teeth in a sweet potato! Right as a wart on a wart hog! Absolutely, one hundred and ten per cent right!"

A cheer from the crowd.

"Now men, it's time to look things square in the face. There are some men across the river who don't amount to much, an' who wouldn't stop at nothin' if they had the guts to go with their gall. What's the difference between Jericho an' Bedestown? Bedestown is a corporation town! It's owned, body an' soul by a bunch of millionaires back in St. Louis, Missouri—an' I've got the documents to prove it! Is Blair County goin' to take its orders from St. Louis, Missouri? St. Louis don't give a damn whether you live or starve! The only thing in God almighty's world they're interested in, is the dollar mark. Tell me, are you goin' to knuckle under to St. Louis, Missouri?"

He had achieved a fine effect as the howl from the farmers showed. From now on the money of St. Louis would be an ever-growing talking point in the affairs of the County. He

paused, mopped the beads of perspiration from his forehead and heavy jowls, and pushed back his black hat until his baldness showed.

"You've heard the ugly things being said about our friend an' fellow citizen, Sheridan Quarternight, an' you know how baseless them things are. But Sherry's perfectly capable of takin' care of his own snake-killing!"

He gave them a ferocious leer and another cheer went up.

"But what of the rest of us?" he asked instantly. "What are we goin' to do when they start to threaten us, an' brag what they're goin' to do to stop the railroad? Are we goin' to take orders from St. Louis?"

Loud cries of "No!", led by Spilker, Holcomb, Quarternight and other Archelaus satellites.

"I figgered you'd feel that way," said Henry. "I thought I hadn't misjudged the temper of Jericho, the finest little town on God's footstool. We'll never knuckle under—we'll tell that to the world, definitely, positively, unequivocally, categorically, irretrievably, inexorably, irrevocably and finally! *Never!*"

At this fine barrage of words he received another yell.

"But gentlemen, this is a serious responsibility. It may mean drastic action. I want every man in this Association to consider himself in the army, fightin' for right in this County. An' when I say fight, I mean just that! It may come to it. Men, are you ready? Are you boys with me?"

They gave him an answering roar, and he stepped down from the block, satisfied. The spark was kindled. The fuse was lit. The business of the meeting was over and he did not remain for any anticlimactic conversation. Out of the blacksmith shop he walked, heavily and powerfully, leaving the crowd buzzing behind him.

Tremendously excited, tremendously exalted, Simeon hung around until he saw that it would be after nightfall before he could reach home. For the first time in his life he felt that he was in the inner circle of great events. Something he had been missing—missing since he left the sober prominence he had gained in the Bethesda community back in Indiana—was supplied to him. As the crowd at last began to fritter away, and to scatter, he gathered up his papers.

Men who had never noticed him before now nodded to him as he passed on the street, as if he were a person of consequence; and he realized that he had achieved stature to which he never before had aspired. He ordered his horse and buggy brought out, but long before he reached the boundary fence

of his farm, darkness had come, and the stars burned brilliantly overhead, with the milky way flourishing all across the sky.

## 5.

Til said: "It's gone down. I could put my foot on the floor."

"You mustn't be too quick," objected Gary.

It was after Simeon's departure for Jericho, and Til was sitting up, shaving and tidying himself while Gary finished her work in the kitchen.

He was neat now, with strong chin fresh-razored and his hair smoothed down, although its rebellious sandy waves never would lie evenly. About his face remained the lingering imprint of sickness, and a faint hint, also, of sadness.

"The swelling of that foot ain't hardly to be noticed," he said calmly. "You see, even the bandages is loose on it. It's been days now, an' days in bed always takes the strength out of a man. I'm goin' to put that foot down an' see what happens."

In spite of Gary's alarm, he sat on the edge of the bed, with the coverlet about him, and gingerly touched his toes on the floor.

"It don't hurt," he announced, and rested his heel also. "I believe if it wasn't for where Old Lady Wessel butchered me, I wouldn't hardly know it happened."

Resting his weight on his hands, he half-rose, and then sat heavily down again.

"I've got to get my britches," he said. "Layin' down all the time does take the strength out of you."

"It isn't all laying down," she insisted. "You've been poisoned. Most men would have died—"

She came over beside him. "You must lie down. Til—please do. I'll help you." Her arm was behind his shoulders, and he lay back obediently, his head on the pillow.

But his gray eyes did not close.

"I have you to thank," he said slowly.

"Oh, no. You don't have to thank me. The thanks are the other way." She attempted a laugh.

But she could not overcome his gravity.

"I must thank you for what you've done for me," he in-

sisted. There was that in his voice that made her shrink. Not since the day when he was struck by the rattlesnake had he spoken other than impersonally.

She looked down at her hands and found them nervously pulling at her apron. "It was no more than anybody would have done." Her voice had become queer and small.

"Yes it is. You nursed me like a baby. I did not deserve so much from you."

"You saved Ranny's life," she told him, as if reciting a lesson. "You saved him—and took the snake's fang, knowing you were taking it, to save him. You couldn't have saved him any other way. And I—know how you dread a snake . . ."

Something within her warned her to go—to fly away. Something that was all of her past and all of her bringing up and training.

But something else made her stay. And she could not have said what that something else was.

Til was silent for a moment. He had not said what he wanted to say. It seemed to him that he had been talking foolishness. This was a moment that fairly ached to find expression in him, and he was talking numb foolishness.

He wet his lips with his tongue. Gary had not gone away. She was still there beside his bed, and that was more kindness than he would have believed possible. He agonized to say something to her that would transfer to her some of the longing and worship and tragedy that was in him. And he could not make his tongue work.

His hand moved on the crazy quilt and suddenly his fingers had closed over hers.

"I—I wish—" he said. She did not answer but she had ceased trying to take her hand away.

He was drawing her gently down, and the stiff, self-induced reserve in her seemed to dissolve away. Obeying his insistence, she seated herself on the edge of the bed beside him.

"There," he said. "That is how I wanted you. Not for long—only for a little. You'll stay long enough for me to say what I have to say, won't you? It's this: You mean something terrible important to me. I been working here an' I've done a sight of thinkin' since I come. When first I saw you, you was jest another woman—right nice, but jest a woman. But after awhile I seen that you wasn't jest another woman. You was . . . you was Gary. You was the only woman in the world that my heart ever got set on. I couldn't no ways help from liking you—that quick step, an' the proud way you hold your head, an' the prettiest hair I ever saw. Well—"



He paused and she did not stir. The panic in her had died out and she sat as if mesmerized, not dulled but eager, carried out of herself by what was in his voice and in him.

"I wouldn't never have said nothin' about this, but for that snake. I would have gotten away from here, an'—tried to forget how you are."

Still she sat there, perfectly motionless and silent, although her heart seemed swelling and beating until it would choke her.

"Now this thing has come," the deep voice went on, "an' I've had plenty of time to weigh things up in my mind. You are married. But something tells me you ain't no ways near happy. I know that, an' nothin' you could ever say would teach me different. Bein' the way you are, there's jest nothin' you can do except go through with what your life has laid out for you. You wouldn't never step one hair's breadth off the line of duty—"

The grip on her hand suddenly strengthened. "So there's this to tell you, an' you have the right to hear it—any woman has a right to hear what I am going to say, knowin' that it is jest sayin' somethin', although from my heart an' the sincerest thing I ever said in my life. I got you in my heart an' I can't get you out. No matter how I try, I can't get you out. You are like an angel to me—I know I ain't worthy to have no such feelin's about you. An' I know that you can't listen to me with pleasure. But I had to tell you, Gary, that you are the one thing my life has ever known that was pure beautiful an' perfect. It's goin' to stay with me as long as I live. Now that's all. Thank you for listenin', an' please forgive what I said."

The hold on her hand loosened and the grave voice trailed away.

She was blinded by sudden tears.

"Oh, Til, Til darling!" she cried out as if a dam had burst and let forth a lifetime of pent emotion. "Oh, Til! Please—please keep on—forever—loving me!"

His heart bounded as he felt her bury her face suddenly in his shoulder, and his arm went about her, tight, tight. For a long time they lay thus, he weakened and outstretched, hardly believing; she half-crouched beside him, sobbing, her tears dampening his blue shirt on the breast.

After minutes her muffled voice came:

"I've been starving—all my life. Starved for someone to love me. To really *love* me. Oh, Til, you came too late!"

The last words were sharp, poignant, almost reproachful.

"You—don't mean—you love *me*?" he asked, wonder and disbelief struggling in his voice.

A nod of the bright head on his shoulder.

"Then honey, it ain't too late. It ain't too late—"

She lifted her wet face and stared at him for a moment. Then something almost like alarm came into her eyes. She shook her head as if to clear it.

The strength of him was unbelievable, even in his sickness. She was swept down by the power of his desire, outstretched, his lips on hers, hot, filled with fire and possessiveness. She struggled instinctively for a moment, freed her mouth long enough to say, panting:

"Let me go—Til—someone might come in!"

He did not obey her. And then she gave over all resistance. She was sobbing, but it was not sorrow. She did not care who came . . . or what happened . . .

His love was all that mattered, now. To feel his lips, to hear him tell of it, was all she craved.

## 6.

They were waiting for Simeon to come home. It was after dark. Supper had been silently eaten and Ranny put to bed. Wordless, they now sat in the kitchen and gazed at one another.

It had been so almost from the first.

After the first delirious embrace she had lain in his arms and cried a little, then kissed him over and over in a warm soft fury of love.

And then she had risen and left him.

It was so strange that Til, even though he understood much of Gary, could not make out what was wrong with her. They were two lovers confessed, they should have been in bliss temporarily at least, and suddenly it seemed that a greater wall separated them than ever before.

There had been, to be sure, a weak attempt at talking the matter out.

Gary had stood in the middle of the floor looking off through a window at nothing at all, while he stared at her.

"You said you loved me," she said, speaking at last calmly, with vast effort. "And I said I—loved you. We kissed. We shouldn't have done it. It was sin."

"There was no sin," he argued desperately. "We did nothing wrong. Kissing—it ain't a real sin."

"Kissing—the way we kissed—*means* something, Til," she said solemnly. "Maybe it isn't a sin for you. But it is for me. I am the married one."

"We love each other like you said," he pleaded, in terror of a great loss. "Why can't we be married? People fixed like you, honey, get divorced—an' married again. Simeon, he don't love you—he don't know the meanin' of the word. You work your fingers raw for him an' he never appreciates it. An' then look, at this, honey, he's an old man—old enough for your father; an' he—he abuses you. You don't owe him nothin'. Why don't you leave him? Ain't a law in all the land can keep you from doin' that. Leave him, honey. I'll take care of you. You can stay right in Jericho until you get your divorce. An' then we'll be married. I got so much love for you . . . it makes me feel sacred toward you—an' whatever devotion can do, I'll promise—"

She shook her head.

"I can't. Even if it wasn't for anything else, I couldn't. Divorce—why it's nothing but *adultery*." She paused, shocked at the word as it came from her own lips. "It would be a worse sin than we—than I've done already. The *worst* sin of all—"

"But Gary—" his voice was sharp with pain and protest.

"I don't know what to say," she said, as if speaking to herself alone. "I feel different. I feel like a changed woman. Something's happened to me that I didn't want—wouldn't have had for the world if I'd known it—but it's happened. Oh, Til, it was so sweet, and yet—"

"Wait," he pleaded.

She turned away from him, so quickly that her skirt swirled out about her, and stood with her back to him. He could not see the way her face was working.

"Gary," he said after a moment, and his voice was deep with feeling, "please think this over. What happened—havin' you in my arms—hearin' you say you loved me—it was a bigger surprise to me than to you. I didn't really believe it *could* happen. No, I *knew* it couldn't happen. Not with anybody like you it couldn't—but it did." His voice had fallen very low. "It was like a miracle comin' to me, to know that, in spite of everything, you thought about me the same as I thought about you. I can't hardly realize it yet. Are you goin' to take that away from me now? You are like the stars to me—so much better an' higher an' more wonderful than I can

even hope to be. I'm askin' you to give me the chance to prove to you all my life what I've said to you today—"

Once more the bright head shook slowly.

"If I only could," she whispered. "If I only, only could. But I can't. It wasn't your fault. It was mine. I'm to blame, because I should have stopped it. I was the one that was married. Don't you see how impossible what you want would be? I have a loveless marriage—but it *is* a marriage, entered into in the sight of God and man. I can't change that. I can't defile my marriage. I can't defile the holy institution. I've sinned already, by listening to what I shouldn't hear, and letting myself do what I had no right to do, but divorce—that sin would be so black that I don't know how I'd ever, ever save my soul!"

Her voice died away and she stood for a moment, her hands covering her face, her back still to him. Then she walked swiftly from the room, and in the kitchen Til could hear her softly weeping.

Presently this ceased and she began to move about the room. He heard kitchen utensils in use. Gary was turning to her old refuge of work.

After awhile the outside door opened, and Ranny came into the kitchen from his play. Til listened for her voice when she spoke to the child and was filled with grateful relief when the timbre of the voice was firm.

"Ma, what can I do?" Ranny said.

He always said that when he ran out of expedients to amuse himself. She made several small suggestions, hoping to interest him. Finally she asked, "How would you like to undo some flour sacks for mother?"

Ranny had done that before and it fascinated him.

Til heard Gary's quick step as she crossed to a drawer from which she took several clean, newly laundered flour sacks. The method of undoing them was a trick, but simple. The end of the strings which held the seam together could be unraveled. Once the key string was found it could be pulled and the whole seam would come undone, the strings intact. It was almost magical. Ranny undid the first one after Gary found the string for him. Then he puzzled long over the second. His mother finally had to find the right string for him to pull here also. All told, the undoing of the flour sacks occupied half an hour. Gary later would devote them to new service as dish towels. Now Ranny was ready to go out again, and with the command not to leave the yard, romped forth from the house.

The sun was dipping low and Til began to stir. He was

almighty tired of lying in that bed. He managed to sit up and was surprised that he seemed able to move his leg with more ease. Holding the head of the bedstead he pulled himself upright on his good leg, then put the injured foot on the ground. It felt funny, still half numb, but it would bear his weight. The bandages wrapped around his ankle and calf made the leg look thick, but the swelling was gone out of the whole foot. With slow care Til took a step, still holding the bed post. He could hobble. He took another step and reached the wall where his overalls were hung. One entire leg of them was torn. He had ripped up the fabric to make his tourniquet when the rattler struck him. From the wall, therefore, he took down instead his other trousers, his "town trousers" of serge, returning with them to the bed where he sat for some minutes regaining his poise and balance.

It was Gary's religion that was responsible for all this, he realized. She loved him—he knew it as well as he knew that he was alive. The way she had clung to him, and wept. It could not be anything else. The way she had said, almost accusingly, "Oh, Til, you came too late!"

Now he was up against the terrible wall of her religion. Her Old Testament religion. It was worse than any kind of a physical obstacle. Anger at the religion, useless anger, burned in him. Then it passed away. It was no use to hate religion, any more than it was any use to hate drought or blizzard or any other mood of nature. It was bigger than he, and his puny feelings toward it were futile.

He began working his trousers over his legs, carefully putting in the wounded foot first. It took minutes to complete a process which normally required no more than a few seconds. Then he found a clean pair of socks. This was even more complicated. It was moderately difficult to bend his bad leg, but at length the sock was on—after a fashion. Its mate went on quickly. Now for the shoes. The laces were cut out of the one that had been on his wounded foot. It was just as well, he could not lace it anyway. The foot went into its leather casing with surprising ease. He wriggled his toes. The sensation was almost comfortable. The other shoe went on, was laced, and Til was dressed.

He now started for the kitchen. At the sound of his slow steps Gary came to the door and looked in. She stood watching him, expressionless. But only for a moment. Then she flew to him and took his arm. Her fingers were firm and strong as she helped him, but she said nothing.

He seated himself by the kitchen table and watched her prepare supper. Both of them expected Simeon home before

sunset, but he failed to arrive. Eventually Gary set the table and they ate. There was no Bible reading afterward. Til tried to interest himself in an old newspaper, while Gary finished the dishes and took Ranny off to bed.

There was constraint between them such as there never had been before, not even when they first were acquainted as strangers.

Once, tentatively, Til again ventured the question of divorce. But her answer was decisive, almost sharp, as before:

"Divorce is as great a sin as adultery. I don't want even to talk about it!"

The hard realism of her attitude stunned Til. The word *adultery* put such a different aspect on the question. Would she have committed adultery? Would she—when she lay on the bed with him, locked in his arms—if he had been just a shade more insistent? . . .

He shook the idea out of his mind. He was sure she would not. Adultery—that was against the Ten Commandments! *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. It was in the same category as *Thou shalt not kill*. And she linked divorce and adultery together in her list of shalt nots.

Til had the simple and profound reverence for Scriptural dictate that characterized the people among whom he lived. But in spite of this his mind sought once more to reject the dogma. He was free. He wanted Gary. He tried again:

"Gary, listen. Why do people get married? Because they are in love with each other—that's the only reason why they ever ought to get married. If you look at it that way, it's just as sinful to stay married when you don't love a man, as it is to get a divorce from him."

She did not reply. Her eyes were on the socks she was darning.

"Another thing," he continued. "There's Ranny. I'm crazy about the little feller. You know that, I think. Don't you believe it would be better for the child to live with two people that love him, than to live—like—like he is?"

Ranny! He brought up Ranny to her—and she had been thinking of nothing else but Ranny for hours! Once more she shook her head.

"It's no good arguing, Til. I can't and I won't, and this has got to stop. Don't you think it's hard for me? I'm so tormented I can hardly think! But there's one thing that's as clear as a bell in my head—I'm married, and that's the end of it. I've already done wrong. I won't commit a deadlier sin. As for my marriage, I don't hold it against Mr. Trudge. After all, he hasn't done anything to hurt me any more than what I've

expected from marriage. Til, you say you care for me. If you do, please don't argue any more about this. There can never be any chance of what you say, Til. No, never. Never in all our lives!"

For a very long time after that they sat silent. Once or twice he cleared his throat as if to speak. The first time she was afraid of what he was going to say. Then she became unbearably curious, yet did not feel that she should prompt him. His words came of his own accord at last, and now she noticed with a species of disappointment how very reasonable his tone had become.

"Gary, jest consider that I didn't say what I last said to you. You couldn't do it, an' I should've known. I wouldn't have you any other way than you are—for anything." He was silent for a moment. "I'm leavin'. I already told Simeon I was goin'. An' it's the only right thing to do. You've told me you love me. Well, nobody can take *that* away from me. I'm goin' to carry it away with me an' keep it. But I would not be able to stand it, workin' around here, seein' you near me every day, seein' an' knowin' what goes on, an' never say a word or do a thing. Flesh an' blood couldn't stand it. An' it wouldn't be right by you. You've chose what you must do, an' I know it's right. I won't hamper you."

His renunciation almost accomplished what his insistence had failed to accomplish. Gary felt her heart swelling, and words, soft words, came to her lips.

But she did not utter them. Outside in the darkness they both heard the rattle of Simeon's buggy.

## 7.

Simeon came in, having put away the horse, and his eyebrows lifted when he saw Til sitting at the table.

"Well, Tilford," he said heavily. "I see you can get around again."

"A little," said Til.

"Can't walk much, though?"

"I jest made it out here to the kitchen."

A moment's silence. "I was half hopin' you could take care of the cow tonight," Simeon said at last, in a disappointed voice. "Well, Gary, get me somethin' to eat. I want to talk to you a little, Tilford, soon as I get the milkin' done."

He went out with the pail and lantern, while Gary poked together the fire and fried more potatoes. Within the kitchen the silence grew minute by minute.

Til was uneasy. He was thinking: Now what would he want to talk to me about so special? Could he have some sort of notion . . . ?

Gary was thinking, equally guiltily. He accused me of this . . . once. It wasn't true then, but it is now. What will I say if he starts in to ask questions?

But fears were needless. Simeon was concerned with something that involved neither of them, except indirectly. He ate his supper, then called for the Bible and prayed. After the prayer, while Gary was at the dishpan, he broached his subject.

"Tilford," he said, "you been treated pretty good around here, I guess you know, an' I expect you'd be glad to do anything you could to return the favor, eh?"

"Well—I guess—I scarcely know what you mean—" Til began, wondering.

"Looky here. Some men might dock you for them days you been layin' off on account of—well, because of that snake-bite. Now don't say a word. I'm a fair man, an' I don't aim to short you a penny, although I'd be within my rights if I did, as I guess you'll agree—board an' keep without workin', an' all."

Til saw Gary's face go like stone. Simeon was deliberately ignoring the reason why Til had been flat on his back—why he had almost lost his life.

"Well," the farmer hurried on briskly, "there's a little thing you can do for me—a mighty small thing, but we'll call it square. I'm interested in a proposition. Been up town today seein' about it, in fact." He raised his whiskered chin and looked at his wife with a half-grin. "Do you know, Mrs. Trudge, that your husband's just been elected secretary *and* treasurer of the Blair County Booster an' Railroad Improvement Association? Elected this afternoon. Fifty of the biggest men in the County's in the Association, an' they elected me right over the heads of men like Purd Weaver an' Shad Spilker. What do you think of your old man now?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"Well," Simeon continued complacently, "we're determined on havin' a railroad in Blair County. It's the only way to develop. Every right-thinkin' man ought to be behind it. You know what the first step is, Tilford, I take it? Railroad bonds. We got to get a bond issue voted by the people—a hundred an' fifty thousand dollars. With them bonds passed we have



it fixed already with the Dodge City, Amarillo & Southwest railway to build through the County. Now what I want of you is to sign the petition for the election. We got enough names, but we want to turn in the petitions with a big bunch of names more'n we need, to make it more impressive."

He began unrolling the petition, hand-written on legal-cap paper.

Til was dumbfounded. He remembered Simeon's previous positive negation of this proposition. The farmer's subsequent conversations and activities were unknown to him. He ventured a question:

"It's goin' to cost in taxes, ain't it?"

"Well, yes," agreed Simeon rapidly, "but not near as much as the railroad will pay back later when it builds through. Besides there'll be more people brought into the County, an' spreadin' out the taxes on them will make taxes less for everyone. An'—" he lingered cunningly, "there's always the chance that the railroad might come across that piece of land of yours. You'd be well-fixed!"

Comprehension dawned on Til. This was the missing piece of the puzzle. He had been wondering what had changed Simeon. The farmer expected to profit by the railroad . . .

Mounting dislike for this man and a sudden stubbornness came over Til.

"It's something I want to think over—" he began.

"Now Tilford," interjected Simeon hastily, "I can't see any reason for hesitatin'. It's for your good as much as anybody's. An' then—there's your obligation to me."

It was the wrong note. Til felt that he might have some sort of obligation here, if only because Simeon was the husband of Gary Trudge—but never the kind the farmer was trying to force on him.

"I ain't aimin' to sign that petition," he said flatly.

Simeon's chin whiskers bristled. "What d'you mean?" he rasped. This had become very important to him. He felt that his newly-gained prestige in the Association in some measure depended on it. "Let me tell you, Tilford, that what I just said ain't binding—I can still dock you for them days you laid off!"

"Go ahead an' dock!"

Simeon was taken back and his threat faded.

"An' there's somethin' that you can tell your friend Henry Archelaus," Til continued. "This scheme of his is part of his whole general policy. He's got a strangle-hold on this County, an' he aims to make it stronger. How many farmers in this County are slavin' their lives away for Henry Archelaus right

now? Breakin' his ground, fencin' his acres, buildin' improvements—hopin' against hope? An' just as sure as God made little green apples, they'll lose all that under the 'iron-clad contract' he puts on 'em. I ain't signin' anything that gives Henry Archelaus an' his ring a tighter grip on this country. An' I'd jest as soon tell him as you that very thing!"

Til Rector was angry. Ordinarily Simeon shrank from displays of violent rage in other men. But here he sat—and realized that he felt no shrinking, no timidity . . . His new confidence had brought a change in him, and the discovery sent a surge of delight through him, so that he hardly heard the next words:

"I've already quit," said Til. "I leave tomorrow."

He hoisted himself from his chair and limped slowly to his sleeping room. For this one night only would he lie in that bed with Gary's patchwork quilt over him. •

## ELEVEN

### 1.

THE SUN fried and frizzled outside and the hot wind blew little racing puffs of dust down the street, but inside the office it was still, where Henry Archelaus sat in a fat man's attitude, with his hands folded over his belly. His eyes, beneath their heavy lids, barely glittered. He was gazing, however, through the window glass at the girl who was passing along on the other side of the street with a man.

From where Henry sat the girl made a pleasant picture. Her dress was light blue—which went well with her corn-yellow hair—and the full skirts of it fluttered so crisply about her that she yielded an impression of coolness even in this heat. Almost with melancholy Henry watched the smooth undulation of her walk.

It had been long since women had meant anything more to him than distant pleasant pictures. This was because his stomach had grown too great of late years. Its immense quaking mass had made a celibate of him as surely as if he had been gelded. Women could, of course, be hired . . . but Henry did not relish the secret laughter even of a prostitute.

Nowadays so simple a matter as the tying of his shoes had become a problem presenting difficulties, an occasion of puffings, and shortness of breath, and redness of face. Sometimes, also, of dizziness. That was why he had taken to wearing Congress gaiters with elastic sides—because they elimi-

nated lacing. A man who had to struggle at putting on his shoes had no business thinking about women . . .

Still, Henry Archelaus, gazing out of the window, could not repress the sad wish that it was possible for him to do something about the electric challenge which was thrown out by every movement of that creature across the street.

The woman was Gussie Gosney, and the man walking with her was Sherry Quarternight. They were seen together most of the time lately. This in spite of the fact that she was the kind of a woman who turns men's heads on their necks as she walks down the street, and could have had her choice of many different kinds of male company.

The men of Jericho spoke of Gussie in one way; the women in quite another. She created impressions wherever she went, and none of them were neutral. Henry had heard that she had drifted over to Jericho from one of the Fred Harvey eating houses on the Santa Fe railroad. Since she had begun presiding over the counter at the Bon Ton Restaurant across the street, business there had doubled and trebled, the male customers crowding in to be attended by her at their meals, in her queer silent way.

A woman like that could cause plenty of trouble, Henry considered Gussie was not really beautiful, but there was a daring about her, an audacity, a certain kind of cheap and artificial good looks. Her figure was provocative, and for the unsophisticated men of this isolated community there was heat for the blood in the very pertness of her nose and of her speculative eyes.

Among the loafers of Jericho ran common talk that there was in her a burning core of fire, and for this there was excellent personal testimony, dating from before the period when Quarternight assumed proprietary interest in her. When Gussie waited on the counter or walked down the street, her face was decently decorous, her attitude one of sedate propriety. Yet an intangible aura of impropriety hung about her in every movement she made.

Henry Archelaus did not know that this aura was the product of a studied effort on the girl's part; nor did he know that she had speculated on him, then dismissed him, as she had speculated on and dismissed most of the other men in Jericho.

To Gussie Gosney, the thoughts and doings of men were the beginning, the middle, and the end of life. She had been brought up in the river-front section of Kansas City, where her mother took in washing from the gamblers up on Missouri Street, and sometimes, from the same gentry, made quicker,

easier money. Gussie had no kind of a notion who her father was, but though she was not educated in any formal way, the girl had a shrewd little native intelligence. Lack of education had never bothered her since the day she discovered that a delicate ankle and a round figure are worth more in dealing with men than a library of learning.

The art of attracting men, and of managing them once she had attracted them, became thereafter the only things that mattered or were worth considering. To this art Gussie devoted assiduous study. She cultivated a manner of walking, of standing, of sitting, even of talking, which combined languor with a hinted vitality, all based on techniques of some of the most successful fancy women she had observed in her adolescence. She taught herself to keep her full lips slightly parted, showing a flash of white teeth, because she had observed that the partly opened mouth, with its counterfeit of hard-breathing passion, caused men sometimes to lose judgment.

Of conversation she had little, and what little she had was personal, or charged with innuendo. She was wise enough to abstain from most conversational subjects, since a pair of swaying hips were worth more than any amount of brilliant talk. Actions were what counted, and men did not hire the best rigs from the Apex Livery Stable, and take her riding in the country to hear her converse.

Concerning men, Gussie was judicious and keenly mercenary. Men to her meant money, and so she was selective. At first, on her arrival in Jericho, she had specialized in traveling salesmen—"drummers"—because the breed was known as "spenders." These men were addicted to pomade on the mustaches and oil in the hair; but she swallowed her distaste and accepted them on a strictly business basis. Occasionally, also, married men asked her furtively to go riding after dusk. She did not too greatly encourage such offers, because trouble flares quickly in a small town; but married men, because of their guilt and terror, can sometimes be induced to be generous with their money, so occasionally she met these secretive and disreputable admirers in out-of-the-way places, and allowed them, excited beyond expression, to drive her out into the prairie night.

On a few occasions the girl from the Bon Ton went to a dance with one of the numerous bachelors of Jericho, but most of the younger men were too poor to be interesting. Gussie was a mistress of her arts and able to choose her consorts. Yet there was this about her; she had her own code of fair play. Men have an ugly name for a woman who accepts

favors or presents, under the pretense of fairly yielding, and then does not. That name was not applied to Gussie. She was calculating; but when, as happened a few times, she was alone with her man and found that he suffered from poverty and had only passion to offer, she did not renege. She might let him feel her scorn, but there was a quality about her commonly associated with the glow-worm, and a man, after all, was a man.

As might be supposed, the "good women" of Jericho were not entirely ignorant of these matters, and what they did not know they more than made up for with feverish speculation and gossip. It did not, however, trouble Gussie that she was an object of malevolence from her own sex. Other women she regarded almost exclusively as her competitors, and so long as the men came to her, she was quite willing to forgo any association with women. Moreover she knew that much of the asperity with which a virtuous woman regards an unvirtuous one has its origin in envy.

It was almost inevitable that in the end Gussie Gosney and Sherry Quarternight should drift together. Quarternight possessed the kind of an eye that never misses a detail in an attractive woman. It was an eye that roved unceasingly, picking up an ankle or the curve of a bodice with the neatest of flicks. A well-turned figure would light that eye with approval, although Sherry, whose tastes were slightly toward the gross, cared nothing for thin women.

When he saw Gussie for the first time, he smiled to himself beneath his narrow black mustache. He appraised her—a little bold, a little scheming, but after all with the bloom of life on her lips, its luster in her eye, and the bewitching curves of it in her form. After a little time he began an adroit campaign to gain a clear field with her for himself. He saw in her exactly what he wanted—a mistress who would be contented with that status.

The campaign was not unnecessarily long. Gussie, who knew the way to enhance herself by withholding herself, snubbed him quite casually at first. But after all Sherry Quarternight was just the kind of a man for whom Gussie had been waiting, too. He had a sleek, dark handsomeness; but more important, he was "in the money." In addition to being town marshal—with a very good prospect of being sheriff—Quarternight owned the gambling room back of Potlicker's Drug Store. It was sometimes whispered that he was taking more money out of Jericho than Henry Archelaus himself. As long as Sherry enforced the law in Jericho, there would be no disturbance of that lucrative enterprise back of Potlicker's, no

matter how the temperance society fulminated; and as long as Archelaus owned the big end of Jericho, there would hardly likely be any disturbance of Quarternight as law enforcer.

So after due consideration, drummers, married admirers, and simple yokel suitors were pushed aside by Gussie. Within a couple of weeks it was all settled. Somewhat sulkily the other men, who had had brief experience with the glowing qualities of the girl, ceased their attentions as Quarternight took over the territory. It became thoroughly and universally understood that all former claims were abrogated and that Gussie was the exclusive property of the marshal. This was the subject of violent and bitter comment by the church crowd, but Jericho still was a frontier town, and the adage "let every man kill his own snakes" still held good.

Which was just as well, though Henry Archelaus, philosophically contemplating the girl in the blue dress as she paused before the Bon Ton laughing, with the wind blowing her skirts, as she said something to Quarternight in parting. It was difficult enough to run a town properly under even favorable circumstances. In this instance Sherry had saved Henry from worry over what might have been a source of serious difficulty—jealousies over that girl, Gussie Gosney.

There was plenty to worry Henry as it was. He saw Quarternight flourish his hat with a mock-chivalric bow, and come across the street toward the office. On the desk lay the most recent edition of the *Bedestown Weekly Argus*, which had just been delivered to Archelaus.

The door opened.

"Howdy," said the marshal.

"Howdy," said Henry. "Sherry, have you seen the Bedestown paper?"

"No."

Archelaus tossed over the sheet. Quarternight bent to read:

## OUTRAGE AND VILE ATTACK

Last Saturday morning while we were engaged peacefully in running off a batch of sale bills, and at the same time composing in our mind a progressive and constructive editorial for *The Argus*, a low scoundrel and ruffian from that wretched hamlet which lies across the river paid us a sneaking and cowardly visit. True to his poltroon character he entered *The Argus* office before we were aware of his presence and covered us with a brace of large revolvers. Utterly taken aback by this unwarranted and hostile demonstration, and realizing that we were

in imminent peril of our life, we were powerless to interfere, and could only watch with that feeling of protest which an upright and law-abiding citizen must always feel when he watches a flagrant defiance of the laws of God and man, while the miscreant took from our desk a sheaf of affidavits which we had obtained in preparation for exposing the chicanery and corruption which attended the organization of this County, and the election for the county seat. He then departed rapidly on horseback before assistance could be summoned.

The name of the ruffian and thug who committed this outrage is known to us. A warrant has been sworn for his arrest on the grounds of armed entry into private premises, robbery, assault with intent to kill, intimidation, attempted mayhem, and carrying concealed weapons.

Let the infamous blacklegs who are back of this crime beware! Bedestown and all the surrounding country are aroused by this scoundrelly aggression. The ring of embezzlers, thieves, drunkards, jailbirds, and crooks who inhabit the low dive known as Jericho is hereby served notice that Bedestown has under no circumstances given up her just fight for her rights, and that every legal recourse will be appealed to in order to uphold those rights. The affidavits have been stolen, but they will be obtained again, and the true story of the perfidy of the Jericho ring will be laid bare before the world!

Sherry Quarternight grinned recklessly as he read the curious hysterical outburst of bombast.

"Looks like I really rattled that li'l old Dilly Capehart," he said.

Archelaus did not answer the grin.

"This is going to cause trouble."

"With them Jayhawkers? I'll take my chances." Quarternight was scornful. Then he added: "Anyway they can't get new affidavits, with all the ridin' around that's got to be did, soon enough to affect this bond election."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, my friend, I warn you to take care. You have antagonized the press—a bad thing. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but her rage is a small thing compared to the wrath of a two-bit newspaper when it's riled. Warrants have been sworn out for you. Doubt now that there'll be zealous efforts to serve them."

Quarternight laughed outright, his fine teeth white beneath his black mustache.

"Let 'em come," he said. "I'll guarantee to personally take



care of all that Bedestown can raise, an' won't ask no help, neither." He felt safe enough in Jericho among his friends.

"There's another thing to consider," said Henry. "While the affidavits may not affect the bond election, this raid of yours may very well affect the sheriff appointment. Remember that we had none too wide a margin to go on with his excellency, the governor of Kansas. The howls of Bedestown's backers might conceivably have a bad influence on him in his decision. An' there's several reasons why we wouldn't want to see the sheriff's office in the hands of unfriendly persons. Your little enterprise back of Potlicker's, for instance—"

"Hell!" It was the first time, evidently, that Sherry had considered that angle. He frowned. Then he rose and walked out of the office, closing the door behind him.

Henry, left alone, sighed. He was not feeling well this day and the specter of trouble never made him feel any better. He preferred to have things run smoothly, but it seemed that his life was perpetually running into crises. With a sudden movement of irritation, he folded up the copy of the *Argus* and threw it into a waste basket. Then he carefully selected a fresh cigar, clipped the end of it, lit it, and sat gazing blankly out on the dusty, wind-swept street, his mind busy with many speculations.

## 2.

Two barber poles stood on Jericho's main street, flaunting their red-white-and-blue stripes in pseudo patriotic proclamation that these were abodes of the razor, the scissors, and the bay rum bottle. A good block of buildings separated them, giving point to their essential differences.

Nearest to the office of Henry Archelaus and therefore close to the geographic center of the town, was the barber shop operated by Earl Chew. Farther on was that owned by Deacon Putnam Hatch.

Chew's Tonsorial Palace & Billiard Parlor was the gathering place for the uninhibited element of the town. It boasted three barber chairs and three barbers; two pool tables in the rear; and a line of seats for loafers with a plentiful distribution of brass spittoons. Earl Chew subscribed regularly for three copies weekly of the *National Police Gazette*, the pink pages of which, featuring posturing pugilists and voluptuous bur-

lesque queens in tights, were read to rags by the habitues of his shop. At the extreme rear of the establishment were three small cubicles containing each a bath tub, where a hot bath could be obtained for the sum of two bits, with soap and *one* towel thrown in free.

The reckless young bloods of Jericho lounged at Chew's, and the talk there was generally of horses, cards, and women. Lewd stories which made the rounds of the town usually owned Chew's as a point of genesis. In the blue reek of tobacco smoke, the click of the pool balls sounded almost without cessation; and virtuous women, in passing, made a practice of gathering their skirts and crossing to the other side of the street, straightening their backs and their lips as they went by.

As the ungodly element was the purlieu of Earl Chew, so the church element belonged to Deacon Hatch, a thin jug-eared man with an undertaker face and lank sideburns. Respectable mothers sent their little boys to Hatch's to have their locks snipped. The old he-saints also went thither for a hair trim and an occasional shaping up of the whiskers.

What conversation occurred in that respectable place was decently sober and decorous, with a deal of viewing with alarm the sinful conditions in the town. But it was to be observed that being godly was hardly profitable in Jericho. Hatch cut the hair of the good little boys, and the scanty locks of the old he-saints; but the he-saints did not indulge in frequent hair-cuts, and took few shaves, and no hair-oil at all. Hatch never found business too pressing to prevent his closing his shop promptly at six o'clock, the same on Saturdays when the barber business in a country town is at its height, as any other day.

On the other hand Earl Chew kept open Saturday nights sometimes until two o'clock the following Sunday morning, while the bucolic elegants of the community were trimmed and shaved and oiled and perfumed, and the harvest hands came in, and the three bath tubs each had long waiting lines, and the place was blazingly alight, a center of warm activity, guffaws, and general cheerfulness with a thread of rakish wickedness running through it, long after the rest of the town was asleep.

This was not, however, Saturday night. It was Wednesday noon, and Til Rector paused in front of Hatch's barber shop. He had been in Jericho three days, and he was walking quite strongly although he still favored the snake-bitten leg from which, under the bandages inside his trouser leg, the flesh was beginning to slough away from the scarified places. Til looked into the shop. Hatch, stiff and forbidding, stood be-

hind his single chair, snipping at the lengthy hair of a middle-aged farmer with a spade beard and pursed lips. On the chairs in front sat three young sons of the farmer, awaiting their turns after their sire was smoothed for the next two months.

Til shook his head and limped down the street. As he did so, he heard a diabolic chant from some small boys on the corner:

"Yah! Yah! Shinny, Shinny, Shin, Shin—Shinny Shin Shinny! Yah! Yah! Shinny Shintaffer wears men's clo'es. Where you goin', you ole Shinny Shin Shintaffer?"

An ancient lumber wagon, weather-beaten and decrepit, drawn by a pair of starved old horses, had just pulled into the street. Standing up in the wagon to drive was a curious creature. Til stared. Was it man or woman? The clothing was masculine—old overalls, shirt, even a tattered man's felt hat. But the hair was long and loosely wound up. And the face was unforgettable—a gypsy face, thin and dark, with great lustrous eyes and a wild wry handsomeness to it, a defiant sulky handsomeness that was woman and nothing else. The wagon halted in front of the New York Store, and the driver climbed down. She was of medium height and slender, and she moved quickly, as if anxious to be through with whatever errand had brought her to town.

"Yah! Yah! Shinny Shintaffer!" howled the urchins.

A clod whistled through the air. Another flew, and struck one of the old horses, which lurched weakly.

Instantly the woman in man's garb stooped. From the street she gathered not one, but a handful, of clods. She began running at her tormenters hurling the lumps of dried mud with all her might.

There was a shriek from the boys and they fled in a panicky stampede around the corner of Potlicker's.

The woman halted, dumped the rest of the clods on the ground, and with a curious gesture of feminine daintiness, wiped her hands on a red handkerchief. Then she went into the New York Store.

Til entered Chew's barber shop. For once it had less business than Hatch's. Three men were playing pool in the rear, but all the barber chairs in front stood empty. Til slid into the first chair and looked at himself in the mirror. He was quite shaggy and he felt secretly ashamed of his appearance as he told Chew, the barber, to "give her a going over."

The shrouding hair-cloth was spread over him and tucked in about his neck, and the keen *weet-weet* of the scissors began.

"Who is that party that jest went by here in the wagon?" Til asked.

"You don't know her? That's Hattie Shintaffer. She's a character," said Chew, eager like all members of his craft for a chance to talk. "Lives down on Cow Creek. Reg'lar man hater. She'll run a man off'n her place with a shotgun, I been told. Nobody knows where she come from or what's eatin' on her. But she don't have no truck with nobody—lives off by herself. Reg'lar she-devil, I hear. You can have my share of her."

Til could hear the three men idly playing pool in the rear of the shop. They were telling obscene stories, stopping to chalk their cues, making small bets, and clicking the colored balls musically. The subdued sounds, the barber's ceaseless flow of conversation, and the hypnotic sensation of the deft work about his head, made Til drowsy. He half shut his eyes and shifted his foot, feeling the dull unpleasant sensation of deep-contained soreness.

A member of the pool-playing trio left the game and came up to the barber chairs.

"Reckon I'll take a shave," he said.

"O.K., Purd, set in," said the second barber.

Til opened his eyes. In the chair next to him was a man with stork-like legs and a flourishing mustache. Purd Weaver, the Antelope Lake hay contractor.

The door of the shop opened and another man entered from the street, Sherry Quarternight, the city marshal. Quarternight removed his coat and opened his vest with the star of his office hanging from it. The polished scabbard of his shoulder holster was brought into plain view.

"Hi, friend Purd, how's the hay?" he asked.

"Gettin' at it," said Weaver. The barber was lowering him back in the chair, preparatory to shaving him. "Say, Sherry, you better come out there. I could use another hand—an' you could bring your shotgun along an' git yourself a mess of prairie chicken."

"Well, I don't know about pitchin' any hay," grinned Quarternight. "But the last part sounds mighty good. Lots of chicken out there?"

"In them hills north an' east, where the river makes the big bend," said Weaver, "the sage hens is plenty thick. Speakin' serious, Sherry, do come over an' make your camp with us. Plenty of room if you don't mind sleepin' on the ground."

"Arizona bed, eh? Lay flat on yo' belly an' covah it ovah with yo' back? Well, mebbe. Right now I got to watch out. I'm a hunted man, yo' know."

"Hunted? How's that?"

"Don't take it serious. I'm joshin'. Ain't yo' heard of them warrants Bedestown's got out fo' me? I'm greatly honored by sech attentions, but I ain't worried."

"Come on out. If you see any Bedestown folks, you can pretend they're sage hens."

They both laughed and then conversation ceased as the barbers put hot towels over the faces of both men. The click of Chew's scissors vied with the click of the pool balls. Til cleared his throat.

"Beggin' your pardon," he said, "but was you serious when you said you was lookin' for hands?"

Purd Weaver waited until the barber removed the towel and begun lathering. Then he gave a sidelong glance.

"Ain't you Til Rector?" the hay contractor asked.

"The same."

"Say," said Weaver, "what's that story about you givin' the rattlesnake fust bite an' still comin' out ahead?"

"Exaggerated."

"Not accordin' to what I hear. How you feelin' now?"

"Right good."

"An' lookin' for a job?"

"I mean to say."

"After what happened I'd think Old Man Trudge wouldn't let you out of his sight."

"Me an' Trudge don't get along."

'Chew had finished with Till, and the latter stiffly descended from the chair.

"Wait a minute," said Weaver. "This here butcher's about done with me. Ain't you, Cal? Where you goin', Til?"

"Thought I'd get somethin' to eat."

"Gents," drawled Quarternight from his chair, "suppose we all go together. I'm feelin' flush. Since yo' so han'somely invited me out, Purd, I'd be proud fo' yo'-all to put on the feed-bag with me."

They demurred politely, but he insisted. So presently they crossed the street together to the Bon Ton. Til had not eaten there before, but he had heard of the girl who waited on counter. Now, sitting on a high stool, he took her in with his eyes. Good-looking. A little corn-fed. He thought he wouldn't trade one Gary for twenty Gussies.

Purd Weaver sat with his thin back humped and his excessively long legs drawn up, and spoke with his mouth full of food.

"How's Simeon to work for?"

"Fair," said Til briefly.

"No monkey business, I bet."

"Well, nobody can say Simeon's slack."

"Prayer meetin' night an' mornin'?"

"Plenty of religion," admitted Til.

"Say, just what *did* you quit him over? Purd asked suddenly.

Til looked him in the eye. "Personal reasons," he said.

The hay contractor turned his attention to his food. After a minute's silence he said:

"That's all right for my money. About that job—you sure you can work?"

"I limp a little. That's all," said Til, lying.

Purd considered. "Reckon you could ride a mowin' machine, or mebber a dump rake," he said at last. "Any man will jump right into the face of a full-grown rattlesnake to save a kid can work for me any time he wants."

"Why, thanks, Mr. Weaver," said Til, pleased.

"My friends calls me Purd. I'm goin' out to camp right after noon with my daughter. You be ready an' I'll pick you up at the hotel. I pay a dollar an' a half. We camp, but the grub ain't the wust, an' you don't pick up a dollar an' a half a day everywhere."

Til was almost happy. He felt a strong urge to bend his back to labor once more. Toil is a thing that gets in the blood.

### 3.

Weaver's skinny daughter Phoebe, all buck teeth and re-treating chin, wiggled coyly over to let Til have a part of the buggy seat. She was an unattractive young woman, in her late twenties, as short-waisted and long-legged as her father, who scolded her all the way to camp.

Phoebe was a virgin in spite of the fact that she had been languishing for a man ever since she put on long dresses; and Purd, a sensible man in every other way, had a foolish notion that he had one major responsibility in the world, and that was to preserve his motherless daughter's virtue. So he lectured her as they swung out of town on the broad metal prairie, about her making "moon eyes," and paying attention to "riff-raff," and perhaps getting people started to talking about her.

Once he interrupted the steady flow of the monologue by

stopping the buggy as a jackrabbit bounded two or three hops from the side of the road and squatted on its haunches.

"The gun," he said.

Phoebe handed him a shotgun that lay in the bottom of the buggy, and Purd, holding the reins in his left hand which also steadied the weapon, so as to curb the inevitable plunge of the team, quickly and expertly shot the hare.

"Leave him lay," he said. "The crows'll get him. An' you, Phoebe, I don't want no more of that giggling around Frankie Benner. He ain't got but one thing on his mind, an' you know what it is. He talks about it all the time. If I ketch him layin' out at night an' sneakin' up close to the cook shack again, I'm goin' to make him mighty scarce an' hard to find."

He went on like this all the time they rattled behind the trotting horses across the level land, and it was clear that this was an obsession with him. Phoebe already was an old maid, and getting worse. Purd honestly wanted her to marry, and wished he could get her off his hands, but he was so afraid that some man would maybe seduce Phoebe before he married her, that he never let anybody come close enough to her to suggest marriage. They said that one young German fellow from south toward the Neutral Strip had come up to Jericho with honorable intentions toward Phoebe, but the first time Purd found him in the yard talking to her, he took a whiffle tree and sprung the youth's backbone out of true. It began to look as if that was her last chance, because nobody since then had the stamina or temerity to risk that whiffle tree and make any kind of an honest effort at Phoebe.

They came to where the road turned north toward Wessel's, but Purd took the south fork for a mile, until they reached a place where a wagon track turned off the main thoroughfare. It was no real road—just a couple of wheel traces leading off across the buffalo grass.

"We take this trail," said Purd. "The crew's camped north of the lake an' we got to skirt the west end. Can't get too near the water, because you'll bog down."

He now took enough time out from scolding Phoebe to inquire about Til's experience in being snake-bitten. How did it feel when the snake first bit him? Did it bother him any more? What did they do for the bite?

"I'm a little stiff when first I get up in the morning," Til explained. "But I feel better every day. In another week I won't know it ever happened. The snake ain't hatched that can lay me out."

"That's right," said Purd. "They claim once a man's snake-bit an' gits over it, all the rest of the bites he can git in his life

won't affect him. It's like them bee men that gits so used to bein' stung it don't bother 'em no more."

"I ain't aimin' to try it out," grinned Til, and Phoebe giggled sympathetically.

Another mile slid back under their wheels, and again the way divided. This time Purd took the north fork. Pointing with his whip to the track which led east, he said:

"Foller that an' you git to the Shintaffer place. Road ain't much traveled, is it? Not by me, sure. I don't like crazy folks, an' I don't like queer folks. An' the way that woman, Hattie Shintaffer, acts gives me the goose pimples all over. They say it takes all sorts of people to make the world. Well, she's one."

They were approaching the sand hills, gray with their crown of sagebrush, and suddenly they topped a low swell in the ground and saw Antelope Lake, bright beneath the sun like a wet steel shield. It was a curious freak of the plains—a lake with no outlet, created by an extensive hollow in the ground which was fed by storm waters. Sometimes after a long rainy spell it was five or six miles long and a mile wide. Just at present it was perhaps three miles long and half a mile wide. The lake was very shallow, probably not more than ten feet deep at its deepest point. It was surrounded by an oval of green outside the wide mud-flats, which were dried and cracked across in curious geometric patterns. All about stretched the brassy country of sun-cured buffalo grass extending to the sand hills, but in the water shallows and on the mud flats grew sedges among which the red-winged black-birds careened and sang, and on the higher ground the entire shallow cup among the hills was covered by a fine stand of tall prairie grass, rare in this part of the country, and much prized for hay since it cured sweet and nutritious, and kept well.

The waters of the lake were brackish owing to evaporation, and though horses would drink it, water for human consumption had to be hauled every other day in a tank wagon, from the Cimarron River, two miles away.

In the brilliant light of the plains, distant objects appeared crystal clear to the vision. Til made out without difficulty a pair of mowing machines and a dump rake at work—long before the buggy had reached the lake. There were also two or three stacks of new yellow hay visible. Details were sharp, though exquisitely small, like objects seen through the wrong end of a telescope—so much so that Til could even descry the tilt of the hat on the head of the driver of one of the mowing machines, although the machine itself was so distant that its metallic rattle was perfectly inaudible.



They skirted the west side of the lake and reached "camp"—a wooden cook shack on wheels, a tent of dirty brown canvas, a temporary corral of barbed wire, and a litter of odds and ends of machinery.

"You can sleep in the tent—or outside on the ground, or in one of the haywagons, suiting yourself," said Purd. "I'll start you on a mower in the morning."

Til carried his telescope suitcase, which had been brought in the box behind the buggy seat, to the tent. The interior was suffocatingly hot with the stifling hot-house heat of all tents under the sun. He tucked the telescope into a corner and withdrew, glad to escape from the gasping interior.

#### 4.

The sloughing of the flesh on Til's ankle and leg ceased, and the wounds healed, leaving only ugly purplish scars. In the first days at the hay camp the jolting seat of the mowing machine wearied him surprisingly and the never-ending soulles staccato of the sickle-bar made his nerves twist and cringe. This was due to the weakness under which he still suffered. Purd, however, gave him a steady team of horses, with plodding gait and twitching tails, who knew what a swath was and how to follow it.

The grass was heavy, sweet and blue-green. Two mowers worked together. In front went Frankie Benner, a short, red-faced Arkansawyer with a cast in his eye and several scars on his face, who cut the first swath. Til's team followed Benner's machine, the two mowers sending up a ceaseless clatter, the hay folding perpetually over the sickle-bars as it was severed close to the ground, and the strip of virgin bluestem growing smaller each day.

In other parts of the hay meadow the big dump rakes worked, pulling the dried hay first into windrows, then walking down the windrows themselves, straddling them and with arching basket tines, bunching them into ricks.

The crew was experienced, having worked together for some time before Til joined it. Benner was a widower, and a self-proclaimed Confederate veteran. He told the most astounding stories of how he acquired the several scars which made his homely features still more unbeautiful.

"That thar one," he told Til one evening, pointing to a weal

that ran across a cheek, "was a saber cut at Iuka, when I stood off half a company of Yank calvry at a bridge by myself for twenty minutes an' give Pap Price an' his staff a chance to keep from gettin' cut off. This one—" indicating an ugly mark on his chin, "—was a minie ball at Elkhorn Tavern. A piece of canister done this dimple back of my ear. Corinth was where I got that. I could take off my shirt an' show you a bay'nit wound I carried off from Shreveport when we run off Banks an' Shields. An' thar's a old cut on my laig—a Spencer seven-shooter carbine done it, in the hands of one of them Colorado hoss infantry we run into at Westport."

Til was not a little impressed, and said so to Purd. But Weaver hooted.

"Him see action?" he neighed. "Why Frankie Benner was in the supply department. Them ain't bay'net an' saber wounds. He got 'em because he's so damned awkward. He's allus fallin' into the machinery."

After that Til allowed for the fact that Benner was a harmless braggart, and got along well with him, for the man was a willing worker. The other two hands were Ernie and Jack Halper, tall, loose-jointed brothers, with black hair and beards and mild blue eyes. Weaver directed the hay cutting, and did the stacking.

The bucking mower seat soon became familiar to Til. He had two or three spells of dizziness the first two or three days, but after that he experienced no difficulty.

It was at night he suffered more than during the day.

Purd and his daughter slept on cots in the cook shack, but the nights were cool and rainless, and the crew preferred the outdoors to the stuffy tent. After they had eaten supper in the cook shack, they would smoke awhile and talk.

Then Til would go out by himself, spread his blanket, and lie looking at the stars. Those were the bad times. He was doing his honest best to wash his mind clear of thoughts of Gary, but he could not make his thinking work the way he desired it to do. In spite of himself he would wonder what she was doing, what she was thinking, And then would come pictures in his mind of her, and longings which he could not banish. His inability to order his thoughts gave him anguish. It seemed that a man ought surely to be able to get over a woman. Other men had done it. He felt it was a weakness in him that he could not clear his mind of this kind of unprofitable thinking. It "ganted" him like a horse living on loco weed, which has no power of nourishment and only makes the animal start and stare and snort—and go crazy in the end. Gary had told him how it had to be with them, and he had agreed. He had

no right to go on thinking about her. But he could no more put her out of his mind than he could change the color of his eyes.

The distant bickering of the coyotes in the breaks of the Cimarron came to him, and he heard the odd off-key hoots of burrowing owls from a prairie dog town a short distance up from the lake.

The bitterness of his tragedy oppressed him. Even now, after being absent from her for many days, the memory of her voice and her familiar movements were as acute as if he had only parted from her. He knew that she was wrestling with a weight of self-blame and it pained him to think of that, but the situation which prevented his helping her in any way was immutable. The Bible stood between them. The Ten Commandments. No human feelings could prevail against those stark crags on which religion made its foundations.

The nights passed some way. During the days the mowing machines rattled and the spidery rakes went in echelon across the meadow, catching up in their thin arching ribs the dried grass for the windrows. Purd had little to fear from the weather, the hay-maker's bane.

One morning, about a week after Til went to work for him, the contractor said:

"Til, how you feelin'?"

"First rate."

"Feel strong enough to take a hand at pitchin'?"

Til considered, and believed that he did.

"We got to get to stackin'," said Purd. "If you will, I'd like for you to team up with Frankie Benner, since the Halpers allus works together."

There came a new phase in the rhythm of hay-making. Working in pairs, they gathered with the ray racks the hay which they had previously cut and which, now cured, lay in the bunched ricks on the cropped sod of the basin. Til found Benner over-loquacious and slow, but a good working mate. Frankie was short and burly, and he had not Til's height or symmetry, but there was power in his stubby figure. As for Til, some soreness remained in his legs, and he "gave out" more easily than before the snake had bitten him. Together, however, the two of them managed to accomplish a creditable amount of work.

Driving their haywagon up to a rick they would dismount in the beating sun-glare. From opposite sides they would plunge their gleaming fork into the haycock, nice judgment being exercised to get the forks in close enough together to avoid separation of the load, yet not so close as to waste lift-

ing power. The two powerful backs would grow taut, the fork handles would spring, and suddenly up would come the haycock—an almost unbelievable mountain of it—into the rack. Usually Til and Frankie managed to hoist an entire rick in one giant effort, leaving only odd wisps to be raked up and tossed into the wagon.

As the rack began to fill either Til or Frankie climbed up on the hay, and there remained, piling it higher and higher, as the other pitched to the top of the load. Only when the wide timber frame of the hay wagon was heaped until it seemed it would overturn, did they start the team toward the stack, where high in the air Purd Weaver's angular figure awaited them.

Besides the stack the horses stood quietly switching flies, glad of the rest, while the men again teamed together to hoist the fragrant masses skyward to where the lanky stacker stood, putting a forkload here and a forkload there, with the nicest culculation, building his stack to shed water and defy the winds.

Dust rose about them. On his back Til felt the sun beating hot and his shirt growing wet with sweat. It was good to be strong again and be filled with the lust of living. Work was good to fill his mind.

## 5.

The hay-pitchers ceased their work and leaned on their fork handles. Purd Weaver adopted an attitude peculiarly cranelike on the peak of a new stack. All gazed southward, where a distant speck, moving beyond the lake, had been marked as an approaching horseman.

Visitors were infrequent at this isolated place, and the men speculated as to who it might be and what his business was.

"Hell's-kefire, I know who 'tis!" suddenly cried Purd. "Clay-bank horse, ain't it? That's Sherry Quarternight. I asked him out here to hunt chicken, an' here he comes!"

Within a few minutes they all argeed with the identification, and then returned to their labor, pausing only occasionally, as is the habit of farm workers, to glance curiously at the oncoming rider. Quarternight rode as he walked—with ease and competence and a certain swagger. He carried across the pommel of his saddle a double-barrcled English fowling piece,

extremely fine and beautifully finished, with blued barrels and hand-carved stock. He lifted his arm with the gun in his hand as he approached the stack.

"Yo' see, I'm takin' yo' up on that bluff yo' made me," he called to Purd. "Heah I am—wheah-at is yo' chickens?"

The sun was low, and Weaver slid down the stack to the ground.

"You're welcome as the flowers in May," he laughed, shaking the Texan's hand. "We're jest ready to go in. You got here in time for supper, I notice. Well, come Phoebe knows she's got you as a boarder, we'll have somethin' extry-special, I'm bettin'. We'll start you off toward them birds you're a-honin' for, fust thing in the mornin'."

Quarternight rode in with them to camp and mingled with the men as they put up the teams. He was jovial and obliging. When the Halper brothers wished to examine the gun, he willingly let them. Admiringly, lovingly, they passed it from hand to hand. An unconscious affection for weapons which is inherent in Americans, and the love of anything possessing elegant workmanship, which is also truly American, was manifest in the way the tall Halpers, with their black beards, fondled the piece and commented on its features.

Suddenly Quarternight turned away from them, his hat coming off his dark head.

"Miss Phoebe," he said, "I declare, I certainly am fo'tunate to feast my eyes on yo' cha'min' face."

Phoebe had come to the door of the cook shack and it was apparent that she had spared no pains in her appearance.

"Oh, shucks, Mr. Quarternight," she giggled, with a twist of her ungainly body.

Sherry knew exactly the correct approach. He gave her a flash of his fine teeth and paid her another compliment or two.

That evening they enjoyed a meal that was superior to any they had tasted since the hay-making began. As a crowning luxury Phoebe brought forth some yellow tomato preserves and even permitted some piccalili on the table, although ordinarily they received the latter delicacy only twice a week. Save for her simpering and her languishing looks toward him, Quarternight enjoyed himself thoroughly. The largest triangle of pie was his, and Phoebe saw to it that he had the choicest piece of beefsteak.

The men were hungry. They ate heartily, afterward going down in the darkness to the lake where they waded out naked and splashed in the warm water. Quarternight was a pleasant companion. The men laughed at his jokes, most of which were

broad. But he brought his blanket away from the crowd, over to where Til was spreading his bed, when it was time to sleep.

"Mind if I bed down beside you?" he asked.

"Glad to have you," said Til, flattered.

They relaxed on their pallets on the springy turf and smoked. The conversation was lazy and general, but Til wondered what manner of man this vivid figure was.

It shortly developed that the curiosity was mutual. Sherry was filled with desire to know about Til's snake-bite—had it hurt much? How long did it remain swollen? What was done for it?

His experience, Til had discovered, had made of him in some sort a celebrity. With patience he answered the queries, then made bold to ask a question of his own.

"Ain't it a little risky to come this far from town?"

"Why?"

"I heard that the Bedestown crowd was lookin' for you—"

"Oh, them!" Quarternight permitted himself a light laugh. "I been threatened by gents that had something to back their threats with. It ain't likely they'd ever find out I was here, but if they did—well, some of *them* would better be watchin' out, if they ever happened to jump me!"

Til wished the other had not said that. There was a false note here, though he could not exactly place his finger on it. It sounded like cheap bluster. Sherry Quarternight—the Jericho fighting man—assuredly the others *should* look to themselves in an encounter. Yet his saying it . . . somehow it did not ring true.

The marshal's cigar was finished and Til knocked out his pipe. High above in the clear night air, a night hawk uttered his jarring cry. A sleepy killdeer down by the lake gave a trembling *kill-dee-dee-dee*.

## 6.

In the morning Purd Weaver cast a look about the cloudless sky, and said: "She's likely to rain."

Frankie Benner screwed up an eye and agreed. A stranger to the plains might have been mystified by these summations, but the men knew the country and there was a haze on the horizon and a feel to the air that constituted guiding portents.

"Well, it's Sattidy," continued Purd, and Til realized with surprise that he had been working here for nearly ten days. "I wasn't figgerin' on workin' Sunday no how," continued the hay man. "You boys git up what's layin' now, an' we'll knock off for a day or so."

"Knocking off" meant a visit to town for such as desired, and the announcement was received with grunts and comments of assent that amounted to a kind of a cheer. With new zest the crew went to the task—"work brittle" at the prospect of a holiday.

Quarternight, after breakfast, lingered for the time a man might smoke a pipe, exchanging badinage with the simpering Phoebe. That was his way; a woman, be she homely as a wart hog, was always to his mind worth cultivating.

But Phoebe, with her shrill whinny and her coy glances, proved too much even for the practiced ladies' man, and presently Sherry strode away with his gun, mounted his horse, and rode off toward the northeast into the sand hills. It was to be observed that he had not wasted his blandishments. A lunch, put up by Phoebe and wrapped in an old copy of the *Jericho Weekly Clarion*, was tied to the pommel of his saddle.

That morning the hay crew repeatedly heard his gun. A single distant boom. Or perhaps a pair of reports, evenly spaced, quick yet unhurried.

Passing Til's haywagon, which was headed with a load for the stacks, one of the Halpers shouted:

"Sounds like Quarternight's layin' in plenty of birds!"

Til nodded back, swung his team in a wide arc, and brought the haywagon exactly alongside the half-finished stack upon which stood the jackknife figure of Purd Weaver.

The day had grown very hot, the sun beating down with new wrath. Til bent his back to his pitching, forking up huge loads of the yellow, fragrant hay, and the increase in the humidity of the atmosphere was apparent to him. It seemed that the heat in the lee of the haystack was more sickening, scorching, unbearable than usual. Out in the field, when he was loading the hay rack, it was better, but at this steamy place all breezes seemed cut off.

Again and again he paused to pass his bandanna over his streaming face and neck. Spreading stains of moisture darkened the blue shirt at his armpits and in the small of his back. The others were suffering too, and when the sun reached meridian they were glad to stop.

As they sat at the noonday meal in the sweltering cook sack, the crisp clop of horses' hoofs sounded outside. Quarternight had returned, was the first thought, but Purd went to the

door and greeted someone, obviously a newcomer. A moment later the visitor entered.

"Tobe Shankle," muttered the elder Halper. "Wonder what he'll be wanting around here."

The Bedestown man gave them his loose grin as he stepped into the shack.

"Howdy men," he said. Then to Phoebe: "Well, if it ain't! If it *ain't*! It's a sight for sore eyes to see you, Miss Phoebe." He paused and surveyed the table and food. "I was over this-away an' thought I'd drop by for mebbe a bite," he finished.

"Glad for your company, Tobe," Purd said heartily. Phoebe fixed another place at the table.

Tobe Shankle was a top hand with the food. He sat at the middle of the table where he could reach both ways and corral the victuals without having to depend too much on co-operation from anybody else. The crew watched with admiration the huge forkfuls of steak he put into his face. And while he ate he kept up a stream of talk:

"Hear what happened up at the court house yestiddy? The commissioners took orders from Hank Archelaus an' approved the petitions an' ordered a railroad bond election come reg'lar election time next November. Lots of folks on the north side of the river is purty badly upset. What's this yere, yaller tomatter preserves? I hate to see it myself, looks like a breedin' of trouble for the County. Doubt if them bonds pass even if they is a vote, an' why hold a vote to stir things up? Pass the gravy, thank ye kindly. Ain't very much left in this dish, is they—anybody want any more? Wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for Quarternight. People at Bedestown is plumb down on him. They's a justice warrant out for him, ye know, an' if I met him on the road right now, I'd be forced to serve it on him, no matter how good a friend he was. I'll take another helpin' of them potatoes. There's a sight too much consolidation of offices in Jericho. It ain't good for this yere County. Now take me—the governor ain't made his sheriff app'intment yet, but if he names me, I'll be the only man holdin' a major office from Bedestown, or from the Bedestown side of the river. It would be a danged fine thing for this County if the governor app'ints a feller like me. Save a lot of ill-feelin'. Hand me the piccalili. I ain't a man to put myself forward, but—"

The distant report of a shotgun floated down the breeze from the northeast.

"Who you got gunnin' up there?" asked Shankle after a moment.



Nobody answered him at first, but then Phoebe Weaver gave her whinny.

"We got company," she said, archly accenting the first word. "Talk about angels! You just mentioned him—Mr. Quarternight!"

Tobe stared at her, wiping his mouth and mustache with a napkin. Purd was gazing at his daughter as if he would like to slap her.

Tobe rose from the table, with a manner elaborately casual, and reached for his hat.

"Well," he said, "I got to be movin' along." He shoveled a piece of plum pie on his palm and went out eating it, the juice running down the corners of his mouth under his mustache and dripping on his short front.

After a minute they heard his horse's hoofs.

"He's headin' up the river," said Purd, listening. "Away from where Sherry's huntin'—an' straight for the Bedestown ford."

He stood up and stretched himself.

"I got a little errand to run," he said. "You fellers can finish up that stack."

He went out, hitched up the buggy, and drove off toward the sand hills as his crew returned to the hay field.

Less than an hour was required for putting up the remaining hay, with Ernie Halper on the stack. By the time the crew returned to camp, they could see Purd Weaver driving back in, and beside him Quarternight on his claybank horse. A heap of speckled prairie chickens was in the box behind the buggy seat.

Til was surprised at the appearance of the Texan. He looked nervous; even pale.

"I don't think there's no danger, Sherry," Purd was saying, "but I reckon it might be a little better if you went back to town, say. No tellin' what Tobe an' that Bedestown trash has up their sleeves. I an' daughter is goin', an' some of the boys. Wait jest a minute or two an' we'll head back together. That might be smart—could save trouble if any come up.

Quarternight nodded slightly.

Purd turned to Til.

"I reckon, Til," he said, "you're the last man out here. The others is right smart eager to get to town. We got to leave somebody here to take care of the horses an' keep an eye on things. You willin'?"

Til had no desire to return to Jericho at present. He nodded.

In some manner five persons loaded themselves into the buggy, three in the seat—Purd, Phoebe, and Frankie Benner;

and the two Halpers standing in the box behind, making room for their huge feet among the dead prairie chickens. With Sherry on his horse close beside the buggy, they started off southward.

Til watched them recede beyond the lake. When they had disappeared over the distant rise he turned back to the cook shack. The sun was sinking low. He went out and fed the horses, then spent a little time playing solitaire with a pack of greasy cards that belonged to the Halpers. This, however, soon palled on him, and he rummaged in the cook shack for eatables. Eggs he found in a tin bucket, and there was a fresh loaf of bread in the bread box. From a slab of bacon he sliced a few thin strips.

It seemed long since he had "bached," and he found himself unexpectedly awkward at tasks once familiar. The bread would not cut evenly. He broke an egg into the skillet and then had to fish out pieces of the shell. Presently, however, he had his eggs and bacon cooking, and the sun was not yet down.

The domestic tasks his big hands did so clumsily reminded him of the deft expertness of another pair of hands. Overwhelmingly, now that he was by himself, the loneliness for Gary returned.

In his mind rang that accusing cry of hers: "*You come too late.*" There was anguish for him in the remembrance, and yet a little grain of pride and even triumph. By it Gary had told him that had he come sooner . . . he could have had her. Thin comfort though this was, he clung to it.

He made up his mind at last what he would do. The accumulation of misfortune was making him hate western Kansas. Furthermore it did him no good to be in a place where every day brought him bitter reminders. He decided that he would leave the country. That meant surrendering his farm and the slim savings he had invested in the miserable land. It meant also giving up the fight he had promised himself to make against Archelaus and his smooth operations. These things had seemed very important once. They were unimportant now. He only knew that for his own sake . . . and Gary's . . . he must go as far way as he could.

He roused suddenly to the realization that the eggs and bacon were in danger of burning. He scooped them out of the skillet and, taking two slices of bread, made himself a sandwich. Then he sat down to eat.

Horses' hoofs and men's voice sounded outside. He put down his food and stepped to the door of the cook shack.

There were three of them. Tobe Shankle. And two other Bedestown men—Len Le'orce, the auctioneer, and Dilly

Capehart, the editor. They were armed with rifles, but Shankle also had a pistol holstered at his hip.

"Who's in there?" demanded Shankle.

"Nobody." Til spat outside the door. "Come on in."

With his gun in his hand, Shankle dismounted from his horse and entered the cook shack.

"Where's the crew?" he asked after a look around.

"Finished stacking and went to town with Quarternight."

"With Quarternight?" Shankle began cursing softly, but Til seemed to detect an odd note of relief in his voice.

"Just my luck," said Tobe. "The skunk's got away. Rector, this yere's a posse. I picked up them two, the fust I run into, an' brung them over to arrest Quarternight for assault an' illegal entry with armed weepens in the property of Mr. Capehart here. Now our man's gone. Kin ye beat that? Hell's fire!"

"Looks like you overjumped, Tobe, like a houn' dog after a dodgin' rabbit," grinned Capehart. "What do we do now?"

"Nice goin', sheriff," added LeForce. He used the title with irony, as if expressing his opinion of the entire business. "I told you I didn't want none of this wild goose chase. You might have made sure anyhow that your man would be here. Saturday night an' all—looks obvious he'd be headin' back to Jericho!"

"I had to take the chance, didn't I?" asked Tobe in injured tones. "You fellers wouldn't have me settin' on my hind end, lettin' a law violator prance around this close to Bedestown, an' make no effort to grab him? A man's got to gamble some in this business."

He knew his companions were laughing at him, but he had to make the best of it.

"Purty far to ride home tonight," he said ruefully at length. "Guess we might as well camp here. Ye don't mind, do ye?" The last was an afterthought to Til.

"Don't know it would do much good for me to object," said Til. "You're the law—or ain't you?"

He heard Billy Capehart titter, and Shankle looked about helplessly.

He had brought Capehart and his crony LeForce along chiefly in anticipation of an exciting eye-witness story in the *Weekly Argus*, describing the Shankle heroism in arresting the Jericho champion—which, presumably, would be accomplished easily if Quarternight saw resistance was hopeless in face of superior force. But now Tobe feared there would be as much of a snigger in Capehart's article as there was in his voice at present.

"Well, unsaddle," he said sheepishly. "We'll stay here." He

glanced toward the west where low clouds hung on the horizon. "Might rain tonight," he added uneasily.

"If it does, there's the tent," suggested Til.

The Bedestown men secured their horses, and tramped about, glad to feel the ground under their feet. Now they had decided to camp, constraint departed and they began to joke with each other and Til.

"Would Purd mind if we get a little hay for the hosses?" asked LeForce.

"Jest so you don' tear into any of his stacks," replied Til. "There's a pile over in the horse corral."

In the lee of one of the haystacks Capehart built a fire. It grew bright with welcoming light. Traditions of hospitality still held true in the West, and Til did as he knew Weaver would have him.

"There's a fryin' pan in the cook shack, an' some eggs an' stuff," he said. "Bread, too. Can beans an' peaches. Help yourself."

"Thanks," they told him warmly. "Stay with us at the fire whilst we eat an' tell us the latest."

## TWELVE

### 1.

DARKNESS PRESSED down. Gary lay on her back, her eyes wide open, staring upward at the lost dimness of the ceiling. Without moving her head she could make out the window and the only faintly less blue-darkness of the night without.

It was near morning, but the house was quiet, save for Simeon's rasping puffs. Ranny lay sleeping on his cot, and she knew that he was lying as he usually did, on his stomach, with his fat little legs outsprawled, his chubby face flushed and serious with the business of slumber. His breathing was so light that no sound came to Gary. In her first days of motherhood this had preyed on her so that at times she climbed out of her bed and crossed the floor to lean yearningly over him in the darkness and assure herself that life really was in the precious form. It was silly—but she could not resist doing it.

Sometimes she was frightened, she loved Ranny so. It seemed perilous, somehow, to love anything so much. If anything happened to him she would not know how to live or act . . .

She closed her eyes, and opened them again, staring on up into the darkness. Something *had* happened, and whether she liked it or not, it affected Ranny. This was what she had been wrestling with for days now. A heavy pain crouched about her, blotting out the little brightness and joy there had been in her life. It weighted her down, day and night.

Ranny was so dear, so happy, so precious—she was agonizingly jealous for him, for his future. Once she had been harried only by the worry that the drab existence of western Kansas might crush the spark out of him. She thought of the children she knew in this country—the Wessels, and others. Here childhood hardly existed, except in name. There was only a debased imitation of childhood, cankered by greed and selfishness. “Be smart” was the highest advice a boy was given, and to be “smart” in the lexicon of the country meant the development to its utmost degree of the unpleasant talent for taking advantage of others. The grasping cruelty of Archelaus, and of the people attending the Phelps sell-out, were prime examples of the kind of “smartness” that was desired. A certain amount of cheating was esteemed, as demonstrating keenness of wits. Lying, in a transaction of business, was not too severely frowned upon.

Gary yearned for something better than this for Ranny. Something more in life than drudgery and sly trickery and sharp small profits. There was, she passionately knew, a more gracious way of life somewhere. For Ranny she desired it more than she had ever desired anything.

It was torment to think about this, because it always brought up a hideous confusion, capped by a sense of guilt. Here life was prescribed—by Simeon. Well, she had married him, knowing she was taking a man old enough to be her father, fixed in his ways, narrow in his outlooks, bigoted and close-fisted. She had made her bed. Lying in that bed had become a long torture.

The thought of Til Rector kept coming to her, and from this derived her feeling of guilt. She had put away the temptation and made the decision to depart not one jot from the strictest status of her wifehood. And part of that decision was to put Til Rector entirely out of her mind and heart. Yet this she had been unable to do. In spite of her determined, almost desperate efforts, the thought of Til always kept coming back. It was dangerous to think of him, dangerous to her resolution. But even in the turmoil of her soul there was peace and joy in remembering him just as he was—young, long-legged, kind, and humorous. With a lawless rush the recollection came back to her of the moments when she lay locked in his arms, desperately fighting, fighting to quell her sudden longing for him, then ceasing to struggle, her lips on his with that queer, sobbing hungriness.

Why was a thing like that wrong? Til had said he loved her . . . the first time anyone had said that in her whole life. Simcon had only asked her to marry him. The word love had

never passed his lips. And she found it sweet. She remembered how Til pleaded with her to go with him, and marry him, and the thought had power to make her heart ache. But she had brought the whole matter to an end. She could not do as he asked.

Lying on her bed in the darkness, with Simeon puffing heavily in his sleep beside her, Gary knew it was no loyalty to her husband that had made it impossible to go with Til. Nor was it her preoccupation over Ranny—the child would probably be better off in a new home, as Til had pointed out.

She had not even made the decision for herself. The decision had been made for her. The Bible made it. The Old Testament. It was as hard, unyielding, and palpable as a mighty stone wall. There was no going around it; and there was no gateway through it. *Thou shalt not . . .* These were the words from which, however she tried, she could never escape.

How many bitter hours she had brooded over this she could not enumerate or even begin to remember. They seemed to stretch far back into her life, almost as if they had always been a part of her . . . and on into the future, too, because they would be with her forever and ever, Amen.

A rooster crowed and she heard the sound with great thankfulness. Dawn was near. To be up, to be moving, to be working and busy—anything except to lie still here and think, with Simeon's puffs rasping at her side.

She slipped out of bed and went over to the window. Below a polished brightness in the eastern sky surged a faint tinge of salmon pink, and a morning freshness came into the room through the opening. In twenty minutes the sun would be breaking that opaque black horizon.

She began to dress in the darkness. Simeon stirred.

"Time to get up—already?" he grunted. She did not reply, but went out to the kitchen. After a time she heard him moving about, and presently he came from the bedroom, slipping his suspenders over his shoulders, washed his face, and went down to the barn to milk as the morning brightened.

So had another day begun.

It progressed as the others before it. Breakfast over, Simeon went to the field. He had been unable to secure another hired man, and he was working hard these days, not using the mules which Til had broken but which still were fractious. Instead he drove the steadier team of older horses. He came in at noontides haggard and worn, and hurried back to the field again as soon as the animals had been given time to eat.

In the long morning, and the long afternoon of that day, Gary drove herself. Yet her work was mechanical, and her

ways so strange that Ranny wandered around at times like a small lost soul.

At mid-afternoon when the child took his nap, Gary sat for the first time by the table, her chin in her hand, her eyes far away. The thing which was tearing at her at last had reached a point where she must know what to do about it.

Presently she arose and fetched Simeon's huge Bible, and as she had done often before she searched its pages. The print wavered and blurred like the horizons in a mirage. She leafed aimlessly through the pages, finding nothing to help her.

Then she closed her eyes. She was going to pray. It came over her that she really did not know how to pray. The prayer she said at night she knew, but it was a relic of her childhood, and assuredly did not fit the present situation. *If I should die before I wake . . .*

Otherwise she had almost no experience at praying.

It was Simeon always who said the sonorous grace at meals, who led the sounding prayers after supper. Sometimes she had gone to prayer meetings in church, but she never prayed then. It suited her better to sit quietly in a corner and allow others who had a grasp of the words to lift the petitions. She could admire these, but it turned her cold within to think of praying herself.

Now, however, it suddenly came to her that if she could only pray, could only pour out her heart to God as she had heard more gifted ones do, it would help lift part of the crushing weight off her soul. She bowed her head, eyes tightly closed, and attempted prayer.

It would not come. The thought occurred to her that this was because she was not in the proper attitude. Prayer should be said on the knees. Maybe that would help her.

She slipped from her chair and knelt beside it, head bowed, face in her hands. In the kitchen the silence lengthened until the slow ticking of the clock above the door seemed to echo from wall to wall. Desperately she sought for words, as her throat squeezed in upon itself. At last, all alone in the kitchen, Gary Trudge uttered this little prayer:

"God, please. You know what I did. I did wrong, awful wrong, and I know it. God, please tell me what to do. I can't help loving him. I can't hardly—hardly live without him. It is burning my heart out, God, and I can't stop it. It is wrong for me to keep thinking about him—I know it is wrong. And I want to stop, must stop. Oh, God, please. *Please* help Thy sinful daughter to get over this in her heart. Return me to Thy ways of righteousness, God. Bless Thy holy name. Amen."



Gary rose from the kneeling and sat once more at the table. She wondered if God would hear such a prayer as that, and if He did, she wondered if He would do anything about it.

She went into the bedroom and stood for a moment looking down at Ranny, sleeping in his bed.

Then she went quietly out into the kitchen and returned to her work.

God had not answered her prayer. She could not stop thinking of Til Rector.

## 2.

It was a piece of awkwardness, caused by her preoccupation. Hardly ever in her whole recollection could Gary remember doing anything so inept. Simeon brought in the milk that night and set the pail on the floor. She lifted it absently and half set it on the wash bench, not taking care that it was securely placed.

Even as she turned her back she saw the bucket begin to tilt over. She made a frantic reach for it, but too late. The pail crashed down and a pallid sheet of milk cascaded over the entire floor.

In Simeon the accident produced a sudden fury. The crash had startled him. Furthermore there was waste in the spilt milk which was a fundamental offense to him.

But the chief cause of his anger was the irritation many men sustain when any such unexpected disorder occurs in their homes. The accustomed smooth operation is broken for a moment. There is confusion and a mess to clean up. The man does not have the cleaning to do, and the confusion is only momentary, but some inexplicable chord is jangled. He becomes far more agitated than his wife who has the labor of making everything as it was before.

"Can't you look what you're doin'?" Simeon screeched. "You're as awkward as an ole cow!"

Gary's nerves were frayed. Ordinarily she would have paid no attention to him, but now for almost the first time in her married life, resentment overwhelmed her.

"You can't talk to me like that!" she flared.

"Oh, is that so?" Simeon was sneering. "I suppose I ain't got no right to say anything around here. I suppose that mebbe I better keep shet. Likely you think that somebody

else has a better right, eh?" His rage mounted and he struck savagely, aiming to hurt her. "Mebbe you'd like to have that feller Tilford Rector back? Is that what you're thinkin'?"

It was a cruel thing. Gary hardly knew what she was saying as she cried back:

"Maybe it *would* be better! Maybe he would have a little consideration for me. Maybe Til Rector would understand how to treat a woman. Say what you want, Til was *always* good—to Ranny and me!"

It was her voice that did the damage. They faced each other in the tense silence of the kitchen. The spilt milk on the floor was forgotten. Simeon stood by the table, staring at Gary over his steel-rimmed spectacles, the cords in his scrawny neck standing out, the lamp making a dull high-light on his bald forehead. Reaction swept over Gary. She leaned back against the bedroom door, her head against it for support, her arms slightly outspread with the hands turned backward against it. Her knees felt weak.

"So," Simeon said, almost softly. "So that's it. I was right after all, wasn't I? There *is* something between you two—"

"No!" she denied fiercely. "Nothing wrong. Nothin—"

"Gary," he said ominously, as if he saw clearly into her. "That ain't true."

She looked into his eyes, and something seemed to knit itself in her. All at once many matters began to clarify themselves, and a surge akin to relief went over her. At last the long dissembling would be ended.

"I'm glad you said that," she told him, and her voice had become very calm. "Because there's something I've got to say."

"What is it?"

"Something I've been thinking about for a long time." She hesitated, her tongue thick in her throat with momentary returning panic.

"Well, go on say it," he prompted, still staring.

"I've thought and thought about it," she began again. "It took me so I haven't done much else but think about it. It's been living with me—in here—" She put her hand on her heart.

Something of the agony in her caught him. A sense of disaster came to him and a sudden great fear.

"What's this you're a-sayin'?" he said sharply. "Be careful, Gary. Be careful what you say!"

But the momentary panic had left her now. She began to talk, almost as if to herself.

"I've been careful long enough. It's going to come out. All of a sudden it's clear to me. When I married you, everybody

told me how good you were. Your goodness—it was the thing everybody talked about, and I believed. I never doubted it. Even when you did some of—the things you did—I still thought they must be right, because you were *good*. But now I know something I didn't know before . . . *you are not good at all!*"

"Woman!"

"I mean it! Goodness is being kind and unselfish and doing things for others—not just praying, and saying Bible quotations, and acting holy. You're mean, and selfish, and you never thought about anything but yourself in your whole life! I see that now. You talk about being *good*—Til Rector is twice as good as you ever thought of being. And he doesn't go around like the Pharisee who thanked God he wasn't like other men! That's what I think of you, Mr. Trudgel! And since you asked me, that's what I think of Til Rector!"

She stopped, breathless, in the middle of the outburst. While the clock ticked minutes they faced each other. Simeon's eyes, with their yellow Leghorn glare, unbelieving, unwinking, tried to take this in. For the first time full realization of what she had done came to Gary. And for the first time she suddenly could not meet his eyes. For the first time in all the years he had known her, her gaze was on the floor. For her own sin, the sin of loving another man than the one to whom she was married, suddenly came back to her with crushing force.

"It can't be," Simeon said, unbelieving. "You're my wife. It *can't* be!" The last sentence was a hoarse shout.

Two quick steps he took forward and seized her wrist.

"Woman, look me in the eyes!"

His fingers bit into her wrist. She raised her pale face to his.

Simeon released her wrist, and it was as if he had thrown it down. He sank into a chair.

Fear came into Gary's face. What was he going to do? She was not afraid for herself, but Simeon looked so white, so crazy, that she felt a thrill of terror for Ranny. She had heard of men who, under similar circumstances, went berserk and killed their families before themselves committing suicide.

But Simeon did nothing for a long time. Then he only cleared his throat.

"Sit down on that there chair," he said at last.

She obeyed him mutely.

"When—" he began. "When did you . . .?"

"I don't know. All at once—I just couldn't help—"

"Did he . . . ?"

"He . . . said he loved me, too. We . . . kissed . . ." She was

like a child recounting this inexplicable thing that had happened.

"Is that all?"

She did not answer. The question shocked her, and her face paled and her eyes widened.

"Is that all?" he repeated, leaning forward.

She supposed that, under the circumstances, it was natural for him to ask it . . . but in spite of that her whole feeling was speechless indignation. He was assuming that which had not been—that which she had overcome in spite of overwhelming temptation. Up to now she had been frightened—frightened and guilty. But a sudden rebellion swept over her. She had told him everything. Now he was going farther . . . he had no right . . .

She stubbornly refused to answer.

*"Damn him! God damn him to hell!"*

He came to his feet as he said it with terrible intensity. It was the first curse he had ever uttered in all his life. At last the true extent of the disaster seemed borne fully in on him.

Gary shrank still farther back. She could not say anything. Her head was bowed. At last Simeon had seen her back bend, the thing he had longed for in his mind of minds, and when that back bent it meant that the greatest burden he had ever borne was rolled on Simeon Trudge's shoulders.

"God help me!" he groaned. "God help me! Oh, God, God . . . !"

He placed his hands before his face and swayed from side to side. It was frightening. Gary wondered why he took it like that. He did not love her. It could not be that. Was it wounded pride that hurt him so?

That was partly the truth. The blow had shaken him in every fiber because it was so unexpected. Rage and anguish and recrimination struggled in him. But hate was the primary passion. A terrible hate. It was a hate that made his face livid and bared his teeth.

Simeon removed his hands from his face, and his sudden haggardness shocked Gary. In those minutes when he had hidden his eyes it seemed that the age which his wiry physique had so long defied had come on him.

He rose as if by a special effort, placing a hand on the table to help himself up. Then he almost tottered toward the sleeping-room.

She did not follow. She could not. Her limbs seemed to be paralyzed. The confession she had made had not cleared her mind or conscience as she had hoped. It had only made matters impossible . . .

Simeon did not even look at Ranny, sleeping in his bed. He busied himself in the room and reappeared shortly with a heap of garments in his arms.

"From now on I sleep in there," he croaked, indicating with a jerk of his head the lean-to. "I ask jest one thing—you Jezebel. I want for you to stay out of it—for good!"

His voice was almost toneless, and he went in, closing the door behind him.

She sat alone in the kitchen with the lamp flickering on the table beside her.

After a long time she rose. The floor was smeared and puddled with the spilt milk. It had to be cleaned up. She got a bucket and put some warm water in it from the tea-kettle. Then with a rag, on her hands and knees, she began to wash the kitchen floor.

### 3.

Two days passed on the Trudge farm; days of silence, of bleak tension, of horrid unnatural existence. There was no more talking in the house, no more reading of the Bible aloud, no more praying even.

A new order of things existed, already in full effect. Simeon did not notice or acknowledge the existence of the woman who had been his wife. Their marriage was over. She was not his wife—not a being, even, to his consciousness, except as she might discharge the mechanical duties of the household.

He lived and slept apart. He had returned to his former celibacy, and there was in it now a new fervor and hatred which made even more vital the old religious fervor of which it formerly had been a part. No longer would he permit woman to appeal to his mind or body. In two days it seemed already that this was a settled thing in his life, that the manner in which he had lived so long ago that it had been almost forgotten, was scarcely interrupted.

It came to him that he should never have surrendered his celibacy. The thing had been good, a special part of him that he had prized, that had set him apart from other men. He had surrendered it for—this gnawing hate that gave him fury, and at last had sundered him from Gary.

He might have driven her out of his house; indeed she

seemed to expect some such thing. Or he might have killed her. There was Biblical consent for such an act, he believed. He did neither. Daily when she looked at him, however, there was fear in her eyes. This gave him a bitter pleasure. He would not explain his intention to her, or announce his plan. She should undergo the torture of trying to guess what he would do, and this would be a part of her punishment.

Each night he took himself to the lean-to, to which he had now removed all his personal effects. Never again should Gary share any room with him. He even took a pleasure in the discomfort of the bed on which he now laid his bony frame.

On Saturday, without a word of explanation, he prepared to go to Jericho. It was two days after his talk with Gary. This time he did not take the buggy. Instead he brought out the saddle, wiped the dust from it, and cinched it on old John. He had ridden the gaunt gelding before. The horse had a jolting gait and a slow pace. Nevertheless it suited Simeon's purpose to ride this time, and he trotted out of the yard toward town, his seat ungainly, his mount unbeautiful and spiritless.

He was glad to be away from the farm. His admitted purpose in going to Jericho was to attend a meeting of the Improvement Association which had been called; but his real longing was to see again some of the men who had been present at the first meeting of the organization, when he was elected secretary-treasurer, and whom he therefore associated with his one bright moment of triumph. Most of all, however, he wished to be away from the farm, from the near presence of the woman who had given to his pride the hardest blow it had ever suffered.

Old John knew the way. His shambling trot took Simeon slowly across the sun-smitten prairie, past the Wessel place, and then on to Jericho. It was after noon when Simeon reached the town.

Having put up his horse, he went directly to the Apex House for dinner. He liked to eat at the Apex, because there were certain ceremonial touches involved in the process. Each diner registered solemnly at the desk, as if he were taking a room, which carried with it a feeling of dignity. He then went to the double door leading into the dining room, and having seated himself at a table, was offered a real bill-of-fare, printed with fine-sounding French names, and impressive in spite of the thumb marks and coffee stains which advertised its long period of service.

The French names meant nothing, Simeon knew, so he ordered steak and potatoes as soon as he had given the menu a

moment's self-conscious study, and the waitress, a buxom middle-aged female with carrot curls hanging in front of her ears, whereby she had won the community name of Red Feather, departed with the order.

"Simeon Trudgel!"

He looked up. Henry Archelaus stood ponderously beside the table, a cordial grin on his large features.

"May I sit down?"

"Yes—sure, yes," agreed Simeon hastily. He was gratified at this notice from Archelaus. The great man actually was asking to dine with him.

"Red Feather," called Henry. "Bring me what Mr. Trudge has ordered—whatever it is, it's good enough for me if it's good enough for my friend!"

Warm pleasure coursed through Simeon's veins.

"I've been sufferin' from the heat," continued the townsite man. "Fifteen minutes since an' you might have seen me in the bath tub, like a blood-sweatin' behemoth sportin' in an African river!" He guffawed at his own conceit. "This climate is beastly—but salubrious, eh? Most salubrious. You are in town, I take it, for the meetin' of the Association? It will be delayed slightly. We are waitin' for the return of Sherry Quarternight, who went on a huntin' trip yesterday, but is expected home most any time now. How's the family?"

"Well enough," replied Simeon. The question violently recalled him to his trouble.

Archelaus studied him curiously a moment.

"My friend," he said, changing the subject, "you'll be interested to know that the county commissioners yesterday ordered the election to be held on the railroad bonds."

"That so?" asked Simeon, glad of the shift.

"Also, it's goin' to be the duty of the Improvement Association to bring out the vote. A canvass is bein' made already."

"How's it running?"

"I heard varied opinions, an' I'd like your notions on the subject."

"You can just about rule out all them north of the river," said Simeon.

"Oh, I don't know. How about them where the right-of-way is likely to run? There'll be some votes north."

"How about south?"

"Most of 'em will go with Jericho," said Archelaus. He hesitated. "What about Til Rector?" he asked suddenly.

Simeon did not at first reply.

"He wouldn't sign the petition, would he?" Henry insisted. The farmer shook his head. "He is no friend of the project."

"It don't pay a man to go against the wishes of his own people," Henry muttered.

Suddenly Simeon said something he had been desiring to say for some time. "Tilford Rector is to be watched. He's got his hatchet out for you, Henry."

"That so?" said Archelaus. "Tell me about it."

"He's tellin' around that you're squeezin' out all the 'down payment' land holders in the county—said it at the time of the Phelps sale, an' said it again since."

"Oh, he does, does he?" said Archelaus softly.

"Furthermore, he's makin' charges that there's graft in this railroad bond election—them that'll listen is hearin' plenty."

"What has this young man got against me?"

"I don't know."

"I've befriended him, an' helped him, an' done my best for him," said Archelaus, speaking as a man deeply wronged. "I tried to get him a start on that land of his—"

"He holds that against you."

"See what you get for doin' favors for people," said Henry with resignation. Again the sharp glance shot at Simeon. "It's a wonder that a feller like that ain't caused trouble around your place."

The shot told. Simeon's face went bleak.

"He has," he said almost to himself.

"Ah!"

But Simeon would not further discuss it. He did not need to. Archelaus had guessed enough.

"A man like that ought to be run out of the country," the townsite man said craftily.

"Yes," gulped Simeon.

"If anybody monkeyed with my woman—"

"Who said he done that?"

"Nobody. But if he did—shootin's too good for him. I'd run him so far he'd have to pay a hundred dollars to mail a post-card back."

The white misery in Simeon's face told Henry he had made his point. If Til Rector was doing the kind of talking the farmer indicated, he was a very dangerous factor in Blair County—to Henry's plans. But a judicious fuse had been laid to an explosive set of conditions. Archelaus believed he could sit back now and await developments.



## 4.

As he sat alone on the hotel porch after his dinner, a sudden flurry of activity down the street attracted Simeon's attention.

Sherry Quarternight, white with fury, was dismounting from his claybank horse, tying it to a hitch-rack, crossing with whizzing rowels to the office where Henry Archelaus had gone after the meal. The dust puffed up in little clouds behind the marshal's heels. Purd Weaver's buggy came in, crowded with a human cargo. Loafers rose from positions of ease and moved forward to learn the news.

"Nothin' to get excited over," Purd Weaver informed the crowd. "Bedestown's after Sherry, is all. Tobe Shankle come over, nosin' around my camp, an' Sherry didn't like it."

Simeon sidled around the crowd and made his way over to the townsite office. This was business of his, he felt doggedly; after all he was secretary of the Improvement Association. They must consider him. He pushed open the door. The room was filled.

"Now Sherry, keep cool," Henry was saying. "Nothin' to be gained by goin' off half-cocked—"

"I ain't goin' to be hunted around the country like an animal," Quarternight interrupted heatedly. "The lousy, sneakin', son-of-a-bitch!"

"Here, gents, is a place for the Association to act," said Archelaus, raising his voice. "This was what it was organized for. We can't take a thing like this lying down. If we do, Bedestown'll be pushin' us all over Blair County. We won't dare stick our noses outside our own municipal limits. If I was you, Sherry, I'd go straight to Judge Comingo. Tell him I sent you over to get a warrant for Shankle. Then you go bring Shankle in."

"On what grounds?" asked Quarternight bitterly. "Trespassin' on the sand hills?"

"Well, you might charge him with impersonatin' an officer," said Archelaus with sarcasm as heavy as the marshal's. "Use your head. He's got no authority to 'arrest' or molest anybody outside the limits of Bedestown. He's a city marshal, not a sheriff—not yet. You go up to the courthouse. Tell the judge I said to have a warrant drawn up chargin' Tobe Shankle, an'

John Doe, an' Richard Roe, with disturbin' the peace, an' carryin' concealed weapons. Then you get some men an' go up there. If them yahoos are still around the lake, bring 'em in. You'll be carryin' a county warrant, you see, an' theirs is no more than a town notice. You've got the authority an' they ain't. Here's the chance we've been lookin' for, gents! We're goin' to have a showdown at last with Bedestown—on the terms we want. An' when we get through with them over here in court, take my word for it, you won't need to worry any more about Tobe Shankle as a rival candidate—or Bedestown's opposition to the railroad bonds, either!"

Quarternight thought and then nodded.

"If yo' say so," he said. "I'll get up a posse. Yo' come along, Chet. An' how about yo', Simeon? Yo' want to go, Henry?"

"Not me. I'm too fat to ride horseback."

"Well, I'll get Shad Spilker. That'll be four. Mebbe I can pick up a few more. I'll be ready to start in half an hour."

Simeon heard himself named with a half-thrill of apprehension mingled with elation. Here was an actual prospect of armed trouble. He was a man of peace, not accustomed to clashes, and for a moment his ingrained feeling of inadequacy assailed him.

But they were looking at him expectantly. They were assuming that as secretary-treasurer of the Association he would accept the responsibility. It was an honor, in a way. The thought of his position braced him. Where a month ago Simeon would have been panic-stricken at such a proposal, today he quietly nodded his head, carried along into a situation he did not desire, by a sense of his increased importance in the eyes of other men. Carried on, perhaps, also by a different feeling than he had ever known before, a certain recklessness arising out of the events which had recently taken place.

The sun was two hours above the western horizon when they rode out of Jericho. They were men with guns in their hands; but the guns were apart from them, things strange, and in a measure frightening to them.

Except for Quarternight, not a man in the Jericho "posse" ever had carried firearms before—save for a little unskillful hunting of small game, or an occasional feckless shot at a distant loping coyote. Their very weapons showed their ineptitude, their unpreparedness for lethal enterprise.

Riding at the head, Sherry Quarternight considered his followers and was not reassured. Just behind the marshal, on a pudding-footed black horse, rode Chet Tooley, scraggly jaw

hanging, with the weight of a huge old double-barreled Zulu shotgun on his shoulder. The Zulu had a reputation in the county and was highly unpredictable. Its left barrel was on a hair trigger, and a man had to make sure he pulled the rear trigger first, firing that barrel. If the right barrel was fired first it would jar off the left barrel with it, and there would be a double blast that might knock the shooter's shoulder into the next county.

Tooley was silent for once. He was afraid there might be trouble, even shooting; and he had no faith in himself as an antagonist under any circumstances. Tooley was a fighter only when he could hide behind the anonymity of print. Faced by a personal foe he quailed and turned ill. But he could not back out here. He was president of the Association under the auspices of which the arrests were to be made, and he knew better than to question Henry Archelaus when the latter gave orders.

Crowding Tooley close, as if for the comfort of near association, was the slight figure of Simeon Trudge, on his old raw-boned nag. Trudge was armed with a lever-action Winchester 30-30, borrowed from Purd Weaver. Quarternight doubted that the farmer knew how to work the rifle, much less shoot it with any accuracy.

The undertaker-corer, Shad Spilker, with his face settling into its usual lines of gloom, was last. Quarternight knew Spilker was no more happy than his comrades ahead, and the unaccustomed sag of a .44 in the holster at his hip did not increase his joy.

What the others did not know was that even their leader, Sherry Quarternight, was heartily distrustful of himself in this affair, although he took care to conceal it. Sherry possessed a secret, a secret that had made him more than once hesitate and hold back in his role as an officer of the law.

He knew himself to be a creature falsely magnified. People said of him that he was a killer—that he had slain two men. Sherry did not deny the story, because it did not hurt him to possess a reputation somewhat baleful. Therefore he made no effort to explain that one of those two men had been a wretched Negro in whose death he had no greater part than in being an outskirts member of a lynching mob; and that the other was Ham Bates, his own friend, whom he had brought to death quite by accident when the two of them were drunk together in Dallas, and Sherry had shoved Ham playfully off the four-story hotel where they were roistering that evening. Vividly Sherry yet remembered the nausea in his stomach after the drunkenly humorous push, when he felt

suddenly the body of his friend give, and saw the thin air in front of him, and heard the thin, receding scream, ending in the sickening crash far below. Sherry would never forget that; or the coroner's jury that held the death was "accidental."

And now, knowing himself to be a fraud, Quarternight was placed in a position where he had to lead this posse on what might be a dangerous mission. He could not permit it to be believed that he was other than the desperate character he was supposed to be. To have that myth exploded would mean ruin, and what was infinitely worse to Sherry Quarternight—ridicule. The fiasco of the Bedestown affidavits had been bad enough, but at least nothing in that affair had damaged his reputation for intrepidity. The real test was coming. Fear rode with Sherry—and the greatest fear was that men should know that he was afraid.

Quarternight, Tooley, and Spilker were there on that errand by the will of another man, Henry Archelaus, and they knew it. The fourth member of the posse, Simeon Trudge, also had been forced into it, just as unwillingly, but by a different compulsion—a newly discovered and totally unsuspected pride.

So the Jericho marshal led his little group of riders across the buffalo grass plain. Sherry held to a hope—a hope that secretly and fervently all of them shared. He hoped there would be no Bedestown men at Antelope Lake. He indulged this hope, and presented it to himself in various lights, all reasonable, in order to reassure himself by the logic of it. Assuredly Purd Weaver exaggerated—he was given to exaggeration. What if Tobe Shankle had come to the hay camp, was that proof that he had hostile designs? And if he had, why would he remain at the lake when he returned and discovered that the crew, and Quarternight with it, had gone?

Sherry considered these aspects of the matter, until he began to make himself believe that there was, after all, no danger ahead. Having concluded that this was so, he decided that he should lead his posse with spirit. It would find nothing at the end of the ride, but the men in it would have reason to return to Jericho and tell of the courage and zeal which Quarternight had displayed in the prosecution of his duties.

With his spurs Sherry nudged his horse to a faster pace, and turned a carefully grim and confident smile on his men over his shoulder.

"How yo' feelin', Shad? Simeon, keep a bullet in the chamber of that Winchester. Where'd yo' get her anyhow? Purd Weaver? I know that gun. She shoots high an' to the right.

Hold to the left of a man about the height of his knees if yo' wants to fetch him in the middle. Don't point that Zulu of yours at nobody yo' don't want to bag, Chet. I don't want none of that buckshot combin' *my* hair. Well, boys, look bright now. We could be jumpin' them fellows most any rise."

He enjoyed the electric shock that ran through his companions at this statement. They were asking themselves: What does Sherry mean? Does he know where the Bedestown people are? Is this some kind of extra sixth sense that killers possess which other persons lack?

They began to regard him with a new respect and dependence, crowding their horses forward as close as possible to his. To Simeon it seemed, as it seemed to the others, that Quarternight's presence removed from all of them a part, at least, of the stigma of their amateurism. It was evident that the marshal knew what he was doing and where he was going. They could place their faith in him; his knowledge and judgment would make up for their own lack of these qualities. Within himself Simeon felt a cold, contracting fear; but he was in for it now, and he gripped the borrowed Winchester until his knuckles whitened. With each step old John lurched forward, Simeon felt himself remorselessly propelled another step nearer to some fearful crisis.

The sun went down over the edge of the bowl which was the earth and darkness descended. At every black rise in the ground the four men strained apprehensively forward, each with his own fearful thoughts.

Suddenly, in the night, they saw it all at once. Far away, a red light. It was the flicker of a campfire, extending toward them as a glimmer across the lake, which lay ahead smooth as the most perfect product of the lapidarist's craft.

## 5.

In spite of the threat of rain in the southwest, the camp by the haystacks was pleasant. Bacon fried over the fire, and a lively dispute went forward between Dilly Capehart and Len Leforce over the best way to fry bacon. LeForce believed in a hot fire and crisp bacon; Capehart held to the school of the slow fire and bacon in which the grease was retained.

The argument ended inconclusively as supper was made

ready. Good-humoredly the men ate, washed the dishes, and then sat around the embers, smoking. Conversation slid back and forth, on many subjects. After a time Shankle said:

"How's things at the Trudge place, Til? We heard you was laid up with the snake-bite. Still limp a little, don't ye? Old Man Trudge, he's head an' heels in this railroad bond thing, I hear. They say his woman's considerable younger'n him. With that red hair she looks like she might be a proposition when she gets mad."

"I never saw her mad," said Til shortly, disliking Shankle for bringing Gary into the talk.

"I never did hold that red hair an' temper necessarily went together," asserted Dilly. He sensed the feeling in Til's words and came to his rescue. "Mrs. Trudge is likely way above the old man. Sometimes it turns out that way. Knew an old, tough, ornery cowman named Jed Thraikill once, without an iota of education, culture, or cleanness—just an old plains badger. An' his wife, Misses Thraikill, was just as clean an' sweet an' fine as he was the opposite. She could play the pianny or sing, an' she did a lot of readin'—had a reg'lar library of books. She certainly was a contrast to that old horned toad."

"How come a pair like that got together?" asked Leforce.

"Funny, one day I asked Jed that very question when I run into him in town. Jed, he took it all right, knowin' I meant no harm, an' he up an' told me just how come a han'some, cultivated lady like Missis Thraikill to wed a low-down, mangy, uncurried mustang like him."

"I ain't never heard this one, Dilly," said LeForce. "Go on."

Capehart's reputation as a story-teller was as wide as the Short Grass. The men lit pipes, disposed themselves comfortably, and Dilly began his story:

"Jed was raised on a cow ranch up by Cimarron, a little town on the Arkansas River. His mammy died when he was born, so he spent his infancy among cow hands of low breedin' an' character, an' never came any nearer to knowin' what a woman was than by observin' Charlie, the Chink cook, who was also washer woman, an' a lot of other things to the gang of cowboys.

"Come the time when he was a fine, up-growin' lad, of mebbe twenty-one summers, young an' good with hoss or rope, but still ignorant of all the rules of etiquet an' particularly of how to talk an' deal with she-stuff."

Dilly paused to pull a small, flat tin box out of his hip pocket. He opened the box, revealing a smooth brown powder

—snuff. With the blade of his knife he dipped a pinch of it and pushed the dab under his long upper lip. He then carefully wiped the knife blade, closed the box, and replaced the knife and box in his pocket. After that he spat a sluice of brown liquid into the glowing coals of the fire.

“When he’d go to Cimarron,” the editor resumed, “an’ had to talk to Old Lady Kenzie there, an’ her old enough to be his grandmother an’ broad as she was long, not to mention havin’ a mole on her chin with a bunch of hairs sproutin’ out of it—just talkin’ to a woman like that, even, used to tie him up so he couldn’t hardly yammer like a coyote, let alone talk like a man with good sense. A woman—any kind of a woman—plumb dislocated his brain processes, you see.

“Imagine then Jed’s youthful amazement an’ chagrin when, goin’ to Kenzie’s place in Cimarron one evenin’, figgerin’ to stop overnight, same as he generally did, he found a strange young lady there. Old Lady Kenzie insisted on introducin’ him, an’ this in spite of the fact that his adam’s apple was tying knots in his epiglottis. Miss Ada Hunter, her name was, as pretty as a spotted pup, an’ plenty educated an’ refined. Seems like she was Old Lady Kenzie’s niece, just graduated from one of those bang-up finishing schools for young ladies back East in Maryland or Massachusetts or some other seaport town. She wanted to see what the wild West was like, an’ she begged her folks, for a graduation present, to let her go out an’ visit a couple weeks with her aunt and uncle.”

Til leaned forward and pushed the fire together, grateful that Dilly had taken over the burden of the conversation. The men sat about the blaze, the lines of their faces showing strong in the firelight.

“Well, there was Jed,” continued Dilly, “all elbows an’ knee j’int, with his ears a-swelling up an’ growin’ purple from embarrassment, forced to sit at the supper table alongside this awe-inspirin’ young creature. Jed told me he sure covered himself with distinction in that reepast. He dropped the potatoes on the floor, upset the water pitcher, an’ tromped all over Old Lady Kenzie’s feet, not to mention a hundred other jackass things. By the end of the meal, when he had a chance to go surging out to commune with his own soul, he was as rattled a young man as there was betwixt the Rockies an’ the Big Muddy. All the same, he made out it was nice, some way, to be a-settin’ by Miss Hunter, even if he did make a delirious fool out of himself. He stayed over night. If he hadn’t he’d probably have died an old bachelor, because he’d never have et them sour potatoes.”

Capehart spat another brown sluice into the fire. Then he wiped the corner of his mouth and went on:

"Next mornin' they had breakfast early, on account that Miss Hunter, her vacation bein' ended, was catchin' a train for the East. Old Lady Kenzie hustled up the meal an' that was why she fried them potatoes that had soured during the night. Old Lady Kenzie was a plumb good cook an' never did that particular stunt before or after. She was in too big a hurry to notice the potatoes was sour, an' Jed was too dotty, a-sittin' by the girl, to notice it an' et away with his mind on anything but the food. Miss Hunter et hearty too, it turned out."

LeForce lit another of his stogies and Til was cramming a pipe, both intent on the story teller. A grumble of thunder sounded to the southwest. Dilly continued:

"They was just finishin' breakfast when they heard the train whistle. In them days the schedules wasn't as strict as they are now. Miss Hunter was no ways near ready. I take notice that women most generally leave a lot of things that just has to be done the last minute. Mostly they manage to make out some way, but this time they didn't. Miss Hunter missed that train.

"They got to the station just as the train was pullin' out. There was some thinkin' for a minute. Then Old Man Kenzie says to Jed, 'It's twenty-two miles from here to Dodge City. There won't be no more trains from Cimarron east today, but Dodge City's the division point. You got a spring wagon. If you'd take Ada an' her trunk, an' drive overland to Dodge, she could catch an evenin' train east from there. I'd shorely consider it friendly of you—bein' as how you've got that spring wagon an' that team of fast ponies.'

"What could Jed do? He has to agree, of course, an' in about ten minutes he finds himself, after the tearful goodbyes, a-drivin' out toward Dodge with a distant young lady sittin' beside him."

Dilly scratched his leg reflectively and once more spat in the fire.

"Things were all right until they climbed out of the Arkansas valley an' started out across the flats. You know how it is there—just like a table top with nothin' but short buffalo grass an' a few spindly little old milkweeds or thistle. You can see a jackrabbit ten mile, an' he looks as big as a mule because there ain't a crack or a bush he can hide behind.

"Jed an' Miss Hunter hadn't said six words to each other. Jed was paralyzed with fear that he'd do somethin' else half-witted an' she seemed to be all taken up with lookin' at the



scenery, if you can call anything scenery that is laid out so awful flat as that."

He paused and gazed about at them solemnly.

"It was right about there that them sour potatoes begun to take hold," he said, his voice lowering with gravity. "Til, do you know what sour potatoes will do inside you? Make you feel like you swallowed a charge of dynamite, they will. Jed an' Miss Hunter had got miles out on the flats, as I said, when the first wave of belly-ache hit him. He was so sick for a minute he felt dizzy. Then the full horror of the siaution come over him. Nature was callin', gentlemen, an' she was callin' in stentorian tones—an' there was Jed on a billiard table twenty miles across, without a crack or a bush anywheres on it, an' an icy young princess, all armored with her Boston correctness, a-sittin' there beside him.

"Jed told me he'd looked into a six-gun later, an' seen the bullet settin' there. He'd been throwed an' dragged by a man-killing bronc. He'd done a lot of things that was dangerous an' difficult, but he never before or since had been jaw-to-jaw with a situation which he deemed so fraught with horrible consequences as this here one."

A heavier roll of thunder came from the direction of the brooding clouds to the west.

"Say, I believe she's going to come down," said the storyteller.

"Go on, go on!" they urged him. "This ain't no time to be worryin' about the weather."

Capehart replenished his snuff and shook his head sadly.

"Jed fit off that spell of sickness like a hero, an' whipped up his team, hopin' the belly-ache wouldn't come back, but all the time knowin' the hope was vain. In a few minutes she hit him again, an' gents, them sour potatoes really dug in that time. They doubled pore Jed right up. The sweat stood out on his forehead like marbles an' his insides twisted in figger-eights an' double-hitches. He turned green. But somehow, in consideration for the young lady an' his own modesty, he fought off that spell too.

"When it passed he lay back in the seat, weak as a cat, an' knowin' that if it come again he was goin' to have to do somethin' quick, or there'd be consequences plumb serious. He kept lookin' an' hopin' against hope, for a badger hole, or a soapweed, or anything that would give him a chance to get away by himself for just a few minutes. Never was a young man who longed for solitude more. But there wasn't a twig stickin' up anywhere in all that scenery."

Dilly sighed. "Another half mile passed an' the belly-ache hit Jed again. But this time it was wusser'n the first two. Jed felt he'd shorely die. Them great crises of life tends to upset a man's notions. He'd been scared to death of that young lady, but as Nature got in her third an' most imperative call, Jed hauled up the ponies, looked Miss Hunter square in the face, an' said without a quiver:

"Ma'am, I think I hear a bolt rattlin' under this wagon. If you'll hold the lines, I'm goin' to get down there an' see what's loose."

"She looked at him kind of strange an' solemn, but she took the reins, an' Jed was out of that wagon an' under it like a streak of lubricated lightning. In a few minutes he was feelin' like a new man, an' when he clumb back in the wagon, he was chipper as a meadow lark.

"They drove along. Feeling so grand an' relieved, that-away, Jed for the first time felt like he wanted to talk. He made one or two tries to start a conversation, but she scarcely answered him. Jed could see that she had a set, white look on her face, an' it come over him that she'd been offended by that there subterfuge of his, for which he couldn't hardly blame her, knowin' plumb well it didn't fool her anyhow."

The men around the campfire were grinning at him in delight, in spite of a renewed thunder roll from the clouds, and Capehart, warming to their appreciation, proceeded.

"Jed got discouraged an' quit talkin', an' in a minute or two he had somethin' else to think about. That belly-ache come back. Just as strong, an' powerful, an' sublime as before. He stood it as long as he could, then pulled up the spring wagon again.

"That bolt's rattling—" he begun. But she was lookin' at him with that same white look, so intense an' strange it scared Jed. Some turrible emotion seemed to be tearin' her. An' then, all of a sudden, she busted out:

"Jed Thraikill, if you think you're the only one who has a bolt rattling, you're the biggest, stupidest, most selfish fool in Kansas! There's one rattling on this side too. I've got to get down there an' see what's the matter. An'—" here her voice rose to a wail, *'an' I can't wait another minute!'*"

Dilly put inimitable poignancy into the wail. Then he chuckled.

"Funny about women," he said. "Men are always puttin' them up on shrines an' worshippin' them as if they were made of rainbow dust an' cloud foam. Yet they ain't any different from a common, ordinary male man in most things. They

breathe the same air an' eat the same food, an' sleep just like men.

"Them sour potatoes hit Ada Hunter just as hard as they did Jed, only she hung on a little longer, bein' braced by her female sensibilities, that-a-way. But as soon as she give in it was different. She an' Jed, what with stoppin' every little while to examine loose bolts under the wagon, got plumb well acquainted by the time they reached Dodge. So well, I might say, that they finally got married—the only romance I ever heard tell of that was based on a case of runnin' bowels."

There was a clap of laughter around the fire. Til felt contented and measurably happy for once. In particular he leaned toward Dilly Capehart in friendliness. This slow-drawling, humorous man appealed to him. He was drowsy in the warmth of the fire, and again he heard the rumble of thunder, growing much nearer now.

Almost as an echo to the roll, a voice spoke from the darkness right behind Til:

"Stand up, all of you! Raise your hands an' don't turn around!"

The command was reinforced by the multiple click of the hammers of firearms.

## 6.

In ludicrous and awkward haste the men at the fire, hands lifted, scrambled to their feet.

"Chet, take cha'ge of them shootin' irons," said the same voice.

The rifles of the three Bedestown men were leaning, out of reach, against the near haystack, and with them, carelessly discarded, was Shankle's cartridge belt and revolver in its holster.

"Is—is it you, Quarternight?" quavered Tobe.

"It's a posse from Jericho. You're under arrest."

"What for, Sherry?"

"Disturbin' the peace, carryin' concealed weapons, intimidation, an' attemptin' false arrest."

"What authority?"

"None of yo' God damned business, but I'll tell yo'. Bench warrant from the county court. Oh, it's legal enough. Yo' can turn around now."

The four men about the fire slowly rotated, arms still awkwardly in air.

They found themselves facing Quarternight, who held Tooley's Zulu shotgun with the uneasy left barrel while the editor gathered the Bedestown weapons. With this chancy piece the Texan was covering his prisoners. From one to another the muzzle swung. Til watched the twin black holes and when they foreshortened toward him, his stomach shrank. When the muzzle swung away he breathed deep in relief.

Behind Quarternight clustered the other Jericho men. For the first time Til noticed among them Simeon Trudge. A creeping uneasiness came over him.

"What are you doing in this crowd, Rector?" asked Tooley.

"He ain't doin' nothin'," snapped Quarternight. "He was jest watchin' camp fo' Purd Weaver. Them fellows rode in on him, that's all. Til, yo' ain't in on this. Step aside."

"Tilford Rector's a Bedestown sympathizer," suddenly objected a new voice. Simeon Trudge's voice. "I heard him with his own lips—"

"Who's runnin' this?" snarled the marshal. "Til, I said step aside!"

With a feeling of gratitude, Til withdrew a few paces and ventured to lower his arms. He saw Simeon Trudge staring toward him with a malevolent glare. The farmer's evident hostility was as ugly as it was mystifying to Til. Simeon did not take his yellow stare off his former hired man.

The nervousness of the prisoners was exceeded only by the nervousness of their captors. It was becoming apparent that the posse hardly knew how to proceed. Weapons were pointed rigidly, and the tension was increasing rather than decreasing. More nervous than anyone was Quarternight.

Here were three men. They stood silently regarding him. What were they going to do? What if they started to run—how could he stop them? In the darkness he could feel his face nervously twitching.

"What are you figgerin' on doing with us?" asked Capehart.

"Take yo' to Jericho." Sherry was afraid his voice shook with his excitement.

"You know there ain't nothin' you can do with us."

"Think not?" Quarternight forced himself to sneer, to be domineering, swaggering. "Wait an' see," he said bitterly. "When yo' get through with this affair, yo'll know mighty well what a jail's like—from the inside."

"Railroadin' us, eh?"

"Shut up!" His nerves were jangling and Sherry desired no more of this sort of exchange.

Len LeForce was the only one of the Bedestown men who had not spoken. He did not want to go to the Jericho jail. There were a number of things on hand—two or three sales were coming up, and in any case the colonel was a gregarious soul to whom incarceration lacked any kind of appeal. His shrewd auctioneer's eyes were studying Quarternight's face in the firelight. Those eyes were accustomed to making lightning-quick appraisals of human character—they were LeForce's one greatest asset in driving up the bidding when he stood on the block, calling a sale. And now they saw something the others missed—looked again, and satisfied their owner of what they saw.

Why, said Len LeForce, wonderingly to himself, the man's scared to death. He isn't any case-hard killer. Sherry Quarternight's a big bluff—a false alarm!

Nervously the auctioneer shifted his half-smoked stogie from side to side in his mouth. Did he dare to act on what he had seen beneath the Jericho "fightin man's" bluster?

The darkness had increased with a great cloud which seemed to sweep overhead. Now came a heavy gust of wind, blowing the dust before it, and sparks scattered from the fire. The storm which had threatened was coming.

LeForce chose that moment of confusion to make his gesture of defiance. Ducking his head he suddenly began to run. With the derby on the back of his skull, he bolted into the darkness.

Quarternight's face stiffened, and he cursed with surprise and alarm.

But the running, ducking figure, receding into the night, clicked a cog in him. A fleeing figure was always a hunter's quarry, and the old Zulu shotgun was in his hands—a hunter's weapon.

LeForce ran with an awkward bobbing gait, and he was nearing the sedge at the border of the lake.

Quarternight brought the shotgun to his shoulder and pulled a trigger.

Straight up into the air with the terrific recoil went the gun, and the appalling racket of the report deafened them. In his excitement Quarternight had pulled the wrong trigger and both barrels went off together. He staggered back, and the heavy puff of smoke for a second hid the running figure from them. The wind whipped the smoke away. LeForce was gone.

Quarternight threw the gun to the ground and grasped his bruised shoulder. Then his hand went inside his coat. The revolver came out of its shoulder holster like a snake and the

marshal turned, with a white, crazed look on the other prisoners.

"Look out! Sherry, for God's sake—"

Tooley's warning cry was vain. Solid, shocking, the reports of the six-shooter echoed as Quarternight, his sanity for the moment gone, killed. With surprise frozen on his face Tobe Shankle staggered backward and fell. Beside him slumped Dilly Capehart, his waggish features almost comical in the glow of the camp embers as he died.

In the quick succession of shots and the frightful tragedy of Quarternight's berserk violence, his companions did not notice one other report.

Simeon Trudge had stood watching Til Rector throughout the episode, never taking his eyes from the man he hated. His sweaty hands gripped the stock of the Winchester. Archelaus words came back to him: *Shooting's too good for him . . .*

Suddenly Quarternight's fusillade roared out in the night, and Simeon, acting almost as if someone had directed him, swung his rifle up. He hardly realized what he did. The kick of the Winchester bruised his shoulder as he pulled the trigger, and the report blended with those of the marshal's revolver.

Til Rector seemed to kneel slowly, one knee at a time, and then went forward on his face.

In a lurid climax, lightning flared with an instantaneous explosion of thunder. The storm broke.

It came like all prairie storms—a black, brooding portentousness at one moment; a sudden quaking spasm of livid light; a lunging together of the ground and air; and then the wind and rain. The first raindrops splashed in their faces, and suddenly the whole world was a wet, lashing fury, the blackness incandescent from time to time with baleful flashes of violet light.

Quarternight, jaw hanging, turned his wet face toward his companions. His mind was clearing and he was suddenly sick at what he had done.

"You fellows are in this with me," he croaked.

Simeon heard his own voice speaking, and it sounded as if it belonged to somebody else:

"Let's get to the tent."

Together, shambling hurriedly, the Jericho men reached the tossing, straining canvas.

## 7.

Inside the tent they squatted, holding the leaping flaps together with their hands while the rain hissed and swirled outside.

"Here's a lantern," someone said.

A match was struck, a tiny radiance at the finger tips, brightening as the lantern was lit.

The interior of the shaking tent sprang suddenly out of the gloom.

Three men were staring at Quarternight.

"They was tryin' to escape—remember that!" he said to them.

"Three men dead out there . . ." said Tooley as if unbelieving.

"Four." It was Simeon's voice. They turned white faces to him.

"Four?"

"Yes. I saw Rector fall too."

"God! I didn't realize what I was doin'," moaned Quarternight, suddenly broken. "I—I emptied my gun. I shorely didn't mean to hurt Rector. He was a nice feller."

"Well, he's dead." Doom was in Simeon's voice.

"What are we goin' to do?" wailed Shad Spilker.

Simeon had been thinking more rapidly than ever before in his life. The shooting of Til had been entirely unpremeditated. He answered an impulse. The next moment Rector was lying on his face on the ground.

Simeon was still dazed. His words had not been planned, but almost incredulously he saw the accidental effect of them. Quarternight was taking the whole blame . . . of everything.

Simeon found time for a momentary thrill of surprised joy. It seemed to clarify his mind. And it was as if a new decisive voice spoke through his lips:

"One thing's sure. We got to stick together, no matter what."

They clustered about him, and it was a marvel to them that he seemed cold, unexcited, calm. Their astonishment was combined with a feeling of comfort. Here was at least one among them who was not panic-stricken. Simeon had told them the first step, and they felt he was correct in his judg-

ment. Sherry, to whom they had looked for leadership, had collapsed. He was trembling, his jaw hanging, his face twitching. They had depended on him and he had failed. With pathetic eagerness they now looked hopefully at the only one among them who seemed to have the power of making decisions, who might take from them the intolerable burden of thinking their own way out of the horrible difficulty in which they were entangled. That this was Simeon Trudge, for whom all of them had until now held a mild contempt, did not matter.

"We all got to stick together," repeated Simeon. "We got to back Sherry in this thing. There's four men out there, dead. Sherry done the shootin' . . ." He hesitated, tentatively, to see if there would be any protest or dissent. None came. It was evident that in the excitement nobody had noticed his act, being too fascinated by Quarternight's murderous insanity. Sherry, dull of eye, continued to assume all culpability.

"I didn't know what I was doing," he kept mumbling. "I jest saw one feller go an' let him have it, an' then I shot, an' shot—Four men . . . God, this is awful—"

"Get ahold of yourself, Sherry," said Simeon, satisfied. "You're a law officer, remember. You got a right to arrest people, an' to prevent them escaping, ain't you?"

"Why, yes, I reckon—" The eagerness of a dawning hope and the beginning of understanding of Simeon's plan was in Quarternight's face.

"These men all was tryin' to escape," went on Simeon calmly. "Remember that. All of us got to remember that. They made a break. Sherry had to shoot to stop 'em."

"But Rector—" began Tooley.

"He went for a weapon," said Simeon with inspiration. "He made a dive for a gun. It was self-defense. Sherry done it to save all of us." He looked around at the tense faces. "See? Actually, men, I know from my own personal knowledge that Tilford Rector was a Bedestown supporter. How do I know? Because he wouldn't sign the railroad bond petition. Said Archelaus had cheated him. Oh, of course, it's too bad that Sherry . . . had to do what he done. But Rector was one of that crowd just as much as Tobe Shankle. It was a Bedestown gang, an' I think we can all call it a good job. But we got to stick to the same story. Now I want to hear you say it—you, Chet, first."

His plan had taken form and his newly-found assurance held them. Obediently, Tooley began:

"We come up on 'em—surprised 'em—at the fire. They stood up, an'—an'—then they made a run for their hosses in



spite of our—our orders to halt. Young Rector tried to get a gun. Quarternight did the shooting in the course of discharging his duties. That was how it happened.”

“Pretty good,” said Simeon, and unaccountably Tooley felt flattered, which is the first proof of the acceptance of a new leader. “Now let’s hear you rehearse, Shad.”

Eagerly Spilker rattled through the same account.

“Is that all right with you?” Simeon asked Quarternight.

“I reckon so. Only—couldn’t yo’ say that Til took a shot at me, or something, to make it look . . . better?”

“We don’t want to complicate this too much. But, yes. I don’t think that would hurt, an’ it might help. Where’s Tobe’s gun?”

Spilker handed over the revolver, and Simeon stepped outside, firing one shot off toward the lake.

“Now that shows that one shot was fired,” he said. “It’ll help out Sherry’s story. Is that all right with you fellows?”

Tooley and Spilker nodded.

“Well,” said Simeon, “it’s still raining, an’ it looks like it might keep it up. We better get back to town an’ make a report of this.”

“I—I shorely am grateful,” said Quarternight, his voice shaking. “I can’t tell yo’ how much I appreciate it—yo’ fellers stickin’ to me, an’ all. Now, we’re all in it together, ain’t we? Ain’t we Simeon? Ain’t we?”

He was appealing to the new leader.

“Well,” said Simeon, “I wouldn’t hardly want to say that, Sherry. After all, you done the shootin’. But we’re goin’ to back you up. We ain’t goin’ to let you down.”

“Thanks.” Quarternight was a disgusting sight. He looked as if he might blubber.

“Come on,” said Simeon.

He was imbued with a new confidence, a purpose, a decisiveness which had been foreign to him, but which now suffused him with an intoxication of power. Occasional thunder still boomed, but the head of the storm had passed on toward the east now, and the sky was pitch black with the rain falling steadily. The last coals of the campfire had been beaten out. Simeon walked over to where, by the stacks, the dead lay scattered.

Always, to one unaccustomed to the sight, the dead are shocking. And these were particularly so, because of the causeless suddenness of their taking off. Dilly Capehart lay on his back, his hands clutching his chest, his eyes open to the rain, his rat teeth gleaming in the light of the lantern which Simeon flourished over him. Slovenly in death as in life, Tobe Shankle

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sprawled half on his side, his clothing rumpled, a dark sticky mass oozing from a gaping hole in his head. Simeon walked over to the other figure. Til Rector. He had experienced a slight qualm looking at the others, but here suddenly he felt nothing but a savage vortex of triumph. A Bible verse came to him: *There is no remission save in the shedding of blood.*

This was a condign fulfillment of that word. That slack figure had been the man who dishonored him, who ruined his life for him. He was dead now by Simeon's hand, and that was elemental justice. Almost the farmer had to suppress a sudden desire to proclaim this fact—to tell them all, fiercely and proudly, that he, Simeon Trudge, had killed this man, and for what reason.

But he choked back the impulse with a quick access of discretion. Instead he gazed silently at the rain-soaked body, lying face down beside the wet black embers, then placed beside the outstretched hand Tobe Shankle's revolver, with its powder-blackened barrel.

"Anybody see where Len LeForce went?" asked Spilker.

"I saw him run toward the lake," replied Tooley. "After the gun smoke cleared he was gone."

"Well, locate him," ordered Simeon.

With alacrity they obeyed him, running to the edge of the water.

"There he is," suddenly cried Spilker as Simeon raised the lantern. They all saw the body, half-submerged, face down, and the discoloration of the water among the reeds about it.

"Looks like them buckshot cut him half in two," said Tooley with horror.

"Well." Quarternight was nervously half-laughing, trying to keep up his courage. "I'd begun to think mebbe I missed him."

"You didn't miss none of them," snarled Simeon, and watched the other's face go slack again as fear returned to it.

"I'll send out for the bodies, soon as we get back to town," Spilker suddenly said. For the first time he had begun to think in terms of his craft. "Four of them," he said, licking his thin lips with eagerness. "Four bodies. The biggest undertaking job since I come out here. Who do you think'll pay for the services. The County?"

"I don't know, but I expect you'll get your money some way." There was a sneer on Simeon's face. "Let's get going."

The lantern, blown out, was replaced in the tent. In the cold pelting rain which soaked their clothes and ran in chill streams down their necks, they clambered on their horses and began the weary ride back to Jericho.

## THIRTEEN

### 1.

TIL RECTOR lay on the soaked stubble of the mowed hayfield, face downward, arms outstretched almost in a position of relaxation, long legs extending across the ground. The shirt and overalls were beaten wet on the prone body, and a stain spread across the back.

Back and forth across the body played tiny lancets of rain. Sometimes they fell with a drumming steadiness, as if determined to wash away the outrage that had here been committed. At other times they seemed to run up and down, like the keys of a piano under the fingers of a very light and dextrous performer, ascending and descending the scale in delicate glissandos. Occasionally little gusts of wind would whip them, so that they whisked away and for a moment seemed not to descend on the slack body at all; then the wind would quiet and the steady beating of the raindrops would begin again.

Life! the raindrops seemed to be saying. We are life!

For a long time the body of Til Rector lay sodden still. But at last the whispering voice of the raindrops seemed to make itself dimly heard. Til stirred, moved an outstretched leg. From him came a long, shuddering moan. His face was in the grass and he turned it slightly. That was better. He could breathe more freely. Coldly the rain beat on his face and slowly he began to recover perception. In his body was a vast

anguish, and he seemed pinned by an enormous weight to the ground on which he lay.

Til groaned again. His eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, then opened squinting in the downpour. Darkness was all about him and above him. What had happened? He dragged at his memory, and slowly things began to come back to him.

He had been standing by the campfire, an outsider, a bystander, watching the drama of the arrest. And then the dreadful thing happened. A man gone mad, with twitching face, shot at the hapless, helpless men huddled by the little blaze.

And then, hardly comprehending, Til saw the gun in the hands of Simeon Trudge rise. There was no time to do anything; not even to cry out. Til did not even hear the report of the gun. Utter blackness enveloped him. And now he awoke . . . to this . . .

He tried to stir, but the effort was too much and a terrible pain was connected with it. He desisted and permitted himself another long moan.

Now he realized he was very cold. He could not lie here, chilling, very much longer. If he could reach the cook shack . . .

With a great effort of will he managed to turn on his side. Something quite near to his eyes focussed his attention. It was very dark but the object was not far distant. It was only a yard away. It looked like a boot. It *was* a boot—someone was lying near him. He was not alone, then:

The realization brought Til out of the last of his daze. He looked again. The wearer of the boot was dead.

Til attempted to prop himself up and found that his left arm was useless, but that his right would support his weight. With the right arm he dragged himself forward until he could see the dead face.

#### *Dilly Capehart.*

The dead eyes were open to the rain, and there was a silly half-grin on the loose lips. Dilly's sly humor was ended for good now but he seemed almost to be smiling inwardly at some climactic joke upon himself.

A little farther on was another dark lump. Til hardly had to look to know that it was all that remained of Tobe Shankle.

So he was alone after all.

Murder. Murder had been committed in this lonely place.

For the first time fear added itself to Til's other impressions. Where had the murderers gone? With weak apprehension he looked about him. No sign of living men. They were gone temporarily . . . how soon would they be back?

A sudden conviction came to Til: Simeon Trudge had shot him deliberately—because he knew what had happened between Til and Gary.

That was as certain as the fact that it was now raining. *Simeon knew*. But how could he know? Had Gary told him?

And with that there was a new terror. If he knew . . . had he harmed Gary? The thought almost dragged another whimpering moan from him. If anything had happened to her . . .

He could never forgive himself, nor did he care much whether or not he lived, if Gary had been harmed.

But the vitality deep within him demanded that he live. He gathered his will to push back the clutching languor that threatened to suck him down again. Propped on his one arm he fought that languor like a swimmer, all but overwhelmed, fighting with weak strokes against oblivion.

A new spattering shower of the rain helped him. His head cleared again and he began dragging himself forward over the muddy ground, feeling somewhere within him the hot gush of new blood welling.

Horses. If the Bedestown men's horses had not been taken, he might get away.

With a prodigal expenditure of the small strength remaining in him, he got a knee beneath him; rested a moment, then staggered to an erect position. Weaving like a drunken man he walked, supporting by an elbow the arm which dangled from the wound in his shoulder, striving to remember in this wilderness of wet blackness where was the cook shack and where the horses stood.

Dark shadows loomed ahead. Approaching closer he saw inquiring ears pricked forward. The horses. There were what he sought. Three horses tied to a wagon. Two had been unsaddled, but one saddle had not yet been removed. It was Dilly Capehart's mare. The Bedestown editor, always filled with procrastination, had put off the small task of unsaddling, and for that indolence Til could now be supremely thankful.

The mare nickered at him curiously. She was gentle and friendly. Til reached the side of the saddle and clung to it.

Mounting seemed an insoluble problem. Would the mare stand? Could he muster the strength to climb up? After a time he managed to unfasten the hitch rein. Then he got a foot in the stirrup and began to pull himself into the saddle.

Slowly, doggedly he dragged himself upward. The mare stood. She had been taught to stand for a man who frequently dragged himself into the saddle just as this man was doing—Dilly Capehart when he was drunk. After a time she felt the man was in the saddle and started wisely away at a slow

walk. At first she tried to go back toward the home trail, but the bridle said, No. The mare felt her head pulled around and obediently she began the long circuit of the north side of the lake, heading eastward down the Cimarron, mile on mile through the sand hills.

On the mare's back lolled the man, and sometimes seemed ready to tumble out of the saddle. At last he lay forward, clinging to the saddle horn, his head resting on the mare's coarse mane.

Continually the rain beat down. Almost prostrate on the mare's back, Til could feel its chill soaking through to his spine. He knew only enough to keep going on around the lake, somewhere away, somewhere that he could not be found or overtaken by the murderers.

After a time the rain began to ease up and he dimly perceived that he was in the sand hills. Steadily Dilly Capehart's mare kept her course in the direction set. At last she struck a trail of some kind—dim wagon traces across the prairie—and this she took and kept to it.

Once Til roused to wonder where he was. He had no way of telling. It was darker, if anything, than it had been. The rain had ceased. He gave over trying to decide the troublesome question and concentrated on the business of staying in the saddle . . .

## 2.

The rain had been over for an hour when they saw a light on the prairie. One light. Someone up at this hour toward dawn. Sickness, perhaps. Or a mother attending to a child. One light in an entire town. That was Jericho ahead of them.

Horses' feet splashed and sucked in the mud. They rode in single file, Quarternight, Tooley, and Spilker, with Simeon ahead in his newly attained position of leadership and authority. With his farmer's habit of thinking, Simeon appraised the rainfall. It must have fallen a good half-inch, he thought. It would be mighty good for the crops. The remaining kaffir and sorghum would have a lease of life from this. Clouds already were clearing from the sky. He could see stars glimmering in the west. When the sun came out, it would take no great time to dry the ground.

But, after all, what difference did it make to him—rain or

no rain? A depression had come over him. He had killed a man. Though this was known only to himself, the knowledge of it sat heavily on him. *Thou shalt not kill*, was the Biblical injunction. The Sixth Commandment of Almighty God. And there was an after-provision, contained in Leviticus. Simeon remembered the exact wording:

*Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . and he that killeth a man shall be put to death . . .*

Simeon shuddered. The rain-soaked garments must be chilling him. Then another thought brought him unexpected reinforcement. Like a great beam of light the Bible came to his assistance. There was a Seventh Commandment:

*The man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death . . .*

The penalty was clear. He remembered Gary's face when he asked her the direct question as to her relations with Tilford Rector. She had gone pale. Her eyes had widened. And though he asked her twice, she had not answered. She was guilty. She *had* to be guilty. And Tilford Rector with her.

The transgressor should be put to death; and since this was enjoined of Jehovah, the sin and penalty of the slaying were removed. Simeon's chill passed away. He straightened his narrow shoulders. Then another thought came.

The adulterer *and* the adulteress shall be put to death . . .

He considered this, turning it over and over in his mind. Both must die, according to Biblical command. *Both* must die? He had not thought of this before. His head felt queer. An ache was in it somewhere deep behind the eyes. But the thought came back, and the injunction. He began to consider the matter from a different viewpoint. Was he not, after all, an instrument of God's justice?

He remembered now how the slaying of the man had left him with a sensation of complete astonishment. It had been so easy, once he had acted. There had been the kick of the Winchester against his shoulder, and the tall young man, whom at times he had feared, began slowly to topple, first shortening himself to his knees, then going over all across on his face. Pulling that trigger had been such a little thing to do, but the results had been tremendous. To kill was not difficult.

And after, the shifting of the blame on someone else had been amazingly simple. Quarternight, in fact, had assumed the blame, and none of the others, hypnotized by the shock of what they saw, had noticed Simeon's share in it. He himself was scot-free in this matter. The Almighty had created of Sherry Quarternight a scapegoat. All Simeon had to do was



remain silent, and Quarternight, the broken Quarternight, un-nerved and babbling, accepted the responsibility and whatever penalties attached to it.

In this Simeon believed he saw still further evidence of Divine favor and wisdom. If anyone was to be scapegoat, surely Quarternight was the right and proper one. After all he was an officer of the law, with authority. They had invented a proper story to support Quarternight. This was as much as he should ask—they were going out of their way to help him. He should stand on his authority and win immunity with their story. Simeon was convinced that Tooley and Spilker would stick to the version in which he had drilled and rehearsed them. His chief concern was Quarternight himself. The man's nerve had collapsed. All the reckless pose with which he had ruffled it these months, had departed from him. This was contemptible, but it was something to be reckoned with. Quarternight might break, and spoil their whole elaborately compiled story, by confessing that he had shot down the prisoners where they stood unarmed and un-resisting.

But Simeon's mind was working, in spite of the ache in his head, with a rapidity and smoothness which surprised himself. Already he had decided on his course in the contingency of Quarternight's breaking. Simply, he would state that he had, in the goodness of his heart, attempted to help the marshal out of his difficulty. He would drop back into the role of the bystander, and let it go at that. Quarternight, after all, would be the only loser.

They rode in a body up the muddy main street and dismounted among the shadowy buildings in front of the town-site office. Spilker hurried to fetch Archelaus. He was to be acquainted with the news first of all. The others waited silently in the office, dreading the appearance of Henry.

In a surprisingly few minutes they heard hurried footsteps stumbling on the wooden walk. The door burst open. Archelaus, his huge bulk filling the opening, stood glaring at them, his florid face dark with passion. Behind, Spilker peered apprehensively around his master.

They dropped their eyes before the wrath of Archelaus. He entered the office and walked straight across to where Quarternight sat.

"You fool! You condemned *idiot!*" he almost screamed.

"I couldn't help it—they was tryin' to get away," mumbled the marshal.

"Oh, they was tryin' to get away!" Henry repeated the words with exaggerated sarcasm. "What if they were? Do you

realize what you've done? You've ruined the sweetest little proposition that a bunch of men ever put together! You've ruined everything that all of us have built up! You've ruined me—you've ruined the town, and everyone that's interested in it. *Why didn't you let them escape?* Jee-zus Kee-rist! What difference would it have made? Alive they couldn't have done us any harm—dead they'll destroy us!"

"I don't get you, Henry."

"Dolt, Dumbhead! It's as simple as A-B-C. I've explained it until I'm black in the face, an' I thought—God help me—I thought I'd gotten it through that thick skull of yourn. Well, I suppose I've got to go over it again—listen this time an' see if you can comprehend a few simple facts:

"Those killings of yourn means that the state's goin' to intervene here. That means Jericho will be closed tighter'n a drum. It means that you, for one thing, will never be sheriff, an' for another that your little barrel house gamblin' room is closed as of this instant. You're through, Sherry!"

He paused and glared around at them, his fury so prodigious it was frightening.

"But it's worse than that!" he continued with his tirade. "The very thing I've been fightin' against has happened. An' after all the times I warned you. You an' that itching trigger-finger of yourn—you, the big Texas bad man! Quarternight, you're a fraud an' you know it. God, but I found it out too late. Too late—what'll the voters of Blair County do now to the railroad bonds, do you suppose? Jericho done the Antelope Lake killings—an' Jericho pushing the bonds. Do you think the people are likely to forget that connection? A good many of them may not like Bedestown, but by the jumping Jehosophat, they ain't goin' to stand for a massacre by a posturing fool with a stuttering trigger-finger! We've kissed the bonds goodbye. An' here's the final thing that kills me. Here we been sittin' around, as nervous as a bastard at a family reunion, just hopin' the state wouldn't get interested out here. Well it's interested plenty now. An' when the attorney general an' the militia gets out here—what do you suppose they're goin' to do about them county organization census affidavits? Sure, you got the original papers—in your remarkably subtle way—but the same folks are goin' to be fallin' over themselves to swear to the same things again! They got us over the barrel, I tell you—the way that election was swung is goin' to come out too. Every one of us is mixed up in it. Jericho ain't even the county seat no more—or won't be when the state gets through with it. There'll be indictments, an' lawsuits, an' prosecutions. Oh, it's a fine kettle of fish you've cooked up

for us with your Wild West brag an' your schoolboy playin' with shootin'-irons! Gr-r-reat God in heaven, what am I goin' to tell Tecumseh Jackson! Get out of this officel Get the hell away! I never want to see any of you again!"

They stumbled out into the darkness. In the east the clouds still tumbled blackly low on the horizon, but above the blackness the sky was brightening minute by minute. Dawn could not be far off.

Lights blazed in windows up and down the street. In some manner the news had spread. Voices tossed and caught questions back and forth:

"Was there a fight?"

"Yah. Jericho an' Bedestown. Big gun battle. Half of Bedestown's kilt."

"Where-at?"

"Dunno. The ford, I reckon."

"Naw, I heard it was down on Cow Creek."

"The hull town of Bedestown was headin' this way, they say."

"What doin'?"

"They was goin' to burn the town!"

"The hell you say! Why, them bastards!"

In the graying streets men, half-dressed, knuckling their eyes and dragging their galluses over their shoulders, gathered in close excited knots. Three or four were carrying weapons. In curiosity and apprehension women peered from open doors. The shrill voices of children cut through the heavier undertone of the adult talk.

"Anybody gone to git the bodies?" asked a voice.

"No. That's right. We better do that. I'll get a wagon."

"Here—who's for fetchin' the dead men?"

"Me!" "I'll go!" "Count me in. I got a saddle hoss."

Voices rose in clamor and the expedition quickly organized itself. Shad Spilker pushed importantly in.

"As county coroner, I hereby takes charge of this expedition. You men follow after this here wagon. I'm goin' to be in it."

In a spatter of mud, with whip-crackings and swearing, the wagons slithered out of town just as the sun rose. Most of the riders carried guns. The general impression was that a pitched battle had been fought somewhere between Jericho and Bedestown, and the Jericho crowd did not know when Bedestown would appear again, armed for war. Excitement such as it had never known gripped the community.

Simeon watched the departure of the wagons, and then walked down the sidewalk with Tooley and Quarternight.

The editor turned off at his print shop. He wanted only one thing—that demijohn of sour corn whiskey.

"Where *you* goin', Sherry?" Simeon asked.

"To my quarters. Say, Simeon, why don't yo' come along? Gawd, I need someone to talk to, bad."

Simeon agreed. It was odd how their positions had been reversed. Quarternight kept talking, asking Simeon again and again to voice an extenuation of what he had done. He clung to Simeon's skinny arm, in pitiable dependence. The farmer stalked along silently with the broken man to Potlicker's where Sherry stopped and bought a quart of whiskey. Then he led the way up an outside flight of steps to a second-story door above the General Store across the street from the drug-gist's.

The marshal knocked on the door.

"You, Sherry?" asked a woman's voice.

Simeon felt a certain astonishment as the door opened.

Gussie Gosney. She had risen from bed and combed her hair, but she had not yet dressed. Some kind of a filmy, frilly wrapper was her chief garment, and Simeon gasped at the revelation of a creamy shoulder, and the indications of an uncorseted, pliant figure beneath the silken fabric which the woman caught about her with one hand.

Quarternight brushed past her and Simeon, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

"Sherry—what's wrong with you?" asked the woman.

"I need a drink," he answered. "Gimme a glass."

"What happened?" She fetched a tumbler and then turned to Simeon.

"There was shootin' at Antelope Lake," the farmer told her. "Sherry tried to arrest some men. They wouldn't stand. He had to kill them."

"*Them?* More than one?"

"Four."

With eyes dilated she looked at Quarternight. Sherry was pouring himself a tumbler of the liquor and a moment later he was gulping it down so fast that part of it ran down his wrinkled shirt front. The man was haggard, unkempt, with a day's growth of beard bristling his cheeks. This was a different Quarternight from the sleek, sure Sherry to whom Gussie was accustomed.

He set down the glass.

"Yes, I killed them," he said thickly, the whiskey still burning in his throat. "I killed them, an' it's busted things wide open. I didn't know what I was doing. Oh, Guss, Guss—"

He pulled her to him and laid his head on her bare shoulder.

She twisted away.

"Here, have another drink," she said.

He released her and poured another glass of whiskey. Again he gulped. Then he went over and lay down on the bed.

Simeon watched Gussie step to the side of the bed and help Sherry off with his muddy boots. After that she smoothed the Texan's pillow. The gestures were feminine, kind, gentle. And this was a Scarlet Woman. In some manner her actions did not comport with his previous notions. He felt oddly drawn to her, excited by an immense curiosity, a wonder, a boundless speculation.

In the upper room they waited through the morning hours. Gussie went down the outside stairs and brought up a tray with some fried eggs, ham, bread and coffee. On this they dulled their hunger.

Quarternight continued to gulp down liquor. He was very drunk now, and mumbling to himself as he half slept.

In the high sun the muddy ground on the street outside began to dry. By night, Simeon thought, there would be little left to show for the rain except a few puddles here and there, in buffalo wallows and other low places.

Still they waited. Noon passed and again they ate from a tray brought up by Gussie from the Bon Ton. Sherry continued to appeal to the woman, and at last she began to show symptoms of annoyance with his maudlin reiterations.

"Gussie," he would say drunkenly, "you're the bes' girl I ever had. Yo' love yo' ol' Sherry, don' yo', sugar? Sherry feels fo' yo', right down heah." He tapped his breast solemnly. "Yo' love Sherry, an' yo' wouldn't go back on him, no matteh what, would yo'?"

He fondled her hand, and pulled her down on the bed beside him. His arm went around her, did intimate things to her body. She pulled away from him and stood up.

"I can't stand that when you're drunk!" she exclaimed.

Simeon had stood by the door, staring down at the street for a long time. Mid-afternoon came and he turned back into the room and seated himself on a chair.

"The crowd's sure milling down there," he said. "Somebody just rode in. They say the wagons are coming."

"Wagons?" Sherry sat up on the bed. The words seemed somewhat to clear his head, but the drunken lines still blurred his countenance. "Wagons—they're bringin' the bodies in. I gotta go an' see."

He swung his feet around to the floor. "Where's my boots?"

Gussie ran to fetch them and assisted him as with difficulty he pulled them on.

"Come on, Simeon," he said. "We gotta go down look at them wagons."

From the landing at the top of the outside stairs Simeon could see the distant procession now—one, two, four, five wagons and some buggies. Men on horseback clustered around them. The teams were mud-splashed and the drivers stood up and urged them to a half-run as the town was neared.

Behind Quarternight's lurching figure Simeon clumped down the steps.

The wagons entered the town and halted before the Apex Hotel, a crowd gathering quickly about it. It was composed mostly of men. A few boys scurried in the outskirts, and women, horror and avid curiosity on their faces, lingered on the sidewalks, clutching at their skirts, some with shawls over their heads, others in sunbonnets or bareheaded. A little man with a huge camera on a tripod, jumped back and forth like a monkey beneath his black cloth, trying to take a photograph of the scene.

Through the crowd Quarternight pushed with Simeon close behind.

"Yo' got 'em?" the Texan asked the driver of the first wagon.

"Yeah. Two in here. The other un's in the wagon drove by Willie Madden an' Poke Trembley."

"The other *one*?"

"Yeah. We found three."

"Did yo' find the one in the water?"

"Yeah, He's in the wagon behind. That Bedestown auctioneer. These here is Tobe Shankle an' the editor."

Quarternight and Simeon clambered hastily on the muddy wheel hubs to gaze down into the wagon boxes. The dead men looked small, stiff, and pitiable. Rain had splashed mud and dirty pieces of trash on their faces. They were the color of putty. At the sight of his handiwork, the marshal stepped back into the street and stood looking at the ground.

Simeon stood on the wheel hub gazing in stupor.

Three dead bodies. Three—*when there should have been four.*

Spilker appeared, talking excitedly and Simeon stepped down beside Quarternight.

"Rector was gone," the undertaker said, his stump arm jabbing nervously. "He wasn't killed. Nobody got him, because one of the horses was gone."

"Which way did he go?" Simeon heard himself ask.

"Dunno. The rain had beat out all signs of a trail. But we reckon to Bedestown."

"Bedestown? Shad—you know what that means? Rector knows just how them shootings happened!" Simeon clutched the undertaker's coat, breathed the words hoarsely in his ear.

Spilker stared. "Well, it's all up with Quarternight, then," he muttered. After a minute he added, "An' we was there, too."

Simeon looked around for Sherry. The marshal was gone.

### 3.

It seemed self-evident to Simeon that Til Rector had escaped to Bedestown. That the man should have been able to do so was a matter of amazement. Simeon had shot him through the body; had looked at him and made sure he was dead. But it appeared that he was not dead—and if he succeeded in reaching Bedestown, everything would be known.

The whole story of the attempted escape would be discredited if Til Rector had a chance to give his testimony. Furthermore, a dread more personal now began to be felt by Simeon.

Til knew who had fired that shot at himself.

Now, in all truth, Simeon was closely involved in this misadventure. He considered plans quickly. He would have to get the posse group together and pledge them anew to stick to their story. It would be their united word against the word of one man. This was at best, however, only a desperate hope—that a jury would believe their combined perjury.

A glimmer of a new idea went through his head. If Til were found—and was dead—before he could give evidence . . .

Simeon, very serious, eyes narrowed with purpose, sought out Archelaus. He found the townsite man in his hotel room, rocking back and forth in helpless rage. Henry knew himself to be ruined. His great gamble, his total investment, all were swept away. Furthermore he was deeply, hopelessly in debt now, with Tecumseh Jackson holding his notes on money "advanced" for the development of the Jericho project. No use remaining here any longer. He would have to leave the country—and he was considering how soon. Certainly there would be indictments against him when the Bedestown affidavits were gathered again.

Yet he was able to bring himself to listen to Simeon's proposal and this in itself revealed that the caliber of the man was not altogether small.

"A reward for the apprehension of Til Rector?" he asked. "I take it that his capture's necessary. The county commission can arrange it. I'll call a meeting."

"Dead or alive," said Simeon.

"Dead or alive," repeated Archelaus staring. He made a shrewd guess, and he suddenly knew that guess was correct. Simeon had something to do with these shootings. But why not grant the request? It might bring about a solution of many things, without further involving Henry or those about him. "So be it," he said.

The day was growing old and the shadows lengthening. Suddenly Simeon felt very weary. He had not slept, and during this day he had lived exclusively on excitement and his nerves. The three muddy corpses had been conveyed by Spilker to his undertaking establishment. In his print shop, Tooley lay dead drunk.

Only Simeon, of the whole posse, was on the street. He saw that the townspeople turned toward him as he passed.

"Look at his eye," he heard an admiring voice in a group of loafers.

He was known now to be the leader. The real boss of the posse. Everyone understood it. They had observed how even Sherry Quarternight gave him deference and took orders from him.

It was a position of pre-eminence but it did not please him. There were drawbacks to it and responsibilities. He decided to talk with Quarternight, and tell him what was to be done; what must be done at once. Laboriously Simeon climbed the stairs to Quarternight's place. He knocked on the door; it was opened.

"Oh, you. Come in."

The Gosney girl held open the door for him and Simeon entered.

"What's up?" Quarternight stood fully dressed, his revolver strapped under his armpit, his hat on his head.

"We're gettin' out a reward for Rector. Alive—or *dead*," said Simeon grimly.

"That ain't no help to me. I'm done fo'." Never in his life had Simeon seen a man disintegrate so completely and so quickly as had the marshal. The handsome and imposing façade was gone. Quarternight's had shook, his face twitched.

A new, partly consumed bottle of liquor stood on the table



beside the empty one. Sherry had been drinking all day long. Simeon sat down wearily.

He saw Gussie moving toward him. She stood beside him and perfume was in his nostrils. "A drink will do you a lot of good," she said.

"I don't drink."

"Oh, come. This is a special time. You need it."

He took the glass from her hand. He wondered: Am I, Simeon Trudge, doing this? The liquid in the glass sparkled at him.

Experimentally he tasted it. The taste was raw and sharp.

"Down with it," the woman said. She laughed, a rich, caressing laugh. Simeon experienced a sudden wish to please her. He held his breath and recklessly gulped down the fiery liquid. It seemed to burn all the way down and he sputtered and gasped.

But in a minute he felt warmth in his stomach. For the first time that day he grinned.

"Another?" she asked.

Simeon accepted a second drink, but he held the glass in his hand.

"I ain't much used to this," he said. He felt apologetic. It was as if he confessed to lacking an essential accomplishment. One day since he would have regarded this as an unforgivable sin. Now he was apologizing because he had to go slowly. Curious how a man's entire viewpoint could be altered by events in a few hours.

"It won't hurt you," she wheedled. He had become an object of overwhelming curiosity to her. What kind of man was he? His austerity, his distance, the manner in which other men seemed suddenly to accede to him, all intrigued her. She poured herself a little of the liquor and lit a cigarette.

The last act jolted Simeon forcibly. Women he knew did not smoke. It was not considered proper—moral. This woman was *not* moral, and she was exerting just now a spell on him so profound that he could not break it.

Sherry Quarternight moved about the room, paying no attention to them, packing some things into a bag. He started toward the door.

"Where are you going, Sherry?"

At first he did not answer her, but as he reached the door he turned.

"I'm ridin'," he said. "I'm ridin' fo' the Injun Territory. It's the last you'll be seein' of me until this blows over. Want to kiss me goodbye, sugar?"

She turned her back on him. "Well, good luck," she said indifferently.

They listened to him tramping down the outside stairs. He was gone.

She said: "Where you stayin'?"

"The Apex House," Simeon answered.

Profound speculation was in her regard of him. This was a man unique among all the men she knew. He might be one of them old Bible prophets, she said to herself. Damn near a preacher. I bet he never sinned in his whole life.

A curious feline instinct possessed her. This man was a challenge to her—a challenge to the whole way of life she represented. Here was a chance for an achievement of sorts—"to make a preacher lay his Bible down." The wickedness of the thought sent a lush feeling of desire through her. This was strange quarry, but she felt herself suddenly a huntress. She had spent her life perfecting one thing; here was the ultimate test of that power.

They were alone in the room and the sun was setting. Simeon, having swallowed his second drink, was dizzy yet strangely exalted. Responsibility seemed far away; he wanted to sink, and he wondered why in all his life he had avoided the sensation he was now experiencing. He had discovered notable adventure in liquor—and a feeling of achievement. This woman was exciting and intimately close to him in that room. He lifted a tumbler and recklessly drank again.

A long time seemed to pass pleasantly. He found himself standing, and close to him was Gussie Gosney. Perfume. Woman. He had been celibate, then forsook celibacy, then accepted it again. It was harder the second time he assumed the state. Marriage and possession of a woman had given him new knowledge, new desires.

Gussie Gosney was helping him stand up, holding him by the elbows.

He stretched out an arm to balance himself, and she took the arm and pulled it about her. The feel of her was good—soft, elastic, exciting. He suddenly reached both arms for her.

"I want—I want—" he muttered, then stopped, unable to complete his thought.

His mind and senses reeled, but she seemed to understand.

"O.K, honey," he heard her. "Sit down here on the bed." She allowed herself to come close to him and he clutched her, feeling the sudden suffocating resilience of her breasts parting where his face pressed against her thin wrapper. She turned his face up and he felt her lips.

"Wait till I get ready, will you, honey?"

He sat down suddenly, and felt the spring of the mattress under his thighs. In the room the woman moved about in a haze, shedding garments. Her hips twisted as she wormed one piece of apparel over her head. She saw him gazing and laughed.

"Bad," she said. "You're bad. Turn your head."

He obeyed. An instant later she was beside him.

Nude, palpitant, breath-taking.

She drew his face toward hers and the smell of her was an intoxicating combination of cigarette smoke and perfume.

Life was strange and full of inexplicabilities. This was the Scarlet Woman, and he found her unexpectedly the answer to his great want.

## FOURTEEN

### 1.

WITH THE afternoon sun slanting through the muslin curtains of the kitchen window, Emma Wessel sat comfortably huge in her biggest rocking chair, turning the butter churn. It was a new churn, a great improvement over the old-fashioned stick churns she had used formerly. Herman had bought it for her—after a due amount of wrangling—from a mail order catalogue.

The churn consisted of a keg mounted on a frame, which turned over and over by means of a crank. Within the keg a dasher dropped alternately from one end to the other, beating and pounding the sour cream until the butter was separated from the buttermilk. Strength was required to keep the heavy keg revolving, but Emma's great arm seemed hardly to know the strain.

One of the boys should have been there to do the churning, she thought without anger, but they were such wild-jacks that they could not be caught. Indulgently she pictured them, somewhere off in the pasture right now, maybe trying fruitlessly to trap a prairie dog; maybe seeing what last night's rain had done in the gully where Herman had dumped trash and sod to stop erosion.

She would be glad when Kathy grew old enough to be of some assistance around the house. Boys were no good. They were a help to their father on the farm, maybe, but you could not make them take to a dish towel no matter how hard you

tried. Still, that was well, perhaps. Boys and men had their uses, she admitted, chuckling. It was maybe bad to make them do a girl's work. Unnatural, like putting them in dresses. Emma hated boy-girls or girl-boys.

In the revolving churn the cream gurgled *sough, sough*, as the dasher worked back and forth. By the stiffening feel of it, the butter was forming. Emma pulled her bulk awkwardly out of the chair and opened the churn lid. Rich yellow lumps floated in the chalk-white liquid, ready to be gathered by the wooden paddle.

All at once she lifted her head and listened. She heard a voice outside—a woman's voice. Emma wiped her hands on her apron and rolled toward the door. Her pumpkin face lit with anticipation. Company. Steps climbed up to the porch. A mother-voice said:

"Here we are. You can get a drink of water from Mrs. Wessel."

Emma opened the door.

"Gary! Ach, now I am glad to see you. That you should come by me today! So busy—but come in, come in. You should help me maybe a liddle bit, yah?"

Gary's face was drawn. Ranny had been crying, and the tear-marks still stained his face.

"Your buggy—where iss?" asked Emma.

"We walked."

"Walked? Himmell Two miles—foolish you should walk, Gary, an' bring the child with. On a day like this—"

The wanness of the girl's face caused Emma to close her mouth on the rest of the sentence.

"Come in, come in," she repeated. "The liddle boy should want some water? Here, Ranny. Drink good. An' butter-milk too, maybe? I got some fresh. Kathy! *Kathy!* Where iss that girl?"

She filled the house with her clamor and the sound of it reverberated outside, until the chickens in the farmyard cocked their heads and cackled in surprised inquiry. Kathy appeared, with wisps of hay on her dress and in her hair.

"I was looking for hen's nests in the hayloft, ma—"

"How many times I should tell you to stay out that hayloft? You fall down the chute an' old Alladeb will get you!" But she quickly relaxed her sternness. "Here iss the liddle boy again. You take him out an' play. Be good now!"

Gary sank into a chair, fanning her flushed face with her sunbonnet. She looked exhausted. She must have carried the child most of the two miles. Eager curiosity concerning the

occasion for this visit filled Emma, but she wisely asked no direct questions.

"Ach, my butter!" she cried. "Gary, you rest a liddle, while I gather the butter."

She began with a wooden paddle to bring the butter together in a golden lump, placing it on a dish on the table. Small flecks of it she chased about in the white liquid with her paddle, scraped the yellow clinging masses from the dasher, and moulded the mounting heap. It was good butter. Emma always made good butter. Presently she would salt it, and put it in a small pail, and hang it on a long rope down the well near to the water to keep it cool.

"Now Gary," said the big woman suddenly, "what was it you wanted of me?"

Gary gazed at her, as if at first she could not say the thing that was in her mind. At last, however, she spoke:

"Simeon is gone. He was gone all night. He left yesterday morning and has not yet returned this afternoon. I came here in hope—maybe you have heard something about him?"

Emma shook her head. "Nobody's been here, an' nobody's been off the place. Lots to do today, after that rain last night. Wisht it would rain some more. That shower was just a starter. I don't know what this country'll do if we don't get some more moisture."

As she purposely talked on about the weather, her mind was busy with speculation as to what lay behind the unexplained absence of Simeon which Gary had just announced. It was unlike the farmer to go away and leave no word. Some trouble was here. Emma was sure of it.

"Simeon should be gone maybe on business?"

"He didn't say. But he wasn't home to do the chores—"

"Well," said Emma, and stopped. She looked narrowly at Gary.

"Well," she said again. "It was good you should come here. You stay the night. Yah. I send the boys over to milk the cow an' feed the stock tonight. If Simeon comes home he'll look for you here."

Gary sat silent. She was frightened. Nothing like this ever had happened to her before, and she did not know what to do. A bristle of hitherto unguessed problems appeared before her.

Emma was moving about busily, emptying the buttermilk into containers. Part of the buttermilk would go to the hogs. It made good pork. The rest was for the family. She put the butter on the back of the table and scalded out the churn with

hot water. All this time she said nothing to her visitor. But when the last detail of the churning was finished, she spoke: "Now, Gary, tell. I'm your friend, child."

Sudden realization of the truth of that came over Gary. Emma *was* her friend, and overwhelmingly the girl desired to unburden her soul. To tell someone the whole sorrowful story would be the sheerest, most grateful relief.

But the fundamental caution of her sex held her. Gary knew that Emma was an incurable gossip. With all due recognition that the big woman had the heartiest friendship toward her and would do anything in her power to help her, Gary knew it probable that Emma would overflow with a rush of words the first time she was with other women—perhaps regretting her indiscretion the moment it was committed, but being too far gone then in her words to recall what she said. So Gary did not tell the entire story.

"We quarreled," she said. "I—we disagreed about something. He hasn't spoken to me for days. Yesterday he left, on horseback and he has not returned."

"I bet you was exactly right in whatever it was you had them words over!" asserted Emma, loyally. "Ach! These men! If they don't have their way, they pout an' sulk an' go off like bad liddle boys. But after all, what does it matter, these liddle quarrels? Your man will come back an' sneak in, girl, lookin' like an egg-suckin' dog. When he does, just forgive him an' try not to quarrel with him again. It comes out all right, now you just watch."

"I never crossed him before in all our married life," said Gary, speaking so low it seemed she was talking to herself. "I always gave in. And this was something so important—"

"Gary, are you sorry you stood up to him?"

Emma was looking hard at her. Gary stopped speaking, and her face showed her thinking. No she was not sorry. She would *never* be sorry.

"So," said Emma at last.

Something suddenly was very clear to her. She remembered how often she had speculated over the divergence in the ages of Gary and her elderly husband, wondering at what held a young, attractive woman to the crabbed farmer. Also she remembered Til Rector, and how good he was to look upon, and his bravery when he offered his body to save Gary's child. Til had departed, without explanation, from the Trudge farm before he fully recovered from the snake-bite. These things hardly required putting together.

Emma's warm sympathy flowed toward the miscrable girl sitting in her kitchen. She became Gary's full ally in this

matter. There would be difficulties—ach, yah, Simeon Trudge was one great difficulty all by himself. But what she could do, she would.

"You stay here the night," she told Gary. "The boys will go over to do the chores."

## 2.

It was right after supper that the news came. A hail outside sent Herman Wessel from the table, stumping to the gate. The hoarse growl of men's voices came to the women, who strained their ears in the kitchen; then Herman was back.

"Dot was Earl Josserand, the Star Route man," he said. "Some big trouble last night, he tells. A bad trouble. Shootings an' it gives a lot of men killed. Josserand, he says Jericho an' Bedestown had it out at last."

"A fight? Where?" demanded Emma.

Gary's heart beat unaccountably fast. Was Simeon involved in this? Her mind feverishly went over the possibilities.

"Over east," said Herman. "At Purd Weaver's hay camp." He added that he had heard shooting there the night before, but supposed it was hunters.

"How does Josserand know?"

"They brung the bodies into Jericho two hours ago."

"How many killed—who—?" Gary asked, her heart in her throat.

"Dunno just how many. Josserand says they brung three bodies into Jericho, all Bedestown men. They're lookin' for another—" he stopped and goggled stupidly at Gary. "By damn!" he said. "Feller worked for you—Til Rector."

The room seemed to go around Gary in a great, slow circle. She felt Emma's hand on her arm and found a chair.

"Don't be a fool, Herman Wessel" snapped Emma. "Til Rector—he iss dead?"

Herman shook his head. "They don't know. He was shot. They don't find him when to get the bodies they go back."

"Then, *dumbkopf*, he ain't dead!"

"Well, mebbe not," said Herman doubtfully, with a wary regard of his wife's warning eye.

Emma turned reassuringly to Gary. "The boy, he iss all right. He was just hit an' mebbe wounded a liddle. He will turn up." Again she faced Herman. "Any Jericho people hurt?"



Her husband shook his head. "They all come back safe. I don't know who all it was. That Railroad Association bunch. Sherry Quarternight was one. An'—an'—Simeon—"

"Mr. Trudge?" cried Gary.

"So Josserand tells."

The Association, Simeon—Til shot, perhaps dead. As surely as if she had seen it, Gary knew that in some manner her husband was responsible for the harm that had befallen Til. She stood up suddenly and walked into the next room. She could not bear it, talking any more about it. Voices murmured in the kitchen, as Wessel acquainted his wife with additional details. The Wessel children crowded about, eagerly questioning.

Gary sat down in a chair in the darkened room, gazing at the window, without seeing. Her world was swirling about her, no longer stable. Things began suddenly to assume new meanings, to occupy new scales of importance. Above everything she recognized one insistent cry in her heart: Til—Til—Til. Til was shot . . . Til was lost, wandering about somewhere perhaps, neglected and suffering. The thought tortured her. Someone must find Til, must take care of him. Everything else sank into insignificance.

She could no longer sit here. She had to be moving, and she rose to go outside. Ranny was in the kitchen, playing in a corner with Kathy. Gary threw a shawl over her head and noiselessly let herself out on the porch. With the rapid, nervous stride of the distraught, she walked out in the moonlight, hardly knowing where she was going.

She became aware of the hitch-rack before her . . . and a horse beside it. Someone was dismounting from the horse.

Terror clasped at Gary's throat. Was it Simeon . . . returning?

The figure in the darkness was undersized, like Simeon's. Having killed Til, what new terrible deed did he contemplate? Rooted, she stood, hardly breathing, staring through the gloom.

"Is this the Wessel place?" called a voice so unexpectedly that Gary almost cried out. And then came surprise: it was a woman's voice.

"Yes, this is Wessel's," Gary said.

"You Mrs. Wessel?"

"No, she's inside."

"I've got to see her." The figure came forward and Gary found herself hardly believing her eyes. Trousers . . . instead of a skirt. Yet she could have sworn it was a woman.

But in the next moment it was certain, in spite of the garb,

that the newcomer was a woman. The moon gave a silvery half-light, and in it Gary obtained an impression of a dark queer face—face with a faun's wildness. She turned and led the way into the house.

Mouths gaped as the Wessels stared, for a woman in man's clothing was almost beyond experience. The older children tittered.

"I am Hattie Shintaffer," snapped the strange woman, fixing her eyes on Emma. "I've come to get you, if you're Mrs. Wessel."

"What for?" asked Emma.

"I got a man at my place bad hurt. He needs doctorin'."

"Why didn't you get Doc Hippo?"

"The man said get you. You took care of him once—"

"It ain't—it ain't Til Rector?"

"I reckon that could be his name." The woman was cold, almost sneering.

"All right, I come. A few minutes to get ready. Iss he . . . bad?"

"He's not good."

Emma glanced at Gary. Wide eyes, face drained of all color, lips half-parted, she stood as if ready to cry out. Emma nodded, as if she had satisfied herself about one final thing, and strode forward, taking the girl by the arm.

"Come with," she said. "The next room."

Gary, like a child, followed her through the door and heard Emma close it. They were alone. For a moment they were silent in the dark. "Gary," said the older woman at last, "it iss time for you to make up your mind."

"What—how—"

"I want you should listen to me, girl. You think I am a *dumbkopf* maybe—but I can see. You are thinkin' now of two things—if you should be a proper married woman now, or if you should go to the man you really love. Don't stop me! Save your protests for somebody would maybe believe them! I see an' I *know*. Til Rector iss a fine boy, a fine man. A fine man with plenty trouble, yah? You think—he iss bit by snake, for Ranny. He iss shoot by gun, for you. No? I like this Til, he deserves good thing—he deserves more beside snake-bite an' gun-shoot."

"Stop! You must not. I can't discuss this with you—"

"So? You are married—for why you didn't think of this before? Oh, nobody has told me nothing. But it iss not so hard to guess. You saw Til, you liked him. Good. You talked to him, you liked him more—very much. Comes a time when you are alone—"

"Emma, please—"

"Did you think about being married then?"

In the darkness of the room Gary bowed her head and covered her eyes. Her shoulders shook with a sob.

Instantly a great plump arm was about her.

"Now iss not the time for crying, girl," said Emma, kindness deepening her voice. "What your heart told you—that was not bad. You think about the Bible—but the Bible can be turned around to say anything. Think of this—good can't never come out of bad. An' it iss bad for a young, lovely girl like you to be married to an old, mean man—"

"Oh, Emma—"

"You have to think for yourself, child. Simeon does not care any more for you than he does for that team of mules—less. You are young—out of life you deserve something. You are married, but there iss ways out of all things. Take your luck, girl. This iss the time to decide—are you going to go on living, never thinking for yourself, or are you coming with me to see what iss to be done for that boy who may be dying—now—because of you?"

Gary raised her face, and her cheeks were wet in the darkness.

"I want to go with you, Emma," she said.

"Good!" Emma waddled rapidly back into the lighted kitchen. "Herman, you go hitch up the surrey! You hear me? Then you shall stay here an' take care of the *kinder*. You should be nurse maid tonight, Herman. Ha, ha! Gary, she comes by me. You—what's your name—Hattie? You ride with us, an' lead your horse behind. Hurry now, Herman Wessel, while I get my things ready. Give me that basket, Oscar, for my herbs. Let me see—some golden seal, puff balls—there might be blood to stanch—some fever root—witch hazel—"

With ungainly speed she moved about, gathering the things into the basket.

"He hass bled much?" she asked once.

The strange woman nodded. Emma placed a pair of scissors, a sharp knife, and some clean folded cloths into the basket on top of the bundles of herbs, and covered all with another cloth.

Meantime Herman had driven the surrey up to the hitch-rack. Silencing the clamor of her oldest boys to go along, Emma led the way out to the carriage.

Night lay about them, making strange and mysterious the landscape they knew so well, but the occupants of the surrey were too intent on their errand to note it. Emma was finding the new acquaintance monosyllabic, spcaking only to give the

most necessary information. She answered questions: It was fifteen miles by the road they would have to take. She lived on Cow Creek. Yes, the surrey could make it all right. The young man came to her almost ready to fall off his horse at her door—it was his horse she had ridden to Wessel's. He was shot through the body. He did not want her to go to Jericho for fear they would come and get him. Why "they" were he had not told her.

Other information Hattie Shintaffer would not give, and what she did give came grudgingly. Three hours of jolting over a road which was rough like all prairie roads, then the woman said:

"Turn in here."

They entered a straggling grove of cottonwood trees, and saw just ahead of them a single spot of brightness, a lighted window. Emma pulled up the team, and the Shintaffer woman was on the ground, quick as an Indian, tying the horses. Gary descended and to her Emma handed the basket. Then she levered her own huge self out.

Even in the darkness they could see that this was a sod house which they were approaching. Hattie Shintaffer paused in front of the door, and half turned in them, as if she regretted at the last having brought these strangers—and was of a mind to order them away after all. But then she drew a deep hissing breath, and threw open the door.

By the light of a tallow candle within, Gary saw the whole interior at a glance. It was a typical soddy cabin—a rather long single room, with an old kitchen table standing in the middle of the rammed earth floor. Two or three boxes or stools were arranged about the table as seats. At one end of the room was a wood-burning kitchen range with a wood-box close by, and a hanging shelf of dry-goods boxes above, holding tin dishware and rough utensils. At the other end of the room was a kind of combination wardrobe and shelves, built also of waste lumber against the wall, and covered with hanging curtains of some cheap flowered material. Across the room from the door, beyond the table, stood a double bunk—one bunk above the other—built against the wall. Only the lower bed had any covers on it, and these were disarrayed.

But what riveted Gary's attention was a pallet at the end of the room, with a long sprawled figure upon it.

"I couldn't get him into the bunk," said Hattie apologetically.

But Gary was gone. She had run with quick steps to the pallet and gone down on her knees beside it.

"Oh, Til my darling!" she whispered.

His face was gray and his eyes were closed. He did not hear her whisper.

### 3.

Hands.

Hands worked about him and with him. He dimly knew that there were different kinds of hands. Some hands were broad and plump and endowed with strength and wisdom in knowing ways to ease anguish. Others were cool and gentle, and these soft hands brought wonderful comfort with their touch.

He was grateful for the wise, strong hands; but he felt a yearning in the core of his being, for the touch of the cool, slender hands.

There was red pain and sickness, and the hands, broad and slender, fought with him against the agony. Time stood still and after great struggles, moved slowly and majestically on.

So at last Til's eyes opened and he was gazing upward. Now, in the dimness of distance there was a voice, an odd voice, going on and on. His mind was too tired to make identification. He did not care what the voice was.

It was day, he now saw, and he was gazing above him at faded muslin which bellied down under the roof. The muslin had been white but it was drab gray with age and stained with discolorations.

Muslin ceiling . . . this must be a sod house, then. Muslin or cheese-cloth were commonly used in soddies to keep the dirt from sifting down from the roof into the room below.

He experienced a mild wonder. How did he come to be in a sod house?

Til turned his head. He now perceived the thick layers of dried sod which made up the walls. An abominable ache tugged at his chest and he closed his eyes again, clenching his teeth to keep from groaning. Now he began to pay attention to the voice. It was a woman's voice. She was talking.

"It came on me when I was thirteen. I didn't know what it was at first. I would faint. My people thought I had a weak heart. Then . . . I found out it was the falling sickness. For a time I went on, thinking nothing about it. But the other chil-

dren kept saying: 'Fits. Hattie Shintaffer has fits.' And then I learned the disgrace of being an epileptic."

Hattie Shintaffer . . . Hattie Shintaffer. The name stirred faintly in Til's mind.

"Ach," said a deep feminine voice. "You poor creature."

"We lived at Omaha then. He—he was a young minister. He thought I was beautiful. I could think of nothing but him—the world went around him."

"Yah, go on," said the deep voice again.

"It was sure that it would happen. But I prayed God that it would not. I prayed Him to cure me. But one day . . . when we were driving home from church in the evening . . . I remember to this moment the despair in me, and I remember the look in his eyes of horror and disgust . . ."

There was a long silence.

"That was why I came out here," the voice ended quite simply. "I came here on this claim, to be away—away from everybody. I wanted nobody, no friends, man or woman. That look in his eyes, it poisoned my heart against myself. I wanted to live alone. To be left alone."

Now Til seemed to remember. He was coming through the trees in the wet night, and his horse stopped before the sod house. In the open door stood a woman in man's clothes, bitterly defiant, an old muzzle-loading shotgun in her hands. Behind her the light made a brightness, and her face showed hate and fear.

Then the light went out. He remembered no more. But he knew now the woman was Hattie Shintaffer. Somehow she must have brought him into her cabin. He owed a debt to Hattie Shintaffer.

He heard the deep voice, and now he recognized it as Emma Wessel's:

"But Hattie, you got friends now—"

"I don't want friends, hear me? I'm satisfied the way things are. I took that man in, because he needed looking after. And he can stay—and you can stay—until you can move him. But after that I want no more of you, or anyone else—hear? I want this place to myself—I want to be alone, and nobody, *nobody* near me!"

At the bitterness in the words he closed his eyes.

Someone bent over him. He could feel it, and he opened his eyes. Quickly he closed them once more. His vision was playing tricks—he thought he had seen Gary bending over him.

"He's awake," said someone. His eyes opened again. It was

Gary, and from somewhere new life seemed to flow into him as he knew it.

"Emma, he's awakel" she was calling.

Great-girthed Emma hove into his line of vision.

"So now he iss better," she said. "An' a miracle. The blood he has lost—"

She went away and returned with a basin. "I will dress that wound again," she said. "The bullet went on through. How it missed killing you, don't ask me. But the bleeding iss stopped at last. A little lower an' it would have been—finish."

She pulled back the cover and began to work with the bandages.

"Gary, help," she ordered. "I'm sorry if we hurt you," she said to Til. "But this will fix you up. When you are a liddle stronger, you will be took to my place. There you can get well—an' maybe see somebody often—"

His eyes were on Gary's face, and what he saw there was the true miracle to him. He stirred his hand and at once felt her fingers locked in his. He remembered those fingers now. They were the ones which all that night of anguish had brought comfort with their mere touch.

"I know," she said, her face close to his. "I know now, Til. No matter what happens, my mind is sure. What you want . . . I want too."

She leaned and kissed him, her lips soft and warm and trembling.

Emma looked on with vast approval. This, to her mind, was as things should be. She took Hattie by the arm and drew her outside the cabin, to give the girl and the man their minute alone together.

No words passed in the cabin. Gary sat holding the hand which was so weak and which had been so strong. At last she was happy, and at peace. Not yet did she know all of what she would have to do. Not yet were her problems solved. Not yet did she know when or how the future would open up to her.

But her mind was at rest and the torment of irresolution was ended. For the present, knowing her own heart and his, she was content only to hold Til's hand in hers.

## 4.

It was noon already when, after his debauch, Simeon arose with a splitting skull and a feeling of horror in his stomach.

Beside him Gussie Gosney still slept, and seen in the daylight, with hair disarrayed and her face loose with sleep, she was suddenly repellent to him.

The nausea which usually accompanies the conviction of sin, committed without justification, was in the pit of his stomach. Slowly he sat up. The room reeled, but he got to his feet, holding to a corner of the chiffonier.

Gussie opened her eyes. She half sat up, then pulled the quilt about her with a gesture of feminine modesty that must have been a reflex only, since in the night she had demonstrated the complete absence of all modesty.

"What time is it, honey?"

Her voice lagged, and she yawned widely, not taking the trouble to cover her mouth.

He did not reply.

"What are you goin' to do?"

"Shut up!" he shouted at her.

In a passion of haste he pulled on his garments. He wished now only to be rid of her. He went to the door and paused, then turned around. The woman was sitting up in bed, holding the patchwork quilt in front of her naked breasts with both hands. Great heavens—had he spent the night with that creature?

Gussie's face was raddled, sleep clogged her mind, and her hair hung in a dreary tangle about her cheeks.

A thought filled him with sudden shocking conviction: At last the Scarlet Woman had her way of him. Simeon slammed the door behind him, and through it heard her laughter.

He fled. There was in him one unendurable longing—to escape from Jericho. To escape from himself and what he had done.

At the Apex House he wolfed a bite of food, then went for his horse. He still had the Winchester he had borrowed from Purd Weaver, and he carried it on his saddle as he rode out of town. He was going back to his own place.

Old John appeared worn and weary this morning. The old horse did not recuperate from hard exertion as he had when he



was younger. Simeon was impatient with the gelding and drummed constantly on the basket ribs with his heels. It was nine miles to the farm, and took nearly two hours to make it. The cow and three steers bawled down by the cowshed, and one of the horses whinnied from the barn.

Simeon dismounted and went to the house. The door was shut but not locked. The house was empty.

He came out and mounted again. Twenty minutes later Herman Wessel was answering his questions in front of the Wessel hitch-rack.

Yah, Gary had been here. Yah, she was gone; she had gone the night before with Emma. Where? A *verriicht* woman come—a crazy one and in men's clothes. There was a man sick by her place. Emma had gone to help, and Gary with.

"A crazy woman in men's clothes?" demanded Simeon. "Was she Hattie Shintaffer?"

Yah, that was her name.

Simeon backed old John away from the hitch-rack and turned around in the lane.

Hattie Shintaffer. A sick man. Emma—and Gary.

That "sick man" would be Tilford Rector. And Gary was there with him . . .

Simeon clutched at the Winchester in his hand. Without even permitting old John to suck at the water trough toward which he thirstily stretched his scrawny neck, Simeon took up the ride again. From Wessel's he would cut through the sand hills, reducing by miles the distance to Shintaffer's soddy. He knew just where to strike Cow Creek after skirting the north side of Antelope Lake.

Gary with Til.

His rage had returned with all its savagery. Adulterers, they were. He was committed to this belief, now.

*The man that committeth adultery with another man's wife . . . the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death . . .*  
It was the Word.

The adulterer *and* the adulteress. *Vengeance is mine . . . I will repay.*

The sunlight came into Simeon's eyes with a kind of redness.

Dead or alive, said the notice of the reward. He had seen that it was worded that way. If he found Til, two things would be accomplished at once. Retribution would be gained; and the justice of the Lord would be visited through the instrument of His servant, Simeon. If he found Til and Gary together . . . He ground his teeth at the thought.

Mile after mile he forced the gelding at his awkward rack. It did not occur to the rider that the horse was growing staggeringly weary. John was aged and gaunt. Nine miles from town to farm, two miles back to Wessel's, and now he was well beyond Antelope Lake, passing the deserted hay camp without even stopping. He was twenty miles from his stall in the livery stable at Jericho, and now Simeon pulled the horse to a full stop.

Old John slacked off on three legs. His bony head sagged and his knees seemed to shake. The saddle leathers creaked in regular cadence as his ridged sides rose and fell. Sweat shone on his roan flanks and dripped from his pinched belly. From him rose a sickly, pungent odor. The smell of weariness.

The rider was weary, too, or he might have paid some attention to the condition of his mount. To ride old John much farther was dangerous. It was to court a fall at the very least.

But Simeon sagged in the saddle, his lean back bent. His hat was pulled so low on his forehead that the yellow glare of his eyes appeared to come from a dark recess which somehow pushed his nose and whiskered jaw into relief.

It was late afternoon now and choking hot. Every bit of the moisture which had fallen two nights before seemed to have been baked out of the ground. Broad, red and lazy, the sun began to dip toward the little sand hills of the horizon, with a deliberation which seemed to express a vast scorn of the flat, heated expanse upon which, since dawn, it had laid the weight of its wrath.

To Simeon's eye the landscape before him seemed to justify that scorn. Ambitionless sand hills at his left, bare and tawny, lay in a prideless sprawl. Elsewhere swept the endless vista of the plains. Just ahead was a shallow dip in the ground, with a few willows straggling along its bottom, the leaves not stirring in the stifling closeness of the evening. The willows might indicate a stream of some kind, but Simeon was sure it would be no watercourse worthy of the name. Probably a dry wash with a few coarse weeds and grass to obscure but not beautify its banks.

For once no hint of a breeze stirred the air. Three distant crows flapped low on the horizon. Save for the creaking of the saddle at old John's hoarse breathing and the occasional jingle of the bridle bit in the horse's mouth, the far-off cawing of the obscene birds was the only sound that came to the man's ears. Even the meadowlarks had been beaten into submission by the heat of this day.

Once Simeon had lived in a country of woodlands with white farm houses tucked among them. Rivers and brooks gurgled in

that land with luscious coolness, and fat kine stood knee-deep in grasses in the checkered fields. Greenness, freshness, opulence . . . but that was long ago. A whole lifetime ago.

The sun had sunk deeply into the skyline, only the top of its angry disk glowering above. As if at a signal, now that the conqueror of the day had passed, blue-purple shadows began creeping up from the hills, spreading their dank veil over the lower ground.

Simeon jerked up the horse's head and cut the animal with his whip. There still were some miles to go; he did not know just how many. A ceaseless hammering in his head drove him. Tilford Rector. Tilford Rector. Tilford Rector.

The Lord had told him to punish Tilford Rector. And Gary, the unfaithful and rebellious. There is no remission save through the shedding of blood. This night would he obey the Lord.

Down into the shallow valley led the way. Again the whip urged the horse and the tired beast broke into a jolting trot, every hoof coming down with heavy stiffness, the spring all gone from his gait. The gelding's hollow belly made dull plumping sounds at each jolt. This was another warning of impending collapse, but Simeon, obsessed with his burning haste, ignored it.

So dark was it growing that the way was difficult to see. Old John stumbled, almost going over on his chin, and Simeon jerked him up cruelly with the bit. Again, in the growing gloom, the exhausted animal stumbled, barely recovering himself. He was close to his finish, but Simeon was oblivious of that fact. The stumblings only aroused the man's fury, for it seemed that here was another act to thwart him. All things appeared to be conspiring to that end.

Simeon was seized with sudden blind rage. Jerking old John's head back by sawing the bit, he lashed violently again and again at the gelding's head. The whip bit deep into an eye, and a sudden spurt of blood spattered out on the tortured animal's cheek.

Crazed by the pain, old John reared and turned half sideways. His footing went out from under him, and in the deepened dusk he went over and over, hurling Simeon ahead of him.

The man struck the ground and looked up to see the vaulting form of the horse momentarily silhouetted against the darkening sky. Stunned though he was, Simeon made a desperate effort to crawl clear. A vast overwhelming weight, driven from the whole heights of the earth down on him, crashed.

## 5.

For a moment he felt nothing but the intolerable weight. His body was clear and he could breathe, but his legs were pinned fast and a shivering pain arrowed up through one thigh.

In complete unbelieving astonishment Simeon lay there, his head clearing slowly. Then he began furiously to beat the horse with his whip. There was no shudder of flesh, no movement. He ceased the flailing. A sick realization had come over him. Old John was dead . . . dead and lying squarely across both of Simeon's legs.

They had been close to the bottom of the little valley when Simeon struck the horse in the eye, and old John had staggered to the edge of the draw, losing his footing and turning over as he plunged into it. Simeon, at first thrown clear, had been caught. The horse's neck was broken, and Simeon was trapped as securely as if a log had fallen across him.

At first he thought only of his pain. It was imperative that he loose himself as quickly as possible. He attempted to pull his legs loose, but a tremor of agony caused him to desist. Down his legs he felt, as far as he could reach. That grating anguish there . . . it was broken all right. The left leg. Shattered squarely in two, midway of the thigh.

For a long time after that Simeon lay still, taking stock of the situation. The last afterglow faded and night became absolute. Suddenly he began frantically to fight to free himself, even when the pain seemed near to blinding him.

He might die here, pinned under the dead horse! Nobody ever came this way—through the deserted sand hills. He was far off from any road or trail. It might be days or weeks before another rider passed. By that time, if he did not free himself . . . it would make no difference anyway.

His first wild struggles gained him not an inch. Simeon at length lay back exhausted. In one position he discovered that he did not have much pain, and he lay in that position and tried to think.

He was sure of one thing: it did him no good to struggle aimlessly. He must wait until daylight, and look about him. Perhaps there was some means by which he could escape from his trap, which was not apparent in the darkness.

As much as possible he relaxed, although his broken leg by now was throbbing fiercely, while the other leg had gone numb. The blood probably was cut off by the weight upon it. At first he tried to sleep to conserve his strength. Once he heard the howling of coyotes and instinctively felt for the Winchester. A new horror came over him. The weapon had been hurled somewhere out of reach. He could not place his hand on it.

Endlessly the minutes passed. The hours elongated themselves into years. After an eternity a graying appeared in the east, the sky paling slowly in the color of bright metal, although to the west it still had the deep brooding hue of night with the twinkling brilliance of the stars. Dawn was coming. He heard the morning yell of a coyote, and the jarring cry of an early hunting bull-bat.

Imperceptibly the landscape brightened, and presently it was possible for him to make out objects near to him. He was lying in the bottom of a ravine. There were no trees near him; only a few small willows. Yes. One thing he saw appeared to be promising. A stick. Not much of a stick, but enough to pin a hope upon. It was perhaps five feet long and two or three inches thick. Very old and weathered. The bark had all been peeled away from it long ago, and the color of it was a pallid gray. It was a piece of driftwood from some cottonwood tree which had been washed down the dry creek at a distant flood period, and lodged here.

Simeon had become increasingly conscious of the parched condition of his throat and mouth; and this was as much from the fever which was coming upon him as from the lack of water. But his head was clear. He was able to reach the lariat rope where it was fastened to the saddle of the dead horse. By tugging at the whangs he got it loose. He was going to try to snare that pole and bring it to him.

But the post lay flat and it seemed that there was no way to obtain a purchase on it. Even had Simeon been skillful with the rope he could hardly have fastened. Again and again he tossed his loop. One end, the smaller end, of the pole was slightly crooked, so that it twisted up a little from the ground. There was perhaps an inch of clearance between the tip of this weathered end of wood, and the soil on which it rested.

Cunningly Simeon began playing to get his loop over that end. Tossing the rope was difficult in the position in which he was forced to lie, and any shift in his position brought agony so exquisite that it made him ill. But again and again he threw the rope with endless patience and persistence.

It was maddening to see how close he came time and again,

only to be disappointed. It seemed to him that the rope itself took a malignant delight in raising his hopes, then dashing them. From his very practice at constant throwing he acquired in some sort a skill and there were many times in the three hours he worked at this when the loop *almost* caught the end of that stick. But it never quite did catch. The rope was too stiff and the loop would slip off even when it seemed to enclose that hungrily desired stubby end.

The man's face during this period showed the play of his emotions. Intense concentration would appear on it while he prepared for his throw. Then the mouth would open slightly and the eyes blaze with hope and longing. Inevitably afterward would come again the sick look of despair.

At the end of three hours Simeon was exhausted in both body and mind. He lay still for a long time. The sun by now had climbed high in the sky and pitiless heat blasted down from the fiery ball. It promised to be even hotter than the day before. Already Simeon could mark the wavering mirages in the one bit of horizon he could see by looking directly down along the little draw in which he was pinned. He secured his hat and used this to cover his face and head. He seemed asleep, but he was praying.

Lord help me. Put this cup from me. Thy will be done. Even if He slay me yet will I trust Him. Oh, God, hear my cry as my faith is in Thee.

After a long time he stirred himself again. A few willows were close enough to be reached by the rope. He wondered why it had not suggested itself to him that the willows were his best hope. He tried to remember whether they were tough and strong, and his recollection seemed to be that willows were dependable. If he could fasten to some of them, perhaps he might win the purchase to pull himself out from beneath the horse.

Fired with this new hope, he turned himself painfully to where he could see the willows, and making a wide loop in the lariat, he cast. The first throw was too short. But after two or three tries he got his loop over one of the little willows. With heart thumping he pulled the rope carefully to tighten the loop. When he felt he had tightened it as much as possible, he began to pull.

Once he thought success was in his grasp. But that thought lasted only a moment. The willow bent, the rope slipped, and the loop came off.

Disappointment induced outright nausea in Simeon. He lay back for another while, recovering himself. He must not let

this thing break his spirit. Above all he must keep his head. The broken leg was paining abominably and it seemed to be swelling. As for the other leg, there was no sensation in it at all. Simeon wondered what it felt like to have a leg off. Perhaps this was the very feeling—complete absence of sensation. He found himself imagining that the leg was gone. That he had only a stump left.

And in a minute he was wishing passionately that in reality it was a stump only. How joyfully he would give up that leg right now to have his release!

But the leg remained. A numb, sensationless leg, but a leg nevertheless. Flesh and muscle and bone. It was as real as the other leg which now ached with the steady beat of his pulse. Together they tied him to his position as inflexibly as if they had been hammered iron.

After a long time Simeon tried again for the willows. A dozen times he caught a shoot, and as often the rope slipped away. At last he had a momentary bounding of hope. The rope caught on a willow that divided into two branches. By a lucky throw he tossed the loop over both branches, and when the loop came to the juncture, it held.

Actually it held! Simeon tried it cautiously . . . yes, it seemed firm. He put his weight against it gradually. The willow bent toward him but the rope did not slip. With greater confidence he pulled, finally hauling with all his strength. Did he gain an inch? Were his legs loosened by just an infinitesimal amount?

Suddenly the anchor to which he had fastened loosed. The willow seemed to leap toward him. He had pulled it from the ground.

Then for the first time Simeon Trudge gave over hoping.

For many minutes he lay, his hat resting over his face. Flies hummed and buzzed and mosquitoes sang their wiry songs in his ear. The insects were many, drawn by the carcass of old John, which Simeon discovered to his horror was beginning to bloat. A swarm of gnats discovered him and whined and dipped in a maddening cloud, driving him almost frantic with their stinging.

Anything was better than to lie idle in this manner. A new idea came. He had the willow which he had uprooted. He would try another scheme. He found his pocket knife and trimmed the willow fork. Very carefully he trimmed it, with a definite purpose in view which made it more precious to him than all the other wood in the forests of the world just now. To one end of the fork he fastened the rope, taking

his handkerchief and tearing it into strips to make the lashing good.

Then he prayed again. Prayed as fervently as he had ever done in his life, a prayer which was almost a command.

Lord God Almighty, hear Thy servant. If Thou wantest me to carry out Thy will, help me I pray Thee. I am Thy instrument of vengeance, O Lord. Do not now desert me. Amen.

The God Simeon Trudge envisaged should have understood that prayer.

Now he began throwing the fork, lashed to the end of the rope, over the driftwood pole. He had a sort of hook with a sharp angle to it. If he could get the angle to catch the end of the pole just right . . .

Again and again he tossed the willow fork and pulled it toward him. Again and again it almost seemed to catch . . . only to pull away. But with infinite patience, induced by his desperation, he persisted. So obsessed did he become with his problem that he forgot all about the gnats, the heat, the pain from his broken leg.

And at last he was rewarded. On the fiftieth, or perhaps even the hundredth cast, he drew the willow fork toward him carefully. It reached the pole. Just the right twist came in the rope. The fork straddled that upthrusting end, and suddenly it took hold, just above a knotty protuberance. Holding his breath, the pulse throbbing wildly in his temples, Simeon drew the pole toward him. If he could get it five feet nearer . . . four feet . . . three feet . . . two . . .

The willow prong slipped off and at first the world went black with his disappointment. But Simeon after a time opened his eyes and surveyed the pole. It was very much closer. Almost he could reach it with the tips of his fingers. He stretched. An inch or two at most and he could reach it. He tried again and again, bringing anguish each time to his broken thigh, and each time the tips of his fingers fell just short.

Then he bethought himself of the willow prong. He left it still attached to the rope and used it to lengthen his grip. The hook went over the end of the pole. It moved. An inch or two, no more. But now he could touch it . . . could actually touch it with his fingers. With the tips of those fingers he obtained the tiniest sort of a grip. The pole inched a little nearer and his grip grew firmer. A moment later and almost with a cry of joy he had it in his hands.

Now came a period of intense speculation and study. He felt of the pole. It was very dry but it seemed strong. He considered how best he might put it to use. This little piece of



driftwood had a preciousness compared to which all the riches of the world paled into insignificance.

He decided that the best way to use the pole was as a lever. But the lack of a fulcrum made that impracticable. Then he conceived the idea of planting the pole upright, and by whittling a groove in its upper end, to use it as a spar to lift the horse so that he might draw his legs free.

For half an hour he worked in his cramped position, digging with his knife a hole in which to plant the stick. The upper end was given its groove, and over the groove he ran his rope, the end of which was attached to the saddle horn.

Now was the time for his effort. He pulled on the rope but there was no balance; the stick was not firmly enough planted. Either the rope slipped off or the stick sagged. So he dug again and planted it very much more deeply.

At last, now, he seemed to have achieved the right combination. He took a firm grip on the rope. He began to pull, using his sheer strength in an effort to ease by only a little bit that deadly grip on his legs. Hope came again as he felt the pull on the saddle. He exerted increased pressure. The rope took hold. With a little more effort he began to think he might succeed in partly rolling over the carcass.

Then Simeon's heart died in him. At the very moment when it seemed ready to take the weight, the stick collapsed. Its heart, rotted by months of lying out under the elements, gave way. It crumbled, breaking in three useless pieces.

For a time, after that, he lay still in the great heat. Then he seemed to go into a senseless fury. He attacked the carcass with his pocket knife, trying in bloody, macabre rage, to hack a way through the horror that held him down. But the knife was not adequate for the task, even though he covered himself with shreds of bloody flesh in the effort. The weak blade broke in the end—on a bone.

Now at last Simeon Trudge realized that the hope of escape for him was ended, and he contemplated the spectacle of his own dissolution.

Lying on the heated ground, dying like a trapped wild beast, his mind became gradually clear, so that he saw things in true relationship with each other. He thought back on his last few days. Tilford Rector had escaped; Simeon's death also would give the freedom she desired to Gary. They would marry when he was gone; he knew it.

These things, which would have been more bitter than wormwood at another time, now seemed almost unimportant in his new contemplation. In spite of the tormenting thirst,

Simeon's mind turned with a strange calmness to a consideration of the Biblical injunctions. Where had he failed? It had seemed clear that he should carry out the law.

Then it was made manifest to him: *Vengeance is MINE, and recompense.* So spake Jehovah to Moses.

It was sin which Simeon had been committing. Deadly sin. Punishment was not his to mete out; it was the prerogative of that awful Being who had given the Tablets of Stone.

With that, Simeon lay beaten down in the burning heat of the draw. The end could not be far. His mouth was drawn and black and his mind wandered. Mercifully, before the end, his perceptions were taken away.

Night came and in the darkness his voice was lifted for the last time. It was cracked and broken, but it rose quaveringly for a brief minute in the old chant:

*I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant;  
For I do not forget Thy commandments . . .*

The End.

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